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The Perceptions Of School Psychologists Regarding The Disproportionality In Special Education For Students Of Color: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study

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THE PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS REGARDING THE
DISPROPORTIONALITY IN SPECIAL EDUCATION FOR STUDENTS OF COLOR:
A QUALITATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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DEDICATION

To my amazing husband, Scott, for his never-ending ear as I journeyed through each step of this process. I know the details were painstaking to hear about daily, but you always listened with encouragement and a smile on your face. Without your love, support, patience, and understanding, I would not have made it through. I love you so much!

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ABSTRACT

Racial disproportionality in special education has been a problem of practice since Dunn called attention to it in 1968. Research has demonstrated the adverse effects on students including stigma, labeling, reduced access to high-quality educational opportunities, restrictive settings, and lower expectations and educational outcomes. Little research on disproportionality has examined how individual characteristics and societal factors intersect with specific school variables and contexts. Using disability critical race theory as a lens for exploration, this qualitative phenomenological study examined the phenomenon of disproportionality situated within a specific context to uncover how local factors may contribute to the incidence of disproportionality. Seven school psychologists from a suburban school district cited by the state for racial disproportionality in special education were interviewed to capture their lived experiences with the phenomenon. This study found five themes and eleven subthemes. Themes included lack of consistent pre-referral policies and practices; disparity patterns in the identification of students in the Open Choice population; staff perceptions in their low sense of self-efficacy to support students and perceived benefits of special education; bias; and disparity patterns in student externalizing behaviors and teacher response. Findings indicate the need for further allocation of resources to strengthen the pre-referral process and data collection, increased professional learning in the areas of intervention strategies and culturally responsive teaching practices, and leveraging of protective factors for struggling students.

Keywords: disability category, disproportionality, implicit bias, predictive factors, significant disproportionate representation, special education, students of color

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Disproportionate special education identification rates among students of color continues to be one of the most controversial issues facing the field of education (Cruz & Rodl, 2018; Morgan, 2021; Zhang et al., 2014). According to Shifrer et al. (2016), disproportionality is a persistent problem in the education system, particularly for certain sociodemographic subgroups. Specifically, students of color are often overrepresented in specific disability categories such as learning disability and emotional disturbance, and this phenomenon has been shown to produce adverse effects on students including the risk of stigma, labeling, restrictive settings, increased discipline referrals, lower expectations and educational outcomes, and reduced access to high-quality educational opportunities (Cruz & Firestone, 2022; Hurwitz et al., 2020; Lorenz, 2021; Losen et al., 2021; Peterson et al., 2016; Shifrer, 2013).

Disproportionality is defined as the over or under representation of racial or ethnic groups in special education as compared to that of other racial or ethnic groups (Strassfeld, 2017; Thorius & Stephenson, 2012). Studies have focused predominately on over-representation due to its higher prevalence and have highlighted variables associated with disproportionality including race, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, disability category, referral practices, and societal inequities (Artiles, et al., 2002; Cooc & Kiru, 2018; Ford & Russo, 2016; Raines et al., 2012; Sullivan & Bal, 2013). Historically, the research has pointed to race as the strongest predictor variable for special education placement for students of color (Cruz & Rodl, 2018; Ford & Russo, 2016; Harry & Klingner, 2006; O'Connor & Fernandez, 2006; Shifrer et al., 2016). However, the exploration and interplay of multiple variables is critical for understanding the context surrounding disproportionality for students of color in special education.

In 2019, a U.S. federal judge upheld a rule that aimed to aggressively address racial disproportionality in special education (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2020). This decision, along with the requirements of the Individual with Disabilities Act (IDEA) of 2004, requires states to monitor and address overrepresentation. However, according to Tefera and Fischman (2020), complying with policy alone will not “disrupt the social forces that reproduce and sustain racial inequities” (p. 436). Rather, an interdisciplinary approach must be used to effectively study disproportionality in special education to uncover the complex historical, social, and individual factors contributing to the incidence of overrepresentation and to develop remedies.

Concerns with disproportionality in special education were initially identified by Dunn (1968) who noted that Black students and low-income students were more likely to be identified for special education and more likely to be placed in restricted settings. Since the enactment of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975 and subsequent reauthorizations leading to the IDEA in 2004, the issue of disproportionality has taken center stage among educators, civil rights advocates, researchers, and policy makers who view the issue as a potential violation of educational equity (Ahram et al., 2011; Artiles, 2011; Cavendish et al., 2020; Tefera & Fischman, 2020).

Disproportionality has historically been viewed through multiple frameworks that consider individual and environmental characteristics, social positionality and power dynamics, and the policies and practices of professionals in the identification process (Waitoller et al., 2010). Each of these frameworks offer an understanding of the prevalence of disproportionality however, they are theorized at a macro level versus a micro level. In this way, contextual differences that contribute to or alleviate disproportionality are invisible (Fish, 2019; Sullivan &

Bal, 2013; Tefera & Fischman, 2020; Voulgarides et al., 2017). Further, how the conditions within a school district intersect with risk factors is not widely researched (Cavendish et al., 2020; Harry & Klingner, 2006; Morgan, 2021; Talbott et al., 2011). The relationship between a school district's social and procedural context and disparate disproportionality outcomes was the focus of this study to explore how contextual factors may impact racial disproportionality.

Definitions of Key Terms

The following definitions, listed in alphabetical order, are intended to provide an understanding for the reader of terminology used in this study:

Composition Index: the proportion of those served in special education by a particular group with the proportion of that group in the overall population (Skiba et al., 2008; Voulgarides et al., 2017).

Disability category: a child who meets the criteria under at least one of the 13 disabilities: (a) intellectual disability, (b) hearing impairment, (c) deafness, (d) deaf-blindness (e) speech or language impairment, (f) visual impairment, (g) emotional disturbance, (h) orthopedic impairment, (i) autism spectrum disorder, (j) traumatic brain injury, (k) other health impairment, (l) specific learning disability or, (m) multiple disabilities (IDEA, 2004).

Disproportionality: the overrepresentation or underrepresentation of a racial or minority group relative to the presence of this group in the overall student population (Voulgarides et al., 2017).

Implicit bias: the bias in judgment that results from subtle cognitive processes that operate below conscious awareness (Whatley, 2018).

Individuals with Disability Education Act (IDEA) of 2004: the law that ensures a free appropriate, public education to students with disabilities, and mandates equity and

accountability to meet the needs of children with disabilities (Keogh, 2007; Kramarczuk Voulgarides et al., 2021).

Predictive Factors: factors that lead to the likelihood of a special education identification (Sullivan & Bal, 2013).

Risk: the probability that students of a given racial or ethnic group will be identified as having a disability labeled under special education (Bollmer et al., 2007).

Risk Ratio: the risk of a particular outcome for a particular group against that of the risk of the same outcome for all other groups (Voulgarides et al., 2017).

Significant Disproportionate Representation: disproportionality is considered significant when the overrepresentation crosses a threshold set by state policy or if it meets the definition adopted by the state (Bollmer et al., 2007).

Special Education: specially designed instruction to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability (IDEA, 2004).

Students of color: a term used to describe any student who is of a non-White identity and encompasses all non-White groups (Harry & Klingner, 2006).

Statement of the Problem

The problem explored in this study is the overrepresentation of students of color in special education due to the adverse effects that it has been found to have on students (Cruz & Rodl, 2018; Tefera & Fischman, 2020). Although the IDEA (2004) requires states to develop policies and practices to prevent disproportionality in special education for students of color, there has been little improvement in monitoring and addressing the issue in schools (Strassfeld, 2017).

Research has identified several factors that may influence the prevalence of disproportionality in special education (Ahram et al., 2021; Cavendish et al., 2020; Cooc & Kiru, 2018; Cruz & Firestone, 2022; Lorenz, 2021; Strassfeld, 2017). These factors include student characteristics and demographics, teachers' race and implicit bias, school level characteristics such as size and location, parent characteristics such as education or income-level, and disability category. However, the intersection of these characteristics with different contexts has not been well explored (Cruz et al., 2021; Strassfeld, 2017). As such, the underlying causal factors for disproportionate representation in special education are unclear, particularly across different school settings.

Statement of Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions of school psychologists regarding the factors which may contribute to disproportionality in special education for students of color. School psychologists serve as influential and primary stakeholders in the special education identification process therefore, they can provide insight into factors at the local level (Holman et al., 2021). One concern is that the factors that research has shown to influence overrepresentation do not consistently serve as risk factors across settings (Cruz et al., 2021; Talbott et al., 2011; Waitoller et al., 2010; Woodson & Harris, 2018). Another concern is that there exists a lot of subjectivity in the referral process despite efforts for data-driven decision-making, therefore, developing remedies may be challenging (Holman et al., 2021; Lorenz, 2021; Sullivan & Bal, 2013; Whatley, 2018). In this way, exploring the school contextual factors in conjunction with individual student characteristics provides a more effective framework for understanding and alleviating disproportionality.

Research Questions

Given the extensive literature on the prevalence and adverse impact of disproportionality in special education for students of color, this study sought to explore how factors within individual school contexts influence the prevalence of disproportionality from the perspectives of school psychologists. This study was guided by the following research questions:

- RQ1: How do school psychologists perceive the special education identification process?
- RQ2: What role do school psychologists perceive student characteristics and behaviors play in the decision-making process for special education identification?

Conceptual/Theoretical Framework

My positionality draws from my experience working as a professional school counselor in several different school districts with varying processes for special education identification. I have served marginalized and disabled youth of color and am a mandated member of the planning and placement team during the special education identification process. This positionality has led me to an interpretation of observational data in my professional role that acknowledges the social, historical, and sometimes political factors involved in the identification process across varied settings.

My professional experiences have led me to view disproportionality as a symptom of a larger systemic issue regarding educational access and equity as well as bias. Whether considering over-representation or under-representation, I believe that responses to students of color within the educational system reflect a broader lack of understanding of or attention to the individual backgrounds, academic needs, and potential unique challenges facing students of color. Further, the policies and practices may perpetuate this discrepancy in meeting the needs of students of color, particularly in districts that are largely a majority White student population. As such, the history of disproportionality, how it is measured, how it is framed in the research, and

the impact of disproportionality are important concepts that have emerged from initial research as critical areas to explore.

The theoretical framework that supported and guided this study is drawn from disability critical race theory (Annamma et al., 2013). According to Annamma and Handy (2021), disability critical race theory (DisCrit) suggests that “perceptions about race often influence how one’s ability (in thinking, learning, and behavior) is imagined, surveilled, and evaluated” (p. 42). This lens informs how educators may perceive the behaviors and educational performance of students of color based on socially constructed biases and assumptions (Annamma et al., 2018). As such, students of color are positioned at a disadvantage such that they are presumed as “less than” when their behavior deviates from the norm, and they are more likely to be considered as atypical, problematic, or having a disability (Cruz et al., 2021; Migliarini & Stinson, 2021). This is a direct result of what is historically considered “normal” being tightly connected to the dominant ideology. DisCrit attempts to examine both individual and institutional factors that may lead to specific outcomes for students of color.

According to Cruz et al. (2021), DisCrit emphasizes that practices of “separation and labeling affect multiply marginalized students” (p. 2) in adverse ways. Students of color are more likely to experience segregation from their peers as well as reduced access to high quality education (Lambert et al., 2022; O’Neill, 2022; Skiba et al., 2006). DisCrit suggests the need to investigate the way that our education system privileges White, typical learners to critically examine disproportionality.

Using this theoretical framework, this study explored the experiences of school psychologists, who are integral to the special identification process, to dissect the incidence of disproportionality for students of color within their setting. The exploration of embedded

practices at the local level may help to reveal points where bias may be introduced such as in policies, structures, resources, or perceptions. Further, this may lead to an understanding of how these contextual variables may intersect with student risk factors such as race, socioeconomic status, or gender to contribute to the prevalence of disproportionality in special education for students of color.

Assumptions, Limitations, Scope

The assumptions made in this study are reflected in the methodology chosen.

Phenomenology was used in this study because the researcher presumes that this form of research yields a comprehensive understanding of disproportionality in special education through the common or shared experiences of school psychologists (NeMoyer et al., 2020). A feature of this approach, highlighted by Roberts and Hyatt (2019), is the researcher assumes that the data will reflect the true perceptions of participants and they are responding authentically. In this study, data was collected through in-depth interviews of school psychologists who have experienced this phenomenon. As Creswell and Poth (2018) posit, this research method results in a description of the essence of the phenomenon and offers insight into a common understanding of the phenomenon.

Limitations of this study stem from the methodology used. Because a phenomenological approach requires interpretation of the data, it will inevitably result in the incorporation of any assumptions that a researcher may bring to the table (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To address this limitation, a researcher must be mindful of any personal understandings or positionality that may impact interpretation of the data. Another potential limitation of this method is that it requires skill in the art of interviewing to elicit authentic answers from participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Further, this method is subject to the interpretations of the experiences of the participants

to draw conclusions. As such, a researcher must be skilled to direct the line of questioning to ask any follow-up questions to ensure data is valid and contributes to the research questions. Time and place are also limitations of this study as data represents a specific point in time. The pandemic of the past two years impacts the data collection process as data was captured virtually versus in-person. This shift in data collection method may have limited some collection of interpersonal data such as body language and overall tone of the interview. To mitigate this limitation, a researcher reflection form was utilized to capture researcher impressions immediately following the interview.

The scope in this study was limited because I used convenience sampling drawing from a district that has been cited for disproportionality in special education for students of color. Data was collected from one suburban district to ascertain rich and detailed information related to school psychologists' experience with disproportionality in their context. This delimitation and purposeful sampling of school psychologists restricted the data collection to their experience with the phenomenon due to the key role they play in the special education identification process. Their viewpoint offered empirical and contextual data that directly related to the research questions.

Rationale and Significance

Although there has been extensive research on disproportionality in special education for students of color as well as federal and state policy to address it, disproportionality continues to be a major concern (Cruz et al., 2021; Lewis et al., 2021). Research on the impact of disproportionality in special education for students of color reflects negative outcomes for students (Forber-Pratt et al., 2021; Voulgarides et al., 2017). Specifically, stigma, labeling effects, segregation of placement, and perceived ineffectiveness of special education services

(Cruz & Firestone, 2022; Waitoller et al., 2010). According to Cruz et al. (2021), these outcomes point to questions of educational equity and suggest that educational systems may “perpetuate inequities” (p. 1) through their policies and practices. As such, investigating the influencing systemic factors at the source of the phenomenon is essential to understand how disproportionality manifests at the local level. In this way, contextual factors may affect the rates of disproportionality in special education for students of color. While research has acknowledged the varied contributors to disproportionality, in practice, contextual influences are not commonly accounted for in the data.

Findings from this study may influence educational leaders at the local level to create district and school-based solutions to address disproportionality in special education for students of color. Further, findings may be generalized to develop remedies for other areas of racial disparity including implicit bias, discipline, educational opportunities, and segregated settings. The intent of this study was to understand disproportionality and uncover how educators within schools can serve to reduce disproportionality. Providing data that highlights problematic systemic practices and policies may help to dispel the belief that social, racial, or cultural factors are predictors of academic or behavioral performance that warrant special education identification.

Summary

It has been nearly 50 years since the initial concerns regarding disproportionality in special education for students of color were first identified in the literature by Dunn (1968). Since that time, research has demonstrated persistent racial disproportionality in special education, and the underlying causes for this disparity are often ambiguous or unexplored (Connor, 2017; Cruz & Firestone, 2022; Morgan et al., 2017; Sullivan et al., 2019). Federal and

state regulations have been imposed to measure, monitor, and remediate disproportionality however, their varied implementation and interpretation by individual states has left this problem of practice largely unresolved (Ahram et al., 2021; Cavendish et al., 2020; Kramarczuk Voulgarides et al., 2021; Lewis et al., 2021; Morgan et al., 2017; Sullivan & Osher, 2019).

Research has identified varied frameworks for viewing disproportionality including a sociodemographic model, a critical race lens, and a professional practice analysis (Ahram et al., 2021). Each of these frameworks suggest an approach to understand disproportionality in special education and highlight diverse potential contributors to this phenomenon. Predictive factors including race, socioeconomic status, and gender have been explored to help identify trends in the data (Cruz & Rodl, 2018). Further exploration through a critical race lens of the societal and systemic inequities that students of color face are examined as potential backdrops in the school landscape that contribute to disproportionality (Annamma et al., 2013). An analysis of professional practice considers the eligibility process as a target of disparate treatment of students by race through subjective evaluations, implicit bias, and teacher perceptions (Holman et al., 2021; Sullivan et al., 2019). Although each of these individual frameworks propose the sources of disproportionality, the intersection of these frameworks is not reflected in the research. Further, the frameworks for viewing disproportionality reflect broad examinations of factors that may conceal underlying origins unique to different environments. As such, the prevalence of disproportionality may vary by context pointing to the importance of understanding potential contributing factors at the local level.

This study sought to identify the multiple variables that impact special education disproportionality for students of color including decisions, policies, assumptions, and practices in place at the local level. The decision-making process and criteria that inform the eligibility

determination were an important target of this study. Key players in the referral process provided critical insight into the prevalence of disproportionality at the source of the phenomenon. The perceptions of school psychologists regarding special education identification were explored as they are recognized as highly influential in the evaluation process (Holman et al., 2021; Parker et al., 2020). Other contextual factors, including school and staff demographics, were considered as well as potential factors that influence disproportionality. The triangulation of these multiple data sources was utilized to uncover the contributors of disproportionality and develop practical solutions for educators to alleviate it.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Disproportionate special education identification rates have long been a focus of both quantitative and qualitative research (Cruz & Rodl, 2018; Sullivan & Osher, 2019; Zhang et al., 2014). Disproportionality is defined as the over or under representation of racial or ethnic groups in special education as compared to that of other racial or ethnic groups (Strassfeld, 2017; Thorius & Stephenson, 2012). Studies have focused predominately on over-representation and have highlighted a variety of lenses to use when considering disproportionality including race, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, disability category, referral practices, and societal inequities (Artiles, et al., 2002; Cooc & Kiru, 2018; Cruz & Firestone, 2022; Ford & Russo, 2016; Raines et al., 2012; Sullivan & Bal, 2013). Cruz and Firestone (2022) suggested that students in marginalized groups, such as those who are non-White or from low-income backgrounds, are consistently over-represented in special education which perpetuates educational inequities. Disproportionality has historically been examined in multiple ways – through a sociodemographic model that explores individual and environmental characteristics; through a critical race lens that examines power and social positionality; and through an analysis of the practices and perceptions of professionals that serve in the decision-making process (Waitoller et al., 2010). Studies suggest that race is a strong predictor variable in special education identification, therefore, race is a prominent factor in disproportionality (Connor, 2017; Ford & Russo, 2016; Peterson, 2019; Sullivan & Bal, 2013; Thorius & Stephenson, 2012).

Little research on disproportionality has examined how individual characteristics and societal factors intersect with specific school variables and contexts (Cavendish et al., 2020; Harry & Klingner, 2006; Talbott et al., 2011). Much of the research over the last ten years has

explored individual or societal factors in an isolated way versus studying these factors nested within a specific school context or tied explicitly to the school that a student attends (Tefera & Fischman, 2020; Waitoller et al., 2010). As such, it is unclear if student characteristics such as race or gender are a factor in disproportionality equally across all settings. Further, the impact of school variables such as student-teacher ratios, enrollment, per-pupil expenditures, and teacher demographics on individual student outcomes for students of color is not well researched (Cavendish et al., 2020; Sullivan & Bal, 2013; Talbott et al., 2011; Waitoller et al., 2010). While progress has been made to identify contributors to disproportionality, key relationships among broad policies, racial disparities, and context have emerged as under-explored areas. Fully understanding the local landscape of special education identification may contribute to the development of remedies that may be implemented at the source of the phenomenon. Examining the phenomenon of disproportionality situated within specific contexts will provide a better understanding of how educators can ensure equitable education free from bias for all students (Kramarczuk Voulgarides et al., 2014).

The literature review was conducted within a historical and methodological framework to understand the development of the phenomenon as well as the different methods used to investigate it. The origins of disproportionality along with how the research has evolved over time are presented to illustrate the dynamic and variable understanding of the phenomenon. The differing key approaches used to research the topic are identified and analyzed to highlight the advantages and disadvantages as well as to offer recommendations for investigation of disproportionality in special education moving forward. The literature review demonstrates the widely variable research approaches and seeks to triangulate scholarly thinking on

disproportionality to provide a framework for a comprehensive analysis of the issue at the local level.

The literature review addresses four overarching themes that emerged in the research toward understanding disproportionality in special education. The first theme consists of the historical context of disproportionality and its origin within the research. The second theme consists of the definition of disproportionality along with the complex methodological approaches and controversial interpretations of the data. The third theme discusses the frameworks for viewing disproportionality and the relationship between them. This theme also examines the variables and potential contributors to disproportionality including race, socioeconomic status, gender, behavior, school-based processes and protocols, teacher perceptions and demographics, and student-teacher interactions. The fourth theme presents the impact of disproportionality including labeling effects, segregation of placement, and presumed ineffectiveness of special education services.

Conceptual Framework

Conceptual frameworks are essential to guide a researcher in their work by helping them to organize their thinking and draw from literature and theory to inform their research (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). According to Ravitch and Riggan (2017), a conceptual framework is defined by three key elements: personal interest, topical research, and a theoretical framework. Conceptual frameworks illustrate a researcher's relationship with the study by clarifying what a researcher knows, cares about, and values, as well as how these factors influence the study. The conceptual framework clearly articulates the rationale for a study through personal narrative as well as empirical support from scholarly research (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). By pulling together

personal interest with the topical research, a conceptual framework serves to direct methodology and highlight formal theories that inform a researcher's work.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions of special services staff regarding the factors which may contribute to disproportionality in special education for students of color. Specifically, qualitative data was captured from the school psychologist staff due to their key role in the special education identification process. This approach assumes that individual perceptions and experiences can generate meaning and understanding for a phenomenon and is rooted in social constructivism (Creswell & Poth, 2018). According to Creswell and Poth (2018), social constructivism supports a phenomenological research method to yield multiple and complex views of a phenomenon and "these subjective meanings are negotiated socially and historically" (p. 24). As such, this conceptual framework guided this research to uncover how the varied individual experiences within schools, including norms and procedures, may construct the variable landscape for disproportionality in special education for students of color.

A review of the literature indicated that recent and historical research on disproportionality has largely viewed the topic through two dominant frameworks (Ahram et al., 2021; Waitoller et al., 2010). The first is from a sociodemographic model, including a critical race lens, and the second is from an analysis of professional practice (Ahram et al., 2021; Waitoller et al., 2010). Within these frameworks, variables that may impact disproportionality have been identified including race, socioeconomic status, and gender, as well as implicit bias and procedures and protocols used during the identification process. Each of these frameworks views disproportionality as the result of variable factors which leads to a convoluted understanding of the source of the phenomenon (Ahram et al., 2021). This points to the

importance of viewing disproportionality as a complex phenomenon that cannot be understood fully through the examination of sole frameworks or predictor variables. Rather, exploring how predictor variables intersect and interact with variables within school contexts will offer important insight into disproportionality. As such, further research is required to investigate the source of disproportionality at the school level.

Research has only begun to show the importance of context in the reinforcement or reduction in the prevalence of special education disproportionality for students of color (Tefera & Fischman, 2020). Recent research has examined the role of broad educational policy to effectively address disproportionality within school contexts (Grindal et al., 2019; King Thorius & Maxcy, 2014; Kramarczuk Voulgarides et al., 2014; Sullivan & Osher, 2019; Tefera & Fischman, 2020). These studies illustrated that macro level policies alone do not disrupt the forces that produce disproportionality, and interpretation and implementation practices may play a critical role in their effectiveness. Therefore, examining disproportionality requires a multi-layered and situated approach that considers how different social, historical, and cultural factors are responded to through policy and practice at the school context level.

Theoretical Framework

Critical disability theory situates disability or ableism as cultural, historical, political, and social phenomenon (Annamma et al., 2013; Kozleski et al., 2020). In this way, dis/ability is defined and influenced by cultural and historical definitions of what is considered “normal.” These definitions shape the perceptions and responses toward those with disabilities and result in the formation of specific attitudinal and social environments (Annamma et al., 2013; Ellis-Robinson, 2021). Similarly, critical race theory upholds that race is socially constructed and racism is not merely a product of individual bias or prejudice (Jaulus, 2020).

Rather, racial bias is embedded in the policies, practices, and legal systems that frame our experiences. As such, a central tenet for both critical disability theory and critical race theory is that inequalities are rooted in the foundational practices of our culture and systematically serve to maintain structures of power while simultaneously disadvantaging others.

Disability critical race theory (DisCrit) examines the intersection of disability theory and critical race theory through investigation of multiple power relationships that impact exclusion and stigmatization and define groups of people into categories deemed by society as inferior (Annamma et al., 2013; Kozleski et al., 2020; Kulkarni et al., 2021). This relatively new foundational framework proposed by Annamma et al. (2013) serves to understand the classification of individuals based on perceptions that are rooted in the values of the dominant culture. Annamma et al. (2013) and Kulkarni et al. (2021) argued that race and disability are interrelated, socially constructed phenomenon that constitute issues of equity and within an educational context, produce systematic differences in educational access and achievement.

Jaulus (2020) described DisCrit as the linkage of disability theory and critical race theory to frame our understanding of race and disability within an educational context. According to Jaulus (2020), a DisCrit theoretical orientation “views student behaviors as not ‘aberrational’, but as a reaction to and/or product of the multiple forms of oppression which interact to shape their educational experience” (p. 554). The underlying assumption for both disability theory and critical theory is that both race and disability are viewed as social constructs that are applied by those in a position of power to other groups of people (Annamma et al., 2018; Ellis-Robinson, 2021; Jaulus, 2020; Kozelski et al., 2020). As such, utilizing a DisCrit framework situates disproportionality within cultural and societal structures

and seeks to uncover how educational systems and practices may contribute to the overrepresentation of students of color in special education.

DisCrit informs our understanding of disproportionality in special education for students of color because it offers insight into the categorization of students based on perceived ability (Annamma et al., 2018; Jaulus, 2020, Kozleski et al., 2020; Kulkarni et al., 2021; Migliarini & Stinson, 2021). As such, students may be identified for special education based on implicit biases or subjective determinations that are rooted in the underlying biased systems or practices of educators. Annamma et al. (2013) offered that a DisCrit framework in education theorizes about the ways in which perceptions and assumptions about race and ability are layered into educational practices and impact the interactions and experiences of students of color differently than their White peers. This approach highlights the influence that bias may have in the practices of educators.

Using the assumptions guided by DisCrit theory, research questions were developed to explore the underlying systems and perceptions of those involved in the special education referral and identification process. Specifically, how do school psychologists who are case managers in the referral process perceive the identification process and the variable school and student characteristics impacting the decision-making process? Benson et al. (2020) highlighted the variety of frameworks and practices utilized by school psychologists in the identification process. As such, the considerable variability in protocols suggests that the experiences of school psychologists are reflective of contextual differences and require exploration to understand the factors influencing referral rates. Research questions drawing from DisCrit that explore the contextual factors and experiences of staff serving key roles in

the referral process provide critical insight into the development of remedies to address disproportionality.

Strengths of the Theoretical Framework

Disability critical race theory informs the exploration of disproportionality in special education by suggesting that race and disability can be examined through the same lens of inequality and inequity in education (Migliarini & Stinson, 2021). Further, it provides an explanation for the historical development of overrepresentation. The framework situates the phenomenon within the broader societal context and presumes that the prevalence is rooted in collective beliefs and perceptions about ability and normalcy and is upheld by those in power. This broad understanding suggests that remedies may be found in attempts of shifting ideologies and efforts toward cultural sensitivity and awareness.

Another strength of DisCrit is its contribution to bringing potentially biased ideologies to the surface and understanding how our educational practices are shaped by them (Kozleski et al., 2020). This awareness informs how we respond to students and develop equitable policies that serve all students. DisCrit also guides how we can examine and reflect on the systems in place for students and how they may hinder or enhance educational outcomes (Migliarini & Stinson, 2021). DisCrit suggests that research questions that explore the assumptions and perceptions of those involved in the special education referral process can uncover any racialized practices and offer insight for how to remedy them.

Weaknesses of the Theoretical Framework

A limitation of the application of DisCrit in understanding disproportionality includes the central and often narrow focus on the construction of race and disability at the societal level within the framework. Research points to the intersection of a multitude of variables at

both the societal and local level that influence disproportionality, therefore, it is important to consider the complexities at all levels that may play a role (Ahram et al., 2021; Cavendish et al., 2020; Cooc & Kiru, 2018; Cruz & Rodl, 2018; Kvande et al., 2018; Sullivan & Bal, 2013; Talbott et al., 2011; Tefera & Fischman, 2020). While race is a strong and well-researched predictor variable for special education identification, other factors such as poverty, parental support and income, and school characteristics intersect with race to influence disproportionality (Fish, 2019). In this way, students from other often marginalized groups may experience oppression or disadvantage that is not examined as fully within the DisCrit theoretical framework. DisCrit centers on race and disability which may inadvertently underrepresent those from other disadvantaged groups. However, DisCrit offers guidance for analyzing our policies and practices in the name of social justice and educational equity. It serves as a useful theory because it provides insight by pulling together complex variables and concepts into an overarching understanding and attempts to synthesize the current expertise on the topic while stimulating further research (Anfara & Mertz, 2015). As such, DisCrit is a theoretical framework that provides understanding into the development and persistence of disproportionality and suggests some systemic strategies to alleviate it (Annamma et al., 2018; Jaulus, 2020; Kozleski et al., 2021; Kulkarni et al., 2021).

History of Disproportionality in Special Education

There is a longstanding history of disproportionality in special education (Ford & Russo, 2016; Sullivan & Osher, 2019; Thorius & Stephenson, 2012; Zhang et al., 2014). Skiba et al. (2008) suggested that “The disproportionate representation of minority students in special education is among the most critical and enduring problems in the field of special education” (p. 264). Dunn (1968) was the first to call attention to disproportionality. Dunn (1968) suggested

that the overrepresentation of minorities and the separate self-contained programming for students in special education raised significant civil rights concerns (Artiles, 2011; Skiba et al., 2008). Inequities in special education are often framed as a symptom of broader historical educational segregation and racial discrimination (Artiles, 2011; Cavendish et al., 2020; Connor, 2017; Skiba et al., 2008; Thorius & Stephenson, 2012). Dating back to the 1896 doctrine from *Plessy v. Ferguson* that claimed “separate but equal” educational experiences, segregation in schools became the context for the development of schooling. However, separate was not equal in education (Skiba et al., 2008), as was shown by Connor (2017) who found that early education of students of color was intended to only prepare students for lower-ranked jobs, not equal citizenship. It was not until the landmark case of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) during the civil rights movement that the conversation began around access to equal education for all students. This case led the way for education reform and determined that all students, regardless of race, class, disability, etc., had equal rights under the Fourteenth Amendment and ruled segregation in schools unconstitutional (Goddard, 2018; Keogh, 2007).

Following the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) case, progress continued to be made within legislation against racial discrimination which eventually trickled down to schools. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, specifically Title VI, prohibited discrimination based on race and national origin in programs that receive federal financial assistance such as educational systems (Education and Title VI, 2015). The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) enacted in 1965 by President Lyndon B. Johnson demonstrated the nation’s commitment to ensuring equal access to a quality education for all students by providing funding for schools for resources to support educational programming. One year following the enactment of ESEA, Title VI (1966) was added to ESEA to provide financial assistance to states to support the education of

students with disabilities and later became known as the Education of the Handicapped Act (EHA) in 1970 (Goddard, 2018). This act was a pivotal statute written specifically for children with disabilities (Keogh, 2007).

ESEA has been reauthorized every five years and amendments have been made as the educational landscape shifts (Paul, 2016). One significant amendment was made in 1974 which required states that receive federal funding for special education to provide full educational opportunities for all children with disabilities. A year following this amendment, Public Law 94-142 was put into place that adapted EHA to the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 and guaranteed a free appropriate public education (FAPE), federal financial assistance, due process, and ongoing oversight of progress for students with disabilities (Keogh, 2007). Public Law 94-142 was landmark legislation that mandated that schools meet the educational needs of all students, regardless of disability (Paul, 2016). In 1990, Public Law 94-142 was amended and renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and was amended again in 1997 and 2004. IDEA mandates FAPE and access to education in the least restrictive environment (LRE). Students with disabilities are protected under IDEA, and their educational program and qualifying procedures must meet the requirements as specified in the law (Keogh, 2007). The mandates in IDEA drive the processes and protocols developed by districts, and districts are required to maintain data related to their special education process and programming.

Defining and Measuring Disproportionality in Special Education

The 1997 amendment of IDEA was the first-time disproportionality was mentioned in the law (Voulgarides et al., 2017). The language included specific requirements for individual states to collect data around disproportionality regarding race and disability classification, as well as

educational setting (Voulgarides et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2014). However, despite this mandate, the requirements were not clearly specified leaving states and individual school districts confused about how to interpret the law (Albrecht et al., 2012; Kramarczuk Voulgarides et al., 2021; Losen & Orfield, 2002; Sullivan & Osher, 2019). The 2004 reauthorization of IDEA included further guidance for states on how to monitor disproportionality, the formula for determining disproportionality, requirements for states to set aside funds to address disproportionality, and mandates for action plans to be made public (Albrecht et al., 2012; Voulgarides et al., 2017). The 2004 reauthorization also acknowledged that “black students continue to be overrepresented in special education in specific settings” (Voulgarides et al., 2017, p. 68), such as in more restrictive placements and disciplinary suspensions. This acknowledgement set the stage for the explosion of nationwide research efforts to identify, examine, and remediate disproportionality (Albrecht et al., 2012; Voulgarides et al., 2017). Initial research efforts focused on demographic variables as risk factors for disproportionality, but later research expanded to include contextual factors at the district level as well as cultural and societal implications (Skiba et al., 2008).

Disproportionality Formula

There are three common methods for measuring and determining disproportionality in special education (Boneshefski & Runge, 2014; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Skiba et al., 2008; Voulgarides et al., 2017). The first is using a composition index that compares the proportion of those served in special education by a particular group with the proportion of that group in the overall population (Skiba et al., 2008; Voulgarides et al., 2017). The other two methods include using a risk index or a risk ratio (Bollmer et al., 2007; Skiba et al., 2008). The risk ratio is the most used measure of disproportionality (Coker, 2020; Skiba et al., 2008; Voulgarides et al.,

2017). The risk ratio compares the risk of a particular outcome for a particular group against that of the risk of the same outcome for all other groups (Voulgarides et al., 2017). In the case of disproportionality, there is little consistency across states on which groups to use as the comparison – either all other racial groups or just White students (Boneshefski & Runge, 2014; Coker, 2020; Elder et al., 2021; Skiba et al., 2008; Thorius & Stephenson, 2012; Voulgarides et al., 2017).

Although there has been some movement by the United States Department of Education to standardize measurements of disproportionality, significant confusion remains because states are permitted to define their own standard of disproportionality (Coker, 2020; Coutinho & Oswald, 2000; Cruz & Rodl, 2018; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Sullivan & Osher, 2019; Thorius & Stephenson, 2012). Many studies have criticized the use of risk ratios as a solitary source of measurement because it does not allow for contextual factors or variations in regional or local practices to fully capture the complexity of disproportionality (Boneshefski & Runge, 2014; Coker, 2020; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Skiba et al., 2008). Further, risk ratios are not uniformly calculated even at the state level leaving educators unclear about the accuracy of the data (Boneshefski & Runge, 2014).

Frameworks for Viewing Disproportionality

Recent research on disproportionality has viewed the topic through two dominant frameworks (Ahram et al., 2021; Waitoller et al., 2010). The first is from a sociodemographic model and the second is from an analysis of professional practice (Ahram et al., 2021; Waitoller et al., 2010). While the studies using these frameworks share a goal of understanding disproportionality, their conclusions often diverge, and their interpretations of the phenomenon may lead to a fragmented understanding of disproportionality (Ahram et al., 2021).

Sociodemographic Model

The sociodemographic model considers the characteristics of individuals and contexts as factors contributing to disproportionality (Ahram et al., 2021; Waitoller et al., 2010). These characteristics include such things as race, socioeconomic status, gender, geographic location, behavior, and school enrollment data. However, the most widely researched variables include race, socioeconomic status, gender, and behavior due to the reporting mandates outlined in the IDEA (2004) which require states to maintain and report data for these variables (Kramarczuk Voulgarides et al., 2021).

Race

Research has noted race as the greatest predictor of placement in special education (Coutinho & Oswald, 2000; Dunn, 1968; Fish, 2019; Skiba et al., 2013; Zhang et al., 2014). Ahram et al. (2021) state, “nationally, students of color are numerically disproportionately represented in special education classifications” (p. 311). Due to IDEA (2004) regulating and monitoring disproportionality for racial and ethnic subgroups only, the research focuses on the correlation between race and disproportionality (Goddard, 2018; Sullivan & Osher, 2019). There exists a large body of work that explores how race intersects with special education placement and has consistently found that “race is a strong predictor of disproportionality in identification for special education” (Cruz & Rodl, 2018, p. 58). Race has been a consistent factor in disproportionality research nationally, however, when controlling for other variables such as income level, age of diagnosis, and academic measures, the impact varied (Cruz & Rodl, 2018; Elder et al., 2021; Fish, 2019; Morgan, 2021).

The root of the research on race and special education placement began with Dunn (1968) who found that minority students from low-income backgrounds were disproportionately placed

in self-contained classrooms (Skiba et al., 2013). Dunn's (1968) work was pivotal for the educational experiences of students of color and ultimately led to the legislative actions ending with the IDEA (Skiba et al., 2008). Although early researchers were able to statistically identify disproportionality, they were unable to provide thorough explanations or remedies for the phenomenon (Ahram et al., 2011; Skiba et al., 2008). Similar concerns persist in identifying strategies to help alleviate disproportionality (Cavendish et al., 2020; Kramarczuk Voulgarides et al., 2021).

Studies have demonstrated that African American students and American Indian or Alaskan native students are overrepresented in special education, particularly in disability classifications that include subjective judgments such as emotional disability and learning disability (Ahram et al., 2021; Fish, 2019; Lambert et al., 2022; Thorius & Stephenson, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2020). These specific special education classifications utilize the judgments of educators to qualify a student for services, therefore, inconsistencies exist in referral data used for qualification (Lambert et al., 2022; Skiba, 2013; Sullivan & Bal, 2013; Zhang et al., 2014). As such, states are required to monitor, report, and address significant disproportionality in the identification of the following disability categories: intellectual disability, specific learning disability, emotional disturbance, speech or language impairment, other health impairment, and autism (IDEA, 2004).

The cause of the disproportionate data is controversial as evidenced by the varying focuses within the research field and inconsistencies in data collection methods, however, studies have shown that structural racism and inequalities within society may lead to inequalities in schools as schools are microcosms of society (Cavendish et al., 2020; Connor, 2017; Cooc & Kiru, 2018; Skiba et al., 2005). According to Connor (2017), overrepresentation in special

education reflects other aspects of society where overrepresentation of certain groups exists such as those living in poverty, in single-parent families, and with insufficient housing, healthcare, or quality employment opportunities. As these social inequities persist more often in the lives of students of color, their educational experiences and outcomes are more likely to be impacted (Skiba et al., 2005; Voulgarides et al., 2017).

One explanation behind racial disproportionality is that the behavior and achievement of students of color are perceived as atypical or are interpreted as less desirable in a classroom setting (Artiles, 2011; Cooc & Kiru, 2018; Thorius & Stephenson, 2012). As such, educators are more likely to refer a student for services to address what is perceived as a potential disability (Sullivan et al., 2019; Talbott et al., 2011). New research has demonstrated that the mainstream educational culture is substantively different and disconnected from that of the “cultural orientations of communities of color” (Skiba et al., 2008, p. 277) which contributes to racial disproportionality in special education. This emerging focus on cultural relativism offers promising new insight into how educators perceive and understand the behaviors of students of color and suggests potential remedies to alleviate mislabeling (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2019; Forber-Pratt et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2014).

Socioeconomic Status

Research has focused on the impact of poverty as a confounding variable for race leading to a higher likelihood of a special education referral (Severance & Howell, 2017; Skiba et al., 2005; Kvande et al., 2018; Woodson & Harris, 2018). With a higher percentage of minorities living in poverty, students are more likely to experience risk factors for poor educational outcomes and compromised development such as lack of early educational experiences, quality health care, and food insecurity (O’Connor & Fernandez, 2006; Sullivan & Bal, 2013). Through

this lens, poverty constitutes a high-risk environment, therefore, the normal level of achievement is shifted (O'Connor & Fernandez, 2006). Students from low socioeconomic status (SES) often face lower social support networks and access to quality childcare which has been found to negatively impact student educational outcomes and preparedness for school (Kvande et al., 2018; Skiba et al., 2005; Voulgarides et al., 2017). Shifrer et al. (2016) and Skiba et al. (2005) found that disproportionate identification is driven by differences in SES, and the overlap between race and poverty heightens the likelihood of special education identification.

When considering SES, researchers have examined the impact of poverty beyond the individual experience to the financial state of the school district (Cruz & Rodl, 2018; Morgan et al., 2017). Research related to disproportionality in poorer school districts showed the opposite of overrepresentation such that there exists an underrepresentation of minority students in special education (Cruz & Rodl, 2018; Morgan et al., 2017). Schools that are situated in high poverty areas with low funding often lack intensive resources to support struggling students (Goddard, 2018; Morgan, 2021). In these circumstances, disparities in educational opportunities and lack of supportive programming may explain the lower numbers of students placed in special education overall in high poverty school districts (Morgan et al., 2017). As such, the research pointed to diverging disproportionality outcomes for students from low SES backgrounds resulting from the economic state of the district. In well-funded districts, disproportionality is more pervasive for students from low SES however, the opposite is true for poorly funded districts (Morgan et al., 2017; Skiba et al., 2008). Despite the varying impact of socioeconomic status on disproportionality based on individual and school characteristics, the research is clear that SES is a contributing factor to the educational opportunities afforded to students and impacts the degree to which special education services are implemented (Cruz & Rodl, 2018; Talbott et al., 2011).

The degree to which SES impacts outcomes may reflect, in part, the extent to which social inequalities are able to be alleviated by schools (Cooc & Kiru, 2018).

Gender and Behavior

Despite receiving less attention than racial or ethnic disproportionality, the overrepresentation of males in special education has been well documented (Cooc & Kiru, 2018; Coutinho & Oswald, 2000; Kvande et. al, 2018; Severance & Howell, 2017; Woodson & Harris, 2018). Males make up nearly two-thirds of the special education population in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Cooc and Kiru (2018) stated that the overrepresentation of males "...may stem from expectations of classroom behavior that differ for females and lead to identification for special education, particularly in the emotional and behavior disorder category" (p. 2). Further studies showed that males in special education spend more time in restrictive settings than females (Dowdy et al., 2016; Sullivan & Bal, 2013). Male behavior is often more outward and obvious therefore, it is perceived as more aggressive and problematic (Ahram et al., 2021; Dowdy et al., 2016). As such, males are removed from the general education setting more frequently and have more limited access to the full educational opportunities of their female counterparts (Kvande et. al, 2018; Severance & Howell, 2017).

Some of the literature has pointed to the overrepresentation of males in special education as a function of the underrepresentation of females (Dowdy et al., 2016; Severance & Howell, 2017). Dowdy et al. (2016) discussed the impact of teacher academic and behavioral expectations on perception of student performance. This study suggested that boys may be held to higher expectations, therefore, when they do not achieve the level expected, they are more likely to be referred for services. Further, in the case of behavior, because boys tend to exhibit more outward behaviors, their behavior is more likely to be addressed due to low teacher

tolerance (Dowdy et al., 2016; Sullivan & Bal, 2013). These factors contribute to the higher referral rates for boys and lower referral rates for girls and may not accurately reflect true differences in rates of disability (Dowdy et al., 2016; Severance & Howell, 2017; Sullivan & Bal, 2013).

Another concerning finding in the research on gender differences in special education rates is that student behavior was more predictive of special education referral than was academic achievement (Ahram et al., 2021; Cooc & Kiru, 2018; Lambert et al., 2022; Severance & Howell, 2017). Because behavior is more disruptive and perceived by teachers as more concerning than academic underachievement, students are more likely to be referred for services (Lambert et al., 2022; Severance & Howell, 2017). This practice inherently favors a higher referral rate for males due to their more characteristic outward behavior. Overtness of behavior is a factor in the underrepresentation of females in special education due to their tendency to exhibit more internalized behavior (Cooc & Kiru, 2018). As such, teacher perceptions of behavior for males and females more strongly correlate with the referral rates for special education than does their academic achievement (Gregory et al., 2017; Lambert et al., 2022).

Professional Practice Model

The role of various professional practices in the creation and maintenance of overrepresentation in special education has been well documented in the literature (Benson et al., 2020; Connor, 2017; Voulgarides et al., 2017). Ahram et al. (2021) suggested that educators differ in their approach to the special education classification process for students of color based on varying interpretations and assessments of abilities and behaviors. As such, students of color are more likely to be referred and identified as disabled within their local context due to racialized professional practices. Several notable themes have emerged from the research that

may contribute to disproportionality including school-based processes and protocols, teacher perceptions and demographics, and teacher interactions with students (Ahram et al., 2021; Holman et al., 2021; Jacoby-Senghor, 2016; Lorenz, 2021; Peterson, 2019; Talbott et al., 2011; Voulgarides et al., 2017; Woodson & Harris, 2018).

School-Based Processes and Protocols

The three-step referral process for special education services as dictated by the IDEA (2004) includes student interventions prior to the referral, evaluations and data collection during the referral process, and final eligibility determination by a team of educational professionals and family members. Numerous factors during this process may contribute to disproportionality (Ahram et al., 2011; Harry & Klingner, 2006; Holman et al., 2021; Skiba et al., 2008; Woodson & Harris, 2018).

According to Harry and Klingner (2006), within the three steps of the referral process, there are several inequities that may occur. Schools that do not have a consistent and scientifically researched-based intervention process prior to referral, do not adequately provide prevention services to students, and do not offer students the opportunity to learn prior to the referral (Ahram et al., 2011; Dowdy et al., 2016; O'Neill, 2022). The lack of intervention services prior to referral prevents students from the opportunity to receive targeted strategies to improve their academic or behavioral performance (Dowdy et al., 2016; Gregory et al., 2017; O'Neill, 2022; Raines et al., 2012). Without targeted intervention to strengthen student skills and close achievement gaps, students are more likely to be referred to special education (Ahram et al., 2011; Dowdy et al., 2016; O'Neill, 2022).

During the second phase of the referral process, formal and informal data is collected. This may include psychological evaluations, classroom performance data, behavioral data, parent

and student input, and teacher observational data (Dowdy et al., 2016). Research has shown an increased risk of disproportionality throughout this process due to the often-subjective nature of the evaluative data, particularly for evaluations in consideration of certain disability categories such as learning disability and emotional disturbance (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2019; Cavendish et al., 2020; Connor, 2017; Lambert et al., 2022; Shifrer, 2013; Sullivan & Bal, 2013). Teacher biases, perceptions, and expectations will contribute to their evaluation of the student's academic achievement and behavior (Ahram et al., 2011; Holman et al., 2021; Waitoller et al., 2010; Woodson & Harris, 2018).

Substantial research has pointed to bias within the tools used for assessment as well as in the interpretation of results (Elias, 2021; Fernández & Abe, 2018; Fletcher & Miciak, 2019; Han et al., 2019; McGill et al., 2016). Elias (2021) found that historically, cognitive assessments have been over-emphasized in learning disability determinations, and the tests themselves were often interpreted through the normative lens reflective of the majority White culture. Further, tests that were developed in a Western society revealed more instrument bias when used to assess members of non-Western cultures (Fernández & Abe, 2018). As such, it cannot be assumed that constructs can be evaluated similarly across diverse cultures when normative data reflects the culture that the test was developed in.

Contextual factors such as second language acquisition, access to instruction, economic disadvantages, and emotional problems have also been found to contribute to variance in performance on achievement testing (Elias, 2021). Without the consideration of the range of factors that may influence testing results, evaluative tools utilized in the special education referral process may produce potentially biased and unreliable results (Fletcher & Miciak, 2019). In this way, assessments may not reflect accurate student performance data.

The last phase of the referral process includes review of the eligibility checklist with members of the planning and placement team. The outcome of this step reflects the school's overall referral practices, philosophy of special education, and culture of referral (Harry & Klingner, 2006; Waitoller et al., 2010). Referral protocols that are weak and not data-driven will contribute to overrepresentation, particularly for students of color (Dowdy et al., 2016; Harry & Klingner, 2006; O'Neill, 2022). Waitoller et al. (2010) and Lambert et al. (2022) found that when behavior was noted as a concern in the referral, the team eligibility decision became largely focused on subjective evidence and leaned away from data-driven analysis and interpretation. Dowdy et al. (2016) also noted that pressures to place students in special education may drive decision-making rather than data, particularly when concerns are behavioral in nature. This research illustrated the subjective nature of the referral process and further highlighted areas that may be problematic in disability determination and lead to over or underrepresentation.

Teacher Perceptions and Demographics

At the forefront of the research regarding the role that teacher perception may play in disproportionality is the concept of bias. Literature suggested that disproportionality in special education may emerge from cultural or implicit bias in school practices and beliefs of school staff (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Chin et al., 2020; Morris & Perry, 2017). Implicit bias is the bias in judgment that results from subtle cognitive processes that operate below conscious awareness (Whatley, 2018). Individuals form implicit biases unknowingly based on their own perceptions and experiences, and these biases shape their view of the world (Warikoo et al., 2016). Implicit biases influence the educational outcomes of students (Chin et al., 2020; Holman et al., 2021; Peterson et al., 2016; Woodson & Harris, 2018). Teacher bias contributes to disproportionality

because referrals and placement are often based primarily on the beliefs and assumptions of educators (Ahram et al., 2011; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Morris & Perry, 2017).

Research has demonstrated that implicit biases are pervasive and negative towards students of color and students from low SES backgrounds (Chin et al., 2020; Severance & Howell, 2017; Warikoo et al., 2016). Further, they are difficult to address because implicit biases occur below the threshold of awareness and are rooted in an individual's prior experiences that guide their judgments about others (Whatley, 2018). Therefore, the individual is unaware of their own subjective biases and cannot actively challenge them. Without intentional intervention to bring implicit biases to the surface, biases will continue to perpetuate disproportionality (Connor, 2017; Lorenz, 2021; Warikoo et al., 2016; Whatley, 2018).

Teacher perceptions and expectations on behavior are often rooted in the majority White cultural value system (Connor, 2017; O'Connor & Fernandez, 2006). As such, teachers will use this idealized norm as the measure with which they evaluate all student performance (Connor, 2017; Cooc & Kiru, 2018; Ford & Russo, 2016; Lorenz, 2021; Warikoo et al., 2016). O'Connor and Fernandez (2006) suggested, "in this context, poor and minority youth are destined to 'demonstrate' more academic and behavioral problems, which increase their likelihood of being referred for special education" (p. 8). Through this lens, behavior that does not match the dominant culture will be perceived as problematic and deviant. Skiba et al. (2008) found that the exception to this frame of reference occurred only when the race of the teacher matched that of the student.

Warikoo et al. (2016) examined educators' threshold for supporting struggling students and found that when faced with students of color, particularly when the educator was not a person of color, educators demonstrated lower tolerance and referred students for discipline or

services more frequently. Further, it was unclear whether teacher tolerance was due to perceptions or assumptions of the individual student or due to associations with the minority group (Warikoo et al., 2016). Gregory et al. (2017) identified specific culturally based judgments that teachers may make about dress, speech, tone of voice, and body language that may impact a teacher's perception of a student's behavior. For example, Morris (2016) described the negative perception of Black females who are loud or have an overly assertive "attitude" which, according to Morris, is rooted in a lack of cultural understanding for Black girls' desire to be seen and heard. Voulgarides et al. (2017) offered "there is growing empirical evidence that teacher beliefs and expectations of students, based on race, relate to disproportionate outcomes" (p. 65). As such, within the referral process, Holman et al. (2021) suggested that educators must be cognizant of how implicit and explicit biases shape assessment of student abilities which influences the decision-making process. This research illustrated that teacher bias may play an influential role in the overrepresentation of students of color in special education.

Student-Teacher Interactions

Dominant beliefs about what is considered appropriate and expected behavior may influence teacher treatment towards students and in turn create a self-fulfilling prophecy for students of color (Chin et al., 2020; Lorenz, 2021). False teacher expectations based on implicit or explicit biases shape how a teacher interacts with students and often lead to negative student-teacher relationships (Gregory et al., 2017; Morris, 2016). These adverse interactions become internalized by students who in turn, begin to shape their own behavior in response to the negative treatment which reinforces the inaccurate stereotype held by the teacher (Banks, 2017; Banks & Hughes, 2013; Lorenz, 2021). This cycle of damaging student-teacher relationships perpetuates the inaccurate assessments of teachers and increases the likelihood of referral for

special education services (Lorenz, 2021; Woodson & Harris, 2018). Skiba et al. (2008) posited that a moderating effect for diminishing the self-fulfilling prophecy occurred when teacher race matched the race of the student. This research suggested the importance of diversifying the teaching staff to match the racial diversity of the student population.

Impact of Disproportionality in Special Education

Disproportionality is associated with a variety of detrimental effects. Waitoller et al. (2010) advanced three reasons to explain why overrepresentation is problematic in nature. The reasons included: “labeling effects, segregation of placement, and presumed ineffectiveness of special education services” (p. 32). Each of these reasons illustrated the detrimental impact of disproportionality on students and highlighted the need for continued research to develop adequate remedies that improve student outcomes (Voulgarides et al., 2017; Waitoller et al., 2010).

Labeling Effects

Disability labels are known to precipitate low expectations, poor educational outcomes, and increased behavior issues (Banks & Hughes, 2013; Benner & Graham, 2013; Kearney, 2011; Lambert et al., 2022; Morgan et al., 2017; Shifrer, 2013; Voulgarides et al., 2017). Waitoller et al. (2010) and Lambert et al. (2022) reported that teachers focused more on the negative behaviors and performance of those students who were labeled versus those students who demonstrated the same behaviors but were not labeled. Artiles (2002) found that students who have been identified with a special education label are perceived as lacking the skills and knowledge to be successful in school. This stigma leads to poor educational trajectories for students and is often perpetuated by low expectations of parents as well as teachers (Shifrer, 2013). Over time, this cumulative stigma impacts student self-esteem and self-efficacy leading to

self-fulfilling prophecies of low achievement (Banks, 2017; Cruz & Firestone, 2022; Shifrer, 2013).

Segregation of Placement

IDEA mandates that students must be educated in the least restrictive environment (LRE). However, studies have shown that students of color are likely to be placed in more restricted settings than their White peers with the same disability label (Kramarczuk Voulgarides et al., 2021; Skiba et al., 2008; Waitoller et al., 2010). Kauffman and Anastasiou (2019) suggested that placement in special education may lead to more restrictive settings as a method to maintain racial segregation. Losen and Orfield (2002) also stated that “placement in special education has too often been a vehicle for segregating minority students” (p. 128). These findings suggest that special education placement has societal and cultural implications for minority students that extend beyond the classroom (Kauffman & Anastasiou, 2019; Kramarczuk Voulgarides et al., 2021; Losen & Orfield, 2002).

Segregation of placement also precludes students from access to high quality educational opportunities (Artiles et al., 2002; Cole et al., 2020; Ford & Russo, 2016). According to Shifrer (2013), “students’ access to learning opportunities partially depends on their perceived potential” (p. 464). Students labeled as special education may be placed in more restrictive environments because teachers lack the resources, training, knowledge, and skills to effectively meet the needs of special education students in the LRE (Gregory et al., 2017; Voulgarides et al., 2017). Further, the curriculum offered to special education students in restricted settings often lacks rigor and challenge based on preconceived notions of student potential (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2019; Cruz & Rodl, 2018). These findings suggest that without high quality educational opportunities,

students in restricted settings in special education may not achieve their maximum potential (Hurwitz et al., 2020).

Presumed Ineffectiveness of Special Education Services

The efficacy of special education services has been a subject of controversy for many years (Hurwitz et al., 2020; Keogh, 2007; Waitoller et al., 2010). Data has shown that there exists a considerable achievement gap between students identified for special education services and their peers in the general education population (Ahram et al., 2021; Cole et al., 2020; Hurwitz et al., 2020; Jacoby et al., 2016; Lorenz, 2021). The perceived low abilities of students in special education may hinder a student's progress for return to the general education environment (Hurwitz et al., 2020; Waitoller et al., 2010). Further studies have shown that once a student qualifies for special education, it is unlikely that they will exit (Hibel et al., 2010; Hurwitz et al., 2020; Talbott et al., 2011). Harry and Klingner (2006) and Hurwitz et al. (2020) found that quality of teaching played a role in student progress within special education although limited research is available that considers disability outcomes as a function of poor-quality teaching (Talbott et al., 2011).

Disability classification is also associated with predicted outcomes such that high incidence disabilities including learning disability and emotional disturbance were associated with fewer services and lower academic outcomes as compared to low incidence disabilities such as autism and other health impairment (Cole et al., 2021; Gregory et al., 2017; Shrifur, 2013; Talbott et al., 2011). Cole et al. (2021) discussed the importance of using an ongoing progress monitoring framework to identify the appropriate placement for students to maximize their potential and to continually keep the goal of general education placement as the guidepost. While high expectations are often at odds with availability of resources and staff capacity, special

education services should always be rooted in social justice and offer appropriate opportunities for high quality educational experiences (Cole et al., 2021; Cooc & Kiru, 2018; Hurwitz et al., 2020; Thorius & Stephenson, 2012). Further, consistent review of special education outcomes has been shown to increase the efficacy of special education programming which points to the importance of the use of data to evaluate the quality of services offered to special education students (Cole et al., 2020; Hurwitz et al., 2020; O’Neill, 2022).

Summary

Disproportionate special education identification has primarily been explored through the lenses of race, socioeconomic status, gender, and disability category (Ahram et al., 2021; Cooc & Kiru, 2018). Although there is a strong body of evidence for overrepresentation of students in certain genders, SES, and disability categories, race has been the primary factor for much of the research on disproportionality (Ahram et al., 2021; Albrecht et al., 2012; Cooc & Kiru, 2018; Coutinho & Oswald, 2000).

IDEA (2004) requires that individual states and districts collect and report data related to disproportionality within racial and ethnic subgroups and take steps to remedy any instances of overrepresentation (Keogh, 2017). Although this mandate has been in place since the reauthorization of IDEA in 1997, there is little consistency in how data is captured across states (Boneshefski & Runge, 2014; Kramarczuk Voulgarides et al., 2021; Skiba et al., 2008). As such, disproportionality can be a difficult construct to adequately measure across settings. Studies have pointed to the importance of incorporating data points from a variety of sources to overlay the quantitative data associated with special education identification to determine the incidence of disproportionality (Ahram et al., 2021; Talbott et al., 2011; Zhang et al., 2014).

To fully understand the prevalence of disproportionality, it is important to view special education identification as a function of individual characteristics, school characteristics, societal influences, and broad systems, policies, and practices. As such, it is essential to establish a framework that captures the individual student variables nested within a broader system to understand the complexity of disproportionality and how it may be perpetuated or alleviated. Without this comprehensive viewpoint of the data, it is challenging to draw accurate conclusions about the prevalence of disproportionality at the local level and develop practical remedies to address it.

The literature on disproportionality provided a rich historical understanding of the phenomenon due to the extensive research over time. Cruz and Rodl (2018) summarized plausible factors influencing disproportionality including varying calculation methods for determining disproportionality, sociodemographic factors (race, SES, gender) as well as differences in the special education process (weaknesses in pre-referral intervention opportunities, data used for eligibility determination, teacher perceptions, implicit bias). Due to the legislative actions and mandates required by IDEA, this topic has remained a critical focus of research as well as a concern of educators in practice (Ahram et al., 2021). Many theories have been developed to offer insight into the development of disproportionality including disability critical race theory (Annamma et al., 2018). The research pointed to the importance of viewing disproportionality through the convergence of different scholarly approaches to capture the complexity of the phenomenon (Ahram et al., 2021; Tefera & Fischman, 2020). The research also clearly illustrated the detrimental impact of disproportionality which helps to maintain its place at the forefront of educational research.

Although there has been extensive research examining disproportionality in special education, there are inconsistent findings related to the influence of certain predictor variables. Some of the literature points to SES as a key risk factor for disproportionality (Goddard, 2018; Kvande et al., 2018; O'Connor & Fernandez, 2006) while other studies report that SES alone did not significantly influence rates of special education identification (Artiles, 2011; Voulgarides et al., 2017). There also exists diverging evidence over the existence of overrepresentation due to factors such as inaccurate measurement methods or lack of controlling for certain variables across studies (Cavendish et al., 2020; Morgan et al., 2017). Morgan et al. (2017) found that in many cases, students of color are underrepresented in special education, particularly in poorly funded school districts. Moreover, much of the existing research studies focused solely on certain variables only and did not consider how they are influenced by other factors. There is a gap in the literature toward the understanding of a specific context's intersection with individual student characteristics and influential societal and cultural forces and their impact on disproportionality.

Disproportionality is a complex phenomenon that cannot be understood fully through the examination of sole predictor variables or risk factors. The interaction between a student's individual characteristics and the context of their school will result in variable outcomes. As such, it is important to examine how the characteristics of school contexts might influence the risk for disproportionality. Further, research must go one step further to situate the individual student's experience within the broader societal and cultural systems to best understand the social and racial dynamics influencing disproportionality. Ahram et al. (2021) stated that research has advanced our understanding of disproportionality and demonstrates that "the

likelihood of being classified as disabled varies by context” (p. 328). As such, contextual variables may serve to alleviate or perpetuate disproportionality.

As remedies for disproportionality are developed, the importance of the examination of sociocultural and sociohistorical frameworks has emerged (Ahram et al., 2021; Waitoller et al., 2010). The complexity of the phenomenon suggests that the problem does not emerge due to single predictor variables or only in specific settings; rather, it is situated within a broader context and may be influenced by a variety of individual and contextual characteristics that will vary across settings (Cruz & Rodl, 2018; Sullivan & Bal, 2013; Tefera & Fischman, 2020). As such, disproportionality will be experienced differently for each context demonstrating the critical role that schools have in identifying, addressing, and alleviating overrepresentation.

The knowledge gap identified in the research centers on the impact of the local context in the incidence of disproportionality in special education. In this study, an interdisciplinary lens was utilized to explore the intersection of the predictive factors identified in the research including race, gender, socioeconomic status, and family background, and the contextual influences such as school demographics, implicit bias, and school-based processes and protocols on disproportionality in special education. Conceptual tools from disability critical race theory (DisCrit), which draws from disability theory and critical race theory, were used to explore how the policies, practices, and perceptions at the school level may mediate or reinforce disproportionality. Using these tools as a guide, this study focused on the perceptions of school psychologists as key players in the special education identification process at the local school level to identify critical factors in school practices or policies that may influence disproportionality in special education for students of color.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

In this qualitative phenomenological study, I sought to explore the perceptions of school psychologists regarding the incidence of disproportionality in special education for students of color. Disproportionality in special education, specifically the overrepresentation of racial/minority groups, has been a problem of practice since Dunn called attention to it in 1968 (Artiles, 2011; Skiba et al., 2008). Disproportionality has been viewed as a complex problem because it is not easily defined, it persists over time, and can shift based on a variety of factors including sociodemographic influences as well as professional practice influences (NeMoyer et al., 2020). Although many students benefit from the individualized services offered under special education, research has demonstrated the prevalence of students of color who show little to no educational or behavioral improvement (Kaufman et al., 2021; Powers et al., 2016). Further adverse impacts include stigma, reduced access to high quality educational opportunities, and labeling effects (Hurwitz et al., 2020; Lorenz, 2021; Peterson et al., 2016; Shifrer, 2013). Understanding the role individual contexts have in alleviating or perpetuating educational inequities was a focus of this study. In this chapter, the methodology of the study, including the site information, sampling method, data collection, data analysis, limitations, ethical issues, and trustworthiness is presented.

The purpose of this study was to explore the phenomenon of disproportionality in special education for students of color from the perspective of school psychologists. School psychologists serve as influential leaders in the special education referral process (Parker et al., 2020). As such, their professional experiences can offer critical insight into the contexts, variables, processes, and policies that factor into the referral and identification process.

Disability critical race theory (DisCrit) proposed by Annamma et al. (2013) suggests that disability and race have socially constructed meanings that infiltrate the policies and practices within the education system. In this way, the beliefs and assumptions about a student's ability and race are defined and driven by the dominant culture ideology and lead to educational inequities for students of color (Annamma et al., 2013). DisCrit suggests that race and perceived ability are connected to the educational systems in place that are used to identify students for special education. Thus, DisCrit informed the methodology of this study by targeting the perceptions of school psychologists to uncover any racialized practices, biases, or assumptions that may be contributing to the incidence of disproportionality for students of color, as well as any practices that do not effectively meet the needs of students of color. School psychologists' lived experiences within the school climate and culture help to paint the local landscape of the referral process including the historical practices within their context. Understanding the variables at the source of the phenomenon at the local level served to identify any problematic practices and highlight remedies to alleviate disproportionality.

In this study, I sought to understand disproportionality in special education for students of color through the perceptions of school psychologists. The research questions for this study align with the problem and purpose statements to examine this problem of practice. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do school psychologists perceive the special education identification process?
2. What role do school psychologists perceive student characteristics and behaviors play in the decision-making process for special education identification?

This study utilized a qualitative phenomenological approach to investigate the phenomenon of disproportionality. A phenomenological approach explores the essence of a

phenomenon through participant experiences to develop a collective description of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The benefit of this approach is that it provides a deep understanding of the phenomenon from the participants' perspectives. In this study, the experiences of school psychologists offered rich insight related to disproportionality within their context.

A phenomenological research design was chosen to emphasize the participant's voice as a window into understanding the incidence of disproportionality at the local level. NeMoyer et al. (2020) gathered diverse stakeholder perspectives regarding racial disproportionality in educational placement to develop a "shared language of the problem" (p. 44) and to develop future reform strategies. This method served to identify important collective considerations when attempting to address the issue. Because scholars have deemed disproportionality as "multiply determined" (Skiba et al., 2008, p. 264), collective experiences may shed light on the host of variables at play within schools that contribute to overrepresentation. Similarly, in this study, I explored the experiences of school psychologists to facilitate the connection between the phenomenon and variables unique to the individual context.

Site Information and Demographics/Setting

The site chosen for this study was a school district in the state of Connecticut that has been cited for disproportionality in special education for students of color. The district is considered a moderate size with approximately 3,000 students in grades K-12. As of 2020, the district had 13.7 percent of the population identified for special education which is below the state average of 16.0 percent (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2021). Students of color represent approximately 24.1% of the student population (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2021). The student population also includes students who attend from urban districts.

Collectively, these students make up approximately three percent of the overall district population. Site access and permission for the study were granted through written contact with central office administration (see Appendix A).

In accordance with Section 616(a)(3)(C) of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (2004) and Connecticut's State Performance Plan/Annual Performance Report (SPP/APR) (2021) Indicators 9 and 10 which measure racial disproportionality in special education overall and racial disproportionality within certain disability categories respectively, the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) has determined that a district, which has a Relative Risk Index (RRI) equal to or greater than 3.00 by race and ethnicity in any of six disability categories or overall special education rate will be cited for disproportionality and required to complete an assessment of their policies, practices, and procedures. The CSDE uses an RRI to compare the risk of students with disabilities in one racial/ethnic group being identified for special education to the risk of students with disabilities in all other racial/ethnic groups being identified. The site chosen for this study received a citation for specific learning disability among Black students with a relative risk index of 3.28. This means that Black students are 3.28 times more likely than their non-Black peers to be identified as having a specific learning disability in this district.

Participants/Sampling Method

Qualitative research sample sizes typically are fewer in number than quantitative studies to emphasize and foster a deep understanding of participant experiences with the phenomenon (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). Towards that end, there are seven total full-time school psychologists at the site chosen for this qualitative study. All seven within the district were invited to participate. One or two consulting school psychologists would have been invited to participate if

fewer than six school psychologists consented to participate. However, this was not necessary as all seven psychologists consented to participate in the study.

School psychologists serve as leaders in the special education identification process (NeMoyer et al., 2020). Further, according to Sullivan et al. (2019), special education evaluations “remain the primary professional activity for most school psychologists” (p. 91). As such, school psychologists were selected as participants for this study because of their extensive experience and influence in the referral process. Marrs and Little (2014) utilized a sample size of seven school psychologists to study their perceptions regarding barriers to intervention implementation to “explore the unique experiences and perceptions” (p. 28) and to develop “valid socially constructed versions of the truth” (p. 28). In this way, generalizations can be developed from common experiences to make sense of a phenomenon. In this study, all seven psychologists within the site were invited to participate in individual semi-structured interviews. All consenting psychologists served as participants for this study and collectively represented experiences across all grade levels K-12.

Purposeful criterion sampling was utilized to identify the participants of this study. Purposeful sampling was used to provide “context-rich and detailed accounts of specific populations and locations” (Ravitch & Carl, 2021, p. 83). According to Creswell and Poth (2018), criterion sampling works well “when all individuals studied represent people who have experienced the phenomenon” (p. 157). Participants were selected specifically for their ability to answer the research questions related to the special education identification process at their location through individual interviews. Individual interviews provide rich descriptions of participants’ experiences and details of the setting. Participants in this study must have met the following criteria:

1. Hold a position as a certified school psychologist
2. Participate in the special education referral process
3. Work within a district cited for disproportionality

Instrumentation and Data Collection

A qualitative phenomenological research approach was utilized for this study. A qualitative phenomenological research approach uses interpretive methods as tools to develop an understanding of a phenomenon through exploration of the experiences of others (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). For this study, qualitative data was collected through virtual interviews to gain insight into the experiences of school psychologists related to special education disproportionality for students of color. Interviews were selected for use in this study due to their ability to offer detailed perspectives, contextualized descriptions of experiences, and holistic interpretations of events and phenomena (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

The interview protocol utilized as a data collection instrument was developed by me and adapted from Losen and the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (2008) *Annotated Checklist for Addressing Racial Disproportionality in Special Education* (see Appendix B). Per the disclaimer on the instrument, the questionnaire may be reprinted in whole or part only with express written permission from Daniel Losen. I emailed Daniel Losen directly and received written permission to utilize the instrument for the study (see Appendix C). The interview protocol has been validated through consultation with a subject matter expert in the field of special education and review with one school psychologist.

A modified Losen (2008) checklist was utilized because it was developed to be used as a tool for schools to audit the practices at the local level to assist in diagnosing and addressing racial disproportionality in special education. Further, the questions on the checklist were derived

specifically from research on factors that contribute to disproportionality in special education for students of color (Losen, 2008). The interview protocol used in this study incorporated three areas of questioning as outlined in the Losen (2008) checklist. The three areas included: district and school resource issues; system policy, procedure, and practice issues at district, school, and classroom levels; and environmental factors. These areas of inquiry aligned with the research questions and thematic buckets that emerged in the literature review as significant factors in the incidence of disproportionality. The interview protocol contained 20 questions related to each of these areas to uncover the perspectives of school psychologists that align with the research questions (see Appendix D).

Following approval from the Institutional Review Board (see Appendix E), I sent an invitation to qualifying participants requesting their participation in the study (see Appendix F) along with a participant information sheet that outlines the purpose of the study, the potential risks and benefits, confidentiality measures, permission to record, and the intended process and timeline for the study (see Appendix G). Once participants were confirmed for the study, a virtual interview was scheduled at a convenient time selected by the participant.

Each participant was assigned a confidential identification number for the study using a random number generator application to de-identify their name. This identification number was used throughout the data collection process including on all forms, consents, transcripts, and digital recordings. Further, the individual identification number was used in the data coding and analysis process such that full participants' names were not used in any component of the study.

A master key was developed and maintained solely by the researcher that contained the participant initials linked with their identification number. The master key was kept on a

password protected laptop and file separate from the study data. The master key was destroyed as soon as possible following transcript verification from participants.

Participants were provided with available interview times and selected their preferred time slot. All interviews took place virtually using Zoom Video Conferencing and were recorded using Zoom. All interviews were then uploaded and transcribed using the Sonix program, a transcription program that is compatible with the Zoom program.

This study utilized a semi-structured interview process. According to Marrs and Little (2014), semi-structured interviews allow for structure and direction during the interview process while also creating unstructured space for participants to authentically share “how interventions or programs actually work in real-life contexts” (p. 27). Interview questions were developed that initially established rapport and then strategically eased into the discussion and investigation of disproportionality. Questions focused on exploring the participants’ perceptions of practices and beliefs within their context related to disproportionality. Additional probing questions were asked, when necessary, to gather more depth and breadth of responses.

During the interview, I collected handwritten notes on a template (see Appendix H). Interview lengths varied based on participant responses. Directly following the interview, I completed a summary sheet that captured immediate impressions including key ideas, questions, and my reflection regarding methodology (see Appendix I). The questions on the researcher reflection are guided by the work of Gesch-Karamanlidis (2015) who suggested reflexive strategies for novice qualitative researchers to avoid communicative barriers during the interview process. This step helps to ensure that researchers “are careful not to over-insert ourselves into the space we’ve created for our participants, in a way that would negatively impact our ability to hear their voices” (Gesch-Karamanlidis, 2015, p. 713). Using this self-reflection tool, the

interviewer is aided in their ability to construct meaning from responses that reflect participant voice such that any researcher bias is identified and minimized. This tool also served as a strategy for the triangulation of data.

After participant interviews were transcribed, a copy of the transcription was mailed to participants for verification. Participants had five days to review the transcription and make any corrections to the content and/or discuss any further details with the researcher. One revision was made to one transcript for clarity of participant response where the audio recording did not pick up the response. Once the transcriptions were considered complete following verification from participants and multiple readings by me, the data analysis process began.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a semantic data analysis approach to develop meaning from text (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This protocol involves counting text and phrases to develop patterns, reducing data into themes through coding, and finally representing data in figures or discussion (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data analysis for this study began with multiple readings of transcripts and highlighting of segments of text. The first reading was an unstructured reading (Ravitch & Carl, 2021) focused on first impressions and basic understanding of content. According to Ravitch and Carl (2021), unstructured readings are a “vital first step to get oriented to and immersed in the entire data corpus” (p. 261). Subsequent readings focused on patterns, variations, contexts, concepts, and/or ideas that emerged within the text.

Each virtual interview recording was transcribed verbatim using the Sonix program that is compatible with Zoom. Each transcription was reviewed at least two times by me and then shared with the participants for member checking to ensure accuracy. I developed individual codes for each question and reviewed my notes and reflections to assist in code development

(Creswell & Poth, 2018). Researcher memos and reflections assist in the triangulation of data and data interpretation by synthesizing the data into meaning and emergent ideas (Miles & Huberman, 1994). High frequency codes were identified and highlighted, and low frequency codes were eliminated from the final data analysis. Low frequency codes were defined as those that appeared in less than 25% of the participant responses or those that did not directly apply to a research question. However, I kept some codes that were not representative of 75% of participants' responses to include a counter voice. Sterpin (2018) acknowledged the importance of including infrequent codes to represent potentially marginalized voices as well as providing additional insights toward remedies for disproportionality. A codebook was generated from the resulting list of codes. I combined any overlapping codes under one code for analysis, where appropriate, as recommended by Creswell and Poth (2018) to maintain a manageable and lean coding approach.

Once codes were developed, they were applied to units of text. As much as possible, segments of transcript text data were assigned a code. Coded units varied in length from a sentence to a full paragraph. Once all data was coded, themes were developed based on code families for each research question. Code families were further related to the conceptual framework to develop an interpretation of the data and detailed description of the phenomenon. The essence of the phenomenon as experienced by school psychologists within their context was described in a written discussion of the data.

Limitations, Delimitations, and Ethical Issues

A phenomenological research design offers a rich understanding of a phenomenon as experienced by research participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As such, participant and researcher assumptions play a role in the interpretation of the data and can run the risk of

influencing the validity and reliability of the results. These concerns are addressed in the sections that follow.

Limitations

There are two limitations to be considered regarding the phenomenological research design. The first limitation is that due to the lack of diversity within the small sample size, participants may not reflect perspectives of diverse populations. All potential participants for this study were White and female because that is the demographic make-up of all the school psychologists in the district chosen as the site for the study. However, this limitation is expected based on the general population of school psychologists across the country such that over 80% of school psychologists are White females (Goforth et al., 2021).

A second limitation of this study was that I have extensive personal experience with the special education referral process which has the potential to bring assumptions to my interpretation of the data. However, this limitation was overcome by bracketing assumptions such that I identified my relationship to the phenomena and the data and limited any personal understandings in the data collection and analysis process through researcher reflection (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Further, this study benefited from my already established knowledge of the identification process such that I was adept at identifying relevant follow-up questions to glean in-depth and rich data.

Delimitations

The sample size targeted for this study, which included seven school psychologists, is a delimiting factor because participant experiences may not represent the experiences of all school psychologists. Similarly, this study aimed to reflect the practices within one school district, therefore, may not generalize to other district practices and protocols. However, understanding

the experiences at any local level can provide insight into addressing disproportionality across settings (Ahram, 2015). Qualitative research serves the purpose of allowing other contexts to draw their own comparisons and conclusions based on similarities to various aspects within the study (Marrs & Little, 2014; Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Another delimiting factor results from perspectives gathered from school psychologists and no other related special education staff that are involved in the referral process. Although planning and placement teams consist of varied special services staff, school psychologists are the only staff members that are present at every referral meeting to provide a consistent representation of district practices.

Ethical Issues

To maintain participant right to protection during the study, all participants were assigned a randomly generated identification number that was utilized throughout the study to maintain confidentiality. Data was saved on two password protected USB drives in password protected files to ensure backup of data. Data was also backed up on a password protected laptop and files. Once the transcriptions were complete and verified for accuracy, the recordings were erased. Raw data, such as interview notes, were kept in a locked file cabinet accessed solely by the researcher. Raw data will be destroyed after a period of three years. Further, participants were provided a participant information sheet prior to their participation that outlined their ability to withdraw from the study at any time, option to not answer any question, and confidentiality protocols. The participant information sheet was also reviewed at the outset of the interview. Beneficence was practiced through established rapport with participants, assurances of participant protection from harm, and respect for participant responses through active listening strategies. Issues of justice in the selection of participants and outcome of the research were

mitigated by voluntary participation in the study and outcomes that benefit the practices of the district, versus individual or targeted benefits, respectively.

Trustworthiness

To establish trustworthiness for this qualitative research study, I drew from the recommendations of Ravitch and Carl (2021) and Creswell and Poth (2018) for collecting and analyzing data. The ways in which I affirmed that my findings were reliable and reflective of participants' experiences are outlined in the sections that follow.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the researcher's ability to "take into account all the complexities that present themselves in study" (Ravitch & Carl, 2021, p. 168). Because qualitative research seeks to draw meaningful inferences from complex data, the researcher must take steps to ensure that they attend to the depth and breadth of participant experiences in the methodology and findings while simultaneously triangulating the results aligning to the research questions. To address internal validity, I engaged in triangulation of data, member checking, inclusion of counter points, and peer review to ensure that participant experiences were represented by rich descriptions and were authentically portrayed in the results.

Transferability

The goal of qualitative phenomenological research is to develop rich, descriptive statements of experiences within specific contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The degree to which other contexts may apply the results of a qualitative study relies on the detailed descriptions of the data as well as the context. In this study, I aimed to offer comprehensive, thick descriptions of participants and the sampling method, as well as explicit details around the contextual factors that shaped the study including school specific processes

and protocols. This rich detail assists in the transferability of the study design and findings (Marrs & Little, 2014; Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Dependability

Dependability refers to the “stability of the data” (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Specifically, the data is consistent with the research argument, relates directly to the research questions, and there is a clear rationale and description for how the data is collected. In this study, I ensured dependability by clearly outlining the data collection methods and procedures and aligning them directly to the research questions. Further, I modified a data collection tool (Losen, 2008) that had been vetted for reliability in existing research related specifically to core concepts and variables associated with disproportionality in special education.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the degree that the researcher can mitigate bias and subjectivity in their research (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Although qualitative research by nature is founded on the premise of a subjective world, the researcher must work to identify, address, and minimize any researcher bias or assumptions so that findings may have “relative neutrality” (Ravitch & Carl, 2021, p. 171). In this study, I considered my own positionality with the research topic and took intentional steps toward bracketing my experiences. Further, I utilized triangulation of data to ensure that interpretations of data were consistent across data points as well as participant validation strategies and peer review in dialogic engagement to confirm findings.

Summary

In this qualitative phenomenological study, I sought to understand the perspectives of school psychologists related to disproportionality in special education for students of color. A phenomenological research design was chosen to explore the lived experiences of school

psychologists with the special education identification process within their context. The intended site chosen for the study was cited for disproportionality in special education for students of color. Participants at the site were selected through purposeful criterion sampling to ensure all participants had direct and influential experience with the problem of practice. Participants engaged in virtual semi-structured interviews that were recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were systematically reviewed by me and validated by participants. The data analysis followed steps outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994) including note taking, reflective thinking, identifying codes, developing themes and patterns, counting frequency of codes, identifying relationships among variables, and displaying and reporting the data. I addressed limitations and ethical issues through confidentiality of data and de-identification of participants as well as in-depth review of the participant information sheet with participants. Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation of data, member checking, bracketing, and clarity of rationale for methodological choices that aligned with the overarching research questions, theoretical framework, and scholarly research.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions of school psychologists regarding the special education disproportionality for students of color. This study sought to understand school psychologists' beliefs about the variables within their school context that may contribute to racial disproportionality in special education. Because school psychologists' primary role is to serve as case managers for all initial referrals to special education (Benson et al., 2020), their experiences offer critical insight into the practices that may influence the prevalence of racial disproportionality at the source of the phenomenon. Disability critical race theory (DisCrit) was the theoretical framework informing this study. This framework offered key areas to explore throughout the data collection process to uncover racialized perceptions of ability that may influence the special education identification eligibility decision (Annamma et al., 2018; Jaulus, 2020).

This study utilized a qualitative phenomenological research design to develop an understanding of the phenomenon of racial disproportionality through the lived experiences of school psychologists (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Semi-structured interviews were used to gather and explore school psychologists' perceptions about the special education identification process and student characteristics or behaviors that may play a role in the eligibility decision at their school site. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do school psychologists perceive the special education identification process?
2. What role do school psychologists perceive student characteristics and behaviors play in the decision-making process for special education identification?

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section is an overview of the data collection process and analysis method. The second section highlights the themes and subthemes that have emerged from the data. The concluding section summarizes the results and findings of this study.

Analysis Method

Losen's (2008) *Annotated Checklist for Addressing Racial Disproportionality in Special Education* was utilized and adapted to develop the semi-structured interview questions. DisCrit also informed the development of additional interview questions to highlight policies and practices that are steeped in biased or racialized perceptions of ability. The first section of interview questions explored the overall special education identification process at each of the seven participants' work site followed by questions related to their perceptions of the policies, practices, student characteristics, and staff perceptions that may contribute to disproportionality.

Data collection took place through semi-structured interviews via Zoom. Interviews were audio and video recorded using Zoom and were later transcribed using the Sonix program. Transcripts were developed and sent to participants for member checking to ensure accuracy.

To analyze the data, a systematic semantic data analysis approach (Miles & Huberman, 1994) was selected to prepare and organize the data. This process involved translating interview recordings into text, counting text and phrases to develop patterns, reducing data into themes through coding, and finally representing data in figures or discussion (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Miles and Huberman (1994) suggested more detailed steps for analysis including note taking, summaries of notes, researcher reflection, counting frequency of codes, and noting relationships among variables. These steps were utilized in this study during the data analysis process.

The coding process began following the immersive transcript review. During the initial phase of coding, the main ideas that emerged from each participant response to each question were identified and labeled. Main ideas were recorded for each question on a spreadsheet and were denoted with single words, short phrases, or segments of text. Following this step, an inductive analysis approach to develop codes that “come from the data” (Ravitch & Carl, 2021, p. 264) was utilized for each interview question. In this way, codes were assigned to segments of text that represented words used specifically by the participants to stay as close to the data as possible. This step captured similar main ideas and patterns across participant responses as well as divergent ideas. These initial codes were further collapsed by combining like codes. Finally, the most frequent codes were developed into themes as commonalities clearly emerged from the data. During the data reduction process, I made decisions about which data to emphasize and which to minimize based specifically on their ability to answer the research questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Presentation of Results and Findings

The initial coding process generated 187 codes which were later reduced to 24 codes by combining similar ideas, topics, and patterns. Of these 24 codes, five code groups of emergent themes and eleven subthemes were identified. The overarching themes provided understanding of the participants’ lived experiences with the phenomenon of special education disproportionality for students of color. The subthemes represent the notable specific elements that participants commonly identified as factors under the larger theme impacting the problem of practice. A summary of the themes and subthemes are presented in Table 4.1 and will be discussed in detail in this section.

Table 4.1*Resulting Themes and Subthemes*

Themes	Subthemes	Number of Participant Responses
Policies and Practices	Data Collection and Progress Monitoring	7
	Scientific Research-Based Interventions	7
Open Choice Student Population	Parental Involvement and Connectedness	6
	Early Educational Opportunities	7
	Adverse Childhood Experiences	5
Staff Perceptions	Teacher Self-Efficacy	6
	Perceived Benefits of Special Education	7
Bias	Norms and Expectations	7
	Race	7
Student Behavior	Externalizing Behaviors	5
	Teacher Thresholds	5

Theme 1: Policies and Practices

All participants cited a lack of a formalized and consistent process of referral for support as a major barrier to appropriate and equitable special education identification. There was some divergence among the participants in their accounts of the pre-referral process within their building specific to how formalized a process exists. However, the perception of all participants was that the process was not effective enough. One participant shared, “We have attempted to

put some more specific procedures in place, but it's a struggle. I think that the policy and practice is a big piece of what's missing." Five participants noted that they have a formalized process for referrals for support within their building and two participants shared that they have no formal process for referrals in their building. However, despite the existence of a formal process for providing pre-referral interventions, all participants believed that a lack of a consistent and data-driven practice for identifying and targeting student needs contributes to an increased number of special education referrals and identification.

Subtheme 1: Data Collection and Progress Monitoring

All seven participants stated that the data collection and progress monitoring practices in their building were not fully effective for providing targeting interventions and support for struggling students. All participants expressed that the lack of a consistent and formal data collection process for all students impacts the degree to which students receive pre-referral services. One participant shared, "We don't have a formal data collection, monitoring, and referral process so it's inconsistent on who is identified." The participant continued to say who is evaluated for services is often very subjective leaving them unsure if the right students are being identified. The lack of a universal screening to determine baseline performance was mentioned by all participants as an important aspect of accurately identifying students in need of support. All participants noted that the type of concern such as academic or behavioral impacts the degree to which data is collected for students.

All seven participants commented on the inconsistent tools used to monitor progress. Four participants discussed the specific tools used in their building to capture data related to student growth and how it varies from the tools used by other teachers in their building. These participants expressed that the inconsistencies make it difficult to systematically develop

programs that meet student needs since the performance measures are constantly shifting. One participant mentioned, “I think we have higher numbers of students being referred because it may be that intervention piece needs to be worked on a little bit. We don’t always know which tools give us the best data.” They went on to discuss the need for greater systems in place to assess and target specific skills and capture data related to their progress. Participants expressed that in the absence of adequate data, eligibility decisions are often based on subjective or anecdotal information leaving the door open for bias to be introduced.

Subtheme 2: Scientific Research-Based Interventions

For five of the participants with formalized pre-referral processes in their building, each noted that interventions were often not carried out with fidelity. In this way, students may be on the radar for receiving interventions but barriers such as absences or inconsistent instruction may prevent them from the full benefits of the interventions. When this happens, participants commented that students will be flagged as not making progress and thus more likely to be referred. Further, four participants noted that the district practice of a six-week review cycle for determining progress does not make sense for every student. Participants shared that some students may require additional time to determine if an intervention is successful.

One participant noted that targeted interventions are strong for reading and writing yet lack in other subject areas. They expressed that the strength in this area is largely due to the skill of the reading interventionist and positive partnership with classroom teachers. Two other participants mentioned the experience of the interventionists as a factor in the effectiveness of the scientific research-based intervention (SRBI) process in their building.

Three participants shared their experiences with pressure to qualify a student for special education. One participant discussed that in multiple cases, the SRBI process is viewed as a way

to justify the pre-determined eligibility decision instead of as a means to help prevent a referral. They shared, “I think the mentality here is what do we have to do in terms of intervention to prove that they need specialized instruction?” Two participants noted pressure from building administration to identify students despite the lack of data from the SRBI process to support the decision. One participant shared that they felt that administration often viewed them as the barrier in the process when they requested additional data. They stated, “I find that a lot of people are often really hostile around it and you’re getting quite a bit of pushback. When you have to be the gatekeeper, they see you as blocking a goal that they have.” Two other participants shared their similar experiences whereby external pressures impact the eligibility decision regardless of SRBI data including administrative pressure, teacher pressure, and parental pressure.

Theme 2: Open Choice Student Population

All seven participants shared their experiences with the disproportionate identification of students in the Open Choice program. The Open Choice program offers urban students the opportunity to attend school outside of their district with the purpose of desegregation and equal educational opportunity. All students in the Open Choice program are students of color.

One participant expressed their concern that the Open Choice students tend to stand out in their mostly White district therefore, when their behavior deviates from what is expected, it is more noticeable and more likely to be addressed. They noted, “I think we get overly excited about some behaviors when they’re exhibited by minority students. They almost have like a radar on them anyway and that isn’t positive.” They go on to discuss how this heightened response from staff towards students of color negatively impacts students’ relationships with the adults in the building and their sense of connectedness to the district.

All seven participants discussed the challenges that students in the Open Choice program face when attending their district. They noted issues such as parental involvement, early educational opportunities, and adverse childhood experiences as prominent factors in the likelihood of referral for special education services.

Subtheme 1: Parental Involvement and Connectedness

Five participants discussed the impact that parental involvement with the school has on student success. Three participants mentioned that some staff tend to form perceptions of student ability based on how communicative a parent is. They expressed that staff may view a student with limited parental involvement as one that does not have support at home and therefore requires more support at school. One participant stated, “Teachers might interpret them as not having the same level of family support at home, and I think those students can be overrepresented at times and umm, we’re not really considering their cultural needs.”

Six participants mentioned that parental level of involvement is a factor in the special education referral process. They shared that sense of connectedness and stigma impact a parent’s involvement with the school and their participation in the referral process. One participant noted that where an Open Choice parent feels unwelcome or uncertain about the process, they will not participate or will offer little input. They shared that this impacts identification rates because often there is context to concerning behaviors that would eliminate their consideration for special education. They noted, “A parent thinks the school is doing this to kick them out of the school and then when we finally had a live conversation, I learned that they had a traumatic life experience recently that was causing the behavior and like a different support was required.” Seven participants expressed the need to understand student context, especially from a parent’s perspective, to effectively evaluate for special education services.

Subtheme 2: Early Educational Opportunities

All seven participants noted the educational history of Open Choice students as a factor in their likelihood of a special education referral. Two participants noted this as a significant factor particularly for kindergarten students since the academic expectations increase each year. These participants expressed the wide variability in academic success with students who attend preschool programs and those who do not. Participants who serve students in higher grade levels mentioned age of entry to the district as a factor in their success such that the earlier they enroll, the greater their likelihood of success. One participant shared, “Their background has made their access to different resources and education inequitable.” Two other participants also identified lower socioeconomic status (SES) as a factor in limited access to early educational opportunities and resulting disadvantage. One participant noted several factors that impact achievement, “lower SES and their reduced exposure to language compared to higher SES students and the negative impact of that on later learning, and not having accessibility to preschool like a higher SES family might.”

Subtheme 3: Adverse Childhood Experiences

Five participants discussed adverse childhood experiences (ACE) as a factor in the academic and behavioral performance of Open Choice students. However, they did not express this as a concern for other populations. Four participants mentioned the specific connection between special education overrepresentation for emotional disturbance and a background of high ACE, and three others commented on how trauma negatively impacts academic and behavioral performance.

Theme 3: Staff Perceptions

All participants emphasized staff perceptions as a factor in the special education referral and identification process. They noted multiple ways that perceptions influence the response and approach taken for student support including staff sense of ability to personally meet the needs of students and their perception of the function of intervention and special education services. One participant expressed that once a student is referred to the SRBI team for services, they have observed teachers who perceive that they are no longer responsible for the academic outcome of the student. Rather, the responsibility lies with the interventionist and/or special education teacher. She stated, “And it was basically like, well, they’re on so-and-so’s caseload now, so they’re going to take care of that versus the sense that like, this is my student, and I need to assess their skills.” Another participant shared that staff perception of what they believe a student needs influences the path taken regardless of whether data supports their perception. She mentioned that anecdotal evidence is often used to support decisions regarding referrals.

Subtheme 1: Teacher Self-Efficacy

Six participants expressed that teacher sense of ability to effectively respond to student needs, or their self-efficacy, influences the decision-making process for special education referral. One participant shared, “I think that is a cry for help because they [teachers] are not able to build the relationship and dive into what that student needs themselves.” Another participant commented, “Particularly when we have a behavioral issue, teachers feel uncomfortable or unable to solve the problem, so they refer out, sometimes to even, like, to pass the problem to someone else.” Five of the participants noted a greater likelihood of referral for support when the concern is due to behavior.

Participant responses illustrated the variability in teachers’ sense of ability to get through to a student. One mentioned that some teachers work extremely hard to find a way to reach a

student and others seem to not feel capable. Five participants discussed their experiences with teachers expressing that they have exhausted all strategies and, “They [teachers] used everything they know how to do and get stuck.” These participants indicated that they believe this sense of helplessness or inefficacy results in higher referrals to special education. Connectedness to students, specifically strong teacher- student relationships, were noted by three participants as protective factors in the sense that teachers were less likely to refer where strong connections were made. Participants observed increased teacher motivation to meet student needs in the classroom when they feel a strong relationship with a student.

Subtheme 2: Perceived Benefits of Special Education

All participants cited staff perceptions of special education as a factor in the referral process. Six participants specifically expressed that staff report feeling that special education services are the only way to get a student what they need. As such, they refer for service even if they don’t believe a student has a true disability. One participant mentioned, “They [teachers] want them in special ed because they’ve received consistent intervention. It’s that they receive consistent support and might not in the regular classroom.” Another participant shared, “But some of them [teachers] have even stated out loud that they don’t feel that they necessarily have a disability, but they want them to receive consistent support, which is a problem.” Multiple participant responses also indicated teachers often have a misunderstanding on how students are identified for special education and are not aware that there exists an eligibility checklist. One participant noted that in her experience, staff do not have an understanding of disability or what special education truly is, and this impacts their perception of eligibility.

Two participants noted that the lack of the pre-referral SRBI process in their building leaves staff to believe that special education is the only pathway to support for students. One

participant shared, “So without a clear protocol, and there’s no clear procedure, I think it’s assumed if a student isn’t passing, they need to be in special ed because we don’t have anything else really to offer them.” Three other participants noted similar experiences where staff see special education as the right way to ensure that a student gets what they need, particularly in future years. One participant shared that the planning and placement team (PPT) will look ahead to what the student will experience educationally, and if they feel that the student cannot be successful without consistent support, they are more likely to qualify a student for special education.

Theme 4: Bias

All seven participants discussed bias as a factor in the special education identification process. Responses by participants reflected numerous ways bias creeps into the process including through norms and expectations as well as perceptions about race and/or ethnicity. Five participants expressed that teacher subjective perceptions of students influence their tendency to refer a student for services, regardless of supporting data. Further, four participants noted that teacher perceptions are often biased based on a majority White culture which adversely impacts students of color. One participant expressed:

And again, we’re considering them [students of color] against education in the classic definition of the white Eurocentric, what we think education is. Are we doing them a disservice? For not acknowledging that the way education is structured often doesn’t include representative perspectives from their cultural history. We’re already fitting them into a system they had no say in and they had no design in. And we’re saying that they need special education services to be successful in that.

Another participant shared their experiences that teachers often look at only what the issue is with the student rather than considering or reflecting on their own teaching strategies. They expressed how they feel like the emphasis is “what’s wrong with the kid rather than what’s wrong with our teaching.” They noted that this biased one-way lens influences the decision to move forward with a referral knowing that intervention strategies are unlikely to be successful within that classroom. Three other participants mentioned the general staff’s resistance to considering teaching practices as a factor in student performance.

Subtheme 1: Norms and Expectations

All seven participants agree that the norms and expectations held by staff significantly impact the decision-making process for special education referral and identification for students of color. One participant noted, “We have a narrow lens of what we consider what’s within the spectrum of normal behavior versus a disability, and, umm, students of color might typically express behaviors that are normal for their culture but we view them as abnormal, so we refer them.”

Four participants discussed the high academic expectations within the district that set the bar too high for some students. Three participants shared that the high expectations lead to more referrals where they might not be referred in another district. One participant discussed how a student from the Open Choice program shifted into the district and was an honor student in their home urban district but identified for special education in the suburban district. They went on to share their opinion that not meeting expectations does not necessarily mean a disability, particularly where expectations are not culturally relevant or developmentally appropriate. They shared:

So that leads to the expectations and where students should be performing and what's appropriate instruction for students. I mean, there's the district set standard and the expectations. Obviously, we have curriculum that's statewide. But I think education in general and certainly this district we've constantly sort of upped the ante for kids. And unless we've figured out a way to change their biology, what's developmentally or culturally appropriate is not that really considered. And so more kids are failing.

Four participants discussed their experiences related to classroom behavioral expectations and their impact on students of color. One participant shared, "Controlling students in terms of compliance and behavior, in terms of what a classroom should look like, is very much like a white imposed educator viewpoint." They noted that behavior that deviates from this expectation is labeled as problematic and depending on the severity of the behavior, will increase the likelihood of a referral. Another participant echoed the same concern over biased expectations for students of color. They shared, "We put false expectations on them or biased expectations from a white community on minority students and then get upset because they don't respond when in fact, it's it's in my opinion, very unfair to them."

Subtheme 2: Race

All seven participants discussed race as a factor in how student ability and behavior are evaluated. While six participants agree that bias may be unconscious, they all agree it seeps into the decision-making process for special education eligibility. All participants identified their school site to be made up of mostly White students and staff and students of color to be made up of the Open Choice student population or Asian-Indian. Six participants expressed that assumptions about these minority populations shape the lens through which students are evaluated. For example, one participant shared, "If we consider an Open Choice student, we

might make the assumption that they don't have home support and instead of checking on that or verifying that, we just avoid it, and go on assuming that." Another participant discussed how teacher expectations for students in the Open Choice program are often lower because they are assumed to not be capable of having the home support to follow through with homework completion. As such, students are often held to lower standards whether they demonstrate issues with homework completion or not.

All seven participants identified their role as a school psychologist is to conduct evaluations. Four participants mentioned that the assessments used for determining level of performance are not culturally sensitive and put students of color at a disadvantage. One participant expressed, "It's really important to acknowledge that the assessment procedures we have right now, they are steeped in, you know, systemic discrimination and racism, so we have to know that this piece of the puzzle is very biased and just a procedural requirement." They went on to say that evaluations, while not the sole indicator for special education eligibility, heavily influence the decision-making process.

All participants shared that cultural considerations are not commonly discussed during the special education identification process. Participants expressed that in cases where a student is an English Language Learner, their cultural background may be reviewed for context however, for other cultures, it is routinely avoided. One participant noted, "It feels like we don't discuss it because we don't know enough about non-White cultures to discuss it. Like we don't know what could be a factor for students and we like, umm, we don't ask unless it's staring us in the face." Other participants shared that primary factors for consideration include behavior and academic performance and if cultural considerations came up in conversation, "it'd be a very small part of the conversation." Two participants mentioned the special education eligibility checklist which

includes a question regarding cultural background however, both noted that the review of that question is typically not a substantial part of the conversation during the eligibility meeting.

Two participant experiences diverged from the majority of participants regarding the Asian-Indian population. They both cited a disparity pattern in referrals for the Asian-Indian population. Both participants identified a higher Asian-Indian population than in other schools in the district and expressed their belief that the higher referrals are often due to their limited English proficiency and resulting perceptions of ability. Both participants expressed this disparity as problematic.

Theme 5: Student Behavior

All seven participants identified student behavior as a factor that influences the decision-making process for special educational identification. Specifically, all participants noted that high frequency problematic behaviors as well as highly disruptive behaviors increase the likelihood of a referral to special education. Four participants identified student behavior as the most likely characteristic to influence an eligibility decision. The remaining three participants identified lack of student progress in the intervention process as the primary characteristic influencing an eligibility decision.

Subtheme 1: Externalizing Behaviors

Five participants discussed externalizing behaviors as one of the most frequent reasons for student referrals to special education. Of these five participants, four out of the five discussed that externalizing behaviors are most often demonstrated by students of color at their school site. Two participants highlighted the visibility of students of color at their school site and the increased likelihood that their behavior would be responded to or identified as disruptive. One participant shared, “When our students of color who tend to hang together are loud or

demonstrate behavior that is typical for their culture, teachers talk about that group, refer to ‘them’, and form their assumptions based on their outward behavior.” In this way, participants identified externalizing behaviors to highly influence perceptions of students.

Participants described that overly disruptive behaviors of the classroom or learning environment often trigger a referral to special education. One participant shared, “We move towards referral a little more quickly based on perceptions of highly disruptive behavior.” Three participants discussed that high frequency behaviors impact the likelihood of referral as well. One participant shared, “it’s any student, again, that’s taking up quite a bit of time on the teacher’s hands, or they have to spend a lot of time with that so they refer.” Five participants expressed that unsafe or egregious behaviors will likely trigger a referral.

Subtheme 2: Teacher Thresholds

Teacher levels of stress and burnout were noted as factors contributing to referrals by five participants. One participant mentioned:

Some teachers have had a lot of experience even, but like, they’re almost at a burnout and they just don’t want to deal with it anymore. So, despite their years of experience, their skill set isn’t necessarily matching that or they’re tired trying, and sometimes they tend to want to push the problem on to someone else. I find that that’s sometimes what a special ed referral is. I’ve done all this stuff. Not it’s your turn to try with this student, that kind of mentality.

Another participant mentioned that in their experience, some teachers do not have the bandwidth to figure out what to do or how to modify things to help students. They further discussed that students notice this frustration, and this negatively impacts their relationship with them. They noted that once a student is aware that their teacher does not seem to have time for them or

expect much from them, they act out. They shared, “Teachers don’t realize their contributions to that. They’re expecting kids to act a certain way or behave a certain way and then the kids act accordingly.”

Five participants noted teacher tolerance as influential in special education consideration. Teacher tolerance was discussed in terms of tolerance for disruption as well as tolerance for time required to meet student needs. One participant discussed how being understaffed regarding paraprofessional support impacts the patience and frustration tolerance of teaching staff. Several participants discussed that teacher tolerance level is often related to the personality and skill of the teacher. Three participants discussed that student placements each year take into account the strengths and thresholds of certain teachers such that high needs students routinely get placed with the highly skilled teachers. One participant expressed that this practice often leads to teacher burnout. Participants mentioned that once a teacher reaches their threshold and voices their frustration to the administration, they move forward more quickly with a special education referral. One participant shared, “There’s a lot of these like forced referral situations that kind of get pushed because of some other individual concern, from a teacher, or a parent complaint, or that teacher has just had enough.”

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions of school psychologists regarding the disproportionality in special education for students of color. A variety of factors were explored to uncover contributors to disproportionality within individual school contexts including race, socioeconomic status, gender, behavior, policies and practices, teacher perceptions, and bias. Seven school psychologists were interviewed due to their primary and influential role in leading the special education identification process in their building. They

shared their experiences with the special education identification process and their perceptions regarding student characteristics and behaviors that influence the eligibility decision-making process.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the seven participants and interviews were recorded using the Zoom program. Interviews were then transcribed using the Sonix program. Transcripts were shared with participants for member checking and accuracy. Transcript data was coded and analyzed, and themes were developed based on patterns and central ideas that emerged in the data. Five themes were identified as well as eleven subthemes.

The first theme centered on contextual policies and practices. All participants cited a lack of a consistent scientific, research-based intervention process as a major barrier to appropriate and equitable special education identification. Participants noted lack of consistent progress monitoring tools and targeted strategies as well as subjective sources of data as factors contributing to disproportionality.

The second theme emerged surrounding the Open Choice student population. All participants identified disparity patterns in special education identification for students in the Open-Choice program. Participants noted that the Open Choice student population is all students of color, and higher rates of referral exist within this population. Participants shared three variables that serve as barriers to academic success for students in the program. The three subthemes identified include parental involvement, early educational opportunities, and adverse childhood experiences. Low parental involvement, lack of early educational opportunities, and high rates of adverse childhood experiences were noted by participants as factors impacting special education identification rates for students in the Open Choice program.

The third theme identified for this study involved staff perceptions. All seven participants indicated that staff perceptions influence special education identification rates. Specifically, participants noted that staff perception of their own ability, or self-efficacy, to meet the needs of students impacts their evaluation of what level of support a student will require to be successful. Participants shared that if staff feel that they do not possess the skills or resources to meet the needs of the student, they must require special education support. Additionally, participants discussed staff beliefs about special education as the only solution to ensure student support, particularly in the absence of a strong pre-referral process, as a contributor to disproportionality.

Bias emerged as the fourth theme within the data. All participants noted bias as a dominant factor in the decision-making process for special education eligibility for students of color. Participants expressed that bias exists within the point of reference to which performance is evaluated against. Specifically, participants noted that the staff evaluate students against the White majority standards which serves as a disadvantage for students of color. Subthemes of contextual norms and expectations as well as staff perceptions about race were identified through participant responses as influential in the eligibility decision.

The fifth theme identified centered on student behavior. All participants agreed that behavior was a factor that contributed to the likelihood of a special education referral. Participants mentioned frequency of perceived problematic behavior as well as level of school or instructional disruption as considerations for “rushed referrals.” Subthemes included externalizing behaviors as well as teacher thresholds. Participants expressed that externalizing behaviors are more likely to be responded to due to their high visibility, and students of color are more likely to be addressed when demonstrating these behaviors. Teacher thresholds were noted by participants as a factor in how quickly referrals are made such that low teacher thresholds for

disruptions and time required for support resulted in higher referral and resulting identification rates.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions of school psychologists regarding the disproportionality in special education for students of color. Racial disproportionality in special education has historically been a complex problem of practice within the field of education (Dunn, 1968; Tefera & Fischman, 2020; Kramarczuk Voulgarides et al., 2021). Research has illustrated the adverse effects of disproportionality for students of color including increased segregation of placement, reduced access to high-quality educational opportunities, stigma, and labeling effects (Cole et al., 2020; Kauffman & Anastasiou, 2019; Kramarczuk Voulgarides et al., 2021). Much of the research has focused on the root causes of racial disproportionality from a broad societal lens. As such, current research has not examined the impact of context on the incidence of disproportionality from the perspective of key players at the source of the phenomenon. This study sought to understand how contextual factors influence disproportionality in special education for students of color from the perspectives of school psychologists. School psychologists serve as leaders in the special education identification process therefore, they can provide insight into factors at the local level to help develop remedies for this problem of practice (Holman et al., 2021).

Using Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) as a framework for viewing disproportionality, this study explored context level perceptions regarding race and disability to uncover any potential impact on the incidence of disproportionality. Tefera and Fischman (2020) noted the key relationships among policy, context, and racial disparities in special education identification. As such, this study sought to reveal any racialized policies and practices informing the eligibility decisions that may contribute to racial disproportionality.

The conceptual framework for this study highlighted the need to explore the systems in place specific to how special education eligibility is determined. The topical research has pointed to a variety of factors that may contribute to the incidence of disproportionality including race, gender, socioeconomic status, behavior, policies and practices, teacher perceptions, and implicit bias (Ahram et al., 2021; Ford & Russo, 2016; Lambert et al, 2022; Morgan, 2021; Peterson, 2019). As such, the research questions for this study were developed to explore these variables as they relate to the incidence of racial disproportionality at the study site.

This study focused on two research questions to explore the special education referral and evaluation process within individual contexts. The following research questions guided this study:

- RQ1: How do school psychologists perceive the special education identification process?
- RQ2: What role do school psychologists perceive student characteristics and behaviors play in the decision-making process for special education identification?

Qualitative data was gathered through semi-structured interviews conducted with participants to explore the perceptions of seven school psychologists regarding racial disproportionality in special education. All seven participants worked within the same school district cited for racial disproportionality in special education. After interviews were conducted and transcribed, data was analyzed and coded using a semantic data analysis approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to identify themes, patterns, and trends. This process initially yielded 187 codes which were later reduced to 24 codes. Of these 24 codes, five code groups of emergent themes and eleven subthemes were identified that represented the essence of the perceptions of the school psychologists.

The themes and subthemes uncovered were: (1) policies and practices with subthemes (a) data collection and progress monitoring, (b) scientific research-based intervention; (2) open-choice student population with subthemes (a) parental involvement and connectedness, (b) early educational opportunities, (c) adverse childhood experiences; (3) staff perceptions with subthemes (a) teacher self-efficacy, (b) perceived benefits of special education; (4) bias with subthemes (a) norms and expectations, (b) race; and (5) student behavior with subthemes (a) externalizing behaviors, (b) teacher thresholds.

This chapter presents the interpretation and importance of findings which are tied to the research questions. Additionally, chapter five will share implications for other schools seeking to address disproportionality. The chapter will conclude with recommendations for action and recommendations for further study.

Interpretation and Importance of Findings

This study explored seven school psychologists' perceptions of the special education identification process within their context to understand the incidence of racial disproportionality. Through the data analysis process, themes emerged that school psychologists perceived impact racial disproportionality related to the special education identification process at the study site. These themes answer the research questions and inform the understanding of this problem of practice.

Research Question 1

The first research question in this study explored school psychologists' perception of the special education identification process. This question was created to understand how school psychologists view and experience the referral and identification practices in place at their school

site. Further, this research question aimed to uncover any potential policies and practices within the local context that shed light on the problem of racial overrepresentation in special education.

School psychologists' responses in this study were consistent with findings in previous research that highlighted the inconsistent and often subjective practices used for qualification for special education (Benson et al., 2020; Lockwood et al., 2022; Sullivan et al., 2019). Participants noted the lack of an effective and data-driven pre-referral process as a strong contributor to racial disproportionality. This lack of a strong scientific research-based intervention (SRBI) process was experienced by all participants and identified as a significant concern. One participant shared, "There's just a lot of variations for how we collect data and, umm, like how we provide support. It's not consistent, and the tools don't always tell us what is really going on with a kid."

Quality tiered interventions are critical to appropriately refer and identify students for special education and reduce racial disproportionality (O'Neill, 2022; Raines et al., 2012). Without strong data and progress monitoring tools, accurate information regarding student ability and performance is unlikely which impacts the decision-making process for special education eligibility (Sullivan et al., 2019). Further, the lack of availability of objective data to support decisions may create an entry point for disproportionality since subjectivity and bias may be introduced (Ahram et al., 2011; Lasater et al., 2021). Lasater et al. (2021) discuss deficit thinking whereby subgroup populations are presumed to be less capable due to underprivileged backgrounds. This pattern of thinking poses a barrier to effective data-driven decision-making (Lasater et al., 2021; White, 2014). Participants described the problematic nature of how student ability may be captured through subjective means such as teacher observational report or non-normative assessment data. Further, they reported having limited tools and resources to identify student specific needs and provide targeted support prior to a referral. In the absence of a

consistent and objective pre-referral process, the likelihood of disproportionality for students of color is higher (Dowdy, et al., 2016; O'Neill, 2022). Dowdy et al. (2016) suggest, “limited access to resources for students who need additional assistance does influence teachers’ decisions to refer students to special education” (p. 61). School leaders must work to strengthen their pre-referral processes to intensify their supports and guard against inappropriate or subjective referrals to special education.

In the absence of objective data to refer and qualify students for special education, school and classroom level expectations and norms become the measure for which students are evaluated against (Fish, 2019; Peterson et al., 2016). School level norms and expectations are socially constructed such that they are shaped by the culture whereby they exist (Fish, 2019; Lorenz, 2021; Peterson et al., 2016). In this way, subjectivity seeps into the decision-making process regarding student performance because norms are not rooted in objective data. Rather, perceptions about student performance and achievement may be grounded in stereotypes, implicit bias, or deficit thinking (Chin et al., 2020; Lasater et al., 2021; Lorenz, 2021; Peterson et al., 2016). Chin et al. (2020) suggest, “teachers with implicit biases are liable to provide biased evaluations of students’ academic performance or potential, which can negatively impact Black students” (p. 567). Similarly, one participant noted, “For our students of color, we see, sometimes like, they are assumed to not have the same skill level as White students because they are assumed from impoverished backgrounds. And it’s sad, really, but it’s there.” In this way, subjective and biased perceptions lead to an increased likelihood of referral to special education, particularly for students of color (Lasater et al., 2021). In their discussion of DisCrit, Annamma et al. (2013) suggest that these racialized perceptions and assumptions about race and ability will manifest in how teachers respond to students and their interpretations of their performance

demonstrating the impact of bias in the special education identification process. To alleviate bias, school leaders must seek to uncover bias and encourage conversation around how it impacts policy and practice.

Participant responses varied in their perception of the strength of their pre-referral process at their school site. Four participants expressed that the pre-referral process was consistent for reviewing student progress and implementing interventions. Conversely, the remaining three participants shared that their process was either non-existent in their building or inconsistent. One participant noted a strong SRBI process for behavioral interventions. All participants agreed that interventions at the primary or tier one level in the general education classroom were weak. This variability in district level implementation of pre-referral intervention supports poses a concern for addressing district-wide disproportionality (Fallon et al., 2021). An effective district-wide tiered intervention process will offer the opportunity for students to make progress with varying levels of support and will include interventions universally implemented at the tier one level within the general education classroom (Castillo et al., 2022). However, when a strong tiered support system is not in place, the tier one level of intervention is often weakest due to lack of teacher time, resources, training, bias, deficit thinking, or unclear expectations (Fallon et al., 2021; Lasater et al., 2021). In this study, participants expressed their concerns regarding increased referrals when teachers in the general education classroom have reached their threshold for response to student needs and/or feel that they are unable to provide the appropriate support to meet student needs. Developing a strong multi-tiered support delivery system will be imperative to ensure that students receive appropriate opportunities for growth and improvement prior to a referral to special education.

Teacher perceptions of special education programming was noted as a factor by school psychologists in the disproportionate data. Participants shared the common perception of staff that special education is viewed as the only way to ensure that students receive the services they need to be successful. In the absence of a strong tiered intervention system, this is true. However, even in cases where an SRBI process was intact, participants reported that staff still often felt special education services were the only path to student success to ensure consistent support. One participant shared, “It’s interesting because sometimes teachers want to move to referral because they think it will provide more service. However, this is often not the case because groupings can be bigger in the special ed classes, and they will get equal or less individualized instruction.” Stutzman and Lowenhaupt (2022) discuss this experience resulting from teachers’ lack of understanding and expertise of special education services as well as lack of certainty for how best to coordinate supportive programming. Professional development focused on special education eligibility and programming may help to alleviate some of this misunderstanding. Further, stronger tier one supports and resources will decrease the need to refer for additional services.

Research Question 2

The second research question is this study explored the student characteristics or behaviors that school psychologists believe may influence the decision-making process in special education identification. This question aimed to highlight any specific characteristics of individual students that serve as predictive factors for special education identification. Participant responses to this research question shed light on student level variables impacting disproportionality in special education.

Participants asserted that externalizing behaviors were a primary factor influencing the referral and eligibility decision. Dowdy et al. (2016) suggest, “Behavior drives referral for special education more often than academics, and even more so among African American students and males as compared to other groups” (p. 61). Due to the disruptive nature of externalizing behaviors, students exhibiting these behaviors are likely to be referred for services (Lambert et al., 2022; Roorda & Kooman, 2021). Further, externalizing behaviors often result in low teacher tolerance increasing the likelihood of a referral (Dowdy et al., 2016; Lambert et al., 2022). Participants advanced that the degree to which a student disrupts the classroom and requires significant attention from the teacher correlates with their response tolerance. One participant expressed, “The more disruptive the student behavior is, the less tolerant a teacher is. Some have very small limits and just don’t want to deal. They all have their limits. And I have definitely observed different limits for minority students.” This experience illustrates the connection between student behavior and probability of a referral as evidenced in the literature.

Morris and Perry (2017) suggest that implicit bias may impact the perception of what is considered disruptive behavior. They state that defiance and lack of compliance often result in heightened responses for students of color which coincides with the experiences of the participants in this study. When frequent teacher intervention is required to manage student behavior, the probability of a referral for special education increases (Fallon et al., 2021; Morris & Perry, 2017). While several participants noted a pre-referral process in place for targeted interventions at their school site, consensus among participants was that frequent and disruptive behaviors result in a shorter timeline to a referral. This points to the need for more robust interventions implemented in the general education classroom as well as teacher training. Fallon

et al. (2021) also discuss the importance of relationship building and student connectedness as central factors in reducing behaviors of concern.

According to participant responses, the Open Choice student population emerged as a characteristic that increases the likelihood of being identified under special education. The Open Choice program allows urban students to attend schools outside their district, typically in suburban districts. At the study site, the Open Choice student population makes up a significant percentage of students of color in the district. As such, the disproportionality data reflects students identified within the Open Choice program. Participants expressed the widespread practice for staff to assume students of color participate in the Open Choice program. Participants also noted their experiences with staff assuming Open Choice students come from impoverished backgrounds with little home support. As a result, staff perceive that low student achievement is rooted in or negatively impacted by lower parental involvement or poor parenting. Malinen and Roberts-Jeffers (2021) discuss this perception of cultural deficit thinking such that teacher perceptions and expectations of low parental involvement and/or poverty for students of color influence the perception of student ability. In turn, this impacts the student-teacher relationship and sense of school connectedness which enhances any performance deficits (Malinen & Roberts-Jeffers, 2021). This type of deficit thinking perpetuates the biases and stereotypes that contribute to racial overrepresentation in special education (White, 2014). Lasater et al. (2021) suggest, “Teachers and leaders often use student characteristics (e.g., subgroup population) as a way to ‘explain’ unfavorable data - a practice that subsequently leads teachers to eschew responsibility for student outcomes...deficit thinking destroys the potential of effective data use” (p. 1). To disrupt this cycle of misperception, cultural awareness must be infused into the school culture.

Implications

The implications for this study's findings are important for school districts that have been cited for disproportionality and are seeking to eliminate these disparities. Despite decades of efforts to reduce racial disproportionality in special education, significant improvements have not been made (Cruz & Firestone, 2022; Jacoby-Senghor et al., 2016; Lewis et al., 2021; Tefera & Fischman, 2020). Research shows that students of color are negatively impacted by disproportionality which manifests as lower expectations, fewer opportunities for high quality instruction, and increased segregation from peers (Forber-Pratt et al., 2021; Voulgarides et al., 2017). In this study, all seven participants perceived disproportionality as the result of multiple factors. Further, they expressed those contributors of disproportionality existed at both the macro and micro level. At the macro level, state and local policy influence how eligibility is determined and how intervention and special education services and resources are provided. Further, systemic practices within their district that are biased, inconsistent, or ineffective, including pre-referral interventions contribute to overrepresentation. At the micro level, individual characteristics such as race, the Open Choice population, teacher perceptions and response, and externalizing behaviors all factor into the disproportionality rates for this district. Implications resulting from this complex web of contributors to disproportionality warrant the need for an extensive review of the demographic data for students in special education as well as an audit of the data used for eligibility determination to fully understand the local landscape. Implications at the macro level include a strategic review of how resources are allocated to ensure equitable disbursement across minority populations. Further implications include the need for collaboration with leaders within the Open Choice program to share concerns and issues specific to this population to collectively develop targeted remedies.

All participants agreed that a necessary first step to alleviating disproportionality was the development of a more robust and data-driven pre-referral process. The district has made efforts to build the SRBI system and has successfully implemented a protocol for several schools within the district. However, all participants noted that staff were struggling to implement tier one interventions due to lack of time, resources, or ability. Further, all participants noted the perception that staff believe that special education services are the only way a student will receive the support they need to avoid failure. School leaders would see benefits from working with teachers to build their toolbox with strategies and resources to support struggling students to heighten teacher confidence, self-efficacy, and tolerance threshold.

Another theme that emerged from this study that has practical implications for schools is regarding bias. DisCrit acknowledges the racialized perceptions of ability due to biased assumptions and their negative impact on expectations of student performance (Annamma et al., 2013). Ahran et al. (2011) state, “Research has demonstrated that teachers’ judgments about their students’ behavior, actions, and even appearance influence their judgments about their students’ ability” (p. 2256). Regardless of any citation for disproportionality in special education, it is important for all educators to consider how bias may infiltrate the practices at their school and how it may disproportionately impact minority populations. In this study, participants noted that staff form perceptions for students in the Open Choice program based on a variety of factors including race, behavior, and perceived lack of home support and/or lack of resources, and this perception shapes their expectations and responses for students. Further, two participants noted similar bias in the perceptions of ability for English Language Learners. This cultural deficit thinking has been acknowledged in the literature and has infiltrated the practices at this school site. To shift this pattern of thinking, educational leaders must provide intentional interventions

to tackle this barrier to student success. Addressing these factors at the micro level will ensure that issues of disproportionality are disrupted at the source of the phenomenon. School specific factors may either perpetuate or alleviate the incidence of racial overrepresentation, therefore it is critical that educators prioritize auditing their policies, practices, and staff perceptions.

Recommendations for Action

This research offers three recommendations for action for school districts to alleviate disproportionality for students of color. This study has uncovered the complexities contributing to this problem of practice within the local context, therefore a systematic approach to alleviate disproportionality must be utilized. As such, the recommendations include macro and micro level suggestions to ensure equitable educational practices.

Allocation of Resources

As a result of a citation for racial disproportionality, districts are required to set aside 15% of their allocated federal funding to aggressively pursue remedies for disproportionality. Districts must demonstrate a commitment to this endeavor, and they must illustrate progress towards this goal to prevent escalation of their citation. This intentional financial allocation is a necessary first step toward reducing the incidence of disproportionality. However, dedicated focus to ensure continued allocation of resources must remain a priority. Participants highlighted the need for additional resources in the form of staffing, intervention training and strategies, progress monitoring tools, and professional development to assist in the development of stronger pre-referral support programming for students. Dowdy et al. (2016) and Raines et al. (2012) found that the use of a universal screening tool helped to identify student needs and provide targeted support accurately and appropriately. As such, students are identified early for services preventing the escalation of academic weaknesses and concerning behaviors. In this way,

students are provided the opportunity to make progress sooner which alleviates the tendency for teachers and students to become frustrated due to lack of progress.

Resources may also be allocated in the form of collaborative teams. Prioritizing the development of teams of stakeholders involved in the education of children within the community to collaboratively discuss the issue of disproportionality within their context will ensure that the issue remains at the forefront of focus. In this way, stakeholders can work together to drive policy and practice at the state and local level and collectively determine the best use of strategies and resources to combat disproportionality (Griner & Stewart, 2013). Stakeholders should be tasked with the development of an action plan to address disproportionality which may include changing policies, practices, and procedures in the pre-referral and referral phase of special education identification. Losen's (2008) *Annotated Checklist for Addressing Disproportionality in Special Education* may be a useful tool for districts to conduct their own audit of their policies and practices to develop an action plan in response to disproportionality.

Professional Learning

The need for additional professional development for staff was noted by all participants as a necessary step towards reducing disproportionality. Castillo et al. (2022) suggest, "Researchers consistently cite educator professional learning as critical to building capacity for the implementation of the key practices that compose multi-tiered systems of support models" (p. 166). Participants cited the need for increased training for staff regarding tier one interventions in the general education classroom. Lawson et al. (2022) identified barriers to the implementation of tier one interventions including lack of resources, time, competing responsibilities, beliefs about effectiveness, and training. They also identified facilitators for implementation including

coaching, praise, and collaboration with specialists to better understand the usefulness of various interventions. Participants in this study noted teacher perceptions as a barrier to successful tier one interventions therefore, increased communication and collaboration among support staff and teachers may induce an improved climate for classroom level reform.

Participants in this study cited the need for professional learning around cultural awareness. Barrio (2021) and Griner and Stewart (2013) discussed the need for culturally responsive teaching practices to combat racial disproportionality in special education. Cultural awareness training for staff helps to reduce biases and misinterpretations of ability and behavior by bringing to the surface underlying stereotypes and fostering productive educator discourse surrounding their prevalence (Barrio, 2021; Griner & Stewart, 2013; Peterson et al., 2016). While the topics of implicit bias and cultural awareness may be met with defensiveness and resistance, it is imperative that school leaders engage in transformative and courageous conversations on these topics to effectively promote inclusive and equitable classroom communities.

Leveraging Protective Factors

Researchers have identified a variety of protective factors that educators might leverage to support struggling students (Fallon et al., 2021). Fostering an inclusive and culturally responsive school community will increase the sense of community and belonging for students of color and their families (Fallon et al., 2021, Malinen & Roberts-Jeffers, 2021). Further, a focus on building relationships with students will increase student motivation and overall performance as well as decrease bias and improve teacher frustration levels in the classroom (Corbin et al., 2019; Peterson et al., 2016; Roorda & Koomen, 2021; Whitford & Carrero, 2019). Participants in this study cited improved implementation of tier one interventions as well as

higher teacher tolerance when a strong student-teacher relationship was present. Educators should work to build open and authentic communication with the families of students of color as well as improve access and opportunities for students to participate in school and community activities. These increased opportunities for connection and strong relationships will support a positive school culture and climate so students may reach their full potential.

Participants in this study identified trauma and high incidence of adverse childhood experiences (ACE) as factors impacting student performance leading to an increased need for support services. Offerman et al. (2022) identified ACE as a risk factor for special educational identification. As such, trauma-informed practices may help to mediate the impact of ACE on student performance. Offerman et al. (2022) state, “Trauma-informed education could change the lens through which students’ emotional and behavioral difficulties or disorders are perceived by professionals and can improve students’ ability to learn” (p. 16). Trauma-informed practices such as training for understanding the impact of trauma, ensuring safe and supportive learning environments, developing resilience in students, building strong student-teacher relationships, and explicit instruction for social-emotional learning will help to buffer student stress and impact of trauma and ACE. Further, Herrenkohl et al. (2019) state that trauma-informed practices also help to reduce teacher burnout and stress by promoting a culture of self-care, relationship building, and improved student regulation requiring less time and energy from staff. As such, educators should identify opportunities to infuse trauma-informed practices into instruction as well as implement social-emotional learning as part of the wellness curriculum.

Recommendations for Further Study

This research study suggests opportunities for further exploration related to understanding and reducing the incidence of racial disproportionality in special education. This

study provided the perceptions of school psychologists regarding disproportionality in their local context. The complexities of this phenomenon illustrated in this study point to the need for further investigation across multiple disciplines. Recommendations for further study are outlined in the sections that follow.

Replication of Study

A replication of this study in other school sites or across multiple school sites may be beneficial to determine if findings are generalizable. Comparing and contrasting the experiences of participants across multiple contexts may serve to determine if similar perceptions persist across settings. Additionally, utilizing other key players in the special education identification process as participants would provide varying perspectives. This study only included perceptions of school psychologists in one context however exploring the perceptions of other stakeholders including administrators, parents, special education teachers, or students may provide valuable input to understand this problem of practice from multiple viewpoints and across varying contexts. Further research may also focus on gleaning perspectives of more racially diverse participants as all participants in this study were White. Seeking to include more racially diverse perspectives may uncover different themes or understandings of this phenomenon.

Variation of Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative, phenomenological approach to explore racial disproportionality in special education. Future studies may consider utilizing a case-study approach or grounded theory approach to glean alternative perspectives. Because a qualitative phenomenological approach relies on researcher interpretation of participant data (Creswell & Poth, 2018), there is risk of researcher bias being introduced. As such, other methodological data collection approaches may be useful to gather perspectives such as the use of survey data. A

quantitative analysis of data might also be warranted to review the demographic data more closely at this site to help draw any conclusions or identify any trends in the data.

Narrower Focus

The present study explored racial disproportionality through a broad investigation of the special education identification process, policies, and practices in one local context. Future studies may consider exploration of disproportionality through the lens of specific disability categories such as learning disability or emotional disturbance as eligibility for these categories is typically more subjectively determined (Cruz & Rodl, 2018; Fish, 2019; Shifrer, 2013). Reviewing data specific to these categories may provide detailed insight into the data used for eligibility determination to uncover if bias and subjectivity are more prevalent factors in the decision-making process for specific categories. Further studies may also consider a more focused exploration of student or teacher variables such as demographics including race, socioeconomic status, social factors, or economic state of the district. This may shed light on the incidence of disproportionality relative to specific social, economic, school, or student characteristics.

Exploration of Open Choice Population

This study revealed significant disparity patterns in special education identification for the Open Choice student population. Further research is warranted to explore this finding in more depth. Recommendations for further study include an investigation into the past educational histories of the students in this program, exploration of age of entry in the district and any relevance to the data, further understanding of the unique backgrounds and demographics of this student population, and family and student perceptions of their experience in the program. Because this finding may result from factors outside of the local context, it is

important to explore any external contributors to the incidence of disproportionality at this school site.

Conclusion

The problem explored in this study was the overrepresentation of students of color in special education due to the adverse effects it has on students (Cruz & Rodl, 2018; Tefera & Fischman, 2020). Although this problem of practice has received significant national attention in the field of education, little improvements have been made (Ahram et al., 2021, Strassfeld, 2017). The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions of school psychologists regarding the incidence of racial disproportionality in special education. This study sought to address a gap in the literature to understand racial disproportionality within a local context versus from a broad socio-demographic or historical perspective. The research questions guiding this study included:

- RQ1: How do school psychologists perceive the special education identification process?
- RQ2: What role do school psychologists perceive student characteristics and behaviors play in the decision-making process for special education identification?

The literature review revealed the complex factors that play into the prevalence of disproportionality. This problem of practice has been viewed through a socio-demographic framework which explores the wide range of variables that may contribute to disproportionality including race, gender, SES, and behavior. An investigation of the broad policies and practices at the federal, state, and local level has also been explored in the literature. The adverse impact of disproportionality has been widely researched demonstrating the continued need for research for this phenomenon. However, research exploring the interplay of socio-demographic factors and contextual factors and their impact on the incidence of disproportionality has been an

underexplored area. DisCrit served as the theoretical framework for this study to inform the methodology due to its focus on uncovering the racialized perceptions of race and disability and their impact on educational policy and practice.

The site used for this study was a suburban district that had been cited for disproportionality in special education for students of color. Semi-structured interviews with seven school psychologists were conducted to collect their perceptions of the special education identification process at their school site. Transcripts were developed and provided to participants for member checking. Following transcript verification, data was coded and analyzed and reduced to five themes and eleven subthemes.

The first theme that emerged from this study reflected the contribution of local policies and practices toward the incidence of disproportionality. A lack of a consistent and data driven SRBI process was identified as a subtheme as well as lack of progress monitoring tools. The second theme centered on the disparity pattern of identification for students in the Open Choice population. Within this theme, participants identified three subthemes that impact disproportionality for this population including low parental involvement, lack of early educational opportunities, and high rates of ACE. The third theme contributing to disproportionality is staff perceptions. Teachers' low sense of self-efficacy towards meeting student needs as well as their heightened perception of the benefits of special education services emerged as subthemes that influence rates of referral for services. The fourth theme centered on bias. Subthemes that contribute to higher rates of referral included biased school and classroom norms and expectations as well as biased perceptions about race. The final theme highlighted in this study includes student behavior. Specifically, frequent externalizing behaviors and low

teacher thresholds emerged as subthemes contributing to disproportionality from the perspective of school psychologists.

It is clear from this study that there are multiple layers of variables that impact the disproportionality data at this school site. The participants identified several areas of opportunity to help alleviate this problem of practice within their context. The first recommendation includes developing a more robust, objective, and consistent SRBI process to strengthen pre-referral services. The allocation of resources towards this endeavor will be critical to ensure that all students are provided equitable opportunities to demonstrate growth prior to referral. The second recommendation for action centers on professional learning. Participants expressed the critical need for staff training on tier one intervention strategies as well as culturally responsive teaching practices to support an effective and equitable learning environment. One final recommendation for action involves leveraging protective factors to support struggling students. Specific strategies include a focus on trauma-informed teaching practices, building student relationships, and increasing student sense of belonging and connectedness to the school community.

Future studies may consider replicating this study utilizing other participants involved in the referral process as well as expanding the number of sites used for exploration. Different methodologies may also be valuable including quantitative data analysis and case studies to dig deeper into contextual data. It is important to consider that there are unique factors at the individual level that may impact the data therefore taking a more focused look at specific disability categories or demographics may yield critical insight. Further, investigating target populations such as the Open Choice student population may provide a rich understanding of the unique backgrounds of students that may present as risk factors.

This study highlights the need for continued research to address the issue of disproportionality in special education for students of color. While the literature review illustrated the complex nature of this phenomenon and its roots in political, historical, and societal realms, local contexts have opportunities to impact the prevalence of disproportionality within their site. The intersection of risk factors and the local context in this study revealed the contributors to disproportionality for this school site. Despite the risk factors that may exist for students of color, the incidence of disproportionality may be mediated or alleviated through careful examination of policies and practices and intentional intervention at the local level to develop an action plan that ensures equitable and inclusive educational opportunities for all students.

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Appendix A

Site Approval Letter

Good morning Dr. Nico,

As you know, I am a doctoral student at the University of New England. I am in the final stages of preparing for my research study for my dissertation. I am reaching out because I would like to conduct my study in your district. My research topic is disproportionality in special education for students of color. I am aware that the district has received a citation for disproportionality, so I am hopeful that my research might uncover some remedies for this problem of practice. My proposal includes interviews of school psychologists in the district due to their prominent role in the special education identification process. I anticipate beginning my data collection in April and completing my analysis in June.

Through my university affiliation, I have completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) modules for ethical research conduct with human participants. Further, the specific site information, any quantitative data used for descriptive statistics, as well as all participants in my study will be de-identified within the study from the outset. There will be no identifiers for the site or for the participants in the dissertation, and all data will be stored confidentially on a password protected USB drive. Dr. Kristy LaPorte has graciously agreed to serve as an affiliate member of my dissertation team; therefore, she will be a valuable resource during the research process.

At your convenience, please let me know your thoughts regarding my request. I am happy to provide any further details or information regarding my study.

Thank you for your continued support through my doctoral journey!

Jessica Marshall



Marshall, Jessica

Site Permission

3 messages

Marshall, Jessica

Mon, Feb 7, 2022 at 1:10 PM

To:

Hi

Thank you so very much for taking the time to meet with me to review my dissertation research proposal. I am grateful that you have verbally agreed for me to conduct my study in your district. As we discussed, if you may reply to this email to confirm your permission for me to conduct my study in your district, I would greatly appreciate it. Your email reply will serve as the written permission required by my university for official site approval for my research study.

Thanks again for your time!

Jessica

Tue, Feb 8, 2022 at 8:52 AM

To: "Marshall, Jessica"

This is approved...Scott

[Quoted text hidden]

Marshall, Jessica

Tue, Feb 8, 2022 at 8:55 AM

Thank you again!

[Quoted text hidden]

Appendix B

Annotated Checklist for Addressing Racial Disproportionality in Special Education

**By Daniel J. Losen, in collaboration with the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction¹
August 4, 2008**

Introduction: The reauthorized Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) makes racial disproportionality in special education one of three priority areas for implementation of the law. The law encourages states and districts to look closely at issues in regular education, as well as special education, in addressing potential causes of overrepresentation. This checklist was designed as a tool to aid states and districts that are now required to analyze special education data, and take proactive steps to reduce racial disproportionality. Districts that have used it report that it does help educators analyze racial and ethnic disparities in special education identification, restrictiveness of setting and discipline, identify inappropriate policies and practices that may be contributing, and to design proactive early interventions to reduce such disparities, even where specific causes are not identified.

Where research has revealed likely contributing factors, rarely are intentional actions or blatant incidents of discrimination identified as the cause of the racial disparities in special education. Research does suggest, however, that far more subtle and unconscious forms of race, gender, and class bias may contribute in some cases. Research also indicates that the racial disparities in special education are reflective of problems in general education equally with problems in special education. For this reason, the federal government encourages districts with data revealing large racial disparities to engage in a broad inquiry into the policies, procedures and practices in a school district's regular education program as well as compliance with the IDEA. Therefore, this checklist tool contains many general education probes intended to help educators identify contributing factors outside the realm of special education, yet within the control of schools and districts.

Using the Checklists: The probing questions on the lists suggest possible root causes and help districts develop hypotheses and action plans for more detailed exploration of racial disproportionality. In each area, potentially inappropriate policies, practices, or inadequate programs are discussed. The checklist is meant to highlight possibilities for change. Ideally, each of the three checklists should be reviewed and used as a diagnostic tool. In no case should the check list be used to rule out inappropriate policies or non-compliance. In some cases a factor may suggest non-compliance with the IDEA or other federal law.

Most of the questions reflect a legal requirement and are also derived from research on the factors that may contribute to disproportionality in special education. In most cases an affirmative response to a question suggests one or more areas for further inquiry. Note: there is a version of the checklist available with endnotes describing the relevant research and legal requirements.

¹ © (2008) Daniel Losen. This Checklist was developed in close collaboration with the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and reflects the contribution of ideas, feedback, revisions, and editing by members of the Disproportionality Workgroup, a team of educators assigned to address disproportionality in that state. This document also reflects the contributions of Harvard Law student Dan Klaff and the work of the Civil Rights Remedies Initiative, a collaborative working relationship with The Civil Rights Project at Harvard, and Martha Minow of Harvard Law School. Please do not disseminate in whole or in part without the express permission of Daniel J. Losen.

INTRODUCTION

Some of the checklist items are not specific to racial disproportionality, but an affirmative response may mean that some policies, procedures, or practices with unintended negative consequences may disproportionately burden racial and ethnic subgroups. For example: a particular teacher-assignment policy or practice may result in students with the greatest academic needs having reduced access to the most experienced and capable teachers. Further analysis may reveal that this diminished access is most pronounced for students of color who are struggling academically.

Hypothesis Development: There are usually multiple, and often inextricably linked, causes of racial disproportionality. This tool should help districts form hypotheses about likely contributors to disproportionality as it arises in the context of their particular district. Administrative decisions will likely need to be made as to which areas to concentrate on first. What works in one district might not match the cause in another. Therefore, interventions to address suspected causes should reflect the contextual data, policies and practices of each school district. Districts should think through possible contributing factors under their control, rather than pinpointing factors they cannot realistically change.

Interventions and Evaluations: Once a district develops a hypothesis to match the data and other information, it will need to think closely about practices and policies it wants to explore more closely, and interventions to pursue. Districts should refine their interventions over time and develop methods for evaluating their hypotheses on an ongoing basis. Ideally, districts will evaluate the effect of the intervention driven by the hypothesis. If districts reduced racial disparities by changing identified policies or practices the accuracy of the underlying hypothesis would be supported by the efficacy of the intervention, but not necessarily proven. The capacity of most districts to evaluate an intervention and to rule out potentially contributing factors may be limited because school level implementers do not usually have the experimental capacity of social science researchers. Therefore issues with proper implementation may cloud the districts ability to pinpoint causes or fully evaluate interventions. For this reason if district efforts fail to yield desired results, they may find it useful to use the checklist each year.

Each of the three lists includes a brief paragraph explaining how inappropriate practices or policies in that area might contribute to racial disproportionality in special education identification, placement or discipline.

There are three checklists that follow:

1. **District and School Resource Issues**
2. **System Policy, Procedure, and Practice Issues at District, School and Classroom Levels**
3. **Environmental Factors**

CHECKLIST I: District and School Resource Issues

Introduction: Resource inequities among districts and among schools within districts often flow along lines of race and class. Resource shortages may reveal themselves as overburdened or inadequately trained school psychologists, lack of rigorous pre-referral interventions or early intervening services, or inadequate parent/school communications. Inequities in areas like these may be contributing to racial disparities in identification, placement, and discipline. For example, under resourced districts and schools often do not provide adequate training support to develop and retain highly qualified teachers. Qualitative studies indicate that less qualified and poorly trained teachers tend to refer more students for special education evaluations. Special education identification or restrictive placement may sometimes be used because regular educators regard such placements as the only source of available support. Such “benign” placements, develop from inadequate support in general education, rarely benefit students. The following questions should help you analyze whether resource linked factors may be contributing to disparities in your district.

A: Resource distribution policies	In the space provided briefly state your reasons for identifying this item as an issue in your school or district.
1. Are all students provided equal access to highly qualified and experienced teachers? ²	
2. Do school psychologists have ample time to conduct culturally responsive evaluations?	
3. Do ELL students have a proven-effective program of instruction?	
4. Are there schools or classrooms serving predominantly minority children? How do the class	

<p>sizes and other resources in those schools and classrooms compare to the average for the district?</p>	
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B: Teacher Training	
<p>1. Are there effective supports for inexperienced and struggling teachers?</p>	
<p>2. Have all regular and special education teachers been trained to effectively participate in pre-referral interventions and RTI (response to intervention)?</p>	
<p>3. Are there any educators who are trained in both ELL and in working with students with disabilities? How confident are you that your staff would know when an ELL also needed special education supports and services (delivered in the primary language), and could provide both?</p>	
<p>4. Are teachers or counselors trained in approaches and strategies for identifying and working with children who may be traumatized?</p>	
C: Administrator Training and Awareness	

1. Have administrators been trained to understand and use data on special education referral, identification and placement?	
2. Do all administrators and staff understand district procedures and requirements regarding referral, evaluation, identification, placement, discipline, and the student's right to be educated in the least restrictive environment? Are these disseminated and reviewed on an annual basis?	
3. Have administrators been trained on how to foster more effective inclusion?	
4. Have district staff been trained in sensitivity to racial bias in instruction and assessment?	
5. Do administrators at each school have high levels of training, experience and education with regard to working with diverse learners?	

D: Time for Collaboration:

There is no question that time is a scarce resource for many public school educators. Students with disabilities are clearly entitled to be educated in the least restrictive environment to the maximum extent appropriate. Coordinating the collaboration between special and regular education teachers in order provide adequate support in an inclusive regular education setting requires time for collaborators to meet together. The incentives to place students in more restrictive settings may be higher where schools and districts provide few opportunities to

collaborate during normal working hours. Moreover, designing and implementing effective interventions will require collaboration between regular and special educators at both the school and district levels.	
1. Does the school or district allocate time for special education and regular education collaboration on a routine basis?	
2. Are the data on educational environments reviewed jointly by both regular and special education staff at the district and school levels?	
3. Do regular and special educators regularly meet to discuss issues of racial disproportionality in regular and special education, pre-referral intervention strategy and efficacy, or early intervening services aimed at reducing racial disproportionality? How often?	
E: Data Collection Capacity, Review and Analysis	
1. Do schools have access to data collection methods and analysis tools? Are the data analyzed and discussed soon after it is collected? Is that data used and discussed regularly by general and special educators?	
2. Is the special education data on racial disparities and other factors collected for all the categories required?	

	Restrictiveness of placement? Discipline?	
	3. Do school leaders vary dramatically in their understanding and use of data to identify issues, discuss remedies with staff, and evaluate interventions?	

CHECKLIST II: System Policy, Procedure, & Practice Issues at the District, School & Classroom Levels

Introduction: There is a consensus among researchers that school policies and practices in regular education likely contribute to racial disparities in special education. Policies intended to boost test scores, provide remediation, reduce student disruptions, eliminate “social promotion,” and lower administrative costs may directly or indirectly result in higher rates of special education identification or greater likelihood of placement in restrictive educational environments. Likewise, the failure to conduct appropriate pre-referral interventions and to provide culturally responsive evaluation may contribute to racial and ethnic disproportionality. While not all inappropriate practices violate the law, all should be eliminated.

The earlier problems in the regular classroom can be addressed, the better. Effective early interventions can reduce the numbers of students identified as having disabilities. Furthermore, students with mild disabilities that receive no special services or are unnecessarily restricted from mainstream settings may develop more severe disabilities or experience increased risk of school failure.

Decisions that educators make about referring, placing or disciplining individual students may reflect unconscious bias, lack of training and support, a failure to provide adequate instruction, or lack of cultural awareness, yet be expressed as if the child in question possessed a deficit which was the only possible source of the child’s low achievement or poor behavior. When racial disparities are significant, the possible existence of contributing factors located in the classroom, rather than the student, should be examined.

A: Special Education Evaluation	In the space provided briefly state your reasons for thinking this item may be an issue.
1. As a matter of policy, procedure, or practice, is the quality of instruction and classroom management of the referring regular education classroom teacher routinely examined during the-pre-referral intervention process, and by the IEP Team once the referral has been made?	
2. Are issues of the cultural responsiveness of the curriculum and instruction	

	considered at the pre-referral intervention stage?	
	3. Are the school and district rigorous in attempts to rule out ELL status, and instructional deficiencies as predominant factors before progressing with a determination of eligibility? If so, how often are factors found to be determinant and eligibility avoided as a result?	
	4. Are there educators and supports in place to identify and meet the needs of students who have experienced trauma?	
	5. Is either IQ disparity, or low IQ, used as the primary tool in diagnosing any disability category or for limiting certain educational opportunities?	
B: Special Education: Reasons for Referral and Placement in Restrictive Settings		
	1. Are students who are deemed eligible for a particular disability category removed to a more restrictive environment because that environment has become, officially or unofficially, the place where students with that disability are sent?	

2. Discipline: Are racial groups that tend to be disproportionately identified, also disproportionately removed from the classroom for discipline?	
3. Could incentives to boost test scores in regular education contribute to increased identification or use of more restrictive placements?	
4. Is there a serious reconsideration each year for each student's placement, regardless of disability category, to ensure that each student is educated in the least restrictive environment?	
5. Do students get referred for special education only after grade retention was tried once?	
6. Are new teachers more likely to have minority students or students with disabilities placed in their class?	
C: Using the Data to Reflect on the Procedures for the Identification, Placement, and Disciplinary Decisions	
1. Are there subgroups of children in poverty that are under represented?	
2. Are racially disproportionate numbers of students being identified	

	as possibly special education eligible in more than one category?	
	3. What is the eligibility rate for students referred for an evaluation? Does this rate differ by racial or ethnic group, or by gender within a group?	
	4. Do certain disability labels nearly always yield the same level of removal from the regular education environment?	
	5. Do certain racial or ethnic groups tend to be less likely to be in an inclusive setting regardless of disability category?	
	6. Are there appropriate procedural protections in place for students with disabilities who are suspended or expelled?	
D: Data Collection and Use by District and School		
	1. Does the district collect and analyze data on students with disabilities disaggregated by race? By gender?	
	2. Is the disaggregated data routinely shared and analyzed among both regular and special educators within the district?	

3. Has the district fulfilled the IDEA's requirement to collect and report data disaggregated by race and ethnicity on identification, placement, and discipline?	
4. Can the district tell from the data whether large numbers of students are referred by certain teachers or certain schools within the district?	
E: Parental Outreach by Schools and by District	
<p>1. Do teachers or other school representatives ever meet with parents in the parent's home?</p> <p>2. Prior to referral or short term suspension, do teachers and administrators make serious efforts to reach out to parents of minority children who are displaying poor behavior in the classroom?</p>	
3. Might the expression of concerns and resistance to stigma associated with certain disabilities contribute to disproportionality?	
4. Do culturally diverse or economic disadvantaged parents have adequate knowledge about their children's rights and access to legal support?	

<p>5. Is the information on parental rights provided according to the requirements of IDEA so that it's easily understood and presented in the parent's language of origin whenever feasible to do so? Are language minority parents provided with the same quality and quantity of information as English speaking parents?</p>	
<p>F: Prior or Related Racial Equity Issues</p>	
<p>1. Do school administrators and teachers ever make disparaging, or negative remarks about culturally diverse and/or economically disadvantaged people?</p>	
<p>2. Do the racial disparities in special education mirror similar disparities in rates of discipline; achievement; placements in academic tracks; reading groups; or gifted and talented programs? Have these areas ever been compared, side by side?</p>	
<p>3. Has the district been effective in closing racial gaps in achievement?</p>	
<p>4. Have any parents expressed a belief that some staff members in the district have racial bias?</p>	

<p>5. Is there a history of possible racial discrimination in the school district, unconscious or otherwise, which is documented by complaints against the district, OCR investigations, or other racially tinged conflicts in the schools or greater community?</p>	
<p>6. Has the poverty of students and families from a given racial or ethnic group been previously accepted as the reason for overrepresentation without further analysis?</p>	
<p>7. Are administrators and staff in the district reluctant to discuss the possibility that unconscious bias may be a contributing factor?</p>	
<p>8. Do students in poverty have higher risk for all disabilities in the district or is the higher risk only found in those disability categories where the evaluation is based on subjective eligibility criteria?</p>	
<p>G: Attracting and Retaining Good Teachers</p>	
<p>1. Are there enough special educators in each school to provide all the supports and services to which the students are entitled in the</p>	

	least restrictive environment?	
	2. Are teachers assigned to work with students by disability label? If using a cross-categorical model, do you ensure that the teacher assigned has the skills to meet the child's needs?	
	3. Do teachers have a system of support in place for when they feel they are struggling to meet the needs of students with disabilities? Students generally?	
	4. Do teachers who are struggling with classroom management get all the support they need?	
	5. How has the district addressed the possibility that unconscious bias may be a contributing factor?	
H: IEP Team Meetings (Accounting for All Factors)		
	1. Does the district review IEPs to ensure that careful consideration of LRE is being made?	
	2. Are most members of the IEP team that conduct evaluations knowledgeable about cultural differences and culturally appropriate assessments?	
	3. Has a student's eligibility ever changed after	

	consideration of cultural bias, or after adding a culturally sensitive assessment?	
	4. If the information from parents conflicts with the test results, does the IEP team weigh these conflicting sources of information equally?	

I: IEP Team Meetings (Relationship with Parents)

	1. Does the district or school encourage IEP members to actively listen to economically disadvantaged, minority, or less educated parents during IEP meetings?	
	2. Are members of the IEP Team provided with adequate training on how to work more successfully with culturally diverse or economically disadvantaged parents?	
	3. Do IEP team members ever discuss whether parents are considered equal team members and do they make concerted efforts to ensure such is the case?	
	4. Are evaluators skilled in presenting evaluation information and data in a clearly understandable manner to parents with varying educational	

	backgrounds or limited language proficiency?	
J: Response to General Education Policy Including Discipline		
	1. Are students retained at grade based primarily on their scores on achievement tests?	
	2. Are some low achieving students without disabilities referred for special education to enable them to receive test accommodations on high stakes tests?	
	3. Does a focus on teaching to the test make inclusion more challenging for regular education teachers?	
	4. Are students with disabilities suspended more often than their non-disabled peers? Does every school fully implement all the due process procedures when suspensions of students with disabilities beyond ten days, including cumulative shorter term suspensions for similar infractions?	
K: Pre-referral Interventions		In the space provided briefly state your reasons for thinking this item may be an issue.
	1. To what extent are pre-referral interventions engaged in? Are they rigorously designed to help the teacher and school meet	

	the educational needs of the student?	
	2. Do all students with apparent, but mild, behavioral issues receive the supports or services they need from school counselors prior to referral for evaluation?	
	3. Do students with academic issues fail to get consideration for both special education support and ELL services?	
L: Individual Teacher and Administration Attitudes and Bias		
	1. Have special educators expressed the belief that regular education teachers are poorly trained to work with students with disabilities?	
	2. Have some regular education teachers expressed the believe that students who are struggling academically are likely better off in special education where they assume they will receive intensive individualized instruction even if they are not convinced that the student has a disability?	
	3. Are students with disabilities commonly excluded from test-prep sessions?	

<p>4. Is there a racial disparity pattern among teacher referrals? By race of teacher? By attitude of teacher with regard to special education? By experience of teacher?</p>	
<p>5. Do some teachers actively resist the inclusion of students with disabilities in their regular education classroom How are resistant teachers responded to?</p>	
<p>6. Have any teachers or administrators expressed the opinion there are racial biases among the staff? What about class bias?</p>	

CHECKLIST III: Environmental Factors

Introduction: Both unconscious racial bias and environmental factors may contribute to racial disproportionality in special education. They are not mutually exclusive. However, far closer analysis would be required in order to attribute racial disparities in particular special education categories to environmental factors. Unfortunately, environmental factors sometimes get blamed for these disparate trends to the exclusion of the consideration of other factors and without a close contextual examination of the evidence. As a result, the possible contribution of unconscious racial bias often goes unexamined. Studies designed to account for the influence of poverty and related environmental factors find that race remains a strong indicator for identification. Often districts theorize that other school districts are responsible for inappropriate identification because of students transferring from one district to the next. But every district has an obligation to reevaluate students as soon as eligibility questions are raised. And in most districts the numbers of eligible students that transfer out, are similar to those that transfer in. The exploration of the following questions could help illuminate the extent to which environmental and other external factors are major contributing factors in your district.

A: Exposure to Environmental Toxins (In School)	In the space provided briefly state your reasons for thinking this item may be an issue.
1. Are children of color differentially exposed to environmental hazards at the school level (poor air quality and exposure to lead in water for example)?	
2. Do certain schools serve communities that are known to have an unusually high incidence of disability in children? Has the possibility of environmental pathogens in those schools been explored? Have all potential hazards in the school been explored?	
B: Exposure to Environmental Toxins (Out of School)	
1. Does the kindergarten screening process, or special education evaluation process ask questions that would reveal exposure to environmental risk factors in the home?	
2. Are there certain communities known to have high exposures to environmental risk factors? Have you reviewed any	

	documents about these risks and implications for student health?	
C: Other Health Issues		
	Are there other health issues such as experiencing trauma, poor eyesight, hearing or others that might be contributing to high levels of referral, but that are not reflected in the evaluation for special education eligibility?	
D: Access to and Coordination with Other Health and Human Services		
	1. Are students regularly screened for lead levels or mild visual and hearing impairments?	
	2. Is there a factual record for students in your district of higher exposure to lead or other environmental factors for certain racial groups that have been shown to correlate with racial disparities in identification? Do all student subgroups with the similar risk for exposure wind up with similar risk for identification)?	
	3. How strongly does the number of children at risk for exposure correlate with the	

	numbers identified as having cognitive disabilities?	
	D: Transfers From Other Districts	
	1. Does your district re-evaluate students that were identified in another district within a year of enrollment in the district?	
	2. When transfers out are also considered, is there a significant gain, by race, among students with disabilities?	
	3. Are there racial disparities in the district with regard to any of the following: placement of students in restrictive educational settings; students who are suspended; or identified as being gifted?	
	4. Would eliminating the student transfers into and out of the district eliminate all or most of the racial disparity?	

Appendix C

Daniel Losen Written Permission

Re: Permission for use of Checklist for Addressing Racial Disproportionality in Special Education

Jessica Marshall <jmarshall8@une.edu>

Wed 1/5/2022 12:37 PM

To:

Daniel Losen <losendan@gmail.com>

Thank you so much for your prompt response! The purpose of your checklist is precisely what I'm hoping to explore more deeply within my district. It works beautifully with my research goals!

Thanks again, and I'll be glad to share my results! Hoping to finish up late this summer if I can stay the course.

Jessica

From: Daniel Losen <losendan@gmail.com>

Sent: Wednesday, January 5, 2022 11:32 AM

To: Jessica Marshall <jmarshall8@une.edu>

Subject: Re: Permission for use of Checklist for Addressing Racial Disproportionality in Special Education

Dear Jessica,

Please do go ahead and use it. I'd love to hear about your results. The checklist is meant to be used as the basis for a deeper dialogue and to find out information that will help districts fashion a remedy that will help them get at the root causes under their control.

Thanks for reaching out.

Dan

Dan Losen
Director, Center for Civil Rights Remedies
The Civil Rights Project at UCLA

781-861-1222 (Work)
617-285-4745 (cell)

To Follow On Twitter: @losendan

On Wed, Jan 5, 2022 at 10:19 AM Jessica Marshall <jmarshall8@une.edu> wrote:

Good morning Mr. Losen,

I am reaching out regarding usage of the *Annotated Checklist for Addressing Racial Disproportionality (2008)*. I am currently a doctoral student at the University of New England and am completing my dissertation on racial disproportionality in special education. I'd like to use parts of the checklist to conduct my qualitative research study. I will be conducting interviews with school psychologists, and I'm hoping to utilize the checklist as the foundation for developing my interview protocol. The checklist provides the specific areas that I wish to investigate at the local school level and the questions align nicely with my research questions. Through my research, I hope to develop remedies at the individual school context level.

Your research on this topic has been instrumental in the development of my literature review as well as the direction of my study. I applaud your impressive efforts as you continue to tackle this issue of equity in education.

Please let me know if there is additional information that I need to provide to utilize this tool. I currently work as a school counselor in a suburban high school in Connecticut that has been cited for disproportionality in special education for students of color.

I can be reached via reply email or at 860.268.5632.

Jessica Marshall

Appendix D

Interview Protocol

Script (Italics)

Thank you so much for being willing to participate in an interview for my doctoral study. Before we begin, I'd like to review the contents of the Participant Information Sheet that I emailed to you with the invitation to participate in my study. Let's begin with the first section that introduces my study and outlines its purpose (Read aloud through these sections)...do you have any questions so far? Now let's move on to what you can expect from participation in the study including potential risks and confidentiality measures taken (Read aloud through these sections)...Are there any questions or concerns that you'd like discuss?

Our interview today will last approximately 60 minutes. I will be asking you about your role as a school psychologist, the process of special education identification within the building that you work, your ideas about the disproportionate data, and your perceptions of the role of student and school characteristics in the decision-making process for identification.

Now that we have reviewed what to expect today and the aspects of the Participant Information Sheet, I'd like to confirm if you're ready to proceed with the recorded interview.

Thank you! Please remember that you may opt to stop the interview at any time or choose to not answer certain questions.

If you have any questions that arise as we proceed through the interview, please feel free to ask them at any time.

Thank you again for your participation in this interview. I really appreciate it!

Introduction

1. How long have you worked in this district as a school psychologist?
2. What are your roles and responsibilities as a school psychologist in the special education identification process?
3. Describe your student and staff population (e.g., demographics).

Thank you for sharing about staff and students in your building and your role in the special education identification process. Now I would like to ask you more about your perceptions of that process.

Research Question 1: How do school psychologists perceive the special education identification process?

4. Who typically initiates a referral to special education in your building?
5. What data is considered to evaluate a student for special education in your building?
6. Based on your experience, which sources of data do you feel are the most important to understand a student's current level of performance?

- a. Follow-up: Do you find that special education identification decisions are based on these data sources in your building?
7. As a matter of policy, procedure, or practice, is the quality of instruction and classroom management of regular education classroom teachers routinely examined during the pre-referral intervention process, and by the IEP team once the referral has been made?
8. To what extent are pre-referral interventions engaged in? Are they rigorously designed to help the teacher and school meet the educational needs of the student?
 - a. Follow-up: What systems of support are available for students with academic, behavioral, or social-emotional challenges?
9. In what ways do you believe policies or practices in your building influence the special education referral and/or identification process?
10. Have some staff expressed the belief that students who are struggling academically or behaviorally are likely better off in special education where they assume they will receive intensive individualized instruction even if they are not convinced that the student has a disability?
11. Where applicable, does the IEP team discuss cultural considerations during the identification process?

Thank you for sharing your perspective on the special education referral and identification practices in your building. I'd like to now ask you some questions regarding your perception of student or school factors that might play a role in the decision-making process.

Research Question 2: What role do school psychologists perceive student characteristics or behaviors play in the decision-making process for special education identification?

12. Are all students provided equal access to highly qualified and experienced teachers?
13. From your perspective, is there a disparity pattern in referrals for specific subgroups such as from a particular race, socioeconomic status, disability category, age, hometown, etc.?
14. From your perspective, is there a racial disparity pattern among teacher referrals? By attitude of teacher regarding special education? By experience of teacher?
15. From your perspective, is there is a racial disparity pattern in referrals based on certain behaviors from students?
16. What do you think leads to the disproportionate identification data for students of color?
 - a. Follow-up: What observations or experiences led you to that answer?
17. What student characteristics or behaviors do you believe are most likely to influence an eligibility decision?
18. What role, if any, do you feel unconscious bias plays in disproportionality?

Closing Questions

We have covered a lot of topics today in our interview. As our interview draws to a close, I'd like to focus on your general thoughts about your building's special education identification practices.

19. What are some areas of strength that you feel your building demonstrates in the referral process? Be specific.

20. What are some areas of opportunity that you feel your building could improve upon in the referral process? Be specific.

Before we conclude this interview, is there anything else about your experience as a school psychologist with the special education identification process that we have not yet had a chance to discuss?

Thank you again for your willingness to participate in my study.

Appendix E

IRB Exemption Letter



Institutional Review Board
Mary DeSilva, Chair

Biddeford Campus
11 Hills Beach Road
Biddeford, ME 04005
(207) 602-2244 T
(207) 602-5905 F

Portland Campus
716 Stevens Avenue
Portland, ME 04103

DATE OF LETTER: April 25, 2022

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Jessica Marshall
FACULTY ADVISOR: Ella Benson, EdD

PROJECT NUMBER: 0322-20
PROJECT TITLE: The Perceptions of School Psychologists Regarding the Disproportionality in Special Education for Students of Color: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study

SUBMISSION TYPE: Exempt Project
SUBMISSION DATE: 3/27/2022

ACTION: Determination of Exempt Status
DECISION DATE: 4/25/2022

REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption Category # 2(ii)

The UNE Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects has reviewed the materials submitted in connection with the above referenced project and has determined that the proposed work is exempt from IRB review and oversight as defined by 45 CFR 46.104.

Additional IRB review is not required for this project as submitted. However, if any changes to the design of the study are contemplated (e.g., revision to the protocol, data collection instruments, interview/survey questions, recruitment materials, participant information sheet, and/or other IRB-reviewed documents), the Principal Investigator must submit an amendment to the IRB to ensure the requested change(s) will not alter the exempt status of the project.

Please feel free to contact me at (207) 602-2244 or irb@une.edu with any questions.

Best Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bob Kennedy".

Bob Kennedy, MS
Director, Research Integrity

Appendix F

Email Invitation to Participants

Dear

I am reaching out to determine if you would be willing to participate in my doctoral research study. I am currently a doctoral student in education at the University of New England. I am conducting a study titled *The Perceptions of School Psychologists Regarding the Disproportionality in Special Education for Students of Color: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study*. You are being asked to participate in this study because you have experience as a school psychologist working with administrators, teachers, parents, and students in the special education referral process, and you work in a district cited for disproportionality in special education.

This purpose of this research study is to explore school psychologists' beliefs about disproportionality in special education and their views about the factors that may contribute to racial overrepresentation within their local context. This study aims to identify any racialized practices, biases, or policies that may perpetuate disproportionality within the special education referral process at the local level. This study also seeks to identify interventions that may help to alleviate disproportionality.

Your participation will be kept confidential, and the information gathered will adhere to strict confidentiality and privacy protocols. In this study, participant names will not be personally identified at any time. All data obtained will be coded with a personalized identification number to maintain confidentiality. If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in a recorded virtual interview about your experiences with disproportionality and the special education referral process. The interview should last approximately 60 minutes but could vary slightly. You may select a convenient interview time and a Zoom link will be emailed to you to participate virtually. If none of the times listed below work for you, please let me know and we can work together to find a suitable time for you.

I am available to meet virtually on the following dates and times:

- 1.
- 2.

Please remember that participation in my study is entirely voluntary. If you do not wish to participate in this study, you are not required to do so. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without penalty. You may also opt to not answer every question.

I have attached a copy of the participant information sheet that outlines the specific details of this study including confidentiality and privacy measures.

Thank you in advance for your consideration. Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions. I can be reached at jmarshall8@une.edu or 860-268-5632. Additionally, you may also contact my faculty advisor, Dr. Ella Benson, at ebenson2@une.edu or 757-450-3628.

Sincerely,
Jessica Marshall

Appendix G
Participant Information Sheet

Information Sheet Version Date:	April 20, 2022
IRB Project #:	0322-20
Title of Project:	The Perceptions of School Psychologists Regarding the Special Education Disproportionality for Students of Color: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study
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INTRODUCTION

- This is a project being conducted for research purposes.
- The intent of the Participant Information Sheet is to provide you with pertinent details about this research project.
- You are encouraged to ask any questions about this research project, now, during or after the project is complete.
- Your participation is completely voluntary.
- The use of the word ‘we’ in the Information Sheet refers to the Principal Investigator and/or other research staff.
- If you decide to participate, you have the right to withdraw from this research project at any time without penalty.
- If you choose to withdraw from the project, any data collected will be deleted and not utilized in the project.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS PROJECT?

This study is being conducted as part of a doctoral dissertation. The purpose of this research study is to explore school psychologists’ beliefs about disproportionality in special education and their views about the factors that may contribute to racial overrepresentation within their local context. This study aims to identify any racialized practices, biases, or policies that may perpetuate disproportionality within the special education referral process at the local level. This study also seeks to identify interventions that may help to alleviate disproportionality in special education for students of color.

WHY AM I BEING ASKED TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS PROJECT?

You are being asked to participate in this study because you have experience as a school psychologist working with administrators, teachers, parents, and students in the special education referral process and you work in a district cited for disproportionality in special education.

WHAT IS INVOLVED IN THIS PROJECT?

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to:

1. Participate in one virtual interview lasting approximately one hour via Zoom with Jessica Marshall regarding your perceptions on why disproportionality exists, the local practices, biases, or policies that may contribute to racial disproportionality in your district, and any potential supports or interventions that may help to alleviate disproportionality. The interview will be digitally recorded and transcribed if you consent to do so. The interview will be conducted at a time that is convenient for you.
2. Review the transcription of the interview for accuracy.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS INVOLVED FROM BEING IN THIS PROJECT?

This is a minimal risk study. There is a slight risk of participants feeling some minor concern or discomfort about the information they share with the researcher. There is a small risk of breach of confidentiality, however, the researcher will make every effort to maintain confidentiality.

Please note that as a research participant you have the following rights:

- You may skip or refuse to answer any question for any reason.
- You may choose to keep your camera off during the interview.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE BENEFITS FROM BEING IN THIS PROJECT?

There are no likely benefits to you directly by being in this research project; however, the information we collect may help us understand the incidence of disproportionality within your district. The overall potential benefits to the field of special education and educational equity through this research include a better understanding of why disproportionality or racialized practices exist and how to alleviate them. Your participation may highlight areas for future research in the field as well as further exploration at the local level. Participant insight may help to uncover new interventions and supports that help to reduce disproportionality, particularly within your district.

WILL YOU BE COMPENSATED FOR BEING IN THIS PROJECT?

There will be no compensation for participating in this project.

WHAT ABOUT PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY?

We will do our best to keep your personal information private and confidential. However, we cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law. Additionally, your information in this research project could be reviewed by representatives of the University such as the Office of Research Integrity and/or the Institutional Review Board.

The results of this research project may be shown at meetings or published in journals to inform other professionals. If any papers or talks are given about this research, your name will not be used. We may use data from this research project that has been permanently stripped of personal identifiers in future research without obtaining your consent.

The following additional measures will be taken to protect your privacy and confidentiality:

- Participants will be assigned a randomly generated unique identification number for use throughout the study
- A master key will be kept and will contain only the initials of the participant linked with their unique identification number
- The master key will be kept on a password protected laptop and file separate from the study data and will be destroyed as soon as possible following transcript verification
- All interview notes, recordings, transcriptions, and data analysis will be coded using the identification number only
- No participant full names will be utilized at any time during the study. Only participant initials will be captured for linking of the unique identification number
- Interviews will be conducted virtually from a private setting where others cannot hear researcher or participant conversation. Participants may select a private location of their choosing to participate in the interview.
- Participants may choose to keep their camera off during the interview
- Data will be accessed only by the researcher and kept on two password protected USB drives and password protected files. USB drives will be stored in a locked location.
- Backup data will be stored on a password protected laptop and files accessed only by the researcher
- Researcher handwritten notes will be kept in a locked file cabinet with access only by the researcher
- Audio/video recordings will be destroyed as soon as possible following transcript verification
- Transcript data will be retained for three years following the completion of the study
- Any remaining raw data, such as interview notes, will be destroyed after a period of three years

WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS PROJECT?

You have the right to ask, and have answered, any questions you may have about this research project. If you have questions about this project, complaints or concerns, you should contact the Principal Investigator listed on the first page of this document.

WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR RIGHTS AS A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT?

If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, or if you would like to obtain information or offer input, you may contact the Office of Research Integrity at (207) 602-2244 or via e-mail at irb@une.edu.

Appendix H
Interviewer Notes Template

Interview Date	
Interviewee ID Number	
Notes from Questions	
Question 1	
Question 2	
Question 3	
Question 4	
Question 5	
Question 6	
Question 7	
Question 8	
Question 9	

Question 10	
Question 11	
Question 12	
Question 13	
Question 14	
Question 15	
Question 16	
Question 17	
Question 18	
Question 19	
Question 20	

Appendix I
Interview Summary Sheet

Interview Date	
Interviewee ID Number	
Methodological Reflections	
Describe the overall tone of the meeting.	
Did my own biases influence participant responses? What gave you that impression? What biases might have influenced participant response?	
Was this interview representative of other interviews? Why or why not?	
Overall, what is my impression of the data collection? Did I stray from the interview guide?	
What changes or ideas are recommended for future data collection such as	

additional probing questions to ask?	
Analytic Reflections	
What emerging ideas or themes were evident in the data?	
In what ways might my own biases influence the interpretation of this data?	
What data might be divergent from my beliefs or ideas?	
Did any of the data collected surprise you? Why or why not?	