SCHOOL COUNSELORS' PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES ABOUT THE

DISPROPORTIONALITY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS IN SPECIAL

EDUCATION: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

by

ELBERT MACKENZIE SHELL

(Under the Direction of Yvette Q. Getch)

ABSTRACT

Although researchers have explored the overrepresentation of African American students in various special education categories, few studies have explored school counselors' beliefs or attitudes about the phenomenon. To gain an understanding of the potentially diverse perceptions and viewpoints of school counselors and the essences of their experiences, a qualitative approach allowed for exploration and identification of attitudes about overrepresentation itself and factors that contribute to overrepresentation of African American students in special education. The study included eight practicing school counselors with various levels of experience who were employed in diverse settings in the state of Georgia. The purpose of this exploratory study was to increase our understanding of school counselors' subjective attitudes and beliefs about disproportionality and factors that contribute to overrepresentation of African American students who are served in special education. Implications for how school counselors may positively impact the issue of disproportionality were explored along with the implications for education and training of school counselors to mitigate misclassification of African American students in special education.

INDEX WORDS: Disproportionality, School counselors, African American students, Special education

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to my grandmother, Margie Brown, who pushed me to run faster, work harder, and believe more deeply. Your passion for education will never be forgotten. Thank you for supporting my dreams and giving me the foundation to aspire to do and be more.

This work is also dedicated to one special student, Raukeef, who inspired my research and to other students who have been misdiagnosed, mislabeled, and miseducated.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Nearly 50 years ago, the United States Supreme Court handed down a landmark decision

that changed the landscape of public education: Brown v. Board of Education, 347 U.S. 483

(1954). The decision paved the way for the desegregation of public schools and nullified the

doctrine of "separate but equal". *Brown v. Board* (1954) set the stage for potential academic and

social gains for African American students along with a revised view of segregation that was

based on perceived ability instead of explicit racial segregation. Soon after the passage and

subsequent enforcement of several of the provisions of *Brown*, a new form of segregation arose

in the public schools based on classification systems for students with special needs or learning

disabilities (Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005). Although not explicitly designed to target

African Americans for separate but unequal treatment in the public schools, this new form of

segregation, couched in the language of special education, implicitly and disproportionately

impacts African American students.

Although African American students do not constitute the majority of school-age

children in the United States, they are identified for special education services and receive these

services at rates higher than what would be expected given their numbers in the overall student

population. African American students ages 6-21 represent approximately 15% of all school-age

children in the United States, yet African American students account for 18% of the students

diagnosed with specific learning disabilities (LD or SLD), 34% of the students classified as

having mental retardation (MR) or intellectual disability (ID), and 28% of the students identified

with emotional or behavioral disorders (EBD) (OSEP, 2005). Klingner et al. (2005) noted that when compared to white students, African American students are 1.13 times more likely to be identified as learning disabled, 2.41 times more likely to receive a diagnosis of mental retardation (intellectual disability), and 1.68 times more likely to be identified as having emotional or behavioral disorder. The apparent over identification and placement of African American students in special education is not a recent phenomenon. These disparities have been documented and have persisted for over 40 years in the LD, MR/ID, and EBD special education categories (Skiba, Simmons, Ritter, Kohler, Henderson, & Wu, 2006).

Despite the research produced documenting issues of overrepresentation and disproportionality for African American students in special education categories, researchers have yet to form a consensus about the factors that contribute to this phenomenon. In general, several rationales have been purported to explain the nature and causes of disproportionality: poverty, an over reliance on standardized testing, a cultural mismatch between students and teachers, disproportionate discipline referrals, lack of differentiated instruction in general education, and the special education referral process (Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, & Ortiz, 2010; Blanchett, 2009; Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Ferri & Connor, 2005a; Skiba et al., 2008). These themes contribute to the understanding of the extent and potential causes of disproportionality and almost exclusively involve the many school actors who impact special education referral and placement within the schools except for one group: school counselors.

Even with the large body of research generated about the disproportionality problem or the problem of overrepresentation, the counseling profession has not explicitly addressed the particular issue of overrepresentation/disproportionality, with the exception of Dr. Cortland Lee

(Adkison-Bradley, Johnson, Rawls, & Plunkett, 2006), or studied the beliefs of counselors/school counselors about the phenomenon. Researchers have studied the beliefs of teachers, administrators, and special educators (Skiba et al., 2006), beliefs of school psychologists (Kearns, Ford, & Linney, 2005), and interdisciplinary team outcomes (Klingner & Harry, 2006). None of this research, however, explicitly focused on school counselors' beliefs/attitudes about overrepresentation of African American students in special education categories.

School counselors, in many ways, serve in a unique position to assist students, teachers, and parents prior to referrals to special education services and may advocate effectively for students after special education placement (Moore, Henfield, & Owens, 2008). Because of the unique role of school counselors, an examination of their beliefs about overrepresentation or disproportionality of African American students in special education is warranted. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) has emphasized the advocacy role of school counselors to meet the needs of all students, including students with disabilities. In this role, school counselors attempt to facilitate systemic change to remove barriers for historically underserved student populations (Myers, 2005). For African American students referred for special education consideration, school counselors can facilitate policy or procedural changes that negatively impact this particular group of students. School counselors can also influence academic placement of the students and consult with teachers to suggest interventions before the official referral for special education placement (Adkison-Bradley et al., 2006; Moore et al., 2008). School counselors might serve a vital and proactive role before a teacher makes a formal referral based on concerns he or she might have for a given student.

If a teacher makes a formal referral for special education services for a student, school counselors often have few options to prevent the process from moving forward unless they serve on a multidisciplinary team to evaluate the referral. School counselors may, however, intervene by working with students, their families, and teachers before a formal referral occurs (Adkison-Bradley et al., 2006). Knotek (2003) acknowledged that pre-referral and ancillary interventions may reduce the number of referrals that teachers make for special education services for African American students. When school counselors provide comprehensive services, many students, especially African American students, may not receive referrals for special education evaluation.

School counselors receive little education and training regarding working with students with disabilities (Milsom, 2002). Lack of professional development, training, and education combine to limit the effectiveness of services provided to students with disabilities (Lum, 2003; Milsom, 2002; Perusse, Goodnough, & Noel, 2001). This lack of training and skill development has led some school counselor educators to encourage school counselors to seek professional development opportunities to bolster their skill sets and knowledge of the issues facing African American students with learning disabilities (Milsom, 2002; Constantine, 2002). Although knowledge and skills are vital, it is also critical that school counselors explore their individual beliefs about the nature and causes of overrepresentation and disproportionality. Knowledge and reflection of personal beliefs are necessary to understand and acknowledge that the phenomenon of overrepresentation exists. Only then is it possible to craft a plan to systemically dismantle the procedures that make the phenomenon seem almost intractable.

Statement of the Problem

The social construction of both race and (dis)ability produces notions of deficiency and genetic inferiority for African American students with learning disabilities or other disabilities.

The labels often lead to stigmatization within the public educational system and limited access to postsecondary educational and career opportunities (Block, Balcazar, & Keys, 2002). The intersection of race, ability, and socioeconomic status may contribute to the disproportionate representation of African American students in high incidence special education categories (Shealey & Lue, 2006). While researchers have examined teachers, school psychologists, or administrators' beliefs about the phenomenon of disproportionality, few studies, if any, have examined school counselors' beliefs about the disproportionality of African American students in special education, its causes, or its existence.

The attitudes that school counselors hold about race, socioeconomic status (SES), and (dis)ability may contribute to the phenomenon of disproportionality, even if school counselors do not make the primary referral for special education services nor ultimately decide if a student receives those services (Neal, Davis McCray, Webb-Johnson, & Bridgest, 2003). The role of school counselors as student advocates places them in distinct positions to examine the inequalities associated with the special education referral process for African American students. School counselors also have received a mandate from ASCA to advocate for systemic change by identifying the forces at work in school systems. School counselors' knowledge of their own biases and beliefs about overrepresentation of African American students in special education categories might aid in the identification of factors that ultimately contribute to the phenomenon of disproportionality.

Purpose of the Study

Researchers have examined school counselors' professional development in working with students with learning disabilities, school counselors' comfort level with and knowledge of students with learning disabilities, and how school counselors performed their duties with

students with learning disabilities (Frye, 2005; Milsom, 2002; Milsom & Akos, 2003). This research has focused on how school counselors work with all students with learning disabilities or their attitudes about all students with learning disabilities. However, a special subset of students who have been identified with learning disabilities have historically received fewer services and interventions from school counselors resulting in hardships based on the intersectionality of their racial and (dis)ability labels—African American students with learning disabilities.

This recent study represented a first step toward examining the potentially diverse range of beliefs and attitudes held by school counselors regarding disproportionality and possible contributing factors to disproportionality of African American students in special education. The purpose of this study was to explore the beliefs that high school counselors hold about disproportionality and its roots without using pre-established, *a priori* measures and assumptions. The primary goal of this research was to identify and to explore school counseling activities that may contribute to or mitigate African American students identified as requiring special education services using a qualitative approach that draws from conversations with practicing school counselors. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What descriptions of experiences with students in special education are provided by school counselors?

2. What are the perceptions and beliefs of school counselors about the overrepresentation of African American students in special education?

3. What descriptions of experiences with African American students in special education are provided by school counselors?

4. What is the role of school counselors in the process of identifying African American students for special education services and types of placement?

5. What services do school counselors provide to African American students in special education and what process is used to determine those services?

Significance of the Study

School counselors often serve on interdisciplinary committees, consult with teachers, or provide feedback for African American students who may experience difficulties within a traditional academic setting. In those roles, school counselors may help to limit the number of students referred for special education, advocate for students to receive the full resources available after moving to special education, and advocate for students to be served in the least restrictive environment (LRE) in the school setting. School counselors play a major role in the decision-making for students' academic, career, and personal/social development within the public schools (Moore et al., 2008). Although school counselors neither solely determine identification for special education services nor bear the full responsibility for revamping the special education referral process, their positions within the schools provide opportunities to address the systemic factors that lead to the disproportionality of African American students in high incidence special education categories. The desire to conduct this study emerged from a belief that an exploration of school counselors' attitudes, beliefs, and experiences about the disproportionality problem and its roots could prove valuable and informative as a basis for further study. Additionally, the findings could serve as a basis to evaluate the best methods of preparation and practice for school counselors.

Definitions

Disproportionality has many dimensions and definitions. In general, disproportionality refers to the impact of membership in a given group on the probability of placement in a specific disability category (Artiles et al., 2010). More specifically, Skiba et al. (2008) defined disproportionality as, "the representation of a group in a category that exceeds our expectations for that group, or differs substantially from the representation of others in that category" (p. 266). Disproportionality for African American students has two major components: an overrepresentation in certain disability categories and an underrepresentation in gifted and talented programs (Skiba et al., 2008). Although underrepresentation in gifted and talented programs poses an equally challenging problem, this study will focus on overrepresentation in certain disability categories.

Overrepresentation refers to the "unequal proportions" of African American students in special education programs (Waitoller, Artiles, & Cheney, 2010, p. 29). Zhang and Katsiyannis (2002) purported that "overrepresentation occurs when the percentages of minority students in special education exceeds the percentage of these students in the total student population" (p. 180). More specifically, overrepresentation refers to the unequal proportions of African American students in specific disability categories or high-incidence disabilities.

High-incidence disabilities encompass three categories: emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD), learning disabilities/specific learning disabilities (LD or SLD), and intellectual disabilities (ID or MMR) (Waitoller, Artiles, & Cheney, 2010). EBD, LD or SLD, and ID (MMR) diagnoses account for nearly 75% of the students identified for special education services and rely on context-dependent criteria rather than standardized critieria (Vallas, 2009).

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

High school students with learning disabilities face many obstacles in obtaining both a quality education and preparation for postsecondary education or employment (Foley, 2006; Bear, Kottering, & Braziel, 2006; Scanlon & Mellard, 2002; Murray, Goldstein, Nourse, & Edgar, 2000). The challenge is even more pronounced for African American male high school students with learning disabilities. The intersection of their race, gender, socioeconomic status (SES), and disability correlates with poorer academic outcomes and poorer postsecondary outcomes (Blanchett, Klingner, & Harry, 2009; Murray & Naranjo, 2008). A part of those challenges might stem from the nature of the label 'learning disabled' itself and its impact on students, school personnel, and policies (Reid & Knight, 2006). Another part of the challenge lies in the overrepresentation of African American male students in high incidence learning disabilities categories potentially leading to separate and unequal schooling (Moore, Henfield, & Owens, 2008). School counselors, along with other school personnel, might play a part in mitigating the challenges that African American male students with learning disabilities face when preparing for postsecondary opportunities. More importantly, school counselors can work to reduce African American male student overrepresentation in high incidence learning disabilities categories and the impacts of overrepresentation (Moore et al., 2008).

The disproportionate representation of African Americans in special education is neither a new problem nor is it easily solvable. Finding solutions to disproportionality does not fall within the sole province of school counselors; however, school counselors occupy a unique

position in public schools and their beliefs about overrepresentation can support advocacy for students.   School counselors can function as a protective barrier to special education identification for vulnerable student groups (Moore, Henfield, & Owens, 2008). School counselors, however, are not immune to the issues regarding the meaning and history of special education or the over-identification of African Americans for special education services.

This literature review summarizes issues that influence beliefs about overrepresentation and attitudes towards students labeled as learning disabled--the very nature of learning disabilities, the language used to describe learning disabilities, counselor education, policies, and laws. Several overarching themes inform this literature review: (a) history of learning disabilities categories, (b) the social construction of learning disabilities, (c) disproportionality problem and its possible causes, (d) the re-segregation of public schools, and (e) the role(s) of school counselors with students with learning disabilities.

History of Learning Disabilities Categories

Nineteenth century European physicians introduced the first discussions of the concepts that would later assume the name 'learning disabilities' and studied impairments to language acquisition and reading skills (Hallahan & Mock, 2003). In the studies, the physicians found that some students had 'normal' intelligence in many areas, but could not read (Hallahan & Mercer, 2002). Their research attempted to pinpoint the causes of the variance between ability and expected achievement (Gallego, Duran, & Reyes, 2006). The physicians termed the variance 'word-blindness', postulated that heredity played a part in word-blindness, and hypothesized that one-on-one training with the students could ameliorate the condition (Hallahan & Mercer, 2002; Hallahan & Mock, 2003).

During the 1920s, researchers in the United States began using the results of the studies about European students as a basis for their analysis of reading and language acquisition (Gallego, Duran, & Reyes, 2006). Developmental researchers began developing tests to assess the differences between actual reading ability and expected reading ability. These tests, based on a discrepancy model and eugenics, became the archetype for other tests using the discrepancy models (Baker, 2002; Hallahan & Mock, 2003; Skiba et al., 2008).

The development and introduction of the Intelligence Quotient (IQ) test allowed researchers to assume that they could objectively measure the discrepancy between expected and actual achievement (Gallego, Duran, & Reyes, 2006). IQ tests provided a convenient tool to segregate groups of students. The new tests served as a mechanism to prevent the 'weak minded' from corrupting the purity of the superior races and justified differential treatment based on race/ethnicity (Baker, 2002; Skiba et al., 2008). Additionally, the use of standardized tests helped to identify normal expectations for all students based on white, European, middle-class ideals and marked those who did not meet those testing standards as defective (Reid & Knight, 2006). To succeed in school, these 'defective' students would require specialized instructional techniques to mitigate their impairments (Baker, 2002).

The advent of new tests coincided with novel approaches to remediate struggling students—a multisensory phonics-based method—which led to the creation of several variations and adaptations of the multisensory approaches by educators and researchers (Gallego, Duran, & Reyes, 2006). Discrepancy models and testing laid the foundation for future evaluation of and research on learning disabilities. As a part of that foundation, three practices emerged that informed future work in the learning disabilities field: (1) the identification of students with reading challenges using measures of discrepancy between actual and expected achievement, (2)

the design of instruction based on testing results (Hallahan & Mercer, 2002), and (3) the implementation of categorization and classification of problem populations (Baker, 2002).

A new category arose to encompass and label students having academic difficulties, developmental delays, or risk of failure in school—Learning Disability (LD). The new category aided in the pathologization and medicalization of learning difficulties in students (Baker, 2002; Reid & Knight, 2006). Medicalization of these phenomena added a veneer of scientific truth to efforts to diagnose, refer, label, and remediate students. Moreover, medicalization made the processes of diagnosing, referring, labeling, and remediating seem fair and objective (Reid & Knight). In 1969, Congress officially recognized learning disability as a "state designated handicapping condition" (Baker, 2002, p. 678). This new category of LD with legal backing became the label for nearly a million students within a year of its genesis (Baker, 2002, p. 678).

Although the use of discrepancy models, testing results, and classification systems underpinned learning disabilities research and practice, other theories and perspectives began to influence how educators and researchers viewed learning disabilities and students labeled as learning disabled. The progressive education movement promoted by John Dewey emphasized the importance of the environmental factors and personal background on development and learning (Gallego et al., 2006). Other researchers, such as Piaget and Vygotsky, furthered the discussion by including the interplay between a child and its socio-cultural environment and the subsequent impact on development and learning (Gallego et al., 2006). Eventually, a new interdisciplinary field of Disability Studies appeared to include the voices of students labeled as disabled in dialogues about their goals and expected outcomes (Reid & Knight, 2006).

The new perspectives gained favor with educators and researchers; however, the initial influence of the medical model of discrepancy, individual abilities, and quantifiable behaviors

endured (Gallego et al., 2006). Discrepancy and deficiency models worked together initially to exclude students classified as learning disabled from the public schools, then became the basis for federal legislation mandating inclusion in public schools, and later became the basis for claims of resegregation of students from historically underserved groups within the public schools (Blanchett, Klingner, & Harry, 2009; Ferri & Connor, 2005a; Vallas, 2009).

Learning Disability as an Instrument of Exclusion

As more children earned the labels of slow or retarded during the early 20th century, separate buildings sprang forth to house them. The development of new classifications, such as culturally deprived, mentally retarded, slow learner, learning disabled, and emotionally disturbed, seemingly justified the policy of separating particular students from general education classrooms, especially students of lower socioeconomic standing, immigrant children, and minorities (Ferri & Connor, 2005a). In fact, many students classified as learning disabled did not receive any public education at all if their school districts alleged a lack of capacity to make accommodations for them (Fleischer & Zames, 2001).

Policies of exclusion prevented more than one million students with disabilities, including those with learning disabilities, from accessing public school educations until the 1970s (Ferri & Connor, 2005a; Vallas, 2009). To make public education unrestricted for all students regardless of disability, disability rights advocates used concepts of the Civil Rights Movement—unity and equal opportunity—to advance their cause (Blanchett et al., 2009). The use of terms from the Civil Rights Movement seemed a propos, in fact, because the exclusion of millions of students with disabilities from public schools was indeed a civil rights issue (Ramanathan, 2008). Proponents of equal educational opportunities for students with disabilities envisioned special education as a tool to redress past educational inequities and

pushed for federal mandates to codify changes to policies, including the provision of separate services for some students (Blanchett et al., 2009). The mandates came via historic court cases, reports issued by federal offices, and federal and state legislation that made a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) accessible for all students (LaNear & Frattura, 2007).

Movement to Universal Schooling

During the early part of the 20th century, the need for the government to provide educational opportunities for all students became apparent as awareness of the linkages between education and economic outcomes—creating an employable workforce and achieving economic independence—grew (McLaughlin, 2010). This growing awareness, however, precluded an emphasis on providing equal access for all students and families to a free appropriate public education; it only made restricted access available if parents and their children chose to seek out the limited access granted (McLaughlin, 2010). Consequently, the restricted access led to a new rationale of education for African American students and students with disabilities—a two-tiered educational system (Blanchett, 2009). This two-tiered education system allowed African American students to receive education solely with other African American students and segregated students with disabilities to schools with other students with physical and mental impairments. In both cases, advocates found the differential funding, treatment, and outcomes of this segregation detrimental to the students forced into this system and sought remedies to force inclusion, equity, and removal of the stigma associated with the segregation (Blanchett, 2009; LaNear & Fratura, 2007; McLaughlin, 2010). One Supreme Court case changed the public educational expectations for African American students and laid the foundation for subsequent inclusion for students with disabilities.

In 1954, the United States Supreme court decided a seminal case in the Civil Rights Movement and educational history, *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) case. The *Brown* decision renounced the notion of "separate but equal" that the Supreme Court had earlier endorsed in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) for the public education of African American students and implicitly linked the concepts of equitable treatment to educational outcomes of the education received (Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005; McLaughlin, 2010). In other words, providing the same curriculum to every student could not adequately predict equal opportunity without a simultaneous review of the benefits the students received from that curriculum (McLaughlin, 2010). The Supreme Court also ruled the segregation of African American students violated the 14th Amendment rights of those students to equal protection under the law (Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005). In spite of its historical implications, the *Brown* decision's promise remained more aspirational than realized.

Although the *Brown* decision declared "separate but equal" unconstitutional, segregation endured for African American students, students with disabilities, and African American students with learning disabilities (Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005; LaNear & Frattura, 2007). Judicial oversight of desegregation lasted for 40 years after Brown and desegregation plans often did not lead to true integration (LaNear & Frattura, 2007). Despite the implementation issues surrounding the *Brown* decision, the decision itself underpinned all challenges to the notion of "separate but equal" in public education, especially for students who still faced legal segregation—students with disabilities (Blanchett, 2009).

Before the *Brown* decision and for nearly 16 years after the decision, public schools had no legal mandate to educate students with disabilities. Students with disabilities found their educational fates completely at the whim of states and school districts that had no obligation to

provide access to education (Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005). Losen & Orfield (2002)

estimated that nearly two million students with disabilities went underserved and uneducated by

public schools. States and school districts that chose to educate students with disabilities often

housed their classrooms in rundown facilities and staffed them with underprepared or untrained

teachers (Losen & Orfield, 2002). Proponents of the civil and educational rights of students with

disabilities sought equal access to a free education to address the educational and social needs of

students from this underserved population.

Special education and legal historians highlighted two court cases challenged the

segregated education of students with learning disabilities and set the stage for inclusion and

access to FAPE for students with disabilities (Blanchett, 2009; LaNear & Frattura, 2007). The

two well-known federal District Court cases, *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children

(PARC) v. Pennsylvania* and *Mills v. District of Columbia Board of Education* challenged the

constitutionality of "separate but equal" for students with disabilities and set the stage for future

legislation mandating equal treatment under the law. Both court cases cited *Brown* within their

rationales, although historians argue the significance of *Brown*'s role in these two court decisions

(LaNear & Frattura, 2007). Similar to the *Brown* decision, *PARC* and *Mills* used the equal

protection and due process clauses of the 14th Amendment to the Constitution to overturn

exclusion and segregation practices for students with learning disabilities (LaNear & Frattura,

2007).

PARC and *Mills* **cases.** In 1972, federal District Courts ruled on two cases regarding

access to a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) for students with disabilities

(Blanchett, 2009; LaNear & Frattura, 2007). Each case had slightly different merits and

outcomes for students with disabilities and their families. Although the plaintiffs in the *PARC*

case invoked the equal protection and due process clauses, the District Court did not explicitly

rule on due process or equal protection for the students impacted by the lawsuit. The PARC

decision did, however, spur greater access to free appropriate public education for the impacted

students but the court did not rule that a free appropriate public education was a constitutional

entitlement for students with disabilities (LaNear & Frattura, 2007). Another case, *Mills v.*

District of Columbia Board of Education, also addressed the segregation and exclusion students

with disabilities, specifically 'exceptional' students labeled as "mentally retarded, emotionally

disturbed, physically "handicapped", hyperactive, and other children with behavioral problems"

(LaNear & Frattura, 2007, p. 95) within the District of Columbia public schools.

Similar to the *PARC* case, plaintiffs in the *Mills* case questioned the legality of the

exclusion of students labeled as exceptional from a free appropriate public education (Blanchett,

2009; LaNear & Frattura, 2007). Dissimilar to the *PARC* case, the District Court did assess the

arguments regarding the violation of the due process and equal protection clauses for students

with disabilities. The *Mills* decision affirmed that students with disabilities, 'exceptional'

children, had a constitutional entitlement to a free appropriate public education (LaNear &

Frattura, 2007). Both the *PARC* and *Mills* decisions significantly influenced future court cases

and, along with the future lawsuits and their resulting programs and services, formed the

foundation for the Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (Blanchett, 2009;

Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005; LaNear & Frattura,2007; McLaughlin, 2010).

Special education and legal mandates. Several federal government mandates and

policies set aside money for teacher training, facilities development, and for special education

programs, including the "National Defense Education Act of 1958, The Special Education Act of

1961, The Mental Retardation Facility and Community Center Construction Act of 1963, and the

Education of the Handicapped Act of 1970 (EHA)" (LaNear & Frattura, 2007, p. 99). Although each of these policy changes seemed to hail a significant change in the treatment of students with disabilities, LaNear & Frattura (2007) argued that the policies initiated and helped to reify the division between regular and special education, a legitimization of segregation. Subsequent federal policy changes and laws continued to provide more protections for students with disabilities while also continuing the separation of general education and special education.

Congress passed a law in 1973 that greatly impacted public education—The Rehabilitation Act. One specific section of this law, Section 504, made discrimination based on disability illegal for institutions receiving federal funding. Because virtually every school district in the nation received federal funding, Section 504 made discrimination against students with disabilities illegal for public schools. If schools failed to comply with the law, they would suffer the loss of their federal funding (LaNeur & Frattura, 2007). Blanchett (2009) surmised that Section 504 was the first major piece of legislation to protect the rights of students with disabilities because it defined disability, banned discrimination in the public sphere, and provided educational services. Section 504 of The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 set the stage for further legal action and policy changes to codify increased access to public education for students with disabilities.

Advocates for students with disabilities advanced the cause of equal access to a free appropriate public education as a major goal (McLaughlin, 2010). Proponents of equal access achieved this goal when Congress passed the Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (EACHA). The EACHA authorized a free appropriate public education (FAPE) for students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment (LRE) with several procedural safeguards, including parental due process rights, non-biased assessment for services, and

Individualized Education Plans/Programs (IEPs) (Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005; LaNear & Frattura, 2007; McLaughlin, 2010; Vallas, 2009). The EACHA led to several guarantees not previously granted to students with disabilities and defined 13 qualifying diagnoses for special education eligibility (LaNear & Frattura, 2007; Vallas, 2009). Unfortunately, EACHA also continued a trend of bifurcating schooling into general education and special education (LaNear & Frattura,2007) and introduced more variability and subjectivity to the classification process for special education eligibility (Vallas, 2009). In spite of those two complaints, researchers generally consider The Education of All Handicapped Children Act and subsequent legislation successful for the guarantees and access offered to students with disabilities (Blanchett, 2009; Ferri & Connor, 2005a; LaNear & Frattura, 2007).

A new law and an amendment to EACHA provided even more guarantees for individuals with disabilities. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 extended civil rights protections in both the private and public spheres by mandating appropriate accommodations and modifications for individuals with disabilities (Blanchett, 2009). Even with the extension of civil rights provided by ADA, Many acknowledged that EACHA and its amendments and revisions still occupy a seminal role for the education of students with disabilities (Blanchett, 2009).

The Education Handicapped Act Amendment of 1990 renamed EACHA the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). IDEA endorsed language intended to remove the stigma associated with disabilities; i.e., people-first language (LaNear & Frattura, 2007). IDEA also mandated transition services for students with disabilities. IDEA and its predecessors continued the use of a deficiency/discrepancy model to undergird conceptions and diagnoses of disability. Sailor (2009) argued that a discrepancy model works counter to the goal of inclusion

in general education because the model continues to locate issues within students themselves and allows subjective evaluations of normalcy. Those subjective evaluations led to historically marginalized populations receiving more referrals for special education services; in effect, re-segregating students based on the construct of disability rather than race (Ferri & Connor, 2005a). Ferri and Connor (2005a) argued that "racialized notions of ability are entrenched in our culture—so much so that segregation of "the disabled" has also meant segregating students of color" (p. 454).

As a result of the higher incidence of minority students, specifically African American males, becoming identified as learning disabled and referred to special education, Congress added several provisions to IDEA during the reauthorization process in 1997. IDEA (1997) required departments of education from each state and individual school districts to review data to determine if special education identification and referral processes adversely impacted certain groups of students by preventing inclusion in general education classrooms (Ferri & Connor, 2005a). Unequal representation of historically marginalized students, especially African American students, in special education programs and more restrictive environments concerned lawmakers, advocates, and civil rights activists enough to push for changes in IDEA (Blanchett, 2009; Skiba et al., 2008; Vallas, 2009).

When Congress reauthorized and amended IDEA in 2004, it proposed several changes to rectify the unequal representation of historically marginalized groups within special education categories. The reauthorized IDEA became the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) and mandated that states monitor unequal representation by race or ethnicity in special education placements and categories, review policies, procedures, and practices in incidences where unequal representation is found, and hire and train highly qualified

teachers to work with students with disabilities (LaNear & Frattura, 2007; Skiba et al., 2008).

IDEIA also mandated inclusion in the general education environment when possible and

emphasized placing students in the least restrictive environment (LRE) appropriate for their

needs (Skiba et al., 2008). As seen in prior legislation, Congress did not define what constituted

the least restrictive environment or unequal representation. Those definitions and practices were

left for individual states and school districts to define and implement (Vallas, 2009). The

variability in the definitions and implementations perhaps unwittingly (or intentionally according

to some researchers) led to a conflict between special education policies and the ideals and

promise of the *Brown* decision (Blanchett, 2009; Ferri & Connor, 2005a; Moore, Henfield, &

Owens, 2008; Skiba et al., 2008; Vallas, 2009).

Like *Brown v. Board* (1954), lawmakers created special education laws and policies to

facilitate full inclusion where possible of students within general education classrooms.

However, one trend emerged from efforts to desegregate schools and increase awareness of

learning disabilities—the unequal representation of African American students in certain special

education categories (Blanchett, 2009; Ferri & Connor, 2005b; Moore et al., 2008; Skiba et al.,

2008; Vallas, 2009). Some researchers argued that the subjective nature and lack of clear

definitions for diagnosis of learning disabilities and determination of least restrictive

environments for certain special education categories contributed to unequal representation of

African American students in particular learning disability categories (Artiles et al., 2010;

Ramanathan, 2008; Waitoller, Artiles, & Cheney, 2010). Others argued that school districts

intentionally increased the identification of African American students as learning disabled to

subvert the *Brown* decision and to justify the exclusion of African American students from

general education classrooms (Ferri & Connor, 2005b; Vallas, 2009).

One main argument for the exclusion of the African American students rested on the notion that those students had a significant discrepancy in learning potential and ability from their white counterparts—an old eugenicist assertion (Baker, 2002). Ferri and Connor (2005b) suggested that this particular discrepancy argument led to the intellectual combination of race and ability. In effect, labeling African American students as learning disabled allowed for continued segregation based on disability rather than race—a seemingly defensible practice based on a diagnosis of disability (Reid & Knight, 2006).

Special Education as a 'Dumping Ground'

In the wake of the *Brown* decision, states and school districts used several tactics to undermine efforts at desegregation. At least 10 Southern states implemented pupil placement laws that allowed school districts to place students according to specious measurements of academic ability or aptitude, including student preparation and aptitude, morals, personal standards of students, health, and personal conduct (Ferri & Connor, 2005b). Other statutes divided students based on gender to avoid miscegenation or to track students based on their ability. Ability tracking allowed the sorting of students based on their natural abilities and implicitly used biological determinism and intelligence testing as foundations of the ability tracking practice (Ferri & Connor, 2005b). Another practice proved a more effective and iniquitous method to resist desegregation—the referral of minority students, especially African Americans, to segregated classes in special education classrooms.

The use of special education referrals to keep African American students out of general education classrooms appeared to quell the concerns of parents of the white students and to quell the concerns about desegregation's effects on the guiding principles of public schools—conformity, standardization, and homogenization (Blanchett, 2009). Desegregation conflicted

with the guiding principles of public schools by emphasizing diversity and difference (Blanchett, 2009). As school districts and states implemented desegregation, the pattern of more special education referrals for minority students, especially African American students, persisted.

The earliest discussion of the unequal pattern of representation for minority students occurred in 1968 when Dunn reported unequal proportions of minority students in the mildly mentally retarded (MMR) category (Waitoller, Artiles, & Cheney, 2010; Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002). Dunn noted that African American students' representation in the MMR category exceeded the rates expected based on the proportion of African American students in the total population of students (Blanchett et al., 2005). More significantly, Dunn reported that African American students received the label MMR, but that white students with more obvious disabilities did not (Blanchett, 2009).

Nearly 40 years later, the problem of unequal representation--overrepresentation or disproportionate representation--persists. Zhang and Katsiyannis (2002) explained that "overrepresentation occurs when the percentage of minority students in special education exceeds the percentage of these students in the total student population" (p. 180). Disproportionate representation occurs when either a higher or lower percentage of students from ethnic/racial categories in special education differs from their overall percentage in the total student population (Valenzuela, Copeland, Qi, & Park, 2006). The overrepresentation occurs in the so-called high incidence disabilities—emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD), MMR, learning disabilities (LD), and speech and language impairments (SLI) (Waitoller et al., 2010). The high incidence categories account for approximately three-fourths of the special education diagnoses (Vallas, 2009). Conversely, so-called low incidence disabilities with medically defined criteria including, but not limited to, vision impairment, hearing impairment, and

orthopedic impairment, do not show a pattern of disproportionate representation for African American and other minority students (Arnold & Lassmann, 2003; Reid & Knight, 2006; Skiba et al., 2008). Unclear standards or variable diagnostic criteria, the subjective nature of the diagnostic process for high incidence disabilities, and beliefs rooted in the idea of normalcy contribute to overrepresentation of African American students in high incidence disability categories.

Classification processes. Despite the passage of laws meant to increase inclusion in general education classrooms for students with learning disabilities, the implementation of these federal laws has not led to uniform classification processes for special education. The IDEIA recognizes thirteen qualifying diagnoses for special education eligibility. Of those 13 qualifying diagnoses, LD, EBD, and MMR account for three-fourths of the diagnoses served in K-12 educational settings (Vallas, 2009). Although IDEIA specifies the process for students with disabilities to receive services, it does not specify assessment criteria for the qualifying diagnoses or clear definitions for those thirteen diagnoses (Vallas, 2009). In effect, each state sets its own criteria for diagnosis which leads to a variability in what constitutes a learning disability across states and perhaps school districts. Each state or district has its own sociocultural context in which to enact inclusion and those contexts differ greatly in some cases (Kozleski & Smith, 2009).

In this patchwork system, students classified with learning disabilities in one state or school district may not meet the criteria for that same classification in another state or school district (Arnold & Lassmann, 2003; Reid & Knight, 2006; Vallas, 2009).

Ideology of normalcy. In the United States, definitions of normality have a basis in whiteness, middle class or higher affluence, ability, male gender, heterosexual orientation, etc.

Students outside of those definitions of normal have historically received a label of other and defective because they, "lie outside the predominant norm and, therefore, belong in special education" (Reid & Knight, 2006, p. 19). Diagnosis of a learning disability then implies that students with that diagnosis have fewer resources than their peers without a diagnosis; therefore, supporters of this paradigm suggest that students have more disadvantages and fewer opportunities to contribute to the community. The ideology of normalcy rests on the assumptions that individuals have complete autonomy, agency, and separation from their sociocultural contexts. Furthermore, this ideology assumes that everyone has the same resources and equal access to those resources (Koch, 2005). The ideology of normalcy justifies interventions for students labeled as learning disabled at an individual level rather than a community or societal level and creates systems of unequal access for African American students (Koch, 2005; Reid & Knight, 2006).

Subjective diagnosis. IDEIA does not provide clear definitions for its 13 qualifying diagnoses for special education eligibility. Out of the 13 diagnoses, the high incidence disabilities—MMR, LD, EBD—display the most variability in classification and identification. Diagnoses of the high incidence disabilities depends upon the professional judgment of school personnel and have context-dependent criteria as a basis, including intelligence, communication skills, social skills, and conduct (Arnold & Lassmann, 2003; Ramanathan, 2008; Vallas, 2009). Researchers termed the high incidence disabilities 'judgmental disability categories' because of their subjective nature, dependence on arbitrary criteria established by school districts to distinguish between 'normal' and 'disabled', and reliance on the assessments and conclusions of referring professionals (Artiles et al., 2010; Vallas, 2009).

An example of the arbitrary cutoff scores and policy changes impacting classification occurred in the 1970s when the American Association on Mental Deficiency (AAMD) changed the cutoff score for MMR from one to two standard deviations from the mean on officially recognized intelligence tests. This policy change led to a change in status from MMR to 'normal' for many students overnight (Blanchett, Klingler, & Harry, 2009; Reid & Knight, 2006). Policy changes and definitional changes contribute to the notion of the social construction of learning disabilities because the meaning of learning disabilities depends on sociocultural contexts and historical contexts (Blanchett, Klingler, & Harry, 2009; Dudley-Marling, 2004; Reid & Knight, 2006).

Because high incidence disabilities depend on judgment and context, their diagnoses may lead to unreliable placements—either an over- or under-identification for certain groups of students, especially minority students. In particular, the referral and classification systems have led to a greater placement of African American males in special education and more restrictive educational environments (Moore et al., 2008; Skiba et al., 2008). However, other factors impact the overrepresentation of African American males in more restrictive educational milieus including potential biases in the special education classification process, environmental factors, and different cultural norms (Arnold & Lassmann, 2003; Blanchett, 2009; Moore et al., 2008; Skiba et al., 2008; Vallas, 2009).

Overview of Overrepresentation

History

Researchers have noted a nearly intractable issue of overrepresentation of minority students in particular special education categories for nearly four decades (Anyon, 2009; Blanchett, 2009; Ferri & Connor, 2005b; Moore et al., 2008; Skiba et al., 2008; Vallas, 2009;

Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002). In addition to Dunn's critique of the overrepresentation of

minority students in MMR category in 1968, several lawsuits sought to challenge the potential

bias intrinsic to the standardized tests used for special education eligibility and classification.

The court cases, *Diana v. California State Board of Education* (1970) and *Larry P. v. Riles*

(1971), shed light on the role of school personnel, tests, and testing practices on the restrictive

placement in special education of minority students and unreliable diagnoses of learning

disabilities (Ferri & Connor, 2005a). The decisions of the courts in these two cases spurred

research into testing bias and the assumptions inherent in those tests—scientific objectivity when

measuring intelligence and notions of the hereditary nature of intelligence and its distribution

along racial groupings (Ferri & Connor, 2005a; Skiba et al., 2008). The decisions also spurred

research into the disproportionality problem.

Disproportionate representation measures the probability that membership in a particular

ethnic, racial, or socioeconomic group leads to placement in specific disability categories (Artiles

et al., 2010). Researchers have identified specific categories where minority students,

specifically African American students, show disproportionate representation—the high

incidence disabilities of MMR, LD, and EBD (Artiles et al., 2010; Blanchett, 2009; Skiba et al.,

2008; Waitoller et al., 2010; Vallas, 2009). African American representation in the high

incidence disabilities has remained relatively constant since researchers began measuring

disproportionality (Artiles et al., 2010). However, the rates of over- or underrepresentation vary

among states and individual school districts and by the population of African Americans in those

states and school districts (Waitoller et al., 2010). Southern states consistently show higher

incidence of disproportionality in special education (Ferri & Connor, 2005a). Although patterns

and trends of disproportionate representation appear in the literature, definitive measurement criteria of the issue prove challenging and complex.

Measurement of Disproportionate Representation

Disproportionate representation may seem like a relatively straightforward concept determining representation in a category that does not match expectations, but its measurement involves more complexity depending on one's frame of reference (Skiba et al., 2008). Skiba et al. (2008) identified two methods to assess disproportionality—composition index and risk index/risk ratio. Composition index (CI) refers to the degree to which a racial/ethnic category is over- or underrepresented in a disability classification when compared to the proportion of that same racial/ethnic category within the larger student population. Risk index (RI) and risk ratio (RR) refer to the degree to which members of a racial/ethnic category meet eligibility requirements for special education services at different rates from other racial/ethnic categories (Skiba et al., 2008).

Measurement data. Using the CI, African American students account for 33% of the students classified as MMR although African American students account for 17% of the student population (Donovan & Cross, 2002). Losen and Orfield (2002) reported a different CI in their research. Losen and Orfield found that African American students account for approximately 15% of the total student population, but 20% of the special education population. Using the alternative approach of Risk Ratio (RR) yields a slightly different picture. African American students are nearly 2.5 times more likely to receive a diagnosis of MMR, nearly 1.5 times more likely to receive a diagnosis of LD, and nearly 2.0 times more like to receive a diagnosis of EBD than white students (Donovan & Cross, 2002). Although useful measures, the CI, RI, and RR measures have intrinsic problems associated with usage.

Measurement issues. Skiba et al. (2008) noted several measurement issues with both the CI and RR. The CI has no definitive criteria for determining significance when discrepancies appear. Furthermore, the CI measurement scale may not mean the same for discrepancies at the extremes and discrepancies in the middle of the range. Lastly, the CI does not have as much usefulness when student populations become more similar and less diverse, such as a school with over 90% African American student body. Conversely, the RR contains less sensitivity to changes in population composition, but a small population makes the RR unusable. When using RR, there remains some confusion about the appropriate racial/ethnic category for comparisons. Using the racial/ethnic category white prevents the calculation of a RR for white students. Lastly, RR may not provide the full scope of disparities for minority students (Skiba et al., 2008). IDEIA (2004) requires states to measure disproportionality and develop early intervention programs when significant disproportionality occurs. IDEIA neither defines significant disproportionality nor the indicators to measure disproportionality. Each state has discretion to implement and define indicators and to determine significance of those indicators (Skiba et al., 2008; Waitoller et al., 2010).

The writers of the IDEIA provisions sought to prevent the mislabeling of students as learning disabled and to prevent further segregation through overrepresentation in certain special education categories for minority students (Blanchett, 2009; Skiba et al., 2008). Even with those new provisions, some researchers questioned disproportionality and its impact on minority students labeled as learning disabled. These researchers based their arguments on the additional services gained through special education services, the smaller class sizes, or the influence of poverty on classification (Artiles et al., 2010). However, other researchers have offered

explanations to illuminate the problems associated with overrepresentation based on historical, sociocultural, and ideological rationales.

The Overrepresentation Problem

The initial research of disproportionate representation of African Americans in high incidence categories focused on MMR. After the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act and policy/statistical changes for determining MMR, the MMR classification usage decreased and the usage of the learning disabilities (LD) category increased (Blanchett, Klingner, & Harry, 2009). In spite of this decreased usage, African American students receive the classification MMR, arguably the most stigmatizing, at nearly twice the rates of other ethnic/racial student groups (Ferri & Connor, 2005b). The diagnoses seem dependent on socioeconomic status as well as race. Artiles (2009) reported that African American students in communities with higher SES tend to receive a MMR diagnosis. Conversely, African American students in communities with lower SES tend to receive EBD and LD diagnoses. The number of students identified as LD has increased almost by a factor of six (Blanchett, Klingner, & Harry, 2009). Anyon (2009) reported that more than half the students receiving special education services were classified as having a specific learning disability (SLD) and that this classification continues to grow, especially for minority students. Federal laws define SLD as a "psychological processing deficit accompanied by a severe discrepancy between intellectual ability and academic achievement" (Warner, Dede, Garvan, & Conway, 2002, p. 501). Unlike the changing statistical criteria for MMR, the definition for SLD has remained unchanged since its first proposal in 1968 (Kavale, Spaulding, & Beam, 2009). One could argue that greater identification and classification of students leads to improved access to special education

services and general education classroom placements, but improved access to general education has not happened for African American students.

In general, more students with learning disabilities have gained access to general education classrooms due to the disability rights movement and federal legislation. However, African American students with learning disabilities often receive placement in more restrictive educational settings and not general education classrooms (Fierros & Conroy, 2002). African American students with learning disabilities spend approximately 60% of their academic day in segregated special education classrooms or schools (Blanchett, Klingner, & Harry, 2009). In an analysis of data collected by the Office of Civil Rights, Parrish (2002) surmised that white students received placement in more restrictive self-contained classes generally when they needed intensive services and contrasted this placement with minority students who "may be more likely to be placed in restrictive settings whether they require intensive services or not" (p. 26). The diagnosis and labeling of minority students as learning disabled presents risks for those students as well as the supposed benefits. Researchers have advanced three reasons to explain the problem of overrepresentation: "labeling effects, segregation of placement, and presumed ineffectiveness of special education services" (Hosp & Reschly, 2003, p. 68).

Labeling effects. Diagnosis and classification of students as learning disabled carries consequences for both their present and future educational careers and their lives after K-12 schooling (Oswald, Coutinho, Best, & Singh, 1999). The label influences teachers' assessments of academic potential and behavioral issues, teachers' expectations, classmates' perceptions, and the students' own self-concepts (Ferri & Connor, 2005b; Gaviria-Soto & Castro-Morera, 2005; Ho, 2004). Although the diagnosis helps students gain eligibility to special education services, labeling also allows school officials or policy makers to locate problems within individual

students and to ignore systemic issues which may contribute to academic difficulties (Ho, 2004).

Additionally, Ho asserted that diagnoses of learning disabilities have no moral neutrality. These

diagnoses have historically led to stigma, oppression, and a confirmation of the medical model of

disability (Ho, 2004; Vallas, 2009). Over-labeling of the high incidence disabilities tends to

separate African American students from general education classes and places them in an

"unwanted isolation" (Fierros & Conroy, 2002, p. 40).

Placement segregation. Classification of African American students in special

education categories may often lead to placement in segregated or more restrictive settings than

their white peers with similar diagnoses (Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Gallini, Simmons, &

Feggings-Azziz, 2006). Placement in more restrictive environments generally leads to less

access to general education classrooms or the least restrictive environments for African

American students with disabilities (Waitoller et al., 2010). Furthermore, African American

students tend to receive inappropriate placement in segregated, restrictive environments and miss

vital general education curricula or receive services that fail to meet their specific educational

needs (Waitoller et al., 2010; Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002). Segregation of placement impacts

African American students labeled with high incidence disabilities socially as well by removing

them from classroom settings that include peers without diagnosed learning disabilities (Jordan,

2005; Ferri & Connor, 2005b). Worse yet, segregation of placement continues policies of

exclusion for a group of students historically denied equal opportunity and access in American

public schools—African American students (Artiles et al., 2010).

Efficacy of special education services. Placement in special education services could

potentially have many advantages for African American students: smaller class sizes,

individualized education plans, transition plans, and additional support services (Artiles et al.,

2010). Longitudinal studies, such as the National Longitudinal Transition Study of Students in Special Education II, have shown slight improvements in educational outcomes for students with learning disabilities (Artiles et al, 2010; Waitoller et al., 2010). Researchers, however, have found that the effectiveness of special education services remains suspect. In the National Longitudinal Transition Study of Students in Special Education II, researchers reported an enduring achievement gap in language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies between students placed in special education services and students in the general education population (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Levine, & Garza, 2006). Researchers also noted disparities within ethnic/racial group categories in the special education population.

African American students placed in special education often did not receive the required ancillary services, such as vocational and occupational services. Conversely, white students with the same disability labels tended to receive the required ancillary services (Parrish, 2002). In addition to the lack of support services, school officials removed African American students from school at higher rates than their white counterparts in special education (Osher, Woodruff, & Sims, 2002). Before complete removal from school, Losen and Orfield (2002) reported that African American students face higher suspension rates, more disciplinary actions, and dropout of school at higher rates than their white peers and peers without learning disabilities. For the African American students with learning disabilities who complete school, the statistics paint a grim picture.

African American students with learning disabilities who complete school often graduate with certificates of performance, certificates of attendance, or special education diplomas instead of general education diplomas (Chamberlain, 2005; McLaughlin, 2010). The combination of school removals and less rigorous high school diplomas appears to directly impact post-school

outcomes for these students. African American students with learning disabilities lag behind their peers without documented learning disabilities in college-going rates and college completion (Jordan, 2005). Furthermore, those who choose to enter the workforce after high school have higher rates of unemployment or underemployment than their peers without disabilities (Artiles et al., 2010; Ferri & Connor, 2005b; McLaughlin, 2010; Murray & Naranjo, 2008).

Although the use of special education services offers possibilities for success, its goals and desired outcomes for all students receiving special education services have yet to be realized. The mixed outcomes for students receiving special education services render the issues of overrepresentation and disproportionality serious challenges to equitable educational outcomes for all students. These outcomes become especially problematic when a group of students, African Americans, receive diagnoses for special education categories at higher rates, receive inappropriate or incorrect services to supplement their instruction, and show lowered academic achievement and poorer educational and occupational results after leaving high school (Artiles et al., 2010; Ferri & Connor, 2005b; Waitoller et al., 2010).   In some ways, it appears that special education has helped to marginalize students based on notions of race and ability instead of addressing their needs as diverse learners (Ferri & Connor, 2005b). Researchers have analyzed the special education identification and referral processes to explain causes of overrepresentation and disproportionality and possible strategies to mitigate unequal representation.

Causes of Overrepresentation/Disproportionality

Overrepresentation and disproportionate representation in special education for African American students have complex roots that defy simplistic explanations. Researchers have consistently documented the impact of overrepresentation and disproportionality on African

American students in special education and across educational milieus and have offered multiple

possible causes for this complex issue from multidimensional perspectives, including

standardized testing, sociodemographic factors, unequal opportunities in general education,

special education eligibility process, behavioral issues, and cultural responsiveness (Artiles et al.,

2010; Blanchett, Klingner, & Harry, 2009; Ferri & Connor, 2005b; Skiba et al., 2008; Vallas,

2009).

   Standardized test bias. Several court cases during the 1970s challenged biases intrinsic

to standardized tests of intelligence, specifically the tests used to determine eligibility for special

education services. The standardized tests received court challenges because of their impact on

minority students' overrepresentation in special education categories. In two of those cases,

Diana v. State Board of Education and *Larry P. v. Riles*, the California Supreme Court

invalidated the use of intelligence tests for special education eligibility (Ferri & Connor, 2005b;

Skiba et al., 2008; Vallas, 2009). Another case in Washington, DC, *Hobson v. Hansen*,

invalidated the use of intelligence tests for special education eligibility in DC public schools

(Vallas, 2009). In spite of these initially successful court challenges, later court cases did not

find the use of intelligence tests discriminatory toward minority students and continued to allow

their usage to determine special education eligibility (Vallas, 2009). Concurrent to the court

cases, researchers began to look at test bias as a source of minority overrepresentation in special

education categories.

   Standardized tests of intelligence and their potential biases have influenced an extensive

body of literature. The findings of those studies have yielded different conclusions about test

biases for minority students (Skiba et al., 2008). Skiba et al.(2008) reported that an exploration

of twenty or more years of research around test bias "tended not to identify a level of cultural

bias in standardized tests of intelligence sufficient to account for inappropriate classification of students as disabled" (p. 272). Although researchers have not definitively determined standardized test bias, lower test scores for minority students may have roots in sociodemographic factors that reflect bias in both the educational and social systems (Skiba, Knesting, & Bush, 2002).

Sociodemographic factors. Socioeconomic disadvantage inspired many investigations about its potential correlations with identification for special education services. Researchers attempted to identify the effects of poverty on the academic achievement, psychological issues, and behavioral issues of minority students. More specifically, the researchers attempted to determine if the effects of poverty on minority students increased the risk of identification for special education services (Skiba et al., 2008). Skiba et al. noted that showing the links between poverty and academic achievement does not necessarily help develop the link between poverty and overrepresentation of African American students in special education categories. In essence, Skiba et al. (2008) argued:

> Thus, to demonstrate that poverty contributes significantly to special education
> disproportionality, it would be necessary to show that economic disadvantage increases
> the risk, not merely of underachievement, but of the specific types of learning and
> behavior problems defined by IDEA as disability. (p. 273)

Because of this complicated task, researchers have difficulty finding the connections between poverty and special education identification. The research conducted in this area has yielded contradictory results about the connections among race, socioeconomic status, and special education identification (Skiba et al., 2008; Vallas, 2009). Results of a study by Coutinho, Oswald, and Best (2002) seemed to indicate that poverty does lead to increased rates of

diagnoses of LD for minority students. These authors further reported that poverty leads to increased rates of identification as EBD for minority students. Other researchers, however, have found different effects of poverty on special education identification. Zhang and Katsiyannis (2002) concluded that as levels of poverty decrease, the risk of referrals as LD for minority students increases. Oswald, Coutinho, and Best (2002) found a similar direction of the relationship for MMR identification in minority students; that is, as the poverty level of a particular student body decreases, the risk of identification as MMR for minority students increases.

Economic disadvantage may lead to risk factors that forecast behavioral or academic difficulties that, in turn, may contribute to special education referrals. However, determining special education eligibility involves a complex mixture of policy and human judgment. This complexity may hamper researchers' ability to connect poverty to overrepresentation in special education categories for African American students (Skiba et al., 2008). Poverty does seem to impact the resources and instruction for the majority of students from lower income backgrounds. Those students tend to attend schools with less access to educational resources, less experienced teachers, and lower quality instruction (Peske & Haycock, 2006; Vallas, 2009). The resource gap may contribute to unequal opportunities in general and special education for African American students.

Unequal educational opportunity. Many African American students attend schools that are considered high poverty. A high poverty designation often translates into a lack of resources for these students, including limited access to technology, less rigorous curricula, fewer opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities, and less experienced faculty (Blanchett, 2009; Vallas, 2009). Additionally, the schools deemed high poverty have difficulty attracting

and retaining more experienced teachers (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Peske & Haycock, 2006). The lack of financial resources for the high poverty schools impacts the quality of general education received by the students in those schools and their educational opportunities. Factors that contribute to lower academic achievement and fewer educational opportunities may increase the risk of referral for special education services for African American students (Skiba, Knesting, & Bush, 2002). As a result, African American students may receive fewer of the educational supports needed for academic success which could cause the use of supplemental special education services to meet their perceived educational deficits (Vallas, 2009). The referral process for special education services introduces another area where judgment or bias could influence disproportionality for African American students.

Special education eligibility process. Irregularities in the processes to determine special education eligibility may influence the unequal placement of African American students in more restrictive settings (Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Gallini, Simmons, Feggins-Azziz, 2006). Generally, researchers have broken the eligibility process into three parts: referral, assessment, and placement/decision making. Each of these facets of the eligibility process may contribute to disparities in special education for African American students.

Referral. The initial steps in the process to determine special education eligibility have the potential to contribute to disproportionality for African American students because of the highly subjective nature of referrals. The majority of the initial referrals for special education emanate from teachers and teachers' evaluations weigh heavily in the process (Harry, Klingner, Sturges, & Moore, 2002). Researchers have noted that teachers refer minority students for special education services at higher rates than they refer white students (Riccio, Ochoa, Garza, & Nero, 2003). In a meta-analysis covering 10 studies, Hosp and Reschly (2003) reported that

African American students received special education referrals at higher rates than white

students. The timing of the referrals impacts African American students adversely as well.

Many teachers wait until African American students' challenges in classrooms become severe

before initiating special education referrals (Skiba et al., 2008). The discrepancies in referrals

would not seem so alarming if not for success rates. Cartledge (2005) noted that approximately

90% of the students referred to special education services receive placement. Once placed,

referred students will generally stay in their new settings without the possibility of returning to

general education classrooms or less restrictive placements (Cartledge, 2005; Mamlin & Harris,

2000).

   Assessment. Inappropriate evaluations for special education eligibility and services may

contribute to the overrepresentation of African American students in special education

categories. Part of the issue stems from the imprecise guidelines offered by federal legislation

for assessment of students for special education services. The lack of federal guidance requires

states and local school districts to create and implement their own criteria for assessment and to

set their own cutoff scores on standardized tests to determine eligibility (Vallas, 2009). Before

the passage of IDEIA (2004), many states and local school districts relied on standardized tests

to determine eligibility for special education services (Warner, Dede, Garvan, & Conway, 2002).

IDEIA allowed for a reduced role for standardized testing in the diagnosis of learning disabilities

and less reliance on an achievement-discrepancy model for some states (Madaus & Shaw, 2006).

However standardized tests still carry some weight when screening students for special education

eligibility in some states (Madaus & Shaw). Because each state or local district sets its own

criteria for cutoff scores, variability exists across states or even within states for assessment and

identification for special education services (Vallas, 2009). Cutoff scores for special education

eligibility depend on the mean test scores for the local or state student populations and the

discernment of school staff (Ramanathan, 2008). Ramanathan noted:

> Thus, a student in a high-performing school who falls two standard deviations below the
>
> mean may be referred for testing and identified as eligible for special education. In
>
> another school with a large at-risk population, this same student might be considered
>
> typical. (p. 296)

Standardized test scores help to determine a student's aptitude and, when compared with that

same student's academic achievement, determines if a discrepancy exists between ability and

achievement.

In the initial process of defining specific learning disorders (SLD), educators followed

the lead of federal law by incorporating a discrepancy model for special education identification.

For many states, discrepancy models became the sole determinants of eligibility for special

education services even though the laws did not specify one method of determining eligibility

(Ofiesh, 2006). Ofiesh contended that the overreliance on discrepancy between aptitude and

achievement and the variability of regulations among states contributed to an erroneous increase

in the number of students identified as learning disabled. To avoid an overreliance on

standardized test scores and the discrepancy between aptitude and achievement, IDEIA provided

a new option for assessment—response to intervention (RTI) (Blanchett, Klingner, & Harry,

2009; Ofiesh, 2006). RTI would allow identification of specific learning disabilities (SLD)

without reference to psychometric tests and discrepancy formulas if states choose to prohibit

both practices (Blanchett et al., 2009; Madaus & Shaw, 2006; Ofiesh, 2006). The RTI process

involves using research-based instruction for all students and the use of continuous academic monitoring to determine if students may need a special education referral (Sparks & Lovett, 2009; Ockerman, Mason, & Hollenback, 2012).

 Placement/Decision Making. Placement meetings help determine the labels assigned to students or their eligibility for services (Arnold & Lassman, 2003). The subjective nature of the eligibility determination process and label assignment leaves room for the biases of school personnel to influence placement decisions. Those biases seem more apparent for students of lower socioeconomic status or students who exhibit behavioral problems. Moreover, the presence of biases about socioeconomic status and behavioral issues may influence the overrepresentation of African American students in special education categories. Knotek (2003) suggested that African American students may receive more restrictive placements in special education because African American students as a group tend to fall in lower socioeconomic status categories and tend to receive more discipline referrals than their white peers. Other researchers, however, have reached different conclusions about the existence and impact of bias on the placement process.

 Researchers have disagreed about reasons for African American students' placement in more restrictive special education milieus at higher rates than white students. Hosp and Reschly (2002) reported comparable classifications for white and African American students diagnosed as LD. Hosp and Reschly (2002) concluded that "disproportionate placement in more restrictive programs, when it exists, is not a matter of bias in the process of special education placement" (p. 235). In a review of data from the National Research Council, Donovan and Cross (2002) noted that the referral and placement process exhibited enough flaws to make it impossible to determine if the correct students received identification for special education services. Other

researchers have indeed found bias in the placement process. Hosp and Hosp (2001) found that teachers interpret African American students' behaviors incorrectly. The incorrect interpretation of African American students' behaviors influences teachers to evaluate those students in a biased manner (Elhoweris, Mutua, Alsheikh, & Holloway, 2005). Skiba, Michael, Nardo, and Peterson (2002) concluded that teachers write behavioral referrals for minority students for subjective reasons. Similarly, Harry and Klingner (2006) detailed several irregularities in the conference phase of eligibility and placement determinations that possibly contributed to disproportionality, including teachers' ethnicity/race and its correlation to referral rates, the inordinate amount of influence accorded to teachers' opinions in the conference phase, and lack of emphasis on interventions preceding the referrals for special education services. Despite these potential biases, Donovan and Cross (2002) reviewed data from the National Research Council and concluded that African American students actually have more behavioral and academic problems than White students.

Behavior, Race, and Learning Disability

African American students have received more suspensions, both in-school and out-of-school, office referrals, and expulsions from school than their white counterparts (Raffaele, Mendez, & Knoff, 2003). This unequal representation in suspension data means that African American students have shown disproportionate representation in suspension rates for over 30 years (Skiba et al., 2002). Although African American students receive more referrals, researchers have not found differential rates of misbehavior by African American students. In fact, some researchers suggest that African American students receive harsher consequences for less severe rules violations or receive referrals for more subjective rationales, such as loitering or disrespect (Skiba et al., 2002). The discrepancy in disciplinary rates has consequences for

identification of special education categories, such as EBD, because disciplinary infractions factor heavily into the referral process, diagnosis, and placement decisions (Vallas, 2009; Jordan 2005). The disproportionate rates of discipline referrals for African American students may place these students at greater risk for special education referrals and, ultimately, may contribute to the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education categories (Vallas). Other researchers attribute the disproportionate suspensions and discipline referrals to a disconnect between the cultures of schools and the cultures of African American students (Skiba et al., 2002; Vallas, 2009).

Cultural Mismatch

Public school systems in the United States, special education systems specifically, indoctrinate students with a Western, white, middle class orientation according to many scholars (Blanchett, Klingner, & Harry, 2009; Skiba et al., 2008; Vallas, 2009). Because of the expectations associated with the school culture, African American students may encounter a lack of connection between their lived experiences and the lessons taught in schools (Jordan, 2005; Skiba et al., 2008) or may receive instruction that ignores the role of culture in knowledge production and acquisition (Sheets, 2005). The disconnect perceived by African American students may hamper their ability to learn and increase referrals to special education services (Vallas, 2009). Another result of the disconnect stems from school personnel's expectations of 'normal' behavior, skills, or communication styles. School personnel who view "whiteness" as normal behavior may perceive behaviors that differ as deficient or abnormal (Blanchett, 2009). This perception leads to a deficit view of African American students which requires services to correct or improve the abnormalities (Vallas, 2009). The deficit model forms a historical foundation of special education and special education services, but the Disability Rights

Movement and other paradigm shifts have sought to remove the emphasis on deficits in individuals to the oppression of culture and historical context (Reid & Knight, 2006).

Disability Studies and the Social Construction of Learning Disabilities

Biomedical Models of Learning Disability

Two disciplines formed the foundation for the learning disabilities field—medicine and psychology—and continued to inform conceptualizations of learning disabilities throughout the history of the field (Reid & Valle, 2004). These disciplines had a penchant for diagnosing impairments and creating interventions without regard to students' inputs, students' contexts, or students' differences from stereotypes. To diagnose impairments, however, students had to fall outside of 'normal' or expected parameters of achievement—reading level, math skills, or standardized tests results (Reid & Valle, 2004). More importantly for disability rights and advocacy, these types of diagnoses situated the problem solely within the students and viewed the students as somewhat deficient (Amato, Crepeau-Hobson, Huang, & Geil, 2005). Deficiency models of learning disabilities not only reinforced what researchers considered 'normal', they narrowed the discussions of learning disabilities to an individual or Microsystems level (Reid & Valle). The narrowed focus subjected school counselors and other personnel to two fallacies inherent in the medical model—reductionism and essentialism.

Reductionism. When scholars or practitioners focused on students' deficits rather than systemic issues that could lead to learning difficulties, they have succumbed to reductionism. In effect, reductionism leads to micro-level interventions to address student issues rather than systemic or societal interventions. Practitioners and scholars come to believe that issues or problems originate within students and attribute issues to the students' nature or psychological

makeup (Mayhew, 2000) or come to rely on overly simple interventions that do not account for students' race, socioeconomic status, and gender (Connor, 2009).

Essentialism. When scholars and practitioners assume that every student learns at the same rate, in the same style, and produces the same results, they have negated the individual nature of development and the social aspects of learning. Moreover, they have assumed that all students, no matter their backgrounds or contexts, should reach a prescribed level of achievement—so called 'normal' development or success. 'Normal' achievement, a value-laden term, becomes a universal benchmark and masks the individual nature of development, the social aspects of learning, and the impacts of sociocultural factors on learning (Anyon, 2009; Monk & Sinclair, 2002). Similar to reductionism, essentialism situates disabilities solely within students.

Focusing on individuals and their deficiencies framed discussions about learning disabilities around student failures, individual student remediation, and the behaviors of school personnel and their effects on particular students (Reid & Valle, 2004). This framing prevented discourse about the social nature of the learning process or the societal contexts under with students learned and researchers practiced. In other words, students had a measurable deficiency or dysfunction with a possible biological basis that practitioners could possibly remediate with the proper intervention (Amato et al., 2005).

As the study of learning disabilities and the disabilities rights movement grew, the field adopted perspectives from other theories and disciplines to gain a fuller understanding of learning disabilities. These new perspectives challenged the biomedical models of learning disabilities by including sociocultural factors—ethnicity, native language, culture, socioeconomic status, oppression, policy, and the coordination, or lack thereof, of the classroom

with communities (Rueda, 2005). The inclusion of sociocultural factors makes learning disabilities less about individual deficiencies and more about societal deficiencies in accommodating all students (Burchardt, 2004).

Sociocultural Models of Learning Disability

In contrast to an emphasis on individual deficiencies, sociocultural models allowed for variability in the way that students experience learning disabilities and for students' contexts—race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, etc. (Reid & Valle, 2004). Sociocultural models reframed the discussion about learning disabilities from individual pathology to differences in learning for all people (Reid & Valle, 2004). Furthermore, the new paradigms incorporated notions of language use and meaning creation, relationships between individuals and groups, institutions, and structures (Anyon, 2009).

Social constructivist perspectives. Learning disabilities cannot occur without context; they occur within human interactions and relationships (Dudley-Marling, 2004). Social constructivist perspectives situate learning disabilities within the complex fabric of human relationships rather than solely within an individual student. Additionally, these perspectives require that one look at the label 'learning disabled' from many perspectives instead of relying exclusively on a neuropsychological perspective (Anyon, 2009). In essence, the social construction of learning disability disavows any notion of one objective truth regarding the nature and causes of learning disabilities (Anyon, 2009).

One cannot acquire a learning disability without social context; the label originates from one's interactions with other people, especially in an educational setting (Dudley-Marling, 2004). Students labeled as learning disabled have the unfortunate fate of being in the wrong place at the

wrong time and their challenges lay in the areas that educators and public schools value most—completing tasks in a certain timeframe, excelling on standardized tests, or meeting specific developmental milestones (Armstrong, 2004). The label itself also brings meanings and consequences for those who apply it and receive it. 'Learning disability' and special education imply distinction, otherness, or abnormality (Anyon, 2009).

Anyon (2009) suggested that social constructivist perspectives concern themselves with language as social action and how people build their understanding of their world based on their life experiences and interactions. As more students enter special education services and accept placement into learning disabled or learning disordered categories, addressing their needs and challenges becomes paramount if they are to succeed in this compulsory educational environment. Sociocultural factors seem to intercede on the unique system of institutions, processes, and interactions, perceptions of students about their knowledge and learning, and the significance attached to education and academics (Anyon, 2009). The more recent focus on sociocultural factors has its roots in the need for equity in education and special education service delivery, an emphasis on educational outcome data, the overrepresentation of marginalized groups in special education (Losen & Orfield, 2002), and the desire to include the voices and experiences of students with learning disabilities with labels, policy, and policy making (Reid & Knight, 2006).

Disability Studies

Disability studies combines political advocacy with critical examination using an interdisciplinary approach and provides a justification for using different perspectives and methods to understand the concept of disability (Reid & Knight, 2006; Connor, Gabel, Gallagher, & Morton, 2008). Similar to social constructivists, adherents to disability studies

renounce the use of labels to describe people and reveal the potentially harmful effects of framing people with disabilities as abnormal (Reid & Knight, 2006; Connor et al., 2008). In a quest for equity, professionals who subscribe to disability studies interrogate who can rightfully claim to speak for people labeled as disabled and magnify the voices of people living with various disability labels (Longmore, 2003). These practitioners of disability studies promote advocacy by pursuing full participation for people labeled as disabled and by critiquing deficit models of disability that pathologize and exclude individuals (Ware, 2004). The critiques offered by this field allow for a paradigm shift from a focus on individuals to a focus on society and its institutions (Reid & Knight, 2006; Connor & Ferri, 2010). The influence of disability studies on special education promulgates an emphasis on differing interpretations of behavior, learning, and inclusion (Baker, 2002).

The advent of disability studies has left questions for special education and learning disabilities as well. In the United States, identification and labeling of students as disabled impacts funding for schools. Moreover, the legal mandates and policies incorporate disability categories and help to perpetuate the labels (Baker, 2002). Professionals using a disability studies framework attempt to unmask the sociocultural and historical underpinnings of educational labels and policies (Ballard, 2004) and question the process of identifying reduced function as a state of disability (Reindal, 2008). The use of a disability studies framework allows professionals to recognize that different students experience disability differently "depending on an individual's race, class, gender, and other aspects of positionality and identity (Reid & Valle, 2004, p. 473). As mentioned earlier, several processes may lead to the identification of eligibility for special education services, especially for African American students. One group of school personnel have a unique set of skills, education, and policy statements to potentially

mitigate the effects of labeling African American students as learning disabled and to impact the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education categories.

School Counselors and Students with Learning Disabilities

School Counselors occupy a unique position within schools. One can argue that school counselors belong to a rare group of school personnel who have received training to implement programs that reinforce the academic, career, and personal-social development of all students. Generally, school counselors create programs and administer services that attempt to address the needs of all students (Flowers, Milner, & Moore, 2003; Martin, 2002; Moore, 2006; Sears, 2002). In efforts to address the academic, career, and personal-social needs of students, school counselors advocate for educational equity and social justice by interrogating traditions and the present state of affairs (Mitcham, Portman, & Dean, 2009). School counseling that has social justice at its core abandons notions of one universal truth about the human condition and recognizes the voices of students in the development of services that impact the students. Furthermore, school counselors take a broader view of the systems that impact student behavior while attempting to promote positive results for all students and the communities in which they reside (Sink, 2004). As they view systems and contexts of students, school counselors also challenge the Eurocentric and middle class value systems that undergird traditional counseling practice and theory (Mitcham, Portman, & Dean, 2009). All of these concepts in modern school counseling practice create an advocacy orientation for school counselors.

Demographic changes in public schools have influenced the role transition of school counselors to social justice change agents and advocates. Due to these changes school counselors have undergone a paradigm shift from "agents of the status quo and as gatekeepers for tracking and other educational practices that limit the educational and career opportunities for

poor and minority students" (Galassi & Akos, 2004, p. 153) to systemic change agents who

advocate for all students, especially students impacted by cultural, racial, and economic

disparities (Mitcham-Smith, 2007). As change agents, school counselors attempt to make

systemic changes with, and on behalf of, their students and their students' families (Bradley &

Lewis, 2000). These systemic changes incorporate social justice and multiculturalism along with

the academic, career, and personal-social domains and situate advocacy as a central tenet of

counseling competencies and elevate advocacy as a primary orientation to combat injustice

(Mitcham, Portman, & Dean, 2009). Advocacy, in general, involves an identification of

students' unmet needs and performing actions to eliminate or transform the systems that support

the continuation of the problems or challenges faced by the students (Trusty & Brown, 2005).

Advocacy has become so important to school counseling that the national professional

organization for school counselors, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA),

incorporated and emphasized advocacy in position statements and national initiatives to

transform the school counseling profession.

ASCA Advocacy Initiative

ASCA developed five facets of advocacy: (a) removing impediments to students'

academic, career, and personal-social development, (b) developing favorable environments for

all students to learn, (c) assuring equal access to a quality general education curriculum, (d)

cooperating with other actors in schools and communities to meet student needs, and (e)

championing systemic change to improve schools and students' experiences (Mitcham, Portman,

& Dean, 2009; Moore et al., 2008; Romano, Paradise, & Green, 2009). In this model, advocacy

may occur on either the individual or systemic level. ASCA also developed and endorsed a

position statement regarding the role of school counselors with students with special needs.

ASCA suggested several roles for school counselors regarding students with special needs. Those roles included (a) advocating for students identified as having a disability in the both the school and community, (b) managing a comprehensive school counseling program and the activities associated with the program, (c) offering collaborative services consistent with the services offered within the comprehensive school counseling program, (d) becoming a member of school multidisciplinary teams that identify eligibility and special services using a school counselor perspective, (e) teaming with other school personnel to implement services, (f) implementing group and individual counseling, (g) providing consultative services for parents and school personnel to understand disabilities, (h) referring students, parents, and school personnel to appropriate services within the community and school, (i) assisting with grade-level and postsecondary transition planning, and (j) participating in the creation and implementation of accommodations (ASCA, 2004). In addition to ASCA's effort to improve the school counseling profession, the Education Trust created an advocacy initiative in its Transforming School Counseling Initiative.

The Education Trust's Advocacy Initiative

The Education Trust's Transforming School Counseling Initiative emphasized the role of school counselor advocacy in decreasing the achievement gap for historically underserved students. As a part of school counselor advocacy, the Transforming School Counselor Initiative also encouraged the development of a new method of training school counselors to meet the needs of diverse student populations by honoring their multicultural backgrounds in implementing comprehensive programs to serve all students (Mitcham, Portman, & Dean, 2009). To mitigate the effects of counseling and public schooling's historical reliance on white, middle class, able-bodied values as foundations, The Education Trust's Initiative defined closing the

achievement gap for historically underserved students as a "matter of equity and social justice" (Mitcham, Portman, & Dean, 2009, p. 470). The Education Trust and ASCA's Advocacy Initiatives encouraged school counselors to work to address the needs of, and advocate for, all students (Mitcham, Portman, & Dean, 2009; Romano, Paradise, & Green, 2009).

Students with learning disabilities, especially African American students, often require the benefits of school counselor advocacy to prevent erroneous special education placement or identification. ASCA initiatives and federal mandates combine to emphasize the crucial role of school counselors in the educational experiences of historically underserved students (Janson, Miller, & Rainey, 2007). However, school counselors who have little familiarity with students with disabilities and the concept of disproportionality may feel unprepared to address the needs of all students (Milsom, 2002; Milson & Akos, 2003; Moore et al.; 2008). The problems of unfamiliarity are exacerbated by the lack of courses dealing with learning disabilities in school counseling programs or field experiences with students with learning disabilities (Janson, Miller, & Rainey, 2007; Milsom & Akos, 2003; Studer & Quigney, 2005). Experiences with additional coursework and training regarding students with learning disabilities appear to positively affect the attitudes of school counselors toward consultative work around inclusion and eligibility issues (Janson, Miller, & Rainey, 2007).

School counselors can play a valuable role in the development of in-service trainings for school personnel because of their knowledge of available resources, follow up techniques, data collection and analysis, and guidance to address attitudes of school personnel and students about learning disabilities and students labeled as learning disabled (Janson, Miller, & Rainey, 2007; Sawka, McCurdy, & Mannella, 2002). Despite the potential for valuable contributions by school counselors, researchers have suggested that school counselors have not met the needs of students

with learning disabilities effectively. House and Sears (2002) asserted that school counselors'

efforts to help students with learning challenges suffer from insufficient training, minimal

opportunities for professional development, and a lack of clear role delineation within the school

environment. Even with all of the challenges, school counselors remain in an optimum position

to mitigate disproportionality and overrepresentation of African American students in special

education categories. Martin (2002) suggested:

> With a school-wide perspective, school counselors are in the best position to assess the
>
> school for systemic and other barriers that impede academic success for all students.
>
> Issues of equity, access, and supporting conditions for success come to rest at the
>
> counselor's desk in the form of data about student achievement, community conditions,
>
> and reports of school failure. Thus, school counselors who have served as record keepers
>
> of student data in schools are ideally positioned to use this data to advocate for
>
> traditionally underserved students. (p. 149)

Martin also noted the importance of school counselors in academic placement decisions for

students and the impact of those placement decisions on future career opportunities for students.

Although school counselors may have the tools to lessen issues that contribute to the

overrepresentation of African American students in special education categories, few studies

exist that examine school counselors' perceptions, beliefs, or attitudes about the

overrepresentation of African American students in high incidence disability categories.

The overrepresentation of African American students in high incidence learning disability

categories presents many challenges for educators and policy makers. This complex

phenomenon impacts educational outcomes and beliefs/attitudes about the proper educational

settings and services for students. The purpose of this exploratory study is to investigate the

perceptions of one important group of educators whose beliefs about overrepresentation have not

been documented—school counselors.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

'Disproportionality', and its related word 'overrepresentation', appears frequently in research discussing the population of African American students placed in special education categories; however, the causes of disproportionality and its meanings have multiple explanations. Each assumed cause seems dependent on different theoretical and historical viewpoints and each viewpoint seems inspired by different belief systems. Donovan and Cross (2002) suggested that school personnel, researchers, and advocates have deliberated explanations for nearly forty years about disproportionality or even debated if a 'problem' of disproportionality exists. In spite of the debates surrounding the existence or causes of disproportionality, school counselors play an invaluable role as advocates for African American students labeled as learning disabled and for students referred for special education services. Furthermore, school counselors' beliefs about disproportionality and the potential causes of African American overrepresentation in high incidence categories may impact their ability to mediate the phenomenon of disproportionality in particular disability categories.

Rationale

This study emerged from a perception that an examination of the school counselors' beliefs and attitudes about factors that contribute to the disproportionate representation of African American students in high incidence special education categories may provide valuable information. Few research studies highlight the specific beliefs of school counselors (Grimmett & Paisley, 2008) and even fewer research studies focus on how school counselors experience the

special education referral process and its outcomes, specifically disproportionality. Previous studies have highlighted school counselors' views of working with students with learning disabilities both qualitatively and quantitatively (Janson, Miller, & Rainey, 2007) and school personnel's (teachers, administrators, and school psychologists) views on disproportionality (Skiba, Simmons, Ritter, Kohler, Henderson, & Wu, 2006), but few, if any, of those studies have focused on school counselors' views on the disproportionate placement of African American students in high incidence disability categories or the factors that contribute to the placement. The goal of this study was to examine the perceptions and attitudes of school counselors regarding the overrepresentation of African American students who receive special education services without using pre-established *a priori* measures and, consequently, assumptions. To examine disproportionality, school counselors were asked to provide descriptions of their experiences with students in special education, with African American students in special education, and with the referral process for special education services. To capture the experiences of school counselors with students in special education, this study employed qualitative methodological techniques using facets of phenomenology and vignette methodology.

I attempted to examine the experiences of school counselors with the phenomenon of disproportionality of African American students in specific special education categories by exploring the following questions:

1. What descriptions of experiences with students in special education are provided by school counselors?

2. What are the perceptions and beliefs of school counselors about the overrepresentation of African American students in special education?

3. What descriptions of experiences with African American students in special education are provided by school counselors?

4. What is the role of the school counselors in the process of identifying African American students for special education services and placement determinations?

5. What services do school counselors provide to African American students in special education and what process is used to determine those services?

In this chapter, I examine aspects of qualitative research, including the philosophical assumptions, the role of the researcher, researcher biases and processes to mitigate bias, and the appropriateness of qualitative methods to investigate the research questions. I also discuss the tenets of generic qualitative research based on aspects of phenomenology and vignette research used in this exploratory study, the study design, the participants, the data collection techniques and data analysis, and ethical considerations.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology comes out of qualitative research traditions and focuses on understanding a phenomenon or concept (Creswell, 2007). Flood (2010) defined phenomenology as "an interpretive, qualitative form of research that seeks to study phenomena that are perceived or experienced" (p. 13). Phenomenological studies allow researchers to understand a concept or phenomenon through the experiences of research participants (Creswell, 2007) and how participants think and perceive their experience (Hays & Wood, 2011). In doing so, phenomenological studies solicit participants' experiences with a phenomenon and seek commonalities with a goal of learning the essence of the experience. Moustakas (1994) noted that phenomenology concerns itself "with wholeness, with examining entities from many sides, angles, and perspectives until a unified vision of the essences of the phenomenon or experience

is achieved" (p. 58). Phenomenological research attempts to illuminate how people interpret meanings through their behaviors, lived experiences, and their assumptions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Phenomenology suits research questions that have a goal of understanding the shared experiences of participants in order to inform training and development or to delve deeper into a phenomenon to understand it better (Creswell, 2007). At a basic level, phenomenological studies boil down experiences to their essences for participants by describing what the participants experience and how they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994).

Researchers use phenomenology to understand the experiences of participants. Phenomenological inquiry has a basis in philosophy and several philosophical tenets undergird this research method (Creswell, 2007). Creswell noted that four philosophical assumptions inform phenomenology: "the search for wisdom without reliance on empiricism, a lack of presupposition about what constitutes reality, the idea that reality of an object and consciousness of the object are related, and the notion that realities of objects are perceived in the meanings of the experiences of people" (p. 58). These four tenets imply that people construct meaning as they engage with the world that they interpret. Furthermore, phenomenology rejects the notions of objectivism and subjectivism and provides a method to explore potentially new or richer meanings (Flood, 2010).

The unique nature of phenomenological inquiry requires specific data collection techniques to describe the experiential processes of participants (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas identified four essential steps for phenomenological research data analysis. Initially, in the phenomenological process, researchers must set aside, or bracket, their own experiences to gain a fresher perspective of the study participants' experiences and responses (Creswell, 2007). Because phenomenology requires an interpretation and description, the role of the researcher

includes philosophical assumptions and biases of the primary researcher. Bracketing provides a platform for an exploration of philosophical assumptions, the researcher's experience with the phenomenon, and the potential influence that the assumptions and experience may have on the research process (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994).

After bracketing experiences, the researcher must identify all repetitive and overlapping statements related to the phenomenon under investigation. Consolidating and condensing the repetitive statements leads to horizontalization, or a focus on units of meaning that do not vary (Hays & Wood, 2011). Next, researchers seek to group units of meaning into related clusters to describe the meaning and depth, or textures, of the experience. This process defines textural description (Hays & Wood, 2011). Lastly, researchers review the textural description for multiple meanings and tensions. The result of this process yields a structural description (Moustakas, 1994; Hays & Wood, 2011).

Phenomenology lends itself to counseling and counseling research because of its focus on client experiences using detailed information gleaned from the clients themselves. Furthermore, the philosophical foundations of this methodology provide an opportune platform from which to view and understand participants' common experiences of a phenomenon (Hays & Woods, 2011). One major challenge of phenomenology lies within the process of bracketing. Creswell (2007) noted that researchers may find it difficult to bracket experiences with a phenomenon and may find difficulty in deciding what impact those bracketed experiences have on the study itself.

Researcher as Instrument

Heppner & Heppner (2004) cautioned researchers to bracket philosophical assumptions, experiences, and biases before conducting phenomenological inquiry so that the inquirer might better understand the phenomenon through the research participants. In phenomenological

inquiry, the researcher becomes the primary instrument of inquiry. Therefore, the researcher must explicitly make biases, experiences, and assumptions known (Morrow, Rakhsha, & Castaneda, 2001).

Philosophical Assumptions

This research process began by examining the philosophical assumptions and lived experiences of the researcher as a method to explore how the assumptions and experiences may have impacted research questions, research design, and analysis of data. Two philosophical assumptions impacted the use of phenomenology and the perspective of the researcher: postpositivism and social constructivism. Phenomenology shies away from strict scientific empiricism; it does not rely upon facts, the scientific method, and observations to reach enduring truths about a phenomenon under study. Schwandt (2001) noted that a central tenet of postpositivism is the notion that "all knowledge claims are interpretations" (p. 68). The belief in the interrelated nature of data and theory and the interrelated nature of facts and meanings undergird postpositivist thought (Schwandt, 2001). The causes of the disproportionality of African American students in high incidence disability categories and the existence of disproportionality itself have several competing claims depending on one's theoretical framework or one's viewpoints.

In a general sense, constructivism refers to the generation of knowledge based on one's own experiences and worldview. Social constructivism refers to the notion that "people actively construct knowledge based on their experiences and interactions with the world around them" (Anyon, 2009, p. 46). The perceptions of school counselors about disproportionality and their perceptions of the roots of disproportionality seem to contribute to a social construction of disproportionality. School counselors' ideas about the causes of and necessity for special

education referrals for African American students, the referral process, and other aspects of their experiences and their interpretations of those experiences represent how school counselors attempt to reconcile their experiences with their preexisting knowledge.

The multiple ways of knowing disproportionality specifically and the world in general also inspired the use of a hermeneutical approach. The hermeneutical approach suggests that meanings can be discovered and explored through dialogue between the researcher and participants (Ponterotto, 2005). Each participant may experience a phenomenon differently; therefore, they co-construct meaning with the researcher throughout the research process (Wimpenny & Gass, 2000). To capture the co-constructions, the researcher used thick, rich descriptions through quotes and themes, often in the participants' own words when possible, to provide evidence of different perspectives (Creswell, 2007).

Researchers bring values and biases to each research study and the study topic itself brings value-laden conceptions, perceptions, and meanings. Axiological assumptions refer to the value-laden notion of disproportionality as well as the biases and values associated with the researcher. Because of my experiences with the phenomenon, I made an effort to acknowledge my biases, assumptions, and experiences in order to bracket them for better understanding of the research participants' experiences. Bracketing in this study specifically referred to my attempts to expose my biases and assumptions so that I could gain a better understanding of the experiences of the participants. Researchers can never fully separate themselves from the research process (Geanellos, 2000; Flood, 2010). I recognized that even my attempts to separate myself from the research process cannot be fully accomplished. Geanellos (2000) suggested that personal knowledge is useful and necessary for phenomenological inquiry. Flood (2010) emphasized the impossibility of removing from the mind the background knowledge that led a

researcher to consider a topic worthwhile in the first place. However, prior knowledge and a review of the research literature may possibly lead to researcher bias. To help mitigate the possible effects of researcher bias, I used a reflexive journal and worked within a research team with the caveat that all biases could not be eliminated. The data analysis section further detailed how I acknowledged my biases and methods to bracket those biases. The first effort to bracket biases occurred during my disclosure of personal experiences with the phenomenon.

Personal Experiences

My personal experience involves one specific incident from my personal education history and two specific incidents from my work as a high school counselor. Each of the incidents impacted the ways I viewed the work of school counselors with students in special education. The personal incident from my past involved an elementary school teacher and potential tracking. This incident influenced how I viewed tracking of students. The two school counseling experiences included my very first individualized education plan (IEP) meeting as a school counselor and an incident with an African American male student who received special education services. The combined effects of these lived experiences gave me a personal window into how the process of special education identification can begin at an early age for certain students and an idea of the training needs of school counselors and the importance of advocacy by school counselors for students in special education.

I grew up in a small Southern town in the Southeast that seemed to have a definite educational hierarchy. I was not aware of the hierarchy in my hometown until beginning first grade. My first grade teacher placed every student in one of three reading groups. She placed us in these groups without first hearing each student read or giving each student an assessment to determine reading levels. Nothing struck me as unfair initially until I noticed that all of the

students in one group were African American. All of the students in another group were white.

The teacher placed me in the other grouping where I was the only Black student. I later learned

that this was the middle grouping—the group the teacher perceived as not as smart, but not as

challenged. The all Black group was the lowest group while the all white reading circle was the

highest group.

After placing us in groups, the teacher asked each of us to read out loud. At that point,

the teacher apparently realized that I should be in the first reading group. In that moment I

recognized that we had a hierarchy and that my reading ability somehow challenged the teacher's

notion of my place in the hierarchy. It apparently challenged her notion so thoroughly that she

continually called my mother to report that I displayed behavioral issues in the classroom. While

I cannot speak to the teacher's motivations, in hindsight the thought crossed my mind that she

assumed that a poor Black person should not be in the top group. If my mom had not advocated

for me in that situation, the school may have tracked me into a lower performing group or

academic track. Moreover, if my mom had not challenged the teacher's continual calls about my

alleged poor behavior, I might have received a referral for special education services.

As a fairly young student, I learned about tracking and its possible effects on my

education. That experience led me to advocate for the dismantling of tracking for the students in

the schools where I worked. The salient experience that led to an examination of the education

of training of school counselors happened during my first IEP meeting as a high school

counselor.

"You have an IEP meeting tomorrow at 10:00 am. Please attend and let us know about

your student's Carnegie units, progress toward graduation, and class schedule for the next

semester and the next academic year." The request from a special education case manager

seemed straightforward enough. Dutifully, I compiled all the reports necessary for a 'successful' IEP meeting with a student on my caseload who also received special education services. Armed with rudimentary knowledge of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1997 and 2004, I had no doubts about my ability to participate in the scheduled IEP meeting and to meet my responsibilities. My confidence remained high until the IEP meeting began.

The 'counseling' report lasted for 10 minutes and then the teachers, both the special education and regular education teachers, took turns discussing the student's progress in their respective classes. The realization that I had no proper idea of the school counseling role in an IEP meeting struck me as a theme emerged from the discussion. The teachers focused on the student's lack of effort. They suggested that the student would perform much better in their respective classes if he simply tried harder, listened more intently, or completed tasks on time. In that moment, I realized that this particular IEP process located problems/issues within the student without regard to his exceptionality or his needed accommodations. The process left me with several questions: Was the student lacking motivation? Did the student lack the mental faculties for this particular environment? In an instant, I had located the problems/issues within the student as easily and conveniently as his teachers had.

A more experienced counselor may have asked about the student's accommodations and how the teachers had attempted to implement those accommodations within their classes. A better trained student advocate might have asked to see the specific accommodations and asked the student how he experienced those accommodations within his classes. This initial IEP meeting left me contemplating my simple knowledge of the laws and my inadequate preparation to advocate for my students who received special education services. If an IEP meeting caused me to question my training and experience, could other school counselors have had similar

reactions? I came to believe that my training as a school counselor had not prepared me for my role with students who received special education services. The salient experience that led me to question school counselors' advocacy skills for African American students in special education and disproportionality in special education occurred more recently.

"Mr. Shell, I want to go to college." Those are the words that my third-year high school student expressed during a registration intake meeting. The student had left my school, a predominantly African American, Title I school on the south side of the district to attend a more affluent school where African Americans students made up a minority of the student body during his first year of high school. The student, an African American male with an IEP, and his guardian expressed frustration with my school's inability to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) according to NCLB guidelines; so, they transferred to a school that did not struggle to make AYP. The student had an IEP, but his initial IEP suggested that he should have collaborative or mainstream placement in all of his courses. From what I could determine from his files, the genesis of the student's initial referral for special education services resulted from repeated and persistent discipline referrals.

During the intervening years while the student remained at the new school, his former school, my school, made AYP. This provision allowed the new school to strongly suggest that all of its students who lived in my school's attendance area should return to my school because the new school no longer was required to educate the students under NCLB guidelines. This loophole sent the young man back to his zoned school on the south side. When he returned, we all learned details that adversely impacted this young man's career and academic prospects.

The special education team at the student's new school had recommended the young man for a special education diploma tract. This diploma choice meant that the young man had earned

no Carnegie Units during his high school career and that he had received services in self-contained classes (exclusionary), rather than collaborative classes (inclusionary). Furthermore, this diploma choice meant that the young man could only become a high school completer, not graduate, and would need to pursue a general equivalency diploma (G.E.D.) to become eligible to attend college, technical school, or to enter the workforce. Somehow his interdisciplinary team, his guardian, and the young man himself agreed to this plan.

I immediately wondered if anyone had advocated for him during the interdisciplinary team meeting to plan his high school career and post high school transition. I especially wondered if his assigned school counselor had addressed any specific concerns about referring this young man to the most restrictive environment or the impact that this referral would have on his life. My beliefs led me to question the school district, the special education department at the former school, and the school counselor assigned to this young man. Although the school counselor did not have sole responsibility for the young man's diploma choice and class placement, he or she did have a responsibility to advocate for the student. I believed that school counseling as a profession had failed this student and wondered how many other students had not reaped the benefits of our nascent social justice and advocacy competencies. This critical incident spurred me to conduct research that would shed light on the beliefs and perceptions held by school counselors regarding students who have been identified for special education services.

My personal experiences and beliefs about school counselor preparation for advocacy for students who receive special education services influenced my goals for this study. I saw that a lack of training could impact the interventions offered to and outcomes for students who received special education services. With that in mind, I had to make sure that my strong feelings did not influence the participants in this study. I believe that school counselors have a responsibility to

advocate for students on a macro- and micro-level. My experiences with the special education process and students who receive special education services inspired my belief in educational equity for all students, no matter their placement in general education or special education.

Vignette Research

The use of vignettes in social sciences research has occurred for a relatively long period of time. Hughes and Huby (2002) noted that social and behavioral scientists have used vignettes in research since the 1950s to explore a wide range of issues. Researchers have found vignettes useful because of their ability to draw out essential information about attitudes or perceptions inspired by hypothetical situations (Paddam, Barnes, & Langdon, 2010), their efficacy in the study of potentially thorny topics (Hughes & Huby, 2002), and their ease of use with other qualitative data collection methods (Barter & Renold, 2000). In situations where observation of a phenomenon may prove impractical or unethical, vignettes "elicit specific information about perceptions, knowledge, and attitudes related to a described situation" (Paddam, Barnes, & Langdon, 2010, p. 60).

The described situations in vignettes consist of short stories, either based on real life or hypothetical scenarios, about fictional character(s) in specific circumstances. Schoenberg and Ravdal (2000) suggested that vignettes should be "carefully designed to depict a circumstance or represent a germane issue and to elicit rich but focused responses from informants" (p. 63). In addition to representing a germane issue, the vignettes must appear plausible to participants to elicit rich data (Barter & Renold, 2000; Jenkins et al., 2010; Schoenberg & Ravdal, 2000). After reading the vignettes, participants are then asked to respond to the circumstances by answering questions related to how they would respond, how they experience the vignette, or what actions they may take when faced with the circumstances presented in the vignettes (Paddam, Barnes, &

Langdon, 2010; Spaulding & Phillips, 2007). Barter and Renold (2000) acknowledged that vignettes should describe situations in enough detail so that respondents can grasp the context while simultaneously omitting some details so that respondents can provide additional information about their decision making processes and the factors that would influence their decision making. Leaving some ambiguity within vignettes may allow for an examination of participants' attitudes, perceptions, or beliefs (Barter & Renold, 2000) and, ultimately, to an illumination of their behaviors (Schoenberg & Ravdal, 2000).

Vignettes and Qualitative Research

Vignettes may help discussions during qualitative interviews, especially when the interviews involve the study of potentially sensitive topics (Hughes & Huby, 2002). Hughes and Huby noted that vignettes allow for participants to gain some distance from a potentially sensitive topic while still providing a forum for discussion of those topics. By providing methods to discuss potentially sensitive topics, vignettes allow participants to express their meanings, perceptions, or beliefs to the situations provided within the vignettes (Barter & Renold, 2000) while removing any personal disclosure that could embarrass participants (Schoenberg & Ravdal, 2000). Vignettes serve another role in qualitative research: mitigation of socially desirable responses. The distance provided by examining hypothetical scenarios may help participants voice their beliefs or perceptions without fear of voicing a socially 'incorrect' belief (Hughes & Huby, 2002). This distance comes from the specific contexts of the vignettes which allow participants to respond within those contexts while expressing meanings and beliefs they associated with those contexts (Hughes & Huby, 2002). The most important role of vignettes in qualitative research is to "achieve insight into the social components of the participant's interpretative framework and perceptual processes" (Jenkins, Blor, Fisher, Berney,

& Neale, 2010, p. 178). Vignettes provide a useful method to highlight the processes used by participants to reach conclusions based on their meanings and interpretations of a scenario (Barter & Renold, 2000).

Advantages of Vignettes

Vignette techniques contain several features that make them useful within qualitative research.   Unlike studies that are time and labor intensive, vignettes are an inexpensive research methodology because they require nominal resources to implement and conduct (Collett & Childs, 2011; Hughes & Huby, 2002; Paddam, Barnes, & Langdon, 2010). Researchers can easily modify existing vignettes to make them consistent with their topics of interest (Schoenberg & Ravdal, 2000). If no vignettes exist for a topic of interest, researchers can create them by reviewing research literature (Paddam, Barnes, & Langdon, 2010). Research participants do not need to have familiarity with the research topic to generate meanings or interpretations based on the scenarios presented within vignettes (Hughes & Huby, 2002). Hughes and Huby noted that the use of vignettes in combination with other methods allows participants to respond to the same stimuli; therefore, vignettes may elicit uniform data from participants. Vignettes easily work in conjunction with other methods of inquiry and provide a helpful context for discussion during individual interviews (Hughes & Huby, 2002). Finally, the hypothetical nature of vignettes may allow participants to discuss potentially sensitive topics with greater ease (Barter & Renold, 2000; Paddam, Barnes, & Langdon, 2010; Schoenberg & Ravdal, 2000).

Disadvantages of Vignettes

Vignettes present 'two-dimensional' people for study. The characters within vignettes cannot convey emotions through tone of voice, facial expressions, or body language (Paddam,

Barnes, & Langdon, 2010). The contexts presented with two-dimensional people in a vignette and real people in a real situation may elicit different responses from research participants. Grey, McClean, and Barnes-Holmes (2002) contended that the format of vignettes causes participants to fill in missing context, which may confound research results. Each participant brings a unique perspective to the situations presented in vignettes; therefore, results of studies involving vignettes may not generalize easily (Paddam et al., 2010). Despite the potential disadvantages of vignettes, their use allows the "abstraction and controlled manipulation of target variables" (Paddam et al., 2010).

Study Design

Qualitative research that uses aspects of phenomenology requires the researcher to purposefully select participants or sites, choose the types of data for collection, collect data, and to analyze the data for meaning (Creswell, 2007; Hays & Wood, 2011). Two complementary techniques allowed for the exploration of school counselors' perceptions with overrepresentation, even if they had no direct knowledge of this phenomenon. I chose a qualitative research design featuring vignettes and participant interviews to explore the experiences of school counselors with students with learning disabilities and their experiences with disproportionality in special education. Vignettes allowed exploration of different scenarios to which school counselors could respond and discuss their perceptions based on a fictional situation. The participant interviews permitted the school counselors to define and contextualize their own experiences with disproportionality in special education. Qualitative research design facilitated deep exploration of school counselors' experiences by using the voices of school counselors to examine their experiences and attitudes (Hall, 2009). The following sections of this

chapter provide the sampling, data collection, and data analysis methods based upon qualitative and phenomenological research principles.

Participant Selection

For this study, the researcher used purposeful sampling in the form of convenience and snowball sampling methods to recruit school counselors who had experience working with students in special education within a school setting. Creswell (2007) described the primary focus of sampling in phenomenology as a search to find participants who have experienced the phenomenon under study. Bogdan and Biklin (2003) explained purposeful sampling as the selection of "particular subjects to include because they are believed to facilitate the expansion of developing theory" (p. 65). Although this study did not involve phenomenology per se, many of the trademarks of that research tradition informed this qualitative study. The researcher sought eight professional school counselors who met the follow criteria: (a) practicing school counselor in a high school setting; (b) an ability to articulate beliefs about the school counseling with students in special education; (c) an ability to articulate beliefs about the overrepresentation of African American students in high incidence special education categories and factors contributing to the phenomenon (including whether or not they believe the phenomenon exists); and (d) a willingness to consent to participation for two interview sessions. Additionally, I attempted to recruit both male and female participants from diverse ethnic/racial groups, when possible, in an effort to capture different viewpoints and to provide an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of disproportionality in special education. I sought candidates from referrals from university faculty, practicing school counselors, and professional colleagues. I contacted potential participants through emails with information about the study to recruit participants and to gauge their interest in the study (Appendix B). Participants received informed consent forms

which detailed potential benefits and risks of study participation during the initial face-to-face interview session (Appendix A). After interviewing participants, I asked them to refer me to other school counselors who may want to participate in the research study.

Instruments and Data Sources

A constructivist paradigm and qualitative inquiry bring depth to the examination of school counselors' perceptions and attitudes about the phenomenon of disproportionality. The term disproportionality has many varied meanings depending on the context. The existence of multiple meanings and perspectives of the phenomenon required that this research gain an insider's view of this complexity, or an emic perspective (Fetterman, 1998). To ascertain the complexities inherent in school counselors' roles and perceptions of African American students in high incidence disability categories, the researcher developed four vignettes, a vignette interview protocol, and an individual interview protocol for the second set of participant interviews. The vignette interviews allowed me to discuss potentially sensitive topics with the participants in hypothetical situations. The individual interviews also allowed me to examine the participants' experiences with and attitudes about disproportionality and students in special education. The result was two semi-structured interview protocols with open-ended questions.

Hays and Wood (2011) suggested that interview questions should generate thick, rich descriptions of participants' experiences with a phenomenon. The interview questions focused on (a) responses to hypothetical situations and students presented in the vignettes, (b) experiences with students in special education, (c) counselor roles with students in special education, (d) counselor training/education, and (e) beliefs about overrepresentation. Using the same interview protocol with each participant minimized bias (Bodgan & Biklen, 2003).

Data Collection Protocols

Demographic questionnaires. During the first interview, each participant received a demographic questionnaire (Appendix H). The demographic questionnaire elicited the following data from the counselor participants: (a) overall years and types of experiences in K-12 schools, (b) educational background, (c) current place or school district of employment, and (d) racial and gender background. Information provided by participants on the demographic questionnaire allowed the researcher to garner descriptive data and school/school district data. Each participant was then given a pseudonym to protect their confidentiality.

Vignette review and interviews. I developed four vignettes based on existing literature and my own professional background. The vignettes were manipulated by race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status (SES) to create four students: (1) African American male, lower SES, (2) African American male, higher SES, (3) white male, lower SES, and (4) white male, higher SES. Written narratives provided an assessable and appropriate format. Each written narrative contained information to provide some context for participants, including parents' marital status, neighborhood SES, number of siblings, and parental school involvement. All other information was the same across participants with the same SES (African American male and white male, higher SES, and African American male and white male, lower SES), except the manipulated race/ethnicity variable. Each participant read the narratives in the same order: (1) the two African American students, (2) lower then higher SES, (3) then the two White students, (4) lower then higher SES. After reading each vignette, the researcher asked semi-structured questions designed to elicit awareness of attitudes about educational settings and counseling services. The researcher transcribed the tape-recorded sessions and shared with the research team for analysis.

Individual interviews. Individual interviews served as the primary method of inquiry. The interviews were scheduled and conducted by the primary researcher. The nature of the interviews allowed the school counselor participants to conceive and frame their perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes in their own words (Patton, 2002). Interview questions were developed from the research literature.

Disproportionality/overrepresentation and school counseling research provided a basis for the semi structured, open-ended questions. These questions formed the individual interviewing guide (Appendix G). The semi structured approach allowed for the inclusion or removal of questions based on the participants' responses during the interviewing process which facilitated an ability to account for the changing and emergent nature of qualitative research (Patton, 2002).

Reflexivity. When choosing qualitative research based on phenomenological methodology, the researcher begins a process of introspection and self-reflection (Laverty, 2003). Laverty suggested that the initial self-reflection contributes to the preparatory phase of the research and definitely contributes to the data analysis. The self-reflection serves an important purpose in the research: providing an avenue to explore personal biases and assumptions for bracketing. Increasing this self-awareness helped to protect the study from an imposition of my assumptions or biases and allowed a focus on the perspectives/experiences of the study participants (Laverty, 2003; Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenologists refer to this process as epoche (Hays & Wood, 2011).

The process of bracketing and self-reflection occurred throughout the study. I maintained a reflexive journal throughout data collection and analysis to record my reactions, biases, and assumptions (Creswell, 2007). Reflexive journaling permitted me to bring any assumptions or biases to forefront and mitigate their impacts on the study or the analysis of data.

Research team. Phenomenological research often utilizes a research team to provide external checks and balances for the data analysis process (Creswell, 2007). Within this study a research team has importance because the constructivist-interpretivist approach may give the researcher's biases undue influence on this entire research process (Moustakas, 1994; Ponterotto, 2005). The research team consisted of three doctoral students in the Counseling and Student Personnel Services program and the primary researcher. The members were an African American male high school counselor, an African American male college student affairs professional (disability services), and a white female college student affairs professional (career services). All of the research team members had successfully completed coursework and had prior experiences with qualitative research. Each research team member bracketed their assumptions and biases surrounding this study and its topic and their experiences with the phenomenon.

The research team members described their perceptions of the overrepresentation of African Americans in special education and experiences with the phenomenon, if any, along with their forecasts about school counselors' perceptions. Using their backgrounds, the team members shared their assumptions that may have influenced their analysis of the data. One member saw a colleague's struggle to achieve the proper services for their child, a student with special needs. Due to her familiarity with her colleague's struggle, she thought that schools did not always deliver on their promises to accommodate students with special needs. One member who worked in college disabilities services noted the disparities in preparation for students with learning disabilities based on socioeconomic status and race. He perceived that schools could do a better job preparing students with learning disabilities for postsecondary options. The other member believed that many school counselors did not have adequate preparation to work with

students with disabilities based on his experiences as a high school counselor. This information

proved beneficial as the team embarked on data analysis and strove to reach consensus.

Data Collection

The researcher arranged face-to-face interviews with high school counselors who agreed

to participate in this study. Each interview was conducted by the researcher in a private meeting

space, such as an office or classroom. Before conducting the interviews, the high school

counselors completed a demographic questionnaire (Appendix H) which detailed their years of

experience, educational background, and demographic data. The research consisted of data

gleaned from the demographic questionnaire and two interviews. First, the researcher presented

the study participants with four vignettes that described four fictitious ninth grade students with

problematic behaviors, attendance, and academic issues (Appendix E). A vignette interview

protocol with 11 questions (Appendix F) was developed to elicit participants' thoughts about

academic placement and counseling interventions for the students in the vignettes. The

researcher used a semi-structured interview protocol that contained 14 questions for the

individual interview portion of the research (Appendix G) that was designed to identify themes

that would address the research questions.

Data Analysis

Coding Processes

The vignette and individual interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The individual interviews were sent back to interviewees after transcription for verification, or

member checking. Member checking allowed interviewees to review the transcriptions for

accuracy and provide additional feedback, if necessary. Member checking also established

validity because it gave the participants an opportunity to provide feedback (Bogdan & Bilkin,

2003). None of the participants added or subtracted information from the transcriptions. After transcription, a research team consisting of three other doctoral students and the primary researcher met to analyze data from the individual interviews. Each member of the team had completed a qualitative research class that included qualitative data analysis.

The general data analysis involved common processes from qualitative approaches: inductive analysis and constant comparison analysis. Inductive analysis occurs when the research team had no *a priori* themes, allowing the codes or themes to emerge from the data itself (Hall, 2009). To move from the initial codes to themes, the team employed a three-step sequential coding process known as constant comparison analysis (McAuliffe & Lovell, 2006). The research team began by open coding or identifying themes that emerged from the individual interview data and indexing those themes (Patton, 2002). Each member of the team coded the interviews separately. The goal of the open coding was to develop categories and to group words or phrases that seemed similar into similar categories (Moore, Henfield, & Owens, 2008). After each member coded separately, the team met to discuss the codes. The team resolved differences through discussions to achieve consensus. After all of the individual interviews had undergone the open coding process, axial coding began with the research team. Axial coding involved the collapsing of open codes into similar categories by looking at connections and/or interactions of the open codes (Hays, McLeod, & Prosek, 2009; Moore et al., 2008). The axial codes were then grouped into broader categories, or themes. A review of the themes led to patterns that described the experiences of school counselors with students with learning disabilities, African American students with disabilities, overrepresentation of African American students in special education, and training to work with students with learning disabilities.

Validation

Creswell (2007) noted that validation in qualitative research is the process of assessing the accuracy of findings from participants and the researchers. To increase the accuracy of the findings in this study, I used reflexivity, triangulation, research team debriefing, member checking, and description. This process improved the credibility, or the accuracy of data sources and interpretations, of the study.

Reflexivity. Reflexivity involves the process of researcher self-reflection about researcher biases and assumptions. The researchers must give significant thought to their experiences and "explicitly claim the ways in which their position or experience relates to the issues being researched" (Laverty, 2003, p. 17). To bracket those assumptions and experiences, I kept a reflexive journal to aid the process of interpreting and reflecting (Laverty, 2003).

Triangulation. Analyzing data gathered from multiple participants constituted triangulation for this study. The data included information gathered from study participants in individual interviews and information from the demographic questionnaire. I examined school district profiles (accessed via the Georgia Department of Education website) to ascertain demographic data about the overall population of students who receive special education services, the number of African American students in each participant's school district, and the number of African American students who receive special education services in the school district.

Research team debriefing. The process of allowing the research team to reflect upon themes and to compare interpretations of themes provided an external check of the data analysis process (Creswell, 2007). Moreover, the team's review of the primary researcher's reflexive journal provided additional checks and balances for researcher biases and assumptions. The

primary researcher met with the other three members of the research team to review all interview transcripts for the identification of themes and key phrases. This process resulted in a consensus of themes from the research team, or intercoder agreement.

The research team consisted of one white female student affairs professional in career counseling, one African American male student affairs professional who works in disability services, one African American male high school counselor, and the primary researcher. All of the research team members were doctoral students in Counseling and Student Personnel Services at a large southeastern university. The primary researcher met with the research team prior to data collection to bracket assumptions.

Member checking. To assure the accuracy of transcriptions and interpretations, I returned data analyses, transcripts, and conclusions to research participants so that they could judge the accuracy of the findings. These transcripts were recorded verbatim on a Word document and numbered by line. I emailed, mailed, or faxed transcriptions to the interviewees within two weeks of the completion of their interviews. No coding took place until participants sent email approval to the primary researcher. This process is known as member checking (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). Member checking provides one of the most critical components of credibility in qualitative research (Creswell, 2007).

Description. The thick, rich descriptions of participants' experiences used in this qualitative research allow future researchers to transfer information to other similar settings with similar participants (Creswell, 2007). The descriptions were presented as verbatim quotes from the interviews that support the themes found during coding and analysis.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This exploratory study examined the beliefs and attitudes of high school counselors about the overrepresentation of African American students in special education. A review of the literature illuminated the varied explanations that researchers suggested as potential contributing factors to the phenomenon of overrepresentation in special education (Artiles et al., 2010; Blanchett, 2009; Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Ferri & Connor, 2005a; Skiba et al., 2008). The review also revealed perceptions and attitudes from many actors in the special education referral and identification processes, including teachers, administrators, and special educators (Skiba, Simmons, Ritter, Kohler, Henderson, & Wu, 2006), school psychologists (Kearns, Ford, & Linney, 2005), and interdisciplinary team outcomes (Klingner & Harry, 2006). Prior research in the field has not focused on one group of actors in the special education referral and identification processes whose attitudes or beliefs may influence referral and identification rates: school counselors. School counselors often serve unique roles with parents, students, and teachers prior to and after referral and identification for special education services (Moore, Henfield, & Owens, 2008). The unique roles of school counselors warranted an examination of their beliefs about the disproportionality of African American students in special education.

In this study, an analysis of school counselors' thoughts about the phenomenon of disproportionality in special education, school counseling roles with students who receive special education services, and school counseling roles in the referral and identification processes for

special education services fostered an understanding of their perceptions of overrepresentation and their thoughts about factors which may contribute to the phenomenon. Data collection came from vignette reviews, individual interviews, demographic information, the Georgia Department of Education website, and my reflexive journal and memos.

Participant Demographics

The sample for this study included eight participants who identified themselves as practicing high school counselors. The use of purposeful sampling allowed the researcher to interview four male and four female participants who worked in urban, suburban, and rural areas of Georgia. Their years of experience as school counselors ranged from 7 to 14 years. See Table 1 and Table 2 for descriptions of the participants based on demographic surveys. See Appendix I for a summary of the school district data for each participant. To protect the identity of the participants, the researcher gave each a pseudonym in lieu of using their names. Following is a brief description of the participants based on my impressions during the interviews.

Judy

Judy has worked as a high school counselor for seven years in public school settings. She currently works in a suburban school. She self- identifies as white and works in a high school with a majority African American student population. Prior to working as a school counselor, she worked in disability services at a major research university in the Southeast. She thinks that she should be more involved with African American students in special education, but the division of duties in her school and time constraints prevent her from becoming more involved. She thinks that her background has prepared her for working with students who receive special education services.

Wanda

Wanda has worked as a high school counselor for seven years in public school settings. She self-identifies as African American. She works in a diverse urban school, but the majority of students are African American. Wanda sees herself as an advocate for struggling students, especially African American male students. Wanda values parental involvement whenever possible and noted that "changing student behaviors has to be a collaborative effort between the school and the home."

Pam

Pam has worked in education for 18 years. She worked 11 years as a high school English teacher and seven years as a high school counselor. Pam self-identifies as white. Pam works in a rural school with a predominantly white student body. During the individual interviews, she seemed hesitant to discuss race explicitly. However, she discussed issues involving SES more freely. Because of the nature of her school demographics, Pam wasn't sure if African American students were referred more frequently for special education services. She did believe that overrepresentation of African Americans in special education was a general problem in the United States.

Jon

Jon has worked as a high school counselor for 14 years. Before working as a high school counselor, he worked in community mental health agencies. Jon self-identifies as African American. He works in an urban school setting with a predominantly African American student population. Jon repeatedly stated that he works with all students and treats all students the same. Jon does see a need for additional training for school counselors regarding special education services and interventions.

Kevin

Kevin has worked in education for 16 years. He worked as a teacher in a middle school for seven years, a principal at a charter school for three years, and a high school counselor for seven years. Kevin self-identifies as African American. He works in an urban school setting with a predominantly African American student population. Kevin expressed that school counselors need additional training for their work with students who receive special education services, including additional coursework and collaborative continuing education efforts with special education departments.

Paul

Paul has worked as a high school counselor for 13 years. He currently works in an urban school with a predominantly African American student population. As a part-time job, Paul counsels adolescents with behavioral issues at a mental health clinic. In both settings, the majority of the students that he counsels are African American. Additionally, Paul is working on a PhD in School Psychology. Paul self-identifies as white. Paul suggested that "services are services", but he does try to tailor interventions to particular students.

Chris

Chris works in a rural setting as a high school counselor. He works in a school with a predominantly white student population. Chris worked as an in-school-suspension (ISS) teacher for two years prior to working as a high school counselor for the past 12 years. Chris self-identifies as white. He seemed reticent while discussing race during the interviews, but thought that disproportionality was an important issue nonetheless.

Katy

Katy works in a suburban school setting in a school with a predominantly white student population. Katy self-identifies as African American. She has worked as a high school counselor for ten years. Prior to becoming a school counselor, Katy worked as a business education teacher. Before becoming an educator, she worked in social service agencies. Katy suggested that her counseling department offered "the same services to everyone." Katy also suggested that race factors heavily into disproportionality.

Table 1

Summary of Participant Work Experience

Participant	Years as School Counselor	Years Worked in K-12 Schools
Judy	07	09
Wanda	07	07
Pam	07	18
Jon	14	14
Kevin	07	16
Paul	13	13
Chris	12	14
Katy	10	14

Table 2

Summary of Participant Demographic Information

Participant	Gender	Race	School Setting	Highest Degree
Judy	Female	White	Suburban	Educational Specialist
Wanda	Female	African American	Urban	Educational Specialist
Pam	Female	White	Rural	Educational Specialist
Jon	Male	African American	Urban	Educational Specialist
Kevin	Male	African American	Urban	Masters
Paul	Male	White	Urban	Educational Specialist
Katy	Female	African American	Suburban	Educational Specialist
Chris	Male	White	Rural	Masters

Reflexive Journal

The purpose of this qualitative research was to attempt to understand the experiences of school counselors with a particular topic, overrepresentation, which resonated strongly for me. It resonated so strongly that I decided to conduct research on others' experiences with the phenomenon. At times researchers inevitably research topics that invoke strong emotions or remind them of their experiences with a topic (Johnson, 2009). Reflexive journaling provided an opportunity for gathering qualitative data from the researcher as the interviews proceeded with each school counselor participant. Phelps (2005) noted that journals offer another avenue for

qualitative data collection because journals may "provide key insights that can be difficult to document in other ways" (p. 42). Phelps (2005) referred to those key insights as "'a-ha' experiences" (p. 42) and suggested that journaling encourages researcher self-awareness by providing a medium to document the interaction of a researcher's experiences with emerging awareness and knowledge. After conducting each interview, I wrote observations in my reflexive journal that included descriptions of the interviews and my reflections on the interviews. A sample of an observation is presented here with both descriptions and reflections recorded after an interview. Descriptive notes included the following: "in the counselor's office, it is inviting and spacious, the school itself looks new or remodeled." Reflective notes included the following sample: "This counselor is attempting to avoid race in this discussion, but had no issue discussing SES. I wonder why. Is it our interplay? I am Black. She is white. I wonder if she thinks I am judging her. This counselor wears many hats. Where could she possibly fit in more interactions with students with learning disabilities? Counseling students with LD requires more?"

After completing all of the individual interviews, I also wrote my research observations of the entire process with any ideas that emerged from reviewing the interview transcripts. Two terms emerged and stuck with me: 'disability blindness' and 'differentiated school counseling'. Reviewing my journal revealed that I thought participants made a concerted effort to not see students' learning disabilities when working with students who received special education services, even when the learning disabilities could impact the students' learning styles or access to information. Similarly, reviewing all of my notes led me to another insight. Although many school counseling techniques may seem universal, the participants in this study implied that students with learning disabilities required skills that were outside their school counseling

training. My initial assumption from my experiences was that the counselors may not know how to modify interventions to effectively reach struggling learners. These counselors implied that students with learning disabilities required a different type of counseling or a different set of counseling skills, so to speak.   Both revelations surprised me and informed my notions of how school counselors viewed both overrepresentation and their work with students with learning disabilities.

Discussion of Themes

Following the process described in chapter three, the research team members identified themes and then formed a consensus about which themes to include. Several themes emerged from the analysis of the interview transcripts. The research team and primary researcher agreed that five themes were significant: separate worlds, intermediation, identification and referral, beliefs about overrepresentation, and professional growth. The following thick, rich, verbatim quotations taken from the eight interviews illuminate each theme.

Separate Worlds

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) encourages school counselors to work with all students to enhance their academic, behavioral, and personal functioning. The school counselors in this study did not limit their interactions or interventions solely to students in the general education population. Judy provided the following description of her work with students with learning disabilities.

> As a high school counselor, I have to attend IEP meetings and I work with the special
>
> education department to help schedule the correct classes for students in special
>
> education.

Almost all of the respondents shared the common experience of participating in Individualized

Education Planning (IEP) meetings and working with students on academic and career planning.

Paul described his experiences working with parents, teachers, and students to monitor academic

planning.

> Well, I've had a lot of experience working as a school counselor and a doctoral student in
>
> school psychology. I have many students on my caseload; so, I'm involved with them,
>
> with their academic planning. I get involved with the special education teachers, helping
>
> to monitor their progress, adjusting schedules, helping with parent conferences.

Kevin, perhaps, best summed up the interactions between school counselors and students in

special education. He described his school counseling responsibilities as a need to provide

services to all students on his caseload.

> Well, as a counselor, the main part of our role is to actually counsel all students, which
>
> includes students with special needs who are in special education. So I've had an
>
> opportunity to work with students who are on special education diplomas or transitional
>
> diplomas and students who are getting regular education diplomas, but are receiving
>
> special education services.

As he continued, Kevin explained the interventions that he offered to all students on his caseload

and frustrations that arose from large caseloads, time constraints, or other responsibilities

assigned to school counselors.

> Although the ASCA Model encourages school counselors to work with all students, the

school counselors who participated in this study often found that their roles were constrained by

the division of duties within their respective schools, by time constraints due to large caseloads,

or by a need to follow accommodations listed in the students' IEPs. In some of their respective

work settings, the special education case managers actually scheduled students for courses and performed their academic advisement. Several respondents identified a disconnect between who performs the academic advisement and who is held accountable for the academic advisement. When asked about his roles with students who receive special education services, Chris noted that:

> We have case managers, which are the special education teachers, and they have roughly five or six students on each of their caseloads and then we have one lead special ed[ucation] teacher who teaches no classes and she kind of oversees the actual department itself. The case managers actually recommend the level of courses, if it's an inclusion course or more self-contained pullout. So, they make the recommendation and then we (school counselors) implement. Luckily, we have good collaboration with them, but ultimately, the buck stops with us.

Judy wished that the special education case managers were held accountable for scheduling errors, but realized that:

> If I see that there is a problem, I'll go to the special ed[ucation] director and ask her if she realized that they needed this (class) or they haven't had that one (class) and let her fix that. But if it did slip through me too, it would probably be my responsibility.

Wanda described the separation of duties in similar terms.

> We just do the regular education schedules. We're not allowed to do any special education schedules because it's like IEP-driven. We don't – we're not a part of those meetings. So, it's like we're in separate worlds in a way.

The division of duties between counselors and the special education department left Kevin with the thought that counselors were only used for "scheduling as opposed to intervention" or that

the students on his caseload who had IEPs belong to "the special ed(ucation) department instead of thinking that they (the students) are still on my caseload too." Jon did not find the division of duties problematic. He thought that the special education department probably does a better job with students on transitional diplomas.

> I think that special education does a great job for the kids in transitional diploma. They have vocational training and skills in place for those students and continue to work with them individually to make sure that they're getting a good quality education. I don't know if there's a lot we can do with them…with that particular population.

The practitioners I interviewed described their perceived and assigned roles/duties with students with learning disabilities and the division of roles/duties within their particular schools. One division that became apparent is that school counselors work with students in special education, but often the primary advisement source for those students are their special education advisors, especially for students who receive services in self-contained classrooms. Judy provided a glimpse into who provides the advisement information for students in special education at her school.

> Many students in special education come to my office, just like all the other students do, for a variety of reasons, you know. I work with them. I mean they have teacher advisors, just like the other students do, but they usually have a special ed[ucation] person there together with their advisement group. But the information we give them is the same as everybody else, whether it's college prep or career prep, or anything, so the same as with any other student…. However, I will say that we have one classroom that is very severe and I don't have much interaction with them, unfortunately, just time-wise.

Wanda noted the challenges faced by school counselors when working with the students—the lack of time to do everything. Because of the time constraints, the division of duties ensured that students in special education received services. She suggested that: "The students meet with their special education case manager during advisement (period) every day. So that's kind of like their main advocate and resource." The time constraints, counseling caseloads, and school functions shaped the school counselors work experiences and how the school counselors perceived their roles with students in special education.

Even with the varied opinions about the benefits or costs of inhabiting separate worlds, the respondents described very important counselor roles for students in special education that could only be met by working with special educators. The separate worlds of school counselors and the special educators often necessitated collaborative efforts to safeguard students' rights and access to services.

Although the professionals inhabited separate worlds, the students that they served were the same in most cases. Special education case managers and school counselors shared overlapping caseloads according to the school counselors who participated in the study. Their shared student caseloads required that they work well together to ensure that students received the proper classes and services. Katy explained how the separate worlds impacted course scheduling for her students who receive special education services. She often had to "ask the special education department about the types of classes that students should receive." When asked about scheduling students who receive special education services in her school, Pam reported that:

> We have case managers who recommend particular courses, but the counselor actually
> manages and puts together the schedule for the particular student.

Jon recognized that these students may have legally mandated requirements.

> The decision that you can make for a non-special education student may not be
>
> necessarily true for the special education student because you – it's a legal document and
>
> you have to make sure that you're following what's in that legal document. So, you have
>
> to confer with the special education department before making major decisions about the
>
> student.

The importance of collaboration extends to monitoring the goals of the IEP and academic/career planning with students. Wanda saw a need to collaborate for monitoring the efficacy of the special education services.

> I want to make sure that the services are effective and to help the case manager monitor
>
> to make sure that the students are benefitting from the special education services and that
>
> they are implementing them in the manner that they were written out.

Pam noted how the separate worlds could also hinder collaboration.

> Well definitely like if I could attend an IEP—if I can't attend a meeting, let me see the
>
> IEP notes so that I know, you know, their limitations and if I should be encouraging this
>
> kid to go to college or technical school. Or, you know, am I putting something there that
>
> really isn't realistic for this student, you know. I mean I think just knowing more
>
> information about those students, and those records are pretty tight and kept under lock
>
> and key. And when I ask for them, it's like why do you want them?

According to the counselors participating in this study, the separate worlds of school counseling and special education was a common experience with costs and benefits for the professionals and

students alike. No one questioned whether students should receive special education services. The participants did, however, realize that all students deserved access to information to help with their academic, career, and personal development.

Intermediation

In their discussions of experiences with all students who receive special education services and African American students who receive special education services, participants presented details of their work that characterizes the theme intermediation. For this discussion, *intermediation* refers to the school counselors acting as go-betweens for the students and the school, the school and the parents, and the students/parents and the community. The counselors in this study discussed a range of connections from their experiences that support success for this vulnerable population of students. Intermediation took the forms of advocacy and connecting students and families to resources.

All of the school counselors who participated in this study saw a need to support students in special education and to ensure they have what they need to succeed in school. Advocacy included a focus and recognition of the challenges posed by the label of special education. Wanda especially thought that students who received special education services need advocates. She stated that:

> I feel like our role as counselors is to be an advocate for all students, but especially for those students who are at risk. If they are in special services like, like special ed, they need many advocates on their sides. So I see myself as being that advocate for that child one hundred percent.

African American students who receive special education services required even more attention because of the specific challenges that these students face. Kevin thought that connecting the students to postsecondary options was very important:

> I think that they need some kind of postsecondary options out there. I don't think that they have enough of them (options) out there that are presented to our students that are in the regular education classes. But I think that the students, African American students in particular, need a lot of support when it comes to postsecondary options…students with special needs in particular.

Like Kevin, Paul thought that school counselors should provide additional support for African American students who receive special education services. Paul focused his efforts in more individual and group sessions with African American students who receive special education services.

> Well, I believe that we should be extremely involved, actively involved, without a doubt. I think that this particular group or special ed group clearly has special needs and additional services with more individual counseling and in small group perhaps, if they need help with exploring various courses and career options. So I think that I need to meet with them more often than let's say my top five percent.

Wanda suggested that African American students required more attention because their parents may not know how to help them. Wanda pointed out that:

> The students need a lot of help because their parents don't know how to help them. I make sure that I give them extra attention with their class schedules and their career planning. Many of my students don't know the resources available to them; so, I make it my goal to provide information and resources to them and their families.

Wanda further described other rationales for connecting her students and families with additional resources that could enhance academic performance.

> My babies can't read. They just can't read and accessing resources is difficult for those students because I think it stems from the parents and they don't often know where to go. Where to look or that there's even assistance out there for them. And so that's been the greatest thing is helping them find resources outside of the school that will help them at home, not only for school and for success, but long term success in other areas.
>
> Accessing resources is a tough thing.

The advocacy extended to connecting students in special education to community resources that could help them after their high school careers. Judy emphasized the connection to community resources that she could provide.

> When I see students, who are kind of getting ready to graduate, I try to make sure they're involved in vocational rehabilitation so they can get services to help them. So I kind of see myself as an advocate in some ways. A lot of times the parents don't realize they can qualify for vocational rehabilitation services, and that they (the services) can really help, you know, kind of bridge between high school and life after high school.

Respondents also noted that connecting students to school resources may imply that students in special education received the same information and services that all students received. Paul emphasized that "services are services" and that all students received equal access to services or received services based on their presenting issues. Katy suggested that her counseling department offered the "same services to everyone." Chris noted that his counseling department attempted to give all students the same information.

We try to disseminate the same information and make sure that students are aware of college opportunities and career opportunities as well.

Jon did see a need to serve the same role for all students in the school. He stated that, "I think school counselors should have the same role and serve all students in the school." As Jon continued, he suggested that:

I try to treat all of my students the same. Like I have to go a little further before making a decision about a special education student because I have to know what's in their IEP. But I try to treat all the students the same and I try to make sure they are all moving towards graduation.

Pam actively engaged in supporting students by making sure that they received the same types of information and services as all students as well. She offered students in special education the same services.

The same as others, nothing different, you know, the same kind of services. They come in when they need help. We call them, you know, during classes—the same thing and talk about what their future is going to be.

While the idea may have been to ensure that all students received services from school counselors, the connections to resources that Pam and others advocated came from a desire to provide the same (or equal) services to students who received special education supports. In some instances, the services and interventions reflected the challenges faced by African American students who receive special education services. Conversely, at other times, many of the interventions were applied equally to all students without modifications.

Identification and Referral

In the high schools that the school counselors who participated in this study worked, their roles varied in the identification and placement processes for African American students. Even prior to high school entrance, many of the students had already been identified and placed according to processes in elementary and middle school. Chris commented on the impact of decisions from elementary and middle schools.

In my experience, since I've been here, very few students are qualifying for special education at this level. Like I said less than five in my case since I've been here. So I don't know what's happening, but it's before they ever get here.

Pam shared a thought about the labeling that occurs prior to high school and how the prior referrals impact high school counselors.

At the high school, you know, I feel like we kind of get whatever's been taken care of at elementary school. Or, you know, whatever's been pointed out, unfortunately good or bad, however that works.

Almost all participants had been involved in student support teams (SST) and the response to intervention (RTI) procedures as chairs or as group members. They all universally recognized that referrals for services were rare in high school settings, but that referrals could happen.

The participants were familiar with both the response to intervention (RTI) and student support team (SST) processes and believed that proper implementation of those processes prevented inappropriate placements in special education. Paul detailed the process in his school.

It starts with RTI. The whole intervention that takes place prior to special ed, education. So a teacher, parent, or supervisor may see a student as having a need and then it would actually come through one of our particular counselors and what they will do is start the

SST process, which is having teachers modify assignments, try different forms of reaching the student, using different techniques. After meeting to review the results of the interventions, then testing would be recommended to determine if the student would qualify for special ed or just needs additional support.

Pam added an emphasis on working through the process to ensure that the school follows the RTI guidelines.

I think it's the same for all students that we work through those SST interventions. And our school is really trying hard to say in the pyramid [RTI] this is what should be done at this level. And if that's not working, those students need to have these extra interventions. You know, just working through that pyramid.

All of the participants could discuss the RTI process at their respective schools and all, generally, found the process sound and helpful to students. Factors that could prompt referrals included poor academic performance or behavior issues, teacher referrals, and parent requests.

School counselors who participated in this study had initiated or received referrals for students who struggled academically in their classes. Kevin noted that those struggles included students making efforts to succeed without corresponding academic success.

I think if a student is showing a tremendous amount of effort in classes and they're reaching a level of frustration but not receiving any results. I think it's worth examining whether or not there are some deficiencies there that could be a result of a need that could be provided by special ed, but that would be the only instance that I would think—if a student is putting in an extreme amount of effort and not receiving any results.

Students struggling in one particular subject could also prompt a counselor referral for services from Judy.

> I had a student who was really struggling with math, I think, and we got her qualified for special education because of her math disability.

The academic problems that could prompt referrals also included inconsistent class failure patterns. Wanda suggested that inconsistent patterns could influence a referral for services.

> It's the failing classes that don't make sense. And, in that, I say if a student, for instance, was passing a foreign language that was not their native language, but was failing language arts, or they were passing physics, but were failing math. If there was a match up that just didn't make sense to me and it was afforded through their history, that was worthy for me to ask more questions.

Chris mentioned academics and behaviors that could prompt a counselor referral for services based on a student's academic or behavioral history.

> I have referred to the SST committee. So, for instance for special education, I guess. I think if I notice a child who's really failing academically and there's been a long history or there's some serial behaviors that we cannot fix initially, then certainly I would, you know, send a referral to the Student Support Team chair and then see if the interventions at that level work or not.

Several of the participants had never initiated referrals for services unless prompted by a teacher. Teachers often initiated referrals in some of their respective schools which prompted the school counselors to become involved in the process.

> Teachers referred students to the initial process of special education identification to address attendance issues, behavioral issues, or academic issues. The school counselors who

participated in the referral process discussed those referrals and the reasons for those referrals.

Two roles emerged for the counselors who participated in the process: supporter or intervener.

The counselors who served as supporters received the referrals and initiated the RTI process.

Judy described the process at her school:

> The teachers have a form that they have to fill out. They rate the student on how he's
>
> doing in class and then they have a part where they can summarize some of the student's
>
> misbehavior patterns. After we receive the referral, then I coordinate the meeting with
>
> the parent, teachers, and the school psychologist.

A counselor who performed as an intervener described the process of questioning that takes

place after receiving a referral. Paul suggested that questioning referrals may help limit referrals.

> Teachers often come to us. And I say, you know, what type of things have you done in
>
> the classroom? So yeah, I definitely think, you know, we have an active role.
>
> Absolutely, and look at maybe look at past history, look at records, look at previous data,
>
> test scores, things like that, and if we see a trend, then maybe they just haven't like
>
> identified what the issues are.

Wanda also suggested that her role within the process could prevent inappropriate referrals

because she injected cultural discussion in the RTI process.

> Attending RTI meetings helps to put cultural issues out there so that (cultural issues), at
>
> least, is given a glance before making referrals. And then just being the voice of that
>
> student to make sure that whatever the referral is or whatever the outcome is, that it was
>
> made in the best interest of that student and not necessarily in the best interest of the
>
> teacher.

Referrals from another source could initiate the process for special education evaluation as well. Parents who find themselves concerned with their students' progress in school may contact the SST chairperson to begin the process.

Participants in this study identified a number of reasons for parental requests to initiate the referral process. The parental requests ranged from a way to get additional 'income' from a child diagnosed with a disability to an attempt to determine why their child struggled in classes. Regardless of the rationales for the parental requests, several of the participants agreed that it was the school counselor's role to educate parents about the process and the potential outcomes of the referrals. Kevin explained one need for educating parents.

> I think we could do a better job of educating parents on what they're signing up for when they sign up for it (referrals). And helping them determine whether or not that is actually the best placement for that particular child. I think building open communication between the parent, the special ed department, and the counseling department is key to everybody being on the same page.

Jon suggested that the parents may trust the school system too much to do the right things for students' educational needs.

> Sometimes the parents believe us because we are the, you know, authorities. Someone needs to give them the pros and cons of beginning a referral for special education services. A lot of times, the parents think that it will help their children graduate. But they (parents) don't ever hear about negative outcomes from the referral team.

The school counselors had different levels of interactions with the referral processes at their schools. A few served as chairpersons or members of the RTI/SST committees. Judy commented that "I'd be in charge of facilitating the parent meeting." Kevin and Jon had no

direct involvement with the process, but worked with students who were involved in the process. Kevin described that counselors were still involved in the RTI/SST process, but the counselor that was involved was not necessarily assigned to a particular student. That counselor was assigned to facilitate the process. Kevin suggested that:

> School counselors have been given a greater role in my school district now that they are part of the SST process. So any child that's now referred to or referred for special ed services actually goes through a counselor and the counselor starts the process. And so they are, right now at my particular placement, the counselor is coordinator for the SST process. So they're very much involved. However, it's because it was more of a placement, not necessarily that the counselor of that particular child is involved in the process as much as they should be.

School counselors in this study noted that referrals rarely happened in their high school settings. When the referrals for special education did occur, they had varying roles in the process. When the process is initiated, these counselors rely on the SST/RTI processes to determine the appropriateness of the referrals.

Beliefs about Overrepresentation

School counselors in this study believed that overrepresentation of African American students in special education occurs, in general, across the United States. When discussing their specific work sites, however, the school counselors were not as certain. Chris expressed this idea when he mentioned his uncertainty that overrepresentation still occurs in his work setting because "it has already been dealt with in our school system." Despite the uncertainty around specific work settings, the respondents had notions about what overrepresentation meant in special education and offered their own definitions of the phenomenon. Kevin viewed

overrepresentation as the ratio of students labeled as learning disabled to their corresponding

numbers in the general population of students.

> Well, when you look at a certain population of people represented within the majority, it
>
> – say for example, if African-Americans are 12 to 15% of the population and then you
>
> see in the special education department an overage of that, 20 to 50%, then that's an
>
> indication that something is probably not quite right, especially when you look at the goal
>
> sheet.

Chris, however, voiced a different understanding of the phenomenon.

> Okay. I guess I would define that as a significant proportion of a population that is
>
> negatively skewed in some way that puts that population in a special category, whereas
>
> compared to non or other groups a smaller proportion and therefore it's disproportionate.

Wanda defined overrepresentation in terms of one particular group being identified at higher

levels than another.

> It means - I - I would think it would mean that one - and I'm thinking of
>
> overrepresentation of a particular group, and just having one particular group seem to be
>
> identified at much greater levels and - and much more commonly identified in a
>
> particular area and we're talking about special ed, so overrepresentation is having too
>
> many students identified as special ed that fall under a particular category, such as
>
> African-American males.

But for most of participants, the term overrepresentation in special education seemed confusing.

Paul displayed this confusion in his definition.

> I think overrepresentation means that there is any demographic, if there is any
>
> characteristic that is seen -- if there is a characteristic that is common amongst all

teenagers; however, for one demographic it is more seen in one particular area, like

special education, that is an overrepresentation.

In general, the participants knew of and accepted overrepresentation of African American

students in special education, even if they could not define it based on the ratio of disability to

ethnicity.

Perceptions and attitudes of school counselors about the phenomenon of

overrepresentation of African American students in special education could impact the

interventions offered to those students and their beliefs about how to mitigate the phenomenon,

or if the phenomenon even exists. The school counselors who participated in this study

generated several factors that contributed to the phenomenon: cultural factors (students'

sociodemographics, cultural mismatch, and school demographics), parental involvement, and the

limits of general education.

Cultural factors. Participants interviewed for this study described their perceptions of

factors associated with race and socioeconomic status and the potential contributions of those

factors to school performance and preparedness. Jon referred to racism as a factor in the

overrepresentation of African American students in special education. He stated that:

I think racism and an inability to deal with race outside of placing someone, you know

the answer sometimes to dealing with the racial problem is to ignore it and try to find a

solution, but the solution often leads you right back to the problem which is race – racial

issue. So I think racism is a big part of it. I think that we expect certain groups of people

to be a certain way and as soon as they display any part of that, we're able to label them

and place them in a place that we think they should have been in the first place.

Katy suggested that race and culture led to overrepresentation. She pointed out that "cultural differences and then just some clear cut racial prejudice" factor into the problem of overrepresentation. In addition to race/ethnicity, Judy commented on the impact of socioeconomic status on the phenomenon of overrepresentation.

> I guess because of my own experience with childcare, I think maybe, you know, people living in poverty have less access to resources and less access to good or high quality childcare. So maybe their kids are not getting what they need, you know, from birth. And then it just snowballs into like a behavior issue. That's my theory about overrepresentation because I feel like they are lacking childcare from birth, lacking high quality childcare. The kids are kind of maybe acting out more because they get less attention from home.

In addition to the preparedness issues, Paul identified a challenge that students from disadvantaged economic conditions may face. He claimed that:

> Maybe there are some issues going on with the family and how they treat education and maybe they're not involved and maybe they've had a bad experience themselves. So, therefore, they have an inability to help their child with learning. We should maybe help understand what their life is like, if maybe the child has to help take care of siblings and therefore the grades are suffering.

Kevin referred to the impact of the current economic recession on his students and his work site.

> The economy has really impacted my school. Many of my students move around often due to homelessness and poverty. I think that impacts their behavior and grades at school. They have problems focusing and they don't know where to go for help.

Wanda viewed socioeconomic status as a factor that leads to more referrals for special education services, especially for students who are economically disadvantaged. Wanda explained that lower SES may hinder advocacy.

> I think that poorer students are referred more often than – than more affluent students just because they may not have an advocate who can help them through the process.

Kevin suggested that the labeling of students as learning disabled could also bring about financial gain for students' families.

> Parents may look at the financial benefit of – they talk to other parents and they – they look at the financial benefit of having a student diagnosed with a special education diagnosis, if you will.

Like Kevin, Jon suggested that parents may gain financially from the labeling of their students.

> Some parents think that having their child referred to special education is a clear path to a SSI (disability) check. I think that the word has spread among parents that they can receive benefits if their children become eligible for special education.

Allowing the students to receive special education services may qualify the students for disability payments that may help provide additional 'income' for a household. The interviewees remarked on how the interactions between school personnel and African American students and their families may contribute to special education referral and the overrepresentation of those students in special education.

> Cultural mismatch encompasses the school expectations of normalcy of behavior and achievement, cultural differences among students and school personnel, and test bias. The participants described how the various views of the behaviors and learning styles of African

American students may influence special education referral and overrepresentation. Kevin noted the disjuncture between cultural styles of teachers and students.

> I think that has just been because you have a lot of white teachers who don't understand situations, problems, from anybody who's different than they are, you know. And it's easy to say that somebody's slow or just kind of in need of special ed instead of trying to really look at what the situation is. I think that's probably been the cause.

Jon added more information about the mixing of cultures and the impact on referrals.

> I think the misunderstanding of cultural differences. I think a lack of training for teachers as well as counselors, a lack of training on how to deal with students that don't fit the standard norm.

The cultural differences were not based solely on race as Wanda pointed out. She works in a predominantly African American school. She saw problems with teachers and students of the same race.

> Teacher intolerance. I think that some teachers have a lower tolerance level for African American students, especially if they present with behavioral problems. I didn't say the race of the teacher because I don't think that matters as much. It's just basic teacher intolerance.

Cultural factors also impact testing—the tests used to diagnose students and students' understanding of the questions within those tests. Jon discussed the impact of testing by school psychologists or other testing personnel on the referral to special education and overrepresentation. Jon stated that:

> I think that a non-African American, a psychologist or tester, will test an African

American student and they don't understand the cultural differences of what's going on

with that particular student or some of the norms of the culture that can be misrepresented

in a psychological report. I think a lot of the times if non-African American and, in some

instances, African Americans, depending on the socioeconomic background, you have a

certain idea about a particular population of students who might not be…well, you will

assume certain things about the particular student.

Cultural factors among students and school personnel, and the school culture itself, impacted

views on diversity as well as school counselors' views of factors that potentially could lead to

overrepresentation. One aspect of school culture that influenced how the participants thought of

overrepresentation involved the racial/ethnic and/or the socioeconomic profile of their work

settings, or school demographics.

Some participants in the study thought that overrepresentation occurred in their particular

settings because of their racial/ethnic makeup of their student population. Judy described the

phenomenon in her work setting by discussing school demographics:

African American students are overrepresented here at our high school in the special

education department. One factor is that African American students are the majority of

our students.

Jon noted that "My school is predominantly African American. I think that's why we have so

many African American students in special education." Pam was not sure if overrepresentation

occurred at her school because of its demographics. She suggested that:

My school has few African American students. I wonder for schools like mine if there

are a higher percentage of African American students identified as special ed when

compared to schools with larger enrollments of African American students.

Pam implied that school demographics could influence the percentage of African American students identified for special education services. A cultural factor that may impact referral rates for special education services and overrepresentation of African American students in special education is parental involvement in students' education. Almost universally, the school counselors in this study commented on parental involvement and its impact on the phenomenon of overrepresentation.

      Parental involvement. Participants made connections between school performance and parental involvement. Many of the participants contended that lack of parental involvement contributed to the overrepresentation of African American students in special education. Paul suggested poor parental involvement may increase referral rates for special education services.

> So maybe that's one factor—poor parental involvement. Sometimes if people have poor involvement, they may just, you know, push the child in the program that they maybe don't really belong in.

Wanda suggested that the parents don't know what to do to help their students.

> Some of my parents have not graduated from high school themselves. I don't know if they know how to help their children do well in school. Maybe they (the parents) didn't have a good experience in school either.

Chris focused on the lack of parental involvement and knowledge about special education. He stated that "I think it is parental uninvolvement or lack of knowledge on the parents' part." Kevin shared a similar thought to Chris, but expanded his views to include the school's role with parents in the process of referral for services.

> I think if parents are not appropriately educated on them – their child, what the
>
> ramifications of their child being placed in special ed. If they're not properly educated,
>
> then they are more likely to agree to something that they're not even sure what they're
>
> agreeing to. And I think a lot of times students, you know, the decision has been made
>
> that the child should be in this program and the parent is just led to believe that it's the
>
> best thing for the child without being properly educated about what the ramifications are.

School potentially hinders student achievement in other insidious ways, according to the

counselors in this study. The era of testing and accountability may influence more referrals for

special education services than actually needed. The school counselors saw this as a way that the

structure of general education limited efforts to address students' behavioral and academic issues

prior to referring for special education services.

Limits of general education. In the era of greater teacher accountability for student

success, the pressures on teachers to produce successful academic results for all students may

work to limit their effectiveness in the classroom or to limit their willingness to tolerate students

with behavior issues in their classrooms. Pam described the pressure faced by teachers,

especially with students with behavior issues, and its possible impact on referrals and

overrepresentation.

> A lot of times the teacher may be frustrated with the particular student. A teacher may
>
> want that student out of her class. That same student may have no problems learning if
>
> there was no conflict with the teacher.

The era of accountability may also influence teacher referrals for special education services and

may contribute to overrepresentation. Judy recounted that:

I think maybe that the teachers, with all of this accountability, maybe they feel like if they don't have something or have some kind of intervention that they'll be held responsible for their students not achieving. So maybe they feel like referring is a good way to protect them and make sure their students achieve.

Katy noted that standardized test passing rates impacted the teachers and evaluations of their effectiveness.

The teachers feel the pressure for their students to pass district assessments and end of course tests (EOCTs). If the students are failing, then the teachers can be blamed. If they can't get them to pass, then they may start looking for reasons why they aren't passing.

Kevin focused on the teaching styles rather than student behavior or accountability as a factor for special education referral and possible overrepresentation.

I think one of the biggest mistakes that's often made is there's an association with behavior that leads to identifying a student with special needs. And sometimes I think that a lot of finger pointing is at the student as opposed to the teaching style. I think that African American students are traditionally, you know, if you look at the research, typically have more behavior issues in a traditional school. And I think that many of those students are incorrectly identified as special needs because it's easier to identify as special needs and get them out of your classroom than to deal with the behavior separate from the academic piece.

Instead of focusing on the students' behaviors in class, Paul found that a teacher's ability to follow a behavior plan impacts referrals.

Perhaps a teacher doesn't implement the intervention the way they should have. They may have already kind of just written the child off. It sounds awful, but that's the reality.

Behavioral issues can also disrupt a school climate leading administrators to use special

education referrals as an intervention. Chris suggested that:

> Administrators will see students that they may even want out of school based on
>
> discipline reasons or other reasons and they may make a referral to special education.
>
> Not to say that those are not appropriate referrals because something is certainly going on
>
> with the student where they're not fitting, but a lot of those referrals are motivated by the
>
> wrong thing.

These school counselors described how general or regular education offered limited alternatives

for behavioral issues or lower test scores that put students at risk for referral for special education

services. The school counselors implied that the processes at work to evaluate school

performance and teacher performance may lead to inappropriate referrals for special education

services.

Professional Knowledge

Discussions with the eight participants in this study revealed their beliefs about separate

worlds, intermediation, identification and referral, overrepresentation, and an underlying need for

improved counselor preparation. Participants' reflections on their preparation to work with

students who receive special education services share a common desire for more effective

coursework or trainings to offer interventions to students in special education. In his comments

about education and training, Paul summed up the way that most of the school counselors in this

study learned strategies for students who receive special education services. Paul stated, "You

have to really learn that on the job." Paul stressed that learning on the job can present a mixed

bag for learning best practices. In addition to learning in school counseling positions, the

participants learned transferrable skills in other work settings.

Many of the respondents had worked with students with learning disabilities in other settings that gave them some background for working with students in special education. Judy discussed how her background in disability services provided preparation for working with students in special education.

> I used to work at the Learning Disability Center and the Disability Resource Center at UGA and I actually co-wrote a test accommodations manual when I was at UGA, for a higher education setting. So I feel like I really learned more from working in higher education disability field than I learned in my special education course.

A couple of respondents had worked in community agencies before becoming school counselors. Jon noted how his clinical background helped him to understand language used with students with learning disabilities.

> My background is clinical. And I had to work with psychological evaluations and diagnosing, things like that. So I know the, I guess, the language pretty much and once I got to school, I was able to transfer those types of skills over to the school level.

Like Jon, Katy learned about students with learning disabilities from a community agency background. She suggested that her background helped her to "understand the challenges that students with learning disabilities face." This community agency background also helped Katy learn important community resources for students with learning disabilities and their families.

> When I worked at the AIDS Coalition, some of our clients used Vocational Rehabilitation. So maybe I'm more familiar with them than maybe some other counselors and all the things that they can do to help clients and students. I try to connect my students to Vocational Rehabilitation whenever possible.

One other position prepared the school counselors to work with students with learning disabilities. Several of the respondents had worked as teachers prior to assuming roles as school counselors. While teaching, they worked with students who received special education services and participated in IEP meetings. Pam explained that her teaching background gave her some insight into the needs of students with learning disabilities. "Talking to parents and special education case managers allowed me to see the modifications that students needed in the classroom and why they needed those changes." For Chris and Kevin, their teaching experiences helped them to understand the terminology associated with students who receive special education services and gave them ideas, from a teaching perspective, about strategies to help the students find success in high school. Chris talked about the benefits of his prior teaching experience.

> I enjoyed meeting with the special education teacher, parents, students, and sometimes the school psychologist to find out how the students' psychological or educational history impacted their efforts in my classroom. Each of us brought different perspectives that could help students when put together, when combined.

For these participants, having prior experiences in different jobs with students with learning disabilities helped them to gain skills that transferred well to their school counseling practices. The counselors in this study, however, expressed less satisfaction for the knowledge that they gained from special education or multicultural counseling courses offered in their respective graduate school counseling programs.

All of the school counselors who participated in this study took a course focusing on special education or multicultural counseling. Their opinions on the usefulness of the

information found in their courses varied. Kevin found that the coursework did not prepare him well for working with students in special education from a counseling perspective.

> I don't think that there are many courses that offer proper training in dealing with students from these special populations. You know, you see – you get one class in multicultural counseling and that's supposed to take care of every person, disabled and not, or students with other issues. It's in that one class. It's supposed to deal with everything and there's no way to do that. So I don't feel that I was properly trained to deal with the issues that are surrounding students with special needs.

Wanda, however, found her coursework useful for providing background definitions and an introductory knowledge of interventions.

> It helped me understand many of the definitions associated with special ed, in terms of the criteria for IEPs, you know, those labels tossed around. It helps make sense of all of those. And then also just to give a baseline, in terms of interventions, to apply before you enter into special ed, some things you can expect to see. That was helpful.

School counselors with teaching backgrounds took a course focusing on special education, but not from a counseling perspective. Pam did not remember a course in her graduate program that focused on counseling and special education.

> I don't remember any training specifically dealing with special ed students. What I can say, I think, as a counselor the training was to look at each student as an individual and try to meet their individual needs. Now, as a teacher, when I had training as a teacher, I did have one class specifically on special ed. So, that's some of the rules and what the best services would be for placement and scheduling, but I don't remember any of them with counseling.

In general, though, the participants remember few details or information from their coursework that prepared them to work with students in special education. Jon did not think that his coursework proved helpful when working with students who receive special education services.

> Actually, my training didn't address very much of it. My education didn't address very much of it, unfortunately. On the specialist level, it touched on it a little bit because it only dealt with some parts of vocational training, but as far as working with special, the special education population, not a lot at all.

Paul pointed out that part of the counselor education process, the practicum, provided a lot of his training for working with students in special education.

> I've definitely had more exposure in my training when it comes to practicum internship. Shadowing, you know, the lead counselor and going to meetings and things of that nature. They sort of train you.

Most of the training for their work with students who receive special education services that the counselors received in their current positions focused on the Response to Intervention (RTI) process. Kevin summed up the training that many of the participants received. "My school district provided training to learn and review the RTI process." The knowledge that many of the participants gained about working with students in special education came from internship/practicum experiences, prior work experiences, or from district-level training for the RTI process.

Training needs. Although the school counselors who participated in the study worked with all students and had some on-the-job training, professional development, and prior experiences in other work settings, they all universally recognized a need for more education or training to guide professional school counselors' work with students who receive special

education services. Pam, Judy, and Jon thought that this training could come from more participation with the referral process and the special education departments at their respective schools. When describing the collaboration for training, Jon focused on professional development for counselors that the special education department would facilitate.

> I think that the special education department needs to meet with the counseling department. And I think that, I know that they'll hold the IEP meetings, you know, once or twice a year, but I think that new counselors need to be trained on the legalities of this particular program, what needs to be met. I think a lot of counselors feel like, well, since they're in the special education program, they're already being handled over in that program. But a lot of times, the teachers don't know the counseling piece to that.

Chris focused on participation in the referral or IEP processes at his schools by seeking more time to participate in meetings "to understand the students' individual needs." Like Chris, Pam suggested that she could more effectively work with her students who receive special education services if she could participate in the students' IEP meetings.

> Well definitely, like, if I could attend an IEP meeting. I mean I think just knowing more information about those students. I don't think there's a lot of collaboration with the special ed director or the special ed advisors or teachers.

In addition to collaboration, Kevin talked about generic training needs to address counseling students who receive special education services. Kevin emphasized that counselors could be a useful resource, if properly trained, to reduce referrals to special education and to create interventions.

I think that special – I think that professional development could fill in the gaps because a lot of the learning that, that's taking place is happening with, in the building. And so different buildings and different counselors in different buildings are doing things differently because there is no uniform, uniformity in how counselors should deal with students with special needs. I think it's an underutilized. We're an underutilized asset that could really reduce the amount of students who are just automatically placed in this system if we were trained appropriately to address some of the needs of students who have issues that we aren't trained for that may play into them being identified as a student with special needs.

The additional professional development that could help school counselors came in the forms of more coursework for Judy and Paul. Judy felt prepared by her experiences to work with this vulnerable population of students, but suggested that other school counselors may need more coursework.

I feel like I was little bit more prepared than most people based on my experiences. But still I think that the school psychologists know more about interventions. I wish we had like a class on interventions because I feel like here, like a lot of the referrals we get are behavioral. And sometimes you just kind of feel – I feel more comfortable with kind of like learning disabilities because of my background rather than behavior problems. So I wish I knew more about behavior interventions.

The interventions proposition appealed to Paul as well. Like Judy, he would increase interventions training for school counselors.

What would help me be better prepared, help me do this? So maybe, maybe a course.

Instead of one that's very broad explaining what special ed is and what type of students

fall into those categories, maybe an actual course like an intensive interventions course to

help in planning for students if they're special ed.

Wanda wanted a handbook to help with resource gathering or best practices for school

counselors when working with students in special education.

Then probably a handbook of what's most effective. I know that you can't put every

student's issue into a handbook, but just the things that you would see most often that

would impact academic performance, you know, like with organizations that are

associated with ADHD, for example…just a list of resources so that we have a go-to

resources when that becomes an issue.

Vignettes

The use of vignettes in this study was intended to provide insight into how school

counselors thought about interventions for students with behavioral, attendance, and academic

issues. The vignettes provided a research tool that allowed participants to discuss the sensitive

topics of socioeconomic status and race by answering questions about fictitious students. Each

participant reviewed four vignettes that were similar. Two of the vignettes featured fictional

African American male ninth grade students: one with good attendance from a two-parent,

higher SES home, and one with poor attendance from a single-parent, lower SES home. Two of

the vignettes featured fictional white male ninth grade students: one with good attendance from

a two-parent, higher SES home and one with poor attendance from a single-parent, lower SES

home. The participants viewed the vignettes in the same order and responded to a series of

questions designed to determine how they picked interventions for students who did not succeed in school. Several themes emerged after an evaluation of the interview transcripts.

Educational Setting

All of the participants in this study thought that the fictitious students in the vignettes should remain in a general education setting without special education services. The counselors stated the settings as "general education" or "regular school". None of the school counselors suggested a change in the classroom setting based on the students' attendance, behavioral, or academic issues or based on the students' backgrounds. Wanda suggested that she would focus on attendance before thinking about a change of educational setting.

> What I would want to do first probably is just see what his functioning would be if he had less absences and tardies because I think before you can kind of gauge where he would be most successful, he has to kind of come to school so you can get his base level of knowledge. I would keep him in a traditional classroom setting and just encourage his attendance, and then from there make another decision, if it calls for one.

The first choice for practically all of the participants was the general education classroom with no special education services unless other information changed their impressions. Katy emphasized that point when discussing her thoughts on the education setting.

> I would say traditional school setting because I would not choose otherwise until I had a full understanding as to why he's failing his courses.

All of the school counselors in this study sought to offer counseling interventions to attempt to help students address attendance, behavioral, or academic issues.

Interventions

The participants in this study thought that counseling interventions should address the challenges faced by the fictitious students before implementing a change to the classroom settings. Those interventions included individual counseling sessions, small groups, attendance check-ins, parent conferences, and consultation with other professionals. Paul talked about the options to help a student in this situation.

> I would start gathering information from every place that you can to find out how he does in different settings and with different people. The observations and conversations with all of his teachers, watching him maybe at lunches, you know.

Judy focused on other specific interventions before initiating consultation with a school psychologist.

> Attendance or behavior may use the same types of interventions, you know, groups, check-ins, and talking to him about consequences of his behavior. You know if we got, if nothing, you know if nothing improved, you know, another intervention meeting with the school psychologist to see if we missed anything, and, you know, parent-teacher conferences. The final step was like the intervention meeting with the school psychologist when everything else seemed to be failing.

Basis for Interventions

The school counselors based their choices of interventions on the fictitious students' attendance, behavior, and/or academics. Wanda detailed the process for intervening with the students in the vignettes after providing individual counseling sessions.

> We can address the interventions based on what he thinks would work for him. Again, I would still address it from the academic standpoint or from his failing classes first

because I think if he begins to pass his classes based off the academic interventions and

his behavior improves, then that would of course resolve the issue. But if he begins to

pass his classes and there's still behavioral issues, then I would pull in some community

resources, and I would pull in the parents and have a conversation about things that may

be impacting his behavior in school that are happening outside of the classroom.

Most of the participants, however, saw behavior as the most pressing concern of the fictitious

students in the vignettes. Judy suggested that behaviors may lead to referrals.

Behavior is the most important factor because that's probably what's going to make the,

you know, that's going to get him the referral. Whether the behavior continues or

whatever it gets better or is it getting in the way of academics.

Like Judy, Pam saw behaviors as a precursor to referrals. Student behaviors in the vignettes

impacted how she would plan interventions for students.

Well, just his disruptiveness. It is not going to serve him well out in the real world. And

we try to make the connection a lot for kids, but sometimes they just get the lesson later

on if they don't get it now.

Paul suggested that behavior is a major factor in determining educational setting and

interventions for students in the vignettes.

Again, it's just the behavior. Hopefully that can be monitored and changed – you know,

reduced enough from the intervention process. Then we'll know if we can see anything

keeping him from learning.

Chris suggested that attendance is the most important factor contributing to the students

presenting concern(s).

I didn't even address his behavior, honestly, so having him come to school more often, I would test for basic learning deficiencies because if that improved and his behavior improves with it, then you wouldn't necessarily have to work on behavior because, often times, I think it comes along because there are deficiencies academically. So I would focus on his attendance.

Most of the school counselors also considered cultural factors in their plans to help the students in the vignettes.

Cultural Factors

All of the participants, except one, noted that cultural factors influenced their thoughts about interventions for the students presented in the vignettes. Those factors included socioeconomic status, parental involvement, race/ethnicity, developmental stage, and conflicts arising from a mismatch of school and student cultures. For one of the fictitious African American male students, Judy listed risk factors which impacted academic success.

He is living in poverty which is a risk factor and he's male. I think we have less males graduating from high school than females. So he has some risk factors.

Kevin focused on gender as a risk factor.

Well I think you know that he's male, so he's more at risk. And I think we see more, in general, behavioral problems in males than females. But I think being male makes you more at risk, in my opinion.

Wanda remarked on socioeconomic status, gender, and race/ethnicity.

Well, I mean. I think that the student is at-risk based on many of the factors that the vignette presents. He's African American male, which is a very high risk group. They're

also nationally, and at our school, not graduating at the same rate as African American females. You know with behavior problems, a lot of kids have these risk factors. They have poverty, race, gender.

For one of the fictitious white students, Katy listed several considerations that may be related to socioeconomic status or ethnicity.

He's an adolescent white male. I think that for a white, male student, at 14, his history is not what you would expect. A part of his issue may also be an embarrassment issue. His home life and his social life may be his priority, and he has a lot to contend with and that he's coming to the table with less on his plate. And so that may be why he's acting out, in school, and trying to be recognized for something other than what he has going on at home.

Conversely, Pam saw no cultural characteristics that contributed to the presenting problem(s) unless the student came from a lower socioeconomic background. For students from a higher socioeconomic background, Pam reported: "I don't think there was anything in particular culturally. I don't see any cultural problems—anything that culturally could cause the problem." For the fictitious students from a lower socioeconomic status, Pam suggested that cultural characteristics may contribute to the presenting issue(s).

Well definitely the poverty and the absence of mom and the support. So that's going to make your interventions a little different, you know, having that support. You have to find another way to give him support. So that's the issue.

The participants wanted to know more information about behaviors at home and prior school settings when questioned about addition information to determine interventions for the fictitious students. Paul inquired about the students' academic and behavioral histories.

Has there been any changes in his life, with his friends, at home, just you know personal information and then what interventions they might have used if this is a problem that's gone on in middle school.

Parental involvement was an important factor for many of the participants. Many of the respondents noted students from lower socioeconomic statuses often have less parental involvement. Wanda would seek to involve the parents in the intervention.

I would work with the mother to understand the importance of having him in school, number one, and then working to mediate that. The child just has to be in school. Especially for a child that's not in school, if you have an intervention that is school-based only, it's not going to be successful because he's not in school. So you have to have someone on board, who sees the child most often, has a relationship with that child, and just reiterate the point. So, I would start with the mother.

Kevin emphasized the importance of parental involvement.

The school has to engage the mother to help her assist her student. If she cannot attend a meeting at school, then we need to figure out a way to get her information or resources to help her son like childcare, afterschool programs, tutorial, etc.

Many of the school counselors noted the unexpected issues for the fictitious students who had high parental involvement along with behavioral and academic issues. Judy discussed the unusual circumstance of high parental involvement coupled with academic issues.

This scenario where the student is not succeeding, but the parents are involved in school…I don't usually see that connection. So, I find what struck me is the unusual presentation. It's usually when the students are not doing well then their parents are not involved.

Some of the participants in this study wanted more information about the fictitious students'

home life and attitudes about education. The attitudes about education could possibly reveal a

cultural mismatch between expectations for behavior at school and the students' perception.

Katy discussed the mismatch when counseling the fictitious student.

> You know talking to his mom about his home behavior and I also think it's interesting to
>
> know the kid's perspective about what's going on in the classroom. That's where I find
>
> the opportunity to kind of challenge their belief systems. If you can just talk to the kids
>
> about what they are perceiving because their world view is not the same as their
>
> teachers'.

Wanda concentrated on the perceived culture of African American males and its impact on

students' academic success.

> I think that for African American males it's a cool thing to be academically unsuccessful.
>
> And so it seems, by looking at this, that he's almost bucking against his parents, and his
>
> potential, and their college aspirations because he's an outcast. And, again, he's an
>
> outcast because of his demographic: 14 year-old, African American male.

While not explicitly discussing a mismatch, Chris indicated that he would attempt to access the

student's views on education.

> I would want to know how he views education and what his goals are, in the future, and
>
> how he sees education supporting that goal. That would be nice to know to help him out.

Universally, the participants in this study would try counseling interventions with the fictitious

students in the vignettes first. If those interventions were not successful, then they would refer

the student for testing or to the RTI or SST process. After trying the counseling interventions,

Paul discussed the next steps he would take if the interventions did not help.

> I think then to look at, you know, assessments for behavior, if there's anything emotional
>
> or psychological going on.

The final step for Judy would be the intervention meeting with a school psychologist.

> Like I mentioned, with the other students, we have, you know individual check-in and
>
> group check-ins. And then, if those didn't work, then you know meeting with the school
>
> psychologist with the parents.

Summary

The school counselors in this study provided insight into their thoughts about students in special education, the overrepresentation of African American students in special education, and the referral process for students to receive special education services. The goal in conducting this research was to explore school counselors' thoughts about the complex phenomenon of disproportionality in special education and to gain an understanding of how the participating school counselors viewed their role(s) with students in special education and the process for referring students for special education services.

All of the participants had experiences with students in special education. Those experiences included individual counseling sessions, classroom guidance, and small counseling groups. For students in special education, several of the respondents participated in Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings as part of a committee to determine interventions and academic placement for students. The other respondents did not participate in IEP meetings due to time constraints or due to the division of responsibilities in their respective schools. In those schools, special education advisors or case managers provide services that school counselors would normally provide to students who do not receive special education services.

The division of duties within their respective schools impacted how the school counselors saw their roles with students in special education: collaborators, resource gatherers, advocates, and academic schedulers. More often than not, these counselors worked with students who had already been qualified for special education services before enrolling into their particular high schools. They offered several thoughts about the factors that led to the qualification for services, especially for African American students. The school counselors thought that African American students met the qualifications for special education at higher rates than expected in the United States.

The factors that the school counselors in this study attributed to the overrepresentation of African Americans in special education mirrored many of the ideas in the research literature. The participants identified two major factors: cultural factors and parental involvement. Cultural factors included race, socioeconomic status, and gender. The counselors in this study attributed cultural factors to student academic and behavioral readiness and to the possible over identification of students for special education services. Another cultural factor that may lead to overrepresentation, according to the participants, was the cultural mismatch between teachers and students or students and the school. This mismatch, in their views, led to referrals for students based on behavioral problems and the greater accountability placed on teachers for student success. The counselors also connected over identification for special education services with parental involvement in the process. Parental involvement included lack of involvement and lack of knowledge by parents. The participants thought that school personnel did not educate the parents well enough about the processes of referral and identification for special education services.

The participants had all worked with African American students in special education in individual sessions, small groups, and with their parents. Topics of the meetings offered to the students included academic planning, career planning, and social and behavioral issues. The same issues regarding the school counselor role(s) that participants mentioned in their work with students in special education appeared here: advocacy and division of duties. Advocacy for some of the school counselors in the study involved making sure that all students received the same information and treatment, regardless of their special information needs or modifications. For others, advocacy meant providing extra support for African American students in special education because this group often needs more assistance for school success.

Helping students in special education achieve academic and career success was important for all of the participants in the study. However, many of the participants did not think that their education or training prepared them for the challenges that students in special education face. All of the participants had a course focused on special education or multicultural counseling in their graduate counseling programs or teaching programs. For those counselors who had taken the course, they found it useful for understanding definitions, but expressed that they would like additional course work to address interventions for students who receive special education services.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the diverse range of perceptions that school counselors held regarding disproportionality of African American students in special education and the possible causes of disproportionality. The primary goal of this research was to identify and explore school counseling activities that may contribute to or mitigate the referrals of African American students for special education services using a qualitative approach that draws from conversations with practicing high school counselors. Interviews were conducted to gather participating counselors' experiences with students in special education, with African American students in special education, their views of the overrepresentation of African American students in special education, their roles in the identification and referral of students for special education, and the services provided to African American students in special education. This investigation addressed five research questions:

1. What descriptions of experiences with students in special education are provided by school counselors?

2. What are the perceptions and beliefs of school counselors about the overrepresentation of African American students in special education?

3. What descriptions of experiences with African American students in special education are provided by school counselors?

4. What is the role of school counselors in the process of identifying African American students for special education services and types of placement?

5. What services do school counselors provide to African American students in special education and what process is used to determine those services?

Summary of the Study

The landmark Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board* (1954) abrogated the doctrine of "separate but equal" in public school systems in the United States. The promise of the Supreme Court decision went unfulfilled, however, when a new form of segregation arose based on the notions of (dis) ability or students with special needs (Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005). The new policies were not explicitly instituted to resegregate African American students, but, as practiced, disproportionately affected African American students (Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005; LaNear & Frattura, 2007). African American students are overrepresented in the special education categories of Learning Disabled (LD or SLD), Mental Retardation/Intellectual Disabilities (MMR/ID), and Emotionally and Behaviorally Disordered (EBD) (OSEP, 2005). Researchers have noted that the problem of overrepresentation of African American students has been a longstanding problem (Skiba, Simmons, Ritter, Kohler, Henderson, & Wu, 2006).

Even though studies have documented the issue of disproportionality in special education for African American students for several decades, researchers have not reached a consensus about the factors that cause the issue. Research studies have indicated that multiple factors contribute to the phenomenon of disproportionality, including poverty, standardized testing, school personnel bias, general education deficiencies, and the special education and discipline referral processes (Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, & Ortiz, 2010; Blanchett, 2009; Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Ferri & Connor, 2005a; Skiba et al., 2008). The research conducted into the disproportionality of African American students in

special education has focused on almost every school actor involved in the process of referral and identification of students for special education services except for school counselors.

School counselors serve many roles in schools and may mitigate the issues surrounding the overrepresentation of African American students in special education through advocacy, consultation, and collaboration (Moore, Henfield, & Owens, 2008). Because of their unique roles within schools, school counselors are often uniquely positioned to advocate for students by challenging systemic barriers to success. Missing from the discussion of school counselor advocacy, however, is the knowledge of attitudes and perceptions of school counselors regarding the special education identification and referral processes. Attitudes and perceptions of school counselors about sociodemographic factors, such as race, socioeconomic status, and ability, may contribute to the overrepresentation of African American students in special education, even if school counselors do not make the initial referrals for special education services (Neal, Davis McCray, Webb-Johnson, & Bridgest, 2003). Discovering attitudes and perceptions about the phenomenon of disproportionality and school counselor activities that contribute to or mitigate special education disproportionality formed the basis of this study.

A review of the literature on overrepresentation of African American students in special education revealed that little research exists exploring the experiences of school counselors with disproportionality in special education or with students in special education, even though school counselors serve an important role in academic placement decisions for students (Martin, 2002). The research that does exist indicated that school counselors have received mandates from the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) and the Federal Government that emphasize the crucial role of school counseling programs with historically underserved students (Janson,

Miller, & Rainey, 2007); however, school counselors do not always feel competent to provide services to students in special education (Milsom, 2002; Milson & Akos, 2003; Moore et al., 2008). Qualitative methodology best allowed for school counselors to share their perspectives on disproportionality in special education and the attitudes about their work with students in special education.

Using a theoretical framework of social constructivism and a qualitative design that borrowed liberally from phenomenological research, this researcher sought to explore attitudes and experiences of school counselors with both disproportionality and students in special education. Purposeful and snowball sampling allowed the researcher to recruit eight school counselors with varied backgrounds and school settings to participate in the study. The qualitative design incorporated both interview questions with interpretations of meanings and vignettes designed to examine what services and interventions school counselors in this study would offer to four hypothetical students. Social constructivism informed the interview and vignette interactions through an embedding of the participants' respective experiences in their interview responses and through their interactions with the researcher. The framework also grounded the researcher's experiences within the formulation of interview questions and within interactions with participants. Each participant in the process, including the researcher, has a history, a culture, and a personal story that impacted the interviews and meanings gleaned from those interviews.

Following a qualitative process, the researcher collected data through in-depth interviews and vignette reviews and discussions. All participants had knowledge of the phenomenon of disproportionality in special education and experience working with students in special education. The researcher and a research team analyzed the data using inductive analysis and

constant comparison to go from initial codes to themes after the completion of data collection (Hall, 2009). A review of the themes led to patterns that described the perceptions and attitudes of school counselors on disproportionality in special education and their work with students in special education. Similar to the participants in this study, I describe my experiences with students in special education and my personal history with overrepresentation to bracket my biases and assumptions. I share the passion for advocacy for students in special education and a belief in removing barriers for historically underserved groups that the participants discussed in their interviews.

The experiences of school counselors in this study are characterized by a belief that counselors can and should help students with learning disabilities, especially African American students in special education, advocacy, collaboration, and resource gathering. These counselors believe that overrepresentation of African American students occurs in the United States and, if given the proper tools, they can mitigate the processes that lead to overrepresentation and help students who already receive special education services. The research team identified several emergent themes after the data analysis. Those themes clustered around five areas: school counselor role/duties, referral processes, counselor services, views of overrepresentation, and counselor training/education. Examples taken directly from the interviews and vignette sessions illustrated each of the themes.

School Counselor Roles: 'Separate Worlds' and Collaboration

One of the unexpected findings that became obvious during the course of this study was the extent of the divisions that often exist between school counselors and their special education colleagues. My original assumption was to assume that school counselors actively worked with all the students on their caseloads to perform academic/career planning or to address

social/emotional needs. However, during the course of the interviews, the tensions between the roles of school counselors and special educators presented an additional challenge. In some of the settings, school counselors did not provide services to students in special education. Instead, special education case managers assumed sole province of addressing the academic, career, and social/emotional needs of students who receive special education services. The participants provided several reasons for their limited contact with students who receive special education services, including time constraints, duties assigned by their administrators, and their caseload sizes. Additionally, each of these counselors operated within different schools and school districts. The nature of the schools' or school districts' rules and regulations varied the duties of each of the counselors in the study. The factors limiting contact for these counselors and their students who receive special education services and the site or district specific duties mirror the factors found in the research literature. Trolley, Haas, and Patti (2009) noted that ASCA position statement regarding work with students with special needs does not clearly define the roles that school counselors should serve with these students. The generic nature of the duties as listed by ASCA leaves the specific duties open to interpretation. Trolley et al. (2009) suggested that the "role of the school counselor still varies greatly, influenced by factors such as district policy, number and type of professionals within the school district, level of school served, geographical location, public versus private nature of the school, number of students, and funding resources" (p. 4).

Separate Worlds

The generic prescriptions for school counselors' work with students who receive special education services results in confusion for many school counselors regarding best practices and interventions for their students with special needs (Trolley et al., 2009). The counselors in this

study voiced a need to work with all of their students, but struggled to identify specifically how to translate that desire into practice for students with special needs. These counselors tried to balance the requirements associated with their large caseloads of regular education students with the needs of the students who receive special education services. Their responses indicated that the students who receive special education services required additional supports/interventions and that this additional support often involved special education teachers/case managers. The use of special education teachers/case managers also presented challenges. A specific challenge was who would assume responsibility for ensuring that the students received the information and interventions necessary for their academic, behavioral, and personal development.

The school counselors in this study observed that school counseling and special education often inhabited separate worlds even though the students belonged on both caseloads. At times, the school counselors and their respective special education teachers worked in isolation with the students without consulting one another about interventions or legal requirements. At other times, the overlapping caseloads caused uncertainty when determining who ultimately should take responsibility for certain functions such as scheduling or advisement. The lack of clearly defined roles and duties associated with general educators and special educators may cause disagreements when assigning responsibility. Trolley et al. (2009) suggested that "interventions, modifications, and accommodations that are the responsibility of both educators may create conflict when determining with whom the responsibility lies" (p. 4).

These particular counselors were able to negotiate the separate worlds by working collaboratively with their special education counterparts to make sure that students received the same information as other students. A consistent theme that emerged from this research was that these counselors had a strong sense of what their roles with students in special education should

entail. Each of the participants discussed ways both explicitly and implicitly in which they helped students in special education succeed. The work took many forms, but one aspect of the work stood out: collaboration.

Collaboration

School counselors in this study saw collaboration as an important role for their work with students in special education. The collaboration involved consultation with special education teachers, school psychologists, and parents to meet the educational needs of students in special education. Additionally, many of the school counselors participate in interdisciplinary RTI/SST committees to address issues that students face. This finding is consistent with mandates and policy statements from ASCA and the Education Trust's Transforming School Counseling Initiative. One of the core functions for school counselors involves teaming and collaboration to assist students in historically underserved populations, such as special education (Martin, 2002; Mitcham, Portman, & Dean, 2009; Romano, Paradise, & Green, 2009). Such collaborations can be structured in a way to ensure that all students receive academic/career planning or interventions to address social/emotional issues. For students with the potential for referrals to special education or for those already identified for services, school counselor collaboration with other stakeholders may prevent inappropriate referrals or promote proper placement after the referral process (Martin, 2002; Janson, Miller, & Rainey, 2007). Although school counselors serve as an important safeguard to the improper identification of students for special education services, none of the eight participants explicitly mentioned preventing identification of students for services as a goal of their collaboration. The participants emphasized collaboration as a tool to ensure that all students received access to services and access to services stipulated in their respective education plans. This counselor role is consistent with research on methods for school

counselors to improve outcomes for students in special education (Romano et al., 2009; Moore et al., 2008). School counselors may improve school outcomes for students who receive special education services by emphasizing and practicing collaboration and consultation with other school personnel.

Intermediation: Advocacy Versus 'Disability Blindness'

School counselors were willing to advocate and gather resources for all students in special education, especially for their African American students in special education. The advocacy included providing equal access to academic, career, and social/behavioral interventions. The participants engaged in classroom guidance, individual counseling sessions, small group sessions, and parent meetings in attempts to provide equal access to students in special education. Recurrent in the literature review were suggestions that school counselors advocate for all students to improve school outcomes (Bemak & Chung, 2005; Mitcham et al., 2009; Moore et al., 2008; Romano et al., 2009). Facets of the suggested advocacy included educating parents and connecting parents and students to community resources. Prior research indicated that students in special education benefit when school counselors team with parents (Moore et al., 2008). Throughout the vignette interviews, the participants discussed examples of incorporating parents into discussions with students pre- and post-referral for special education services. Several of the participants also sought to incorporate community agencies and organizations to improve school outcomes for students. Researchers suggested that school counselor collaboration with community organizations may improve school outcomes for students in special education (Bradley & Lewis, 2000), especially African American students (Moore et al., 2008). Findings of this study indicate that successful advocacy for students identified for special education involves school counselors connecting to other school personnel

and community organizations to provide resources for those students and their families to improve school success.

While demonstrating many forms of advocacy suggested by ASCA and the Education Trust, school counselors in this study did not explicitly advocate systemic change to improve special education identification and referral processes within their settings. Another facet of advocacy that school counselors in this study failed to mention was a willingness to challenge student placement into special education. None of the participants mentioned that their advocacy role could or should include challenging inappropriate referrals nor did the participants mention an ability to ensure that services listed on students' IEPs were the most appropriate services.

Disability Blindness

School counselors in this study sought to give all students the same information or services regardless of their (dis) abilities or their individual needs. These participants did fulfill the ASCA mandate to provide services to all students in their respective buildings (Flowers, Milner, & Moore, 2003; Martin, 2002; Moore, 2006; Sears, 2002). Implicit in those responses from the counselors, however, was that they did not 'see' the students' learning disabilities when crafting their interventions or counseling services even when they saw the racial differences. A corresponding, analogous concept to disability blindness is the color blind perspective on race. Color-blind counselors make an effort "to 'not see' race differences despite race's continued salience in society" (Korgen, 2007, p. 1). Korgen (2007) emphasized that a color-blind belief system prevents an acknowledgement of racial differences or discussions around racial issues because of the fear of being labeled racist through those discussions (p. 1). A logical progression of color-blindness ideology leads to a type of color-blind racism according to Korgen (2007) because color-blind ideology of this type "upholds and rationalizes the given power structure of a

society" (p. 2). Similarly, a disability-blind perspective prevents school counselors from acknowledging or discussing student differences based on (dis) abilities for fear of being seen as discriminatory toward students with learning disabilities. A reluctance to discuss learning differences could further entrench the issues that students with learning disabilities face in schools.   While "services are services" as one participant phrased it, students with learning disabilities (and all students, for that matter) may require modifications to those services for comprehension and application to their particular situations. None of the participants reported modifying their interventions or counseling strategies based on student learning disabilities. During discussions of the hypothetical students within the vignettes, the school counselors did tend to 'see' differences based on ethnicity/race, age, gender, and SES, but not (dis) ability.

The vignettes produced different responses from the participants. In those reviews, the majority of the participants did consider sociodemographic factors, such as age, race, gender, and SES in the development of services for the hypothetical students. Moore et al.(2008) suggested that school counselors should work to gain an awareness of the counseling needs of African American students in special education and make an effort to determine how those needs differ and resemble the needs of other students. Students from marginalized groups often require different or more services to meet their academic, career, and personal/social needs (Romano et al., 2009; Mitcham et al., 2009). The participants reflected those increased efforts for African American students in their responses to the fictional students in the vignettes. They based their interventions on needs assessments, a view of cultural characteristics, and the issues that students presented. African American students in special education face many challenges. A comprehensive school counseling program may mitigate the factors that make African American students vulnerable to referral to and placement in special education services. This

comprehensive school counseling program should emphasize the concept that all students learn and behave differently. Furthermore, the program should emphasize that all of those learning styles and behaviors can be considered 'normal'.

Identification and Referral Processes: Supporter vs. Intervener

Most of the participants did not initiate referrals for evaluation for special education services unless prompted by parents or teachers. The majority of those referrals were based on the behaviors of students with some referrals due to academic struggles. In those referrals, whether initiated by parents or teachers, teachers' evaluations of the students weighed heavily in the process. This finding was consistent with the research conducted on the special education referral process (Harry, Klingner, Sturges, & Moore, 2002). For the school counselors in this study, a parent or teacher initiated the referral for services and the counselor either passed it along to the response to intervention (RTI) chairperson or triggered the process if they served as chairperson. Participants in this study had varied roles in the referral process for special education services, but all followed the version of RTI implemented by their respective school districts. Additionally, all participants indicated that they would try a multitude of counseling interventions before referring a student for the RTI process. Prior research has shown that counseling interventions with students, parents, and teachers can limit the amount of inappropriate referrals for special education services, especially for African American students (Knotek, 2003; Adkison-Bradley et al., 2006; Moore et al., 2008). If given the opportunity, the counselors in this study would attempt an array of interventions prior to the initiation of a referral based on their responses to the hypothetical students within the vignettes.

Participation in the RTI process by school counselors, allowed these participants to monitor and suggest interventions for teachers, a supporter role, or to intervene by providing

counseling interventions, the intervener role (Ockerman, Mason, & Hollenbeck, 2012). As supporters of the process, the school counselors in this study served on RTI teams and provided counseling interventions that addressed the needs of all identified students and monitored results of those interventions. As interveners, the counselors offered specific interventions in individual, small group, or classroom settings to address behavioral, attendance, or academic issues for specific students within undergoing the RTI process. Both roles provide an avenue for school counselors to impact the educational outcomes for students referred and/or identified for special education services (Ockerman et al., 2012; Janson et al., 2007; Sawka et al., 2002). Even if the participants in the study had no direct involvement with RTI in their respective work settings, they performed as supporters, in a way, because they facilitated comprehensive school counseling programs that addressed academic, attendance, and/or behavioral concerns in various contexts (Ockerman et al., 2012).

In the review of vignettes, the counselors focused on behavior issues of the fictitious students almost exclusively. This was true for the counselors who had teaching backgrounds and for those who did not. Their focus was slightly different from the research literature on teachers' use of behaviors to initiate referrals (Elhoweris, Mutua, Alsheikh, & Holloway, 2005). These counselors focused interventions on student behaviors to prevent referrals, if possible, in the hypothetical situations. This finding suggests that it is important for school counselors to become involved with identified students prior to referrals to RTI to prevent inappropriate referrals and after referrals to RTI to help guide service and placement decisions. Unfortunately for many students, if a referral is initiated it proceeds unabated. The counselors in this study had no way of stopping referrals once they were made and had to trust that the processes of SST and RTI would screen inappropriate referrals.

Views of Overrepresentation: Confusion and Causes

The school counselors in this study all thought that overrepresentation of African American students in special education occurs. In essence, they would know overrepresentation if they saw it, but had trouble articulating what overrepresentation in special education means. Conversely, they tended to clearly identify factors that potentially contributed to the phenomenon of overrepresentation.

Confusion

Recurrent in the literature review were suggestions that overrepresentation possibly has many different meanings for different people and those meanings cause confusion because measures of overrepresentation vary (Skiba et al., 2008). In every interview, participants displayed different meanings of overrepresentation based on their experiences and understanding. Although the participants did not show complete comprehension of the definition or the issues involved, they all indicated that overrepresentation of African American students in special education does exist generally in the United States and/or in their respective school districts. When participants were not sure if overrepresentation occurred in their specific schools, they still thought overrepresentation was an important issue to consider when evaluating special education. Participants in this study had fewer discrepancies when describing factors that may contribute to overrepresentation. Unlike previous research that posited that educators confused overrepresentation with the factors that may contribute to overrepresentation (Shippen, Curtis, & Miller, 2009), these participants did not conflate the phenomenon with causal factors. They attempted to define overrepresentation without using potential causal factors for the phenomenon.

Causes

Similarities and differences existed between the factors that school counselors in this study listed as contributing factors to the phenomenon of disproportionality in special education and the research literature. The participants listed factors such as cultural factors, parent/family involvement, and the failure of general education. Researchers have identified those three factors as possible contributors to the overrepresentation of African American students in special education (Artiles et al., 2010; Blanchett, Klingner, & Harry, 2009; Ferri & Connor, 2005b; Skiba et al., 2008; Vallas, 2009). The differences included the views of standardized testing. A participant in the study focused on psychological testing without making an explicit reference to IQ tests. Most of the research focused on the possible biases inherent in IQ tests (Skiba, Knesting, & Bush, 2002). Participants in this study did not view the special education referral and identification processes as possible contributors to overrepresentation which is discrepant with previous research findings (Skiba et al., 2006). An unexpected finding involved parental involvement. Participants suggested that parents could actually earn more financial benefits by having a student identified for special education services. Conversely, most of the research on the topic suggested that a lack of parental interest in and knowledge of the process possibly contributed to overrepresentation of African American students in special education (Shippen, Curtis, & Miller, 2009).

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Professional Knowledge: Courses and Training Needs

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Important factors that emerged regarding school counselor preparation to work with students in special education involved coursework, training, and training needs. All of the participants had at least one course specifically dealing with special education or multicultural counseling. The themes that emerged regarding the preparation to work with students in special

education included feelings of inadequate preparation and a paucity of continuing education opportunities. These themes are consistent with other research that indicated that school counselors feel inadequately prepared to work with students with disabilities (Milsom & Akos, 2003) and school counselors do not receive enough training to work with students with disabilities (Milsom & Akos, 2003; Studer & Quigney, 2005; Romano et al., 2009).

Courses and Training

The participants had varied memories of their special educations course in their school counselor degree programs or in their teaching programs, including memories of whether or not they had actually completed a special education course. Although participants may have reported no memories of specific special education coursework, the State of Georgia is one of six states that requires completion of a course or professional learning units in special education for certification as a school counselor (Lum, 2003). The requirements for certification in Georgia, notwithstanding, many counselor education programs do not require special education coursework or experiences (Milsom & Akos, 2003; Studer & Quigney, 2005). Even with the one course or professional learning units, most of the participants did not think that their education prepared them for working with students in special education. Prior research indicated that school counselors who felt underprepared to work with students in special education might feel tentative or hesitant to implement interventions (Milsom, 2002; Romano et al., 2009). The participants in this study did not indicate that they felt hesitant to work with students in special education; unless, the division of duties or time constraints limited their efforts. Participants thought that practicum/internships had helped in the preparation to work with this population of students. This is consistent with suggestions that counselor education programs incorporate practicum/internship experiences with students in special education (McEachern, 2003). Trolley

et al. (2009) noted that the lack of training prior to the first school counseling job "left entry-level counselors in need of developing skills and abilities to work with students in special education programs" (p. 4). Participants also noted that they had prior work experiences where they had exposure to students with learning disabilities or EBD diagnoses. All of the participants learned most of their techniques through on-the-job training. As one participant noted, this means that different counselors use different techniques based on their respective schools, but not necessarily based on best practices. This is consistent with the research. Trolley et al. (2009) suggested that "there is clearly a need for further delineation of and specification of how school counselors can best meet the needs of students with special needs" (p. 4).

Training Needs

The school counselors in this study stated that they require additional training and/or resources to feel competent to work with students in special education. One of their suggested strategies was a collaborative training with the special education department in their respective schools. Milsom (2002) supports this type of training and suggests that school counselors seek out special educators for continuing education opportunities. The other training need was a new course that emphasized interventions for students in special education or interventions for students with behavior issues before the referral process for special education begins. This sentiment recurs in the research literature. Experts in the field suggested that school counselors should have more opportunities for continuing education, especially regarding students with special needs, and that the continuing education may improve confidence and competence (Romano et al., 2009). Interestingly, none of the participants suggested training needs that

would prepare them to work systemically to limit referrals for special education. Their suggestions focused on interventions for students already identified for special education services and the educational outcomes for those students.

Limitations of the Study

Qualitative research is not designed for broad generalizability, and these findings do not imply generalizability. The goal of this qualitative methodology was to provide specificity of information for the participants in the study rather than generalization of data. These findings provide a window into the perceptions of these school counselors about their work with students in special education, the idea of disproportionality in special education, and their education and training to work with students in special education.

The study focused on eight school counselors within the State of Georgia which potentially limits these findings to the culture, educational processes, systems, and rules in this state. While this number of participants may seem small, it met the criteria for a qualitative study that used elements from phenomenology and vignettes. The eight participants included both male and female counselors from two ethnic groups (white and African American) and from three settings (urban, suburban, and rural). A limitation of this study was that only two ethnic groups had representation. Work setting also limited the results: all of the counselors in this study worked in high schools. It must be noted that school counselors in elementary or middle schools may have different experiences or beliefs about African American students in special education.

Because this study examined school counselors' beliefs, attitudes, and experiences about disproportionality, the results depended on the participants' willingness to show frankness and honestly express their opinions. Using individual interviews and vignettes may have caused

participants to feel pressure to share 'appropriate' responses with the researcher and may have confounded research results. Possible researcher bias may have impacted the study as well. As disclosed in the personal experiences section, I have a specific experience that predisposed me to believe that school counselors needed more training to work with African American students in special education. As the primary researcher, my experiences and worldview may have biased my interpretations of the school counselors' experiences.

Implications and Future Research

The results of this study represent an attempt to increase the awareness of school counselors and counselor educators regarding the roles and preparation of school counselors for providing services to students served in special education, understanding overrepresentation and school counselors' perceptions of it, and school counselors' training needs to work with students in special education. This study contributes to the knowledge base of school counselors and disproportionality in special education and to addressing the needs of all students. The findings indicate that school counselors in this study strongly support providing services to students in special education. To provide those services, the participants agreed with suggested practices from ASCA and the Education Trust regarding services to students in special education.

Collaboration is essential for school counselors to affect change for students in special education (Romano, Paradise, & Green, 2009). The findings of this study underscored the importance of collaboration as well as selected research (Martin, 2002; Mitcham, Portman, & Dean, 2009; Romano et al.). School counselors have a unique skill set that allows them to facilitate collaboration with other school personnel to affect positive outcomes for students, including data collection, counseling intervention to address bias from other school personnel, and knowledge of available resources (Janson, Miller, & Rainey, 2007; Sawka, McCurdy, &

Mannella, 2002). School counselors must seek collaboration with other school personnel, teachers, school psychologists, and administrators, to help students with special needs achieve school success. School counselors can seek to join forces with special educators in a formal manner to create continuing education opportunities. Concomitantly, school counselors must define their roles with students with special needs so that all students receive equitable services. School counselors should facilitate culturally sensitive practices to mitigate inappropriate referrals to special education and to improve educational outcomes for students previously identified for special education services. Past research indicates that teachers have referred students based on behavioral issues or a cultural mismatch between students and teachers (Skiba et al., 2006). School counselors must use their unique skills to consult and provide training opportunities for teachers to improve multicultural competency, especially when creating interventions for students. School counselors also must gain the ability to challenge recommendations in student IEPs to make sure that students receive appropriate and effective services. One important way to implement culturally sensitive practices is for school counselors to participate in the RTI process as a team member and participate in IEP meetings.

School counselors who actually participate in IEP meetings fulfill another advocacy requirement. Students who receive special education services often require advocacy, group facilitation, and teamwork to increase positive involvement from school personnel. School counselors generally have unique qualifications to guide the IEP team through the process (Milsom, Goodnough, & Akos, 2007).   Not mentioned in the advocacy research is another type of role—monitoring and intervention. School counselor training may prepare practitioners to ask questions about IEP goals and accommodations. Specifically, school counselors can (and should) questions the goals listed within IEPs. Are the goals adequate and/or appropriate to meet

the needs and desired outcomes for the student? School counselor participation in IEP meetings can serve an important function to protect students because they may be able to identify when the IEP actually constricts services for students or does not fully engage or challenge students to reach their full potential.

School counselors should take an active role in the assessment process during RTI by sharing data and communicating with other team members. This data sharing becomes especially important during IEP meetings to determine students' potential academic placements and services offered to those students. Because of the access to school-wide data, school counselors have a special duty to collect this data and review referral and placement patterns to lessen inequitable treatment. More importantly, school counselors have the task of challenging referral and placement practices by reviewing the impact on different student groups, especially African American students. Further training in social justice and advocacy can help school counselors move from a focus on individuals to a focus on systemic change. Social justice training requires that school counselors look at the larger forces (including systemic and political forces) that conspire to increase referral and identification for special education services for African American students rather than locating the issues within the students themselves (Reid & Knight, 2006).

Collaboration on RTI teams to develop training for school personnel contributes to advocacy for students. School counselors have the training to develop comprehensive counseling programs that focus on prevention and early intervention to address challenges that African American students face including behavior, attendance, and academic issues (Moore et al, 2008; Knotek, 2003). Knotek noted a comprehensive program may decrease inappropriate

referral and identification of African American students for special education evaluation and placement. School counselors should continue to follow the ASCA guidelines for developing their counseling programs and roles with students with special needs. A sound program combined with collaboration and consultation with school personnel can reduce referrals and inappropriate placement decisions for African American students.

Reducing inappropriate referrals for special education and addressing overrepresentation are two of the primary foci of response to intervention (RTI) (Ockerman, Mason, & Hollenbeck, 2012). To help address overrepresentation, school counselors need to first understand overrepresentation. In this study, each participant had a different definition for the phenomenon of overrepresentation. None of the participants doubted its existence, but defining the phenomenon presented more of a challenge. Counselor education programs and/or school districts should incorporate education and training on overrepresentation of African American students in special education to prepare counselors for their work in preventing the phenomenon. Each school district should educate its school counselors on overrepresentation in its district including definitions and suggested remedies. More specifically, the education/training should focus on what school counselors can contribute from a school counseling perspective: data collection, team membership, interventions, and collaboration. Additionally, counselors should receive adequate training to recognize when a student may have possibly been 'misidentified' and placed in special education.

A final implication emerged from participants' discussions of training and education requirements. School counselors require ongoing in-service training or continuing education on the characteristics of learning disabilities, interventions for students with learning disabilities, and community resources to complement services offered within the school. The community

resources play an important part in the decrease in referrals. Meeting student needs prior to referrals or prior to placement decisions requires incorporating community agencies and organizations. School counselors can match the resources to the students, if the counselors know what resources are available or how to find appropriate resources. Effective professional development may help mitigate the factors that lead to inappropriate referrals for special education or inappropriate identification and/or placement within special education.

Future Research

Given the division of duties between high school counselors and special educators presented by participants in this study, further research is needed to determine the most effective forms of collaboration between high school counselors and special educators to achieve favorable student outcomes. Overall, knowing how school counselors at each level (elementary, middle, and high school) collaborate with special educators could prove beneficial to the field of school counseling.

Further qualitative and quantitative research that examines how school counselors from different states and/or different levels (elementary, middle, and high school) perceive the overrepresentation of African American students in special education and their work with minority students in special education could provide data to determine if confusion about the term 'overrepresentation' exists generally for school counselors or if the confusion only existed for participants in this study. Future research is warranted regarding school counselors' attitudes and beliefs about race, ability, and socioeconomic status. Smith, Foley, and Chaney (2008) found it important that counselor education programs address those issues among others. Although teacher bias has been identified as a factor in teacher referrals for special education

services, school counselor biases may prevent school counselors from implementing ancillary services prior to special education identification.

Future research could examine the differences and similarities in attitudes regarding students in special education and overrepresentation among elementary, middle, and high school counselors. Each of these groups of school counselors has slightly different roles in the referral and identification process for special education eligibility. Because the high school counselors in this study mentioned that most students have already been identified for services before reaching high school, an examination of the beliefs and attitudes of elementary and middle school counselors may yield important information.

School counselors in this study agreed that more training would help them assist students in special education. Future research could illuminate the exact training and interventions that school counselors want and need to enhance their knowledge base. Researchers could gather their stories to motivate changes in counselor education programs and district-wide continuing education courses. A larger scale study to evaluate current levels of training and to determine training and intervention needs for school counselors' work with students in special education is needed.

Future studies should focus on the emotional, academic, and social needs of African American students in special education as well as strategies school counselors can employ to meet those needs. Because of the advent of response to intervention (RTI) and its use to limit overrepresentation of minority students in special education, further research should focus on the roles of school counselors as members of the interdisciplinary teams or as chairpersons and their ability to create or monitor accommodation plans.

Summary

"Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing it is stupid." -- Anonymous (but mistakenly attributed to Albert Einstein)

The overrepresentation of African American students in special education in high schools reflects the influences of racism, classism, ableism, and the ideology of normalcy on educational practices. School counselors, as participants in this society and its educational systems, are not immune to the influences of racism, classism, ableism, and the ideology of normalcy. The influences impact the ways in which school counselors view, challenge, or perpetuate systems that adversely impact students. In conducting this research, I hoped that I could contribute to the body of knowledge regarding how school counselors and counselor educators could help African American students overcome the challenges in the American educational system that contribute to the high incidents of referral and identification for special education services, especially those challenges based on being 'other' and outside of the scope of 'normal'.

School counselors possess unique skills to educate other stakeholders in the process about the humanness of difference and how differences do not always indicate an abnormality that requires a label (Bogdan & Taylor, 1989). However, when a label is required, school counselors must work to avoid isolating or stigmatizing students while still recognizing differences (Bogdan & Taylor). The trick, I suppose, lies in providing respectful, age-appropriate, coordinated classrooms and school counseling programs for all students regardless of their backgrounds or levels of ability. Students with learning difficulties, especially African American students, often require the benefits of school counselor advocacy to prevent erroneous special education identification (Janson, Miller, & Rainey, 2007). It is a responsibility of school counselors to prevent inappropriate identification for special education services. In a larger sense, it is also the

responsibility of school counselors to become agents of social, political, and systems change

(Martin, 2002). While no panacea to the challenges faced by African American students or those

referred and identified for special education services exists, increasing school counselors'

knowledge about themselves, disproportionality, strategies to provide differentiated counseling

services, and advocacy may promote more equitable educational outcomes for students and their

families.

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APPENDIX A

INFORMED CONSENT

School Counselors' Perceptions and Beliefs about Disproportionality in Special Education: A Qualitative Study

June 2012

I, _____, agree to participate in a research study entitled "School Counselors' Perceptions and Beliefs about the Disproportionality of African American Students in Special Education: A Qualitative Study" conducted by Elbert Mackenzie (Ken) Shell, who is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Counseling and Human Development Services at The University of Georgia; under the direction of faculty advisor, Dr. Yvette Q. Getch. I understand that my participation is voluntary. I can refuse to participate or stop taking part at anytime without giving any reason, and without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled. I can ask to have all of the information that can be identified as mine, returned to me, removed from the research records, or destroyed.

Item #1: REASON/PURPOSE
The purpose of this study is to examine the attitudes, beliefs, and experiences of school counselors with African American students in special education.

Item #2: BENEFITS
There are no personal benefits for participating in this study. However, this study has the potential to highlight school counselors' beliefs, attitudes, and experiences with African American students in special education. Highlighting school counselors' experiences may contribute to the knowledge base for counselor educators and practitioners to address issues of disproportionality in special education in counselor education coursework and professional development for school counselors.

Item #3: PROCEDURES
If I volunteer to take part in this study, I will be asked to do the following:
1. Participate in two meetings: One 75-minute meeting to review and sign the consent form, learn about this research study, and to complete the first interview and a second 60-minute individual interview. The first interview session will involve the completion of a demographic questionnaire that will take approximately 10 minutes. The remainder of the first session will involve the review of case vignettes and an interview involving a series of questions about each vignette. The second session will involve an interview featuring a series of questions which are designed to allow you to discuss your experiences with African American students in special education. The face-to-face vignette studies

and interviews will last approximately 60 minutes each. The interviews will be audio recorded and will take place at a time that is convenient for me.

2. Verify findings: The verification of findings will increase the validity of the final report however verification is not required to participate in the interviews. The researcher will give participants the option of reviewing interview transcripts and verifying the accuracy of transcription, within 2 weeks of the interview date. In addition, the researcher will give participants the option of reading their individual results to verify accuracy of interpretation, prior to final submission. If participants indicate that they are interested in reviewing their transcript or individual results, the researcher will email participants this information. However, since internet communication is not secure, the participants can also request to meet with the researcher face-to-face to review the findings.

Item #4: RISKS/ DISCOMFORTS
There are no more than minimal anticipated risks and discomfort. There is a slight possibility that some participants may experience some discomfort if they become aware of biases or negative attitudes that they have held toward students with disabilities. Participants will have the option of skipping any questions or sections of the interviews which they are uncomfortable responding to.

Item #5: CONFIDENTIALITY
I understand that my identity will be known only to the researcher and will be protected through the use of a pseudonym in the written report. Information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with me will be kept confidential. No information that can be identified as mine will be shared with others without my written permission unless otherwise required by law. I will be given the chance to review the transcript from my interview and the findings from this study.   While the researcher may use quotations from the interviews in future publications or presentations, the participants' names, school affiliations, and other identifying facts will be deleted or altered to protect participants' identities.

All audiotapes will be destroyed immediately following transcription of the interviews. A transcript of each tape with identifiable facts redacted will be kept in a locked file until the study has been published or presented. Any contact information will be kept in a locked file away from other data. The individually identifiable information and contact data will be destroyed within 6 months.

Item #6: FURTHER QUESTIONS
If I have any questions about this research project, I can call or email the primary investigator, Dr. Yvette Getch, at (706) 542-1865 or ygetch@uga.edu or the student researcher, Mr. Elbert Shell, at (404) 642-7238 or emshell@uga.edu.

Item #7: Final Agreement
I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

Elbert Mackenzie (Ken) Shell

| Name of Researcher | Signature | Date |

Confidential

| Name of Participant | Signature | Date |

Please sign, keep one copy and return one copy to the researcher.
Elbert Mackenzie (Ken) Shell, PhD Candidate
404-642-7238 (cell) or 678-875-1122 (office)
E-mail: emshell@uga.edu
Department of Counseling and Human Development Services
The University of Georgia

Additional questions or problems regarding your rights as a research participant should be addressed to The Chairperson, Institutional Review Board, University of Georgia, 629 Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602; Telephone (706) 542-3199; E-Mail Address IRB@uga.edu

APPENDIX B

RECRUITMENT SCRIPT (EMAIL)

Dear Professional School Counselor:

I am a doctoral candidate under the direction of Dr. Yvette Getch in the Department of Counseling and Human Development Services at the University of Georgia. I received your name from _____, faculty member in Counseling and Human Development Services Department because of your location and counseling experience. As a part of the requirements for my Ph.D. in Counselor Education, I am conducting a research study entitled "School Counselors' Perceptions and Attitudes about the Disproportionality of African American Students in Special Education: A Qualitative Study". The purpose of this research is to assess the attitudes and perceptions of school counselors regarding the overrepresentation of African American students in special education.

If you are currently working as high school counselor and you are at least 24 years old, I invite you to participate in a this research study. Should you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to meet with the researcher two times. The first meeting will last approximately 75 minutes where the researcher will explain the purpose of the study, review the consent procedures, complete a demographic questionnaire, and review case vignettes.. The second meeting will last approximately 60 minutes for an interview. Participation is voluntary and all individually identifiable information obtained from the demographic questionnaire and interviews will be kept confidential. In the demographic questionnaire you will be asked to include your school affiliation so that the research can link to your profile which will be obtained via a public records search with your interview data. The researcher will not notify your school of your participation.

I hope to conduct the interview within the next two weeks. If you are interested in participating please contact me at (404)642.7238 to schedule a time to talk. If you are not interested in to participating, would you kindly suggest other potential participants that I could contact?

I have attached a copy of the informed consent to this email for you to review. If you have any questions about this research, please feel free to contact me, Elbert Shell, at (404) 642-7238 or emshell@uga.edu or Dr. Yvette Getch at (706) 542-1685 or ygetch@uga.edu.

Thank you for your consideration!

Elbert Mackenzie (Ken) Shell

APPENDIX C

FOLLOW-UP RECRUITMENT SCRIPT (EMAIL)

Dear Professional School Counselor:

I am a doctoral candidate under the direction of Dr. Yvette Getch in the Department of Counseling and Human Development Services at the University of Georgia. I received your name from _____, faculty member in Counseling and Human Development Services Department because of your location and counseling experience. As a part of the requirements for my Ph.D. in Counselor Education, I am conducting a research study entitled "School Counselors' Perceptions and Attitudes about the Disproportionality of African American Students in Special Education: A Qualitative Study". The purpose of this research is to assess the attitudes and perceptions of school counselors regarding the overrepresentation of African American students in special education.

If you are currently working as high school counselor and you are at least 24 years old, I invite you to participate in a this research study. Should you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to meet with the researcher two times. The first meeting will last approximately 75 minutes where the researcher will explain the purpose of the study, review the consent procedures, complete a demographic questionnaire, and review case vignettes. The second meeting will last approximately 60 minutes for an interview. Participation is voluntary and all individually identifiable information obtained from the demographic questionnaire and interviews will be kept confidential. In the demographic questionnaire you will be asked to include your school affiliation so that the research can link to your school's profile which will be obtained via a public records search with your interview data. The researcher will not notify your school of your participation.

I hope to conduct the interview within the next two weeks. If you are interested in participating please contact me at (404)642.7238 to schedule a time to talk. If you are not interested in participating, would you kindly suggest other potential participants that I could contact?

I have attached a copy of the informed consent and the interview guide to this email for you to review. If you have any questions about this research, please feel free to contact me, Elbert Shell, at (404) 642-7238 or emshell@uga.edu or Dr. Yvette Getch at (706) 542-1685 or ygetch@uga.edu.

Thank you for your consideration!

Elbert Mackenzie (Ken) Shell

APPENDIX D

FOLLOW-UP PHONE SCRIPT

Hello,

I received your phone call. Thanks for calling. Let's schedule a time for our first interview.

Thank you,

Ken Shell

APPENDIX E

VIGNETTES

Derrick is a 14 year old, African American male ninth grade student on your counseling caseload who has been experiencing difficulty in the classroom. Derrick is frequently absent from or tardy to school. Academically, he is failing his core subjects: language arts, math, science, and social studies. The biggest challenge that his teachers are experiencing with him, however, is his behavior. Derrick has few friends at school and has difficulty making and keeping new friends. In his classes, he can be disruptive to the learning environment by speaking out of turn, getting out of his seat frequently without permission, or by distracting other students when they attempt to participate in classroom activities. Derrick often challenges his teachers' authority by displaying oppositional or defiant behaviors: raising his voice, ignoring instructions, and arguing when told "no". Additionally, he often has conflicts with his peers because of his persistent taunting and teasing behavior. Derrick's records indicate that he has had similar problematic behaviors in the past. Derrick's mother is a single parent who works two jobs and is raising three children. The family lives in subsidized housing in a poverty-stricken neighborhood and Derrick and his siblings receive free lunch. Because of the mother's work schedule, she can rarely come to the high school to discuss Derrick's behaviors or possible interventions.

Vignette 2

John is a 14 year old, African American male ninth grade student on your counseling caseload who has been experiencing difficulty in the classroom. John is a healthy boy and rarely misses school. Academically, he is failing his core subject areas: language arts, math science, and social studies. The biggest challenge that his teachers are experiencing with him, however is his behavior. John has few friends at school and has difficulty making and keeping new friends. In his classes, he can be disruptive to the learning environment by speaking out of turn, getting out of his seat frequently without permission, or by distracting other students when they attempt to participate in classroom activities. John often challenges his teachers' authority by displaying oppositional or defiant behaviors: questioning authority, ignoring behaviors, and arguing when told "no". Additionally, he often has conflicts with his peers because of persistent taunting and teasing behavior. John's records indicate that he has had similar problematic behaviors in the past. John is an only child who lives with his natural mother and father in an upper-middle class neighborhood. Both of John's parents are college educated and both frequently attend school functions.

Vignette 3

David is a 14 year old, white male ninth grade student on your counseling caseload who has been experiencing difficulty in the classroom. David is frequently absent from or tardy to school. Academically, he is failing his core subjects: language arts, math, science, and social studies. The biggest challenge that his teachers are experiencing with him, however, is his behavior. David has few friends at school and has difficulty making and keeping new friends. In his classes, he can be disruptive to the learning environment by speaking out of turn, getting out of his seat frequently without permission, or by distracting other students when they attempt to participate in classroom activities. David often challenges his teachers' authority by displaying oppositional or defiant behaviors: raising his voice, ignoring instructions, and arguing when told "no". Additionally, he often has conflicts with his peers because of his persistent taunting and teasing behavior. David's records indicate that he has had similar problematic behaviors in the past. David's mother is a single parent who works two jobs and is raising three children. The family lives in subsidized housing in a poverty-stricken neighborhood and David and his siblings receive free lunch. Because of the mother's work schedule, she can rarely come to the high school to discuss David's behaviors or possible interventions.

Vignette 4

Jason is a 14 year old, white male ninth grade student on your counseling caseload who has been experiencing difficulty in the classroom. Jason is a healthy boy and rarely misses school. Academically, he is failing his core subject areas: language arts, math science, and social studies. The biggest challenge that his teachers are experiencing with him, however is his behavior. Jason has few friends at school and has difficulty making and keeping new friends. In his classes, he can be disruptive to the learning environment by speaking out of turn, getting out of his seat frequently without permission, or by distracting other students when they attempt to participate in classroom activities. Jason often challenges his teachers' authority by displaying oppositional or defiant behaviors: questioning authority, ignoring behaviors, and arguing when told "no". Additionally, he often has conflicts with his peers because of persistent taunting and teasing behavior. Jason's records indicate that he has had similar problematic behaviors in the past. Jason is an only child who lives with his natural mother and father in an upper-middle class neighborhood. Both of Jason's parents are college educated and both frequently attend school functions.

APPENDIX F

VIGNETTE INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. What are your first impressions of the student in the vignette?

2. How would you describe this student's level of functioning?

3. Given your current knowledge of this student, what do you think is the most appropriate educational setting for him/her?

4. How would you summarize the criteria used to arrive at the appropriate educational setting?

5. What interventions would you implement, if any, to help the student?

6. On what criteria would you base those interventions?

7. What would be your next steps if the student's behavior persisted after the interventions?

8. What cultural characteristics, if any, are important to your assessment of this student's behavior or your choice of interventions?

9. What cultural characteristics, if any, are important to this student's presenting problems?

10. What additional information would have been helpful to determine interventions for this student?

11. As you weigh all of the factors influencing your interventions with this student, what was the single most important factor in your decision about this student?

APPENDIX G

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. What have been your experiences with students in special education?

2. As a school counselor, have you referred any students for special education services? (If yes, on what criteria did you base the referral? If no, what would prompt you to make a referral?)

3. Please describe the referral process for special education services in your school. Does the school counselor have a role in the referral process?

4. In your opinion, what is/are the role(s) of school counselor with students who receive special education services?

5. How did your training/education prepare you for working with students who receive special education services?

6. What would help you feel better prepared to provide counseling for students who receive special education services?

7. What have been your experiences, if any, with African American students in special education?

8. How do you determine which services to provide to African American students in special education?

9. What do you think contributes to the referral and placement rates in special education for African American students at your school?

10. Are you familiar with the term 'overrepresentation' in special education?

11. In your own words please define what you think 'overrepresentation' could mean? (What is your understanding of it?)

12. The term over-represented suggests that a group's membership in a particular program is higher than what would be expected based on their numbers in the overall population…

    a. Do you believe African American students are over-represented in special education programs in the United States?

    b. If yes, what factors do you believe contribute to overrepresentation? If no, how would you describe the proportion of African American students in special education?

13. What are the strategies that you can implement as a school counselor to ensure appropriate referrals and decrease inappropriate referrals for special education services for African American students?

14. How involved do you believe school counselors should be in the academic lives of African American students who receive special education services? (such as assisting with class selection, diploma choices, referrals for services?)

APPENDIX H

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Years you have worked as a school counselor: _____ years

2. What positions have you held in schools other than school counselor? (Circle your answer.)
    a. Teacher
    b. Paraprofessional
    c. Administrator
    d. Other (Please specify):_____

3. Overall years you have worked in schools: _____ years

4. What is your highest degree in school counseling? (Circle your answer.)

    a. Doctoral (Ph.D., Psy.D., Ed.D.)
    b. Educational Specialist (Ed.S.)
    c. Masters (M.Ed., M.A., M.S.)
    d. Other (Please specify):_____

5. Institution where you earned your highest degree in school counseling:

    _____

6. Your current primary place of employment:

    _____

    (Please note that your response will be confidential and will only be used for research purposes. This information will be used to access your school profile to collect demographic data on your school's population: percentages of students in racial/ethnic categories and special education.)

7. Your gender: _____

8. Your racial/ethnic identity (Please circle all that apply):

    a. White (non-Hispanic)
    b. African American/Black (non-Hispanic)
    c. Hispanic/Latino/Latina

d. Asian/Pacific Islander
e. Native American/American Indian
f. Multiracial (Please specify): _____
g. Other (Please specify): _____

APPENDIX I

PARTICIPANT SCHOOL DISTRICT DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

Table 3 provides school district demographic information for their current school district work settings from the 2009-2010 academic year with a focus on three areas—specific learning disabilities (SLD), intellectual disabilities (ID), and emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD). The information was obtained from the Georgia Department of Education website.

Table 3

Summary of Participant School District Demographic Data

Judy – Suburban District

Race/Ethnicity	Number of Special Education Students in High School (SLD, EBD, ID)	%	Number of Students in High School	%
African American	252	88.4	1721	59.9
American Indian	0	0	02	0.0
Asian/Pacific Islander	0	0	48	1.7
Hispanic	20	0.7	531	18.5
Two or more races	0	0	114	4.0
White	31	10.9	455	15.8
Total	303	100	2871	99.9

Wanda – Urban District

Race/Ethnicity	Number of Special Education Students in High School (SLD, EBD, ID)	%	Number of Students in High School	%

African American	1215	38.2	14275	32.7
American Indian	13	0.4	187	0.4
Asian/Pacific Islander	105	3.3	4628	10.6
Hispanic	768	24.2	9440	21.6
Two or more races	133	4.2	1768	4.1
White	945	29.7	13322	30.5
Total	3179	100	43620	99.9

Pam – Rural District

Race/Ethnicity	Number of Special Education Students in High School (SLD, EBD, ID)	%	Number of Students in High School	%
African American	12	18.5	140	16.5
American Indian	0	0	05	0.6
Asian/Pacific Islander	0	0	06	0.7
Hispanic	0	0	35	4.1
Two or more races	0	0	26	3.1
White	53	81.5	634	74.9
Total	65	100	846	99.9

Jon/Kevin – Urban District

Race/Ethnicity	Number of Special Education Students in High School (SLD, EBD, ID)	%	Number of Students in High School	%
African American	1731	87.1	20373	77.5
American Indian	0	0	44	0.2
Asian/Pacific Islander	15	0.7	1209	4.6
Hispanic	65	3.3	2191	8.3
Two or more races	13	0.7	375	1.4

White	164	8.2	2112	8.0

Total	1988	100	26304	100

Paul – Urban District

Race/Ethnicity	Number of Special Education Students in High School (SLD, EBD, ID)	%	Number of Students in High School	%
African American	807	93.6	9982	88.5
American Indian	0	0	06	0
Asian/Pacific Islander	0	0	70	0.6
Hispanic	11	1.3	492	4.4
Two or more races	0	0	129	1.1
White	44	5.1	603	5.3

Total	862	100	11282	99.9

Katy – Suburban District

Race/Ethnicity	Number of Special Education Students in High School (SLD, EBD, ID)	%	Number of Students in High School	%
African American	57	30.5	769	25.6
American Indian	0	0	02	0
Asian/Pacific Islander	0	0	56	1.9
Hispanic	0	0	139	4.6
Two or more races	0	0	92	3.1
White	130	69.5	1949	64.8

Total	187	100	3007	100

Chris – Rural District

Race/Ethnicity	Number of Special Education Students in High School (SLD, EBD, ID)	%	Number of Students in High School	%
African American	42	17.8	486	16.4
American Indian	0	0	12	0.4
Asian/Pacific Islander	0	0	199	6.7
Hispanic	24	10.2	395	13.3
Two or more races	0	0	124	4.2
White	170	72.0	1754	59.0
Total	236	100	2970	100