ABSTRACT

MATTOCKS, LAVERNE LYNETTE. An Exploration of School Leadership Perspectives on the Disproportionate Placement of African American Males in the Serious Emotional Disability Category of Special Education. (Under the direction of Dr. Paul Bitting).

Since 1968, researchers have been questioning the pertinence of special education programs and the prevalence of African American males identified for participation. This exploration uses a constructivist grounded theory framework to inquire about administrative perspectives on the disproportionate number of African American males in special education, primarily in the category of Serious Emotional Disability. The study, conducted using a series of brief pre-interview observations and interviews, develops five themes that have emerged from the analysis of data. These themes are: Significance of Educator Training, Significance of Strong Relationships, Significance of Race, Significance of Socioeconomics, and Significance of Leadership. These themes are consistent with much of the literature on factors related to disproportionate placement of African American males in special education. Elaboration upon these themes provides a basis to synthesize existent research on the topic with new data to develop a theory about the ways in which public school administrators understand and impact disproportionate placement of African American males. The study aims to provide recommendations for future research that not only enhance the literature on disproportionality but also provides practical implications for current and future educators.
An Exploration of School Leadership Perspectives on the Disproportionate Placement of African American Males in the Serious Emotional Disability Category of Special Education

by
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DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to my family for the many sacrifices they’ve had to make to assist in my completion. To my parents, Thomas and Ernestine Mattocks, I dedicate this study for your undying support with my children. I also appreciate your encouragement and faith in my ability to complete this monumental task. To my children, Devin, Caleb, and Lanaa, thank you for entertaining yourselves, helping around the house, and allowing me quiet time to accomplish this lifelong goal. I dedicate this study to you so that you will know that with hard work and perseverance, you can achieve anything. Collectively, you all have been the wind beneath my wings. You’ve kept me going and helped me focus my life and my time around reaching higher heights. I love and honor you for what you are in my heart.
LaVerne Mattocks is a native of Oriental, North Carolina. She is the mother of three children, a leadership coach with Leadership Triangle, and a student of leadership development. LaVerne graduated from Pamlico County High School in June of 1988. As a North Carolina Teaching Fellow Scholarship Recipient, LaVerne attended the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. After graduating from the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, LaVerne returned to Pamlico County High School as an English teacher. After two years as a teacher, coach, and coordinator of programs, LaVerne began her graduate studies from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. LaVerne graduated with a Masters of School Administration in 2002. After practicing as an administrator for a few years, LaVerne began her post-graduate studies at North Carolina State University. She is completing the Ed.D. program in the Educational Leadership and Supervision. LaVerne currently serves as Principal of Carrboro High School in Carrboro, North Carolina.
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

A general review of the literature and specific events related to race and special education programs during the latter 20th and early 21st centuries reveals that one must understand the historical context, education policies, litigation, and possible detrimental effects of disproportionate placement in order to ensure equity in American schools. The existence of disproportionate placement has been recognized for some time in American schools (Dunn, 1968; Harry, 1994; Donovan & Cross, 2002). As educators begin to question the continued disproportionate placement of African American males in high-incidence categories of special education, an understanding of administrative perspectives on the persistent issue will have implication for future practice in our schools. The federal legislation that governs special education is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act IDEA (2004) or Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, IDEIA (2004). In the reauthorization of IDEA (2004), there was a name change to Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act (2004) and became commonly known as IDEIA (2004) (Alazar, 2015). Both names have been used interchangeably in this study. The high-incidence categories of special education generally refer to the IDEA (2004) classifications of Emotional/Behavioral Disturbance, Learning Disabilities, and Mild Intellectual Disabilities (Sabornie, Evans, & Cullinan, 2016). For the purpose of this study, high-incidence categories will refer to those specific to Emotional/Behavioral Disturbance and specified as Serious Emotional Disability
Historical Background

Special education programs began in earnest in the late 1960s and early 1970s. As these programs progressed, Lloyd Dunn (1968) questioned special education in American public schools by examining disproportionate placement according to race and/or ethnicity. In the pivotal late 1960s, Dunn (1968) became concerned about the inherent separation of African American students who were placed in special education classes apart from their peers. He was concerned that often there was a very different educational experience for those who were White and not in special education (Dunn, 1968). Over the span of five decades, new researchers and practitioners (Dunn, 1968; Hosp & Reschly, 2002; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Ferri & Connor, 2005; Sullivan & Bal, 2013) continued the study of disproportionate placement in American schools (as cited in Raines, Dever, Kamphaus, & Roach, 2012). A general review of the literature and specific events related to race and education during the latter 20th and early 21st centuries reveals that one must understand the historical context of disproportionate placement in order to study it in the present.

Early critics such as Dunn (1968) suggest disproportionate placement has been adopted and institutionalized as a means of subverting Brown vs. Board of Education (1954). Many (Harry, 2007; Riddell, 2007; Sullivan & Artiles, 2011) view the very potential for disproportionate placement in specific categories of special education programs as an attempt to re-segregate American schools. Riddell (2007) described possible segregation in special education in a broader context by stating, “…in the developed world it is evident that
separate institutions still exist for those at the social margins, including children with
behavioural problems and those with severe mental health or learning difficulties” (p. 35).
Riddell (2007) also explained how segregation in special education during the modern era is
more within specific units of public schools rather than in separate institutions. These units
can be more restrictive environments such as special education classrooms or less time spent
in the general education environment (Riddell, 2007).

Historically, evidence of disproportionate placement and overrepresentation has
existed primarily in those areas of special education that begin with teacher referral and are
more subjective (Harry, 2007; Riddell, 2007; Thorius & Maxcy, 2014). Harry (2007)
elaborated on how high-incidence categories remain the focus of researchers because these
categories rely on practitioners’ judgments rather than empirical, biological evidence (p. 3).
According to Harry (2007), examples of high-incidence categories are Specific Learning
Disability, Mild Mental Retardation, and Emotional Disturbance (p. 1). In yet another study,
Sullivan and Bal (2013) discussed the consistent evidence of disproportionate placement,
particularly seen in the high-incidence categories, including Specific Learning Disabilities
(SLD), Cognitive Impairments (CI, often referred to as mental retardation), and Emotional
Disabilities (ED) (p. 475). According to Thorius and Maxcy (2014), the struggle to
understand overrepresentation in the high incidence categories continues. Losen and Orfield
(as cited in Thorious & Maxcy, 2014) included Specific Learning Disability (SLD),
Intellectual Disability (ID), and Emotional Disturbance (ED) as examples of the high-
iccidence categories.
According to national data released by state agencies, specific learning disability is the most prevalent disability category for all racial and ethnic groups except Asians (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2014). This report notes that of all African American students in special education programs nationwide, 42.4% were served for specific learning disability as compared to 36.8% of White students receiving services (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2014). According to Harry (2007), “ethnic disproportionality in special education refers to the fact that students from certain historically excluded minority groups have been placed in special education programs at rates that are disproportionate to their presence in the student population as a whole,” (p. 3). As Sullivan and Artiles (2011) point out, “…disproportionality has been a persistent and controversial issue throughout literature, law, and practice since the late 1960s; yet, the complexity of this problem is not fully understood,” (p. 1527).

According to research and data (Harry, 2007; Sullivan & Bal, 2013; U.S. Dept. of Education, 2014), African American student placement in the less subjective areas (such as blindness and deafness) is ascribed proportionately. For example, of all students served under IDEA (2004) for hearing impairments, only .9% of African American students received these services as compared to 1.1% of White students. Conversely, of all students served under IDEA (2004) for intellectual disabilities, 10.9% of African American students received these services as compared to 6.6% of White students. Additionally, the national report on implementing IDEA (2004) cited that 9.1% of African American students served under IDEA (2004) received services for emotional disturbance (ED) as compared to 6.5% of
White students served under IDEA (2004) (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2014). Harry (2007) explained how the high-incidence categories, due to their subjectivity, present the most challenges to researchers and practitioners in studying the phenomenon of disproportionate placement (p. 3).

Donovan and Cross (2002) (as cited in Ford, 2012) noted the level of emotion and energy that is stirred up when discussing special education and disproportionate placement of students from minority groups. In a more recent study, Sullivan and Artiles (2011) go even further to discuss disproportionate placement through a structural theory lens. They include an analysis of racial competition and the need for limited resources as a motivating factor in disproportionate placement for historically disenfranchised student populations (Sullivan & Artiles, 2011). According to their analysis, the desire for the best teachers, instructional materials, and program design lead to practices that are advantageous for White students and disadvantageous for minority students (Sullivan & Artiles, 2011). The assertion by Sullivan and Artiles (2011) that the competition for scarce education resources could lead to disproportionality has implications for examination of American political and social systems.

Researchers continue to study disproportionate placement today, more than forty years after initial conversations on the issue began (Dunn, 1968; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Hosp & Reschly, 2002; Sullivan & Bal, 2013; Alazar, 2015). The nature of classifying students for special education services tends to establish two separate educational experiences for socioeconomically disadvantaged and other minority students, more than fifty years after the abolishment of segregated schools in this country. The Office of Civil
Rights has identified the continuing problem of overrepresentation and placement (in special education) of minority students, particularly African American students, since the early 1970s. IDEA had reauthorizations in 1997 and 2004. During the reauthorization, IDEA (2004) was reauthorized but also became known as Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act or IDEIA (2004). IDEA (2004) had an additional goal to reduce the disproportionate or over-identification of students across the country. IDEA (2004) contained regulations in reaction to the problem of disproportionate placement of minority students. IDEA (2004) and its regulations were officially enacted the government began to require states to monitor and report disproportionality according to race/ethnicity (Hart, Cramer, Harry, Klingner, & Sturges, 2009; Alazar, 2015). Even with this governmental reporting and analysis, this problem continues to persist. One critic believes the lingering problems with disproportionate placement and other elements in the new regulations have to do with the practicalities of enforcement (Kaufman, 2008). Kaufman (2008) elaborates on how the increased regulations also come with more flexibility for states and districts, i.e. self-reporting, and that dichotomy actually does little to address the problems.

Statement of Problem

The early 21st century marked the 30th and 50th anniversaries of two of the most significant events in American history – (1) passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EACHA) of 1975 and (2) the ruling in the Brown vs. Board of Education (1954) case. EACHA (1975) is the pivotal legislation intended to secure a free, fair and equitable education for students regardless of disability or impairment. This federal education
law was revisited in 1997 and renamed the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 (IDEA)*. Congress reauthorized **IDEA** in December 2004. **IDEA (2004)** was scheduled for another reauthorization in 2011, but that reauthorization has not occurred due to the refining of other education policies (Mueller, 2014, p. 1). *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954) attempted to end the official practice of “separate but equal” in American schools. For nearly forty years, both of these important events have served as the prototypical guide for assuring equal access to equitable public education in the United States.

More recently, school reform efforts have focused on subcategories of student populations, such as ethnic and racial minority as well as children with disabilities. For example, *No Child Left Behind (NCLB)* (2002) focuses on subcategories of student populations such as ethnic and racial minority groups and children with disabilities. **NCLB (2002)** links school accountability efforts with federal funding for students with disabilities and those deemed economically disadvantaged. **NCLB (2002)**, as enacted, also requires schools to ensure that all students demonstrate proficiency in reading and mathematics by 2013-2014 (Bohrnstedt & O’Day, 2008).

When educators attempt to comply with such policies, there develops a belief that educational leaders can virtually eliminate restrictive, inadequate educational experiences for previously disenfranchised students (Turnbull, 2005). School reform also links school accountability efforts with federal funding for students with disabilities and those deemed economically disadvantaged. If this is to happen, school leaders must examine their own beliefs as leaders tasked with broadening the learning environment for all students.
Despite judicial and legislative interventions, the issue of minority overrepresentation, especially among African American students in special education programs, remains one of the most elusive problems for educators and community leaders. “Findings of racial disproportionality have been consistent for decades, with disproportionate representation commonly observed in the high-incidence categories of disability,” (Sullivan & Bal, 2011, p. 476). In their study on disproportionate placement according to race, Cullinan and Kauffman (2005) found that though African American students constituted only 17% of the public school population, they accounted for more than 27% of all students identified as having an emotional disability. According to Alazar (2015), African American students continue to be disproportionally represented in the special education category of emotional disturbance or SED.

Though there is limited literature on gender disparities in Emotional Disturbance (ED) classifications, early research established disproportionality among African American students, with African American males 5.5 times more likely to be classified as severely emotionally disturbed than were other students (Mills, 2003). The early research on this issue also revealed that African American males were at a higher risk of identification for special education services in the ED category (Coutinho & Oswald, 2005).

Some researchers (Neal, McCray, & Webb-Johnson, 2001; Neal, McCray, & Webb-Johnson, 2003; Ford, 2012) believe that this difference in placement in special education programs is the result of cultural differences as much if not more than a remnant of institutional racism. In discussing disproportionality and the importance of cultural
awareness for educators, Ford (2012) states, “Understanding African American culture can provide teachers with information, support, and guidance to help them become more culturally responsive and meet the needs of these students” (p. 394). An example of this belief is as follows, “To ameliorate misidentification of students as disabled, we offer suggestions for how teachers might more appropriately respond to culturally embedded behavioral differences” (Neal et al., 2001, p. 169). According to Ford (2012), these differences are embedded in the “verve, movement, oral tradition, and social time perspective” of the increasingly brown and black public school student population (p. 395).

In studies by Beth Harry (as cited in Ford, 2012), cultural differences in expectations for behavior can be misunderstood and lead to subjective referrals to special education (p. 395). Ford (2012) explains how all behavior (e.g., students’ gestures, attitudes, and social interactions) is driven by one’s cultural norms and educators’ interpretations of behavior. For example, rude and disrespectful behavior may be deemed as culturally appropriate in some cultures.

The National Research Council has studied disproportionate placement of minority students (Donovan & Cross, 2002) in hopes of providing insights on the causes and outcomes of disproportionality in the more subjective categories such as Emotional Disability. More recently, Balfanz, Byrnes, and Fox (2015) describe a present situation for African American males who not only experience disproportionate placement in the emotional disturbance category of special education but are also more likely to experience longer terms of school separation (as cited in Wright, Crawford, & Counsell, 2016). Balfanz et al. (2015) have
continued the research into disproportionate placement by focusing on the intersection of race, gender, and disability (as cited in Wright et al., 2016). Ford (2012) describes the low-incidence categories as those that require outside diagnosis like deafness, blindness, and a physical or orthopedic impairment (p. 398). Similar to other studies, Ford (2012) describes the high-incidence categories as intellectual disabilities (i.e., mild mental retardation), emotional disturbance, and specific learning disabilities. The study notes that these categories often have no known cause or origin and begin with an initial referral from a school official. Ford (2012) and Martin (2014) have begun new conversations that focus on the subjectivity of the high-incidence categories, like SED, and the referral process that ultimately begins with the judgment of the school officials. I concluded that looking at how school officials perceive students and disproportionality was paramount to adding substantive dialogue to the literature.

The phenomenon of disproportionate placement deserves more intentional research that focuses on the practitioners who refer, classify, and provide services to students with disabilities. Researchers (Ford, 2012; Jones-Goods & Grant, 2016; Martin, 2014; Sullivan & Bal, 2013) agree that there is a need for ongoing research into disproportionate placement among African American males in the high-incidence categories. For example, future researchers are encouraged to consider the variables leading to initial identification and placement in special education programs from the lens of the decision makers. The phenomenon of disproportionate placement can be studied through the common experiences, judgments, and educational philosophies of K-12 educators.
Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to conduct a grounded theory (Charmaz, 2011) study regarding the phenomenon of disproportionate placement among African American males, as well as to explore the themes that emerge from school administrators’ perspectives on special education placement. This study will examine possible implications for education policies in American public schools. School-related factors are often mentioned in the existing literature as paramount to the presence or absence of disproportionate placement in special education classes. Though few studies are definitive on this issue, some of the school-related factors researchers have noted involve problems with teacher referrals and faulty assessment tools (Cullinan & Kauffman, 2005; MacMillan, Gresham, & Bocian, 1996; Martin, 2014).

As much of the literature on disproportionate placement points to the importance of school-related factors (Skiba, Polani-Staudinger, Gallini, Simmons, & Feggin-Azziz, 2006; Sullivan & Artiles, 2011; Sullivan & Bal, 2013; Martin, 2014), this researcher sought to find the best way to understand school-related factors through an analysis of numerous perspectives from administrators and other education leaders. These are the individuals who both develop and implement school policy as well as informal daily practices within schools.

Some theorists have argued that school-related factors that are within the control of school administrators have the greatest influence on the convergence of race, disability, and overrepresentation (e.g., Meyer & Patton, 2001; Wright et al., 2016). In a recent publication, Harry (2014) argues that if we believe race and disability are social-constructs, there should be more discussion about the problems within our schools instead of the problems with our
children. Theorists cite the significance of school cultures, created by school leaders, as barriers to students’ ability to overcome disproportionate placement. According to a study by Sullivan and Bal (2013), “the most consistent predictors of identification across the categories were students' gender, race, socioeconomic status, and number of suspensions” (p. 475). The study by Wright et al. (2016) suggests that race continues to be the most predictable factor in identification for ED and separation from general education even when you control for socioeconomic status.

While much research (Serpell, Haylin, Stevenson, & Kern, 2009; Sullivan & Artiles, 2011; Ford, 2012; Jones-Goods & Grant, 2016) tends to focus on cultural differences between educators and the students they teach, there is also a need to focus on the relationship between students and school leaders. School leaders make the decision to develop either a supportive or unsupportive school culture. Unsupportive school cultures are characterized by culturally unresponsive policies, structures, and school routines that do not reflect an understanding of cultural competency; and curriculum and instruction that is poor in quality as well as an improper fit for the students (Watkins, Lewis, & Chou, 2001).

Administrative perspectives should enlighten even the layperson on the persistence of disproportionate placement. The study of perspectives requires consideration of what is commonly referred to as the ‘Thomas Theorem.’ The ‘Thomas Theorem’ describes the sociological approach espoused in the theories of W. I. Thomas and Dorothy Swaine Thomas. In *The Child in America* (1928), Thomas and Thomas are credited with giving the utmost significance to perspective. The ‘Thomas Theorem’ is generally known for the
significance of people’s definition of situations in relation to an understanding of the way they act (Link, Monahan, Stueve, & Cullen, 1999). Though not self-titled, the ‘Thomas Theorem’ states, “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences,” (Thomas & Thomas, 1928, p. 572). An exploration of administrative perspectives, based on their understandings of disproportionate placement, will help determine how they’ve defined the situation and the consequences.

If the bulk of the literature defines disproportionate placement of African American males in special education as an issue of concern, confirmed by data, the consequences of this said disproportionality must be real in its consequences. However, additional research is needed to better understand these issues (Meyer & Patton, 2001). In response, this study will provide insight into school leaders’ perspectives on disproportionate representation of African American males in special education, by asking educators to explore and explain their own ideas, practices, and policy implementation as it relates to special education referrals and placements. Meyer and Patton (2001) argue that we “need researchers and policy makers who will further our knowledge and support change through legislation when necessary,” (p. 12).

The study of administrative perspectives is essential to developing a theory about disproportionate placement and administrative approaches to addressing this phenomenon. Perspectives carry the connotation of understanding someone’s viewpoint on a subject. The etymology of the term is from the 14th Century and Medieval Latin from *perspectiva ars*, or the science of optics, (*Collins Concise Dictionary*, 2014). This terminology has now evolved
Thomas (1936) describes how the human condition is focused on understanding our behaviors. In his discussion of studying cultures, Thomas (1936) frames the human desire to study behaviors and essentially change those behaviors as the “general life process” (p. 177). The quest for changing our behaviors, unlike animals, requires humans to consider the social and cultural context in which the said behaviors developed in the beginning (Thomas, 1936). The cultural context is grounded in our social institutions, agreed-upon values and morals, attitudes, and the human desire to act according to these societal norms (Thomas, 1936). He further explains how our social conditioning impacts our attitudes and/or values that make up our individual personality (Thomas, 1936). Here, Thomas (1936) seems to be saying that we become who we are, forming habits and routines, based on our experiences within society.

This is relevant to understanding the context, social conditioning, and attitudes of school administrators when studying disproportionate placement. The literature has established that our habits, related to disproportionality in special education, have not changed to the extent necessary for racial, cultural, and gender equity in special education (Sullivan & Artiles, 2011; Ford, 2012; Sullivan & Bal, 2013; Harry & Klingner, 2014). In making meaning of the differences in behavior and the extent to which behavior has or has not changed, Thomas (1936) posits that a closer inspection of the individuals’ experiences and interpretations of these experiences is important. Thomas (1936) provides the impetus for my quest to understand administrative perspectives:
An adjustive effort of any kind is preceded by a decision to act or not act along a
given line, and the decision is itself preceded by a definition of the situation, that is to
say, an interpretation or point of view, and eventually policy and a behavior pattern.
In this way quick judgments and decisions are made at every point in everyday life.
Thus when approached by a man or a beast in a lonely spot we first define the
situation, make a judgment, as to whether the object is dangerous or harmless, and
then decide (“make up our mind”) what we are going to do about it. (pp. 184-185)

In determining what needs to be done to lessen disproportionate placement of African
American male students in special education programs and services, studies of minority
overrepresentation in special education must first begin on the micro level. This investigative
approach must also solicit different perspectives from those who are aware of the many
variables that affect disproportionate placement (Hosp & Reschly, 2004). Site-level and
district special education administrators are in the microcosm of the school, with the
responsibility for insuring schools comply with the mandates of NCLB and IDEA. It is here
that I began to build a theory of not only the ‘how,’ but also the ‘why’ of overrepresentation
of African American males in SED classes.

This research sought to provide a better understanding of administrative perspectives
aimed at producing future strategies for reducing the overrepresentation of African American
males in special education. To achieve this goal, the main research question in this study is:
*What is the public school administrator’s perspective on the placement of African American
students in the category of Serious Emotional Disability?* Additionally: How do public
school administrators describe their experiences of student placement in classes for students with Serious Emotional Disabilities (SED)? Secondary research questions include:

1. What are administrative perspectives on compliance with educational policies and monitoring requirements associated with the regulations of IDEA (2004)?
2. What is the administrator’s perspective on the relationship between public school policies and student placement in SED classes?
3. What variables do administrators believe affect student placement in SED classes?

As the responses to these questions were analyzed, this researcher searched for themes that emerged from administrators’ perspectives of this phenomenon of disproportionate placement of African American males in the category of Serious Emotional Disability.

**Significance of Study**

The significance of this study is that it provides a different lens for studying a topic many in American public education have come to view as unyielding – the overrepresentation of African American students in special education programs and services. This issue is relevant and timely as demonstrated by the level of attention given to this topic in the literature on disproportionate placement. This study’s focus on administrators’ perspectives of disproportionate placement has tremendous implications for future research by identifying predictors and generating a theory about the variables impacting overrepresentation of minority males in SED classrooms. According to Harry et al. (2002), “to discover what lies behind disproportionality then, research must use methods that can
document the school processes that lead to it’’ (p. 72). The best way to demonstrate what a school does is to document the words and deeds of those who do it daily.

**Conceptual Framework**

Further significance for this study comes from the emphasis on perspectives. Constructivism concentrates on multiple realities and how individuals construct reality based on their social interactions. According to Mills, Bonner, and Francis (2006), constructivism as a research paradigm, does not accept a single explanation or reality from which to frame one’s research. The use of constructivism as a conceptual framework will enable this study to look at the implications of disproportionate placement and the administrative perspectives on the topic. Strauss and Corbin (as cited in Mills et al., 2006) describe how constructivist grounded theory research rests on the interpretations of the researcher, as the researcher hears the voices and perspectives of the research participants. In this current study, it is the school leaderships’ interpretation of IDEA (2004) as well as their implementation of practices that result in the organizational culture that allows or disallows continued overrepresentation by minority students. Harry, Klingner, Sturges and Moore (2002) elaborate on this theme by stating, “to discover what lies behind disproportionality then, research must use methods that can document the school processes that lead to it” (p. 72). Constructivism as a framework will guide the ways in which the researcher addresses the issues of disproportionate placement and synthesizes future considerations for school leaders.

Life is constantly in a state of de-construction, change, re-construction, and construction of meaningfulness. Humanity is organic. The dynamic structure of the human
experience requires that people attempt to organize or create order in their lives (Mahoney & Granvold, 2005). Constructivism provides the language to describe this essential tension between humanity and the external world. When investigating disproportionate placement, the constructivist framework will allow flexibility in the way that the researcher not only designs the study but also in site and sample selection. Constructivists believe we all live to create order and can only understand humans through the acknowledgment of the intertwined social-symbolic systems that surround us (Mahoney, 2003).

In studying the perspectives of school administrators, I was able to include real interrelatedness between school outcomes and social, cultural, and environmental factors. If identification of subjective disabilities, such as SED, is the result of a constructed set of perspectives of those conducting the eligibility evaluation, then analyzing these perspectives is the preeminent approach. Harry et al. (2002) support this notion by stating that it is the spoken (official) and unspoken (unofficial) beliefs and practices that have the greatest impact on more restrictive learning environments. These researchers focused on the subjective decision-making process of special education identification. They found that “The definitions of high-incidence disabilities…and the criteria by which we try to operationalize them, represent social decisions not factual phenomena” (p. 77). It is then a worthy endeavor to sort the perspectives of administrators, who make decisions in public schools, in an attempt to better understand the subjective decision-making and required reforms relevant to special education for minority students.
Administrators are tasked with developing and ensuring implementation of school policies to improve student learning. Though there has been progress over the years, the continued problem of disproportionate placement of African American males in special education programs indicates a need to hear from school administrators. According to Frase (2005), teacher supervision must be based on the research body and has the greatest potential impact on the quality of classroom instruction and student learning outcomes (p. 445). Riehl (2000) focuses on the role school administrators, namely principals, play in creating environments that are able to support students from diverse backgrounds. This has been a problem in American schools, according to Riehl (2000), for well over a century.

As American schools become increasingly more diverse, the questions surrounding educational leaders’ perspectives on how best to serve diverse populations gains significance. This study hopes to develop a theory for how school administrators view special education programs, the criteria for placement in the special education programs, and how they make meaning of their role in addressing issues with special education programs. As IDEA (2004) requires more and more monitoring of these processes, educational researchers likewise should engage in questioning how administrators conduct related monitoring and supervision.

**Definition of Terms**

The following terms will be used in this study:
- *Disproportionate representation* – Adopted from the definition used by Oswald, Coutinho, Best, & Singh (1999) (as cited in Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, & Ortiz, 2010), disproportionate representation refers to "the extent to which membership in a given (ethnic, socioeconomic, linguistic, or gender) group affects the probability of being placed in a specific disability category" (p. 280).

- The term *overrepresentation will be used interchangeably with the term disproportionate representation*. According to Zhang & Katsiyannis (2002) “Overrepresentation occurs when the percentage of minority students in special education exceeds the percentage of these students in the total student population” (p. 180).

- *Serious Emotional Disability* (also designated as ED) is North Carolina’s designation for students who exhibit a feeling of depression or sadness, inappropriate interpersonal or intrapersonal behavior with peers and teachers, fails to adequately matriculate the educational system, and for whom services have been provided to mitigate the behaviors. The inappropriate behaviors are consistent, long-standing patterns that impact the student’s educational performance significantly (NCDPI, 2014). In this study the term SED will be used by the researcher and is synonymous with the term ED that will be used by many of the national research studies.

- *Perspective* is a term used in two distinct ways. The first describes “a way of regarding situations, facts, etc. and judging their relative importance” (perspective, (Def. 1) wordreference.com, 2014) to discuss the inspecting of social phenomena. It
will also be used to describe “a particular way of viewing things that depends on one’s experiences and personality” (perspective, (Def. 1) Cambridge Dictionaries Online, 2014).

**Summary of the Chapter**

This chapter outlines the reasons for the study of disproportionate placement by the current researcher. The chapter explains, from a historical context, the continued need for and interest in studying disproportionate placement. The chapter also introduces the theoretical framework and presents the current study as relevant for scholarly research. From the days when the earliest researchers to question overrepresentation and disproportionate placement (Dunn, 1968), to current day implementation and regulations of IDEA (2004), disproportionate placement continues to present itself as a conundrum for educators (Ford, 2012; Sullivan & Bal, 2013). By studying disproportionate placement, using a constructivist approach to grounded theory research, this study will explore administrative perspectives and develop a theory with implications for the future work of American public schools.

The next chapter of this study is the Literature Review. To begin developing the Literature Review, I reviewed seminal pieces of research and scholarship on the issue of disproportionate placement (Dunn, 1968; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Hosp & Reschly, 2002). I then began to look at more recent additions to the literature. There were a number of researchers still investigating disproportionate placement of African American males in special education but also in negative school outcomes (Ford & Moore, 2013; Sullivan & Bal, 2013; Camangian, 2015; Wright et al., 2016). This new compilation of research
expanded the conversation on disproportionality to look at how misidentification or overrepresentation in special education had a direct relationship to future negative outcomes including suspensions and incarceration. From that starting point, I began to synthesize the chapter by determining missing pieces to the field of literature. This searching and reflection led me to focus on administrative perspectives on the issue. I felt that a closer look at the reality of disproportionate placement, through the lens of administrators, would add to the body of knowledge and have implications for improvements in the future.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

Introduction

This literature review will synthesize the literature through a focus on four subsets of existing research on disproportionate placement: historical context, importance of perspectives and beliefs, future outcomes and effects, and existing gaps in research. To begin an examination of this phenomenon, one must understand the educational policies that have impacted historically disenfranchised student populations, particularly those eligible for special education programs and services. Brown vs. Board of Education (1954) and EACHA (1975) are two historical decisions inextricably linked to any research on disproportionate placement.

Prior to 1954, American schools operated under the premise of “separate but equal” (Brown v. Board of Education, 347 U.S. 483 (1954). With the Supreme Court ruling that states no longer had the right to maintain such an unequal educational system, public schools were forced to integrate along racial lines. In addition to requiring equality through one unified school experience for all students, the passing of EACHA (1975) later enlisted local districts to comply with yet another federal mandate – the free and appropriate education of students with disabilities.

The passage of EACHA (1975) meant localities now must provide a free and appropriate education for all students regardless of physical, mental or emotional disability. This interjection by the federal government into the realm of what had historically been up to
states and local districts created a national uproar that still is heard today. In the passage of time since EACHA (1975) and the sixty-plus years since Brown vs. Board (1954), educators must look carefully at this legacy and how the intent to fully franchise all students has manifested.

**Historical Recognition.**

*Brown vs. Board of Education (1954).*

Proponents of *Brown vs. Board (1954)* and civil rights activists have analyzed this court decision and its impact on African American students for the more than half-century since its ruling. The Office of Civil Rights has identified the continuing problem of disproportionate placement of African American students into special education programs since the early 1970s. The national attention this issue garnered was largely due to the work of Dunn (1968), who pointed to high percentages of African American students in California’s Educable Mentally Retarded (EMR) classes. Early critics such as Dunn (1968) suggested that disproportional placement was adopted and institutionalized as a means of re-segregation following *Brown*. If Dunn (1968) was correct in his assertion, there are even more startling facts that support his argument. For example, southern states historically have the highest incidences of overrepresentation among African American students. The prevalence of overrepresentation in the south, where there is greater economic disparity and poverty, implies a link to socioeconomic factors as well as a legacy of racial discrimination (Ferri & Connor, 2005).
In his early works, Dr. W.E.B. DuBois pondered the idea of racial segregation or “separate but equal” schools (DuBois, 1935). DuBois (as cited in Shealey, Lue, Brooks, & McCray, 2005) emphasized the need for quality instruction and educational opportunities for African American students (Shealey et al., 2005). This discourse addressed the “dichotomy between access and placement” (Shealey et al., 2005, p. 114). According to Dr. DuBois, access to the same schools as European American students would automatically result in improved educational outcomes for African American students.

However, history has illustrated that unless structures are in place to address contextual factors associated with teaching students of color and working effectively with their families, the promises of Brown will continue to elude the very students it sought to protect. (Shealey et al., 2005, p. 114)

The assumption of proponents of Brown vs. Board of Education (1954) was that the means by which European American children experienced academic success would automatically translate into the same type of experience if all students were provided the same type of education (Hudson & Holmes, 1994). However, a layperson’s review of current data on the performance of African American students, particularly males, demonstrates that the reasoning behind the Brown decision does not easily translate into educational equality for students of color.

Historically, students of color faced increases in school segregation as well as a school experience in which the majority of students are economically disadvantaged, creating
a situation of concentrated poverty (Orfield & Eaton, 1996). In recent years, there have been improvements in the degree of disproportionality since IDEA (2004) regulations began requiring deliberate scrutiny of special education services based on race and ethnicity.

Sullivan and Bal (2013) found that the reported national numbers on disproportionality for African American students have become relatively stable, and found there are still indications that in some vicinities Black students are twice as likely to be identified as ED and nearly 2.7 times as likely to be identified as having an intellectual disability than are all other races. One research study found that “African American males are overrepresented among youth in special education identified as having emotional and behavioral disorders. Compared to other youth in special education, they have the least access to needed services and the worst social and academic outcomes” (Serpell et al., 2009, p. 321).

EACHA (1975).

Public Law 94-142, also known as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA), was signed by President Ford in 1975. EAHCA is often referred to as the first law to provide protections for students with disabilities (Ramos, 2008). In 1997, the third revision of EAHCA resulted in renaming of the act as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). During that year, revisions of the reauthorization began to require that data on the race and ethnicity of students receiving special education services largely due to the increasing attention to the issue of disproportionate placement (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2014). IDEA (2004) maintains the same principles as the original act. These are: (1) providing a free appropriate public education (FAPE) for all children with disabilities, (2)
ensuring that the rights of children with disabilities and their parents are protected, (3) assisting states and localities in providing for the education of all children with disabilities, and (4) assessing the effectiveness of efforts to educate children with disabilities (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2014).

The aim of IDEA (2004) continues to be to provide FAPE. However, FAPE is questionable when disproportionate placement and overrepresentation exists in those areas of special education that begin with teacher referral and are more subjective. Placement in the less subjective areas of disability such as blindness and deafness are ascribed proportionately. For example, of all students served in 2010-2011 under IDEA (2004), African American students accounted for 13.9% of the students with speech or language impairments while White students accounted for 19.4% within this category. African American students accounted for .6% of all students served under IDEA (2004) for orthopedic impairments while White students accounted for 1.0% of all students served under IDEA (2004) for orthopedic impairments (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2014). In comparison, the subjective nature of ED creates questions for educators about how students are identified for special education.

By looking at the historical significance of legislation and court decisions associated with educational policies, researchers suggest there is more work to do in this area (Shealey et al., 2005; Sullivan & Bal, 2013). Though there is a wealth of research on disproportionate placement, few studies focus on gender disparities in disproportionate placement (Sullivan & Bal, 2013). Educators must conduct their own timely research about how to understand
overrepresentation in special education categories and still comply with the regulations of special education legislation. According to Shealey et al. (2005), “Special education was founded on the premise that individualizing instruction for children who were experiencing educational problems would help them to catch up to their schoolmates,” (p. 114).

The aspect of IDEA that is threatened by the continuance of disproportionate placement is the requirement for the least restrictive environment (LRE). Researchers have clearly determined that for many years African American students, especially males, have been more likely to be placed in more restrictive settings or experience more educational separation than any other racial or ethnic group (Oswald, Coutinho, Best, & Singh, 1999; Hosp & Reschly, 2002, 2003; Bradley, Henderson, & Monfore, 2004; Wright et.al, 2016). Critical theorists have argued that a very deliberate system of unequal, segregated education has emerged in the guise of special education programs for students with disabilities. Evidence that seems to support such a notion includes, “the differential treatment of students of color in special education…has been well documented and has failed to be solved by legislative updates,” (Shealy et al., 2005, p. 116).

In the most recent report to Congress, the U.S. Department of Education (2014) reported 11.2% of African American students were served under IDEA (2004) in 2011 (p. 44). Additionally, this report found that in the self-reporting of state agencies, African American students have a risk ratio of 1.4. This means that African American students are more than 1.4 times likely to be identified for special education as are students in all the other racial/ethnic groups combined (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2014).
In the piedmont area of North Carolina, four of the five Triangle districts have experienced disproportionality (Office of Civil Rights, 2011). According to the Office of Civil Rights Data Collection, the statistics on students served under IDEA (2004) are recorded in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

Figure 1. *Percentage of African American Students in High-Five Districts*
This information obtained from the most recent Office of Civil Rights Data Collection for 2010-2011.

Figure 2. Percentage of African American Students of All Receiving IDEA Services in District

Disproportionate Placement

Litigation.

There have been lawsuits and even class action suits against school districts and school leaders in response to the persistent overrepresentation of minority students in special education (e.g., Johnson vs. San Francisco Unified School District, 1971; Larry P. v. Riles, 1971 & 1984). This litigation sought educational justice for minority students by utilizing the very tools (legislative & judicial branches of government) used to enact educational policies.
Litigation regarding this societal issue reinforced the initial concerns expressed by Lloyd Dunn in 1968. Two of the most important and far-reaching cases were both argued in 1971. These cases enlightened the world to the possibility that a stereotypical belief in White intellectual superiority could also permeate educational policy and practice (Ferri & Connor, 2005).

Some of the most cited litigation in this area is: Johnson vs. San Francisco Unified School District (1971) and Larry P. vs. Riles (1971). The first, Johnson vs. San Francisco Unified School District, maintained that San Francisco had been using special education classes as a means of segregation since 1965. In this case, parents of Black children stated that the school district did not have a distinct policy of segregation but did not have Board policies that prevented it (Johnson vs. San Francisco Unified School District, N.D. Cal, 1971). The court found that the parents were justified in this concern. The court ruled that two plans to intentionally desegregate the schools in the district must be submitted, approved and implemented (Johnson vs. San Francisco Unified School District, N.D. Cal., 1971).

That same year, Larry P. vs. Riles also filed suit against the San Francisco school district. This case argued that the district willfully discriminated against five African American students who were labeled Educable Mentally Retarded (EMR) and placed in special education classrooms (Prasse & Reschly, 1986). The rationale of Larry P. was that there was cultural bias in the assessment process for special education classrooms resulting in the over-identification of African American students. In the San Francisco Unified District, 29% of the students were African American while 66% of the students identified as Educable
Mentally Retarded were African American (Harry, 1994). According to Ivey (2007), the *Larry P. v. Riles (1971)* case is the most significant to the study of disproportionate placement. This lawsuit resulted in the courts ordering California to develop strategies for reducing disproportionate placement in the subjective areas of special education classification (Ivey, 2007). California was also reprimanded for the use of Intelligence Quotient (IQ) tests that the courts deemed violations of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act and the Rehabilitation Act, Title VI, and overall discriminatory against black children (*Larry P. by Lucille P. v. Riles*, 793 F.2d 969, 9th Cir., 1984).

In its reauthorized version, IDEA (2004) has concise language that outlines specific steps for school systems in order to avoid overrepresentation. IDEA (2004) mandates states to report how many students are in each disability category, specify the occurrence of disproportionate representation, and review existing policies and practices to eradicate overrepresentation of minority students in self-contained or more restrictive class environments (618(d)(1)(2)). IDEA (2004) also contained specific regulations about monitoring and disproportionate placement that were finally enacted in August 2006. This demonstrates the government’s acknowledgment of this phenomenon.

**Effects.**

When analyzed critically, educators are left with the task of uncovering, publicly acknowledging, and tackling disproportionate placement where it exists. Failure to address this issue in an age of high stakes testing and a standards-based public school system has the potential to exacerbate negative results. Recent data shows that 37% of students identified as
ED dropped out of high school in 2010-2011 (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2014). Across all categories of disability, 45.4% of African American students served under IDEA (2004) were outside the regular classroom for less than 80% of the school day (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2014). According to Ford (2011), “When a very large percentage of students (in this case Black males) is labeled as having emotional disorders, intellectual disabilities, and emotional disturbance, they are (depending on the severity) less likely or not likely to participate in college preparation classes and to enter college” (as cited in Ford, 2012, p. 402). Research (Camangian, 2015; Ford, 2012; Martin, 2014; Serpell et al., 2009; Sullivan & Bal, 2013) continues to point out startling revelations for modern public education and the future outcomes of African American males in special education.

**Importance of perspectives.**

**Impact on decisions.**

Perspective, as defined earlier, refers to someone’s view or opinion on a situation, based on the person’s experience and personality. W.I. Thomas is referred to as “the dean of American sociologists” (Merton, 1948, p. 475). Much of social psychology got its beginnings from the work of W.I. Thomas. According to Merton (1968), the Thomas Theorem would enlighten more people on the intricacies of behavior within our society, if it were better known. The Thomas Theorem, in its wisdom and simplicity, is transferable to nearly all our social interactions (Merton, 1968). The theorem simply states, “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences,” (Merton, 1968, p. 193).
This theorem’s importance to this research is in recognizing how we first define or construct meaning of a situation and then act accordingly. It is for this reason that this study focused on administrators’ perspectives and developed a theory about administrators’ definitions of disproportionate placement, and ultimately, what we can learn from the behaviors directly related to those beliefs.

Bandura’s work on social cognitive theory, as cited in Pajares (1996), focused on people’s belief systems and the self-reflective process. Additionally, Bandura and Dewey (as cited in Pajares, 1996) studied under “…the assumption that beliefs are the best indicators of the decisions individuals make throughout their lives” (p. 307). If we can learn how a person defines a situation or attaches meaning to events, we can also know how that person will respond or behave when experiencing those situations or events (Merton, 1968). Merton (1968) asserted that once a person assigns meaning to a situation or forms an opinion about it, that person’s future behaviors will be a direct result of that meaning.

Perspectives matter because they essentially tell us something about a person’s future decisions and actions. This is consistent with social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) and the Thomas Theorem (Thomas, 1936). Whereas Bandura (1986) discussed self-efficacy, Merton (1968) expounded the Thomas Theorem by discussing the concept of self-fulfilling prophecy. Merton (1968) basically asserted that the self-fulfilling prophecy begins with a lie or untrue definition that causes a behavior, that causes the lie to then become true in order to fulfill the individuals’ beliefs about the situation in the beginning.
According to Merton (1968), it is the self-fulfilling prophecy which goes far toward explaining the dynamics of ethnic and racial conflict in the America of today” (p. 477). Merton (1968) continued on to say that it is most Americans’ ignorance of the self-fulfilling prophecy that allows for the continuance of racial discrimination and prejudice in an unwitting manner. Merton (1968) called unwitting pre-judgments “the facts of the case” (p. 478). By being oblivious to the self-fulfilling prophecy, people are able to look at seeming facts of isolated cases. They can then apply the same pre-judgments to larger members of groups associated with the facts as determined by those unaware of the self-fulfilling prophecy.

Merton (1968) provided us with some ideas about how to overcome a self-fulfilling prophecy. He recommended’ that the only way to remedy a self-fulfilling prophecy is to return to the Thomas Theorem (Merton, 1968). The return to the Thomas Theorem means one must look at the initial definition of the situation, again. “Only when the original assumption is questioned and a new definition of the situation introduced, does the consequent flow of events give the lie to the assumption. Only then does the belief no longer father the reality” (Merton, 1968, p. 478). By studying the perspectives of administrators, this study will seek a theory, or definition of the situation, that allows for self-reflection and change in behaviors.

Existing Gaps in the Literature

There are existing gaps in the literature that this study will help fill. Though most data is aggregated on the national level, there is evidence of disproportionate placement and
overrepresentation in even more startling numbers across the nation in states and districts
Sullivan & Artiles (2011). Sullivan and Artiles (2011) noted that collecting data on a
national level inadvertently suggests parity in placement and representation. These authors
contend that looking at data on a national level can sometimes mute the unfairness of
disproportionate placement and overrepresentation in local districts and states (Sullivan and
Artiles, 2011). They recommended a few types of studies that will address the existing gaps
in the literature. For example, they noted that most studies on disproportionate placement do
not utilize a theoretical framework to examine the data intently. Sullivan and Artiles (2011)
suggested that research on this topic should not be an explanation but rather creation of a
theory that looks at the phenomenon.

This study adds to the literature in two specific ways: (1) This study informs and
examines both district and school-level perspectives to obtain a picture of how local
administrators define disproportionality; and (2) This study presents a theory about how
administrators’ perspectives have the potential to positively impact student achievement
regardless of race, socioeconomic, or cultural differences. These two aspects of this study
add to the literature on a mid-Atlantic state with multiple suburban districts experiencing
disproportionate placement.

**Summary of Chapter**

The literature on disproportionate placement has been available to educators for
decades. Since 1968, researchers have been asking questions about how disproportionate
placement of minority students affects educational systems as a whole. Research has also
determined that disproportionate placement, overrepresentation and underrepresentation, is
greater in the more subjective areas of classification (Anyon, 2009; Donovan & Cross, 2002;
Harry, 2007; Sullivan & Ariles, 2011; Ford, 2012; Sullivan & Bal, 2013; Wright et al.,
2016). Plainly stated, a study by Alazar (2015) asserts that African American students are
still disproportionately represented in special education programs when compared to their
White and Asian peers.

IDEA (2004) guides how educators make decisions in regards to identification and
placement of students in special education programs. The literature not only points to the
existence of overrepresentation of African American students in special education programs
but also encourages educators to seek solutions that will help to eliminate or reduce
disproportionate representation. The mystery will only unravel when research produces a
valid theory, from the perspective of the school leaders, about why this phenomenon
continues despite educational policies and federal interventions intended to insure equity in
educational opportunity.

In Chapter 3, I explain the actual procedures of research utilized to conduct the study.
This includes details about the specific qualitative approach, elaboration on the theoretical
framework, ethical issues, and limitations of the study. In this chapter, I achieve the
following: describes the methods the researcher used to ensure reliability and validity,
explain participant selection criteria, and identify the specific modes of data collection used.

This grounded theory study evolves using a social constructivist framework. The use
of a social constructivist framework is most appropriate for this research (Grbich, 2007).
Grounded theory is one of the most popular methodologies used for qualitative research (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). According to Strauss and Corbin (1997), grounded theory is the methodology of choice for researchers hoping to provide explanations or theories for some of the most puzzling situations societies face. Glaser and Strauss (2009) explain the legitimacy of grounded theory methods as having the ability to provide “…relevant predictions, explanations, interpretations, and applications” (p. 1). Constructivist propensity to grounded theory goes about “emphasizing diverse local worlds, multiple realities, and the complexities of particular worlds, views, and actions” (Creswell, 2007, p. 65). The flexibility of the constructivist approach works nicely as the phenomenon of disproportionate placement and practitioners’ perspectives of it are multi-faceted. The study participants are not monolithic and the research needs to demonstrate the diversity present even among students in special education.

Grbich (2007) set constructivism as applicable for grounded theory research. According to Grbich (2007), constructivism should be used as a framework when “the understandings that researchers construct and impose through interpretation are seen as limited by the frames derived from their own experiences” (p. 8). In constructivist grounded theory, the authenticity of the research relies on the researcher’s perspectives, interpretations of observations, and personal experiences. Grbich (2007) went further to state that the subjectivity of the researcher and the researcher/participant interactions are pertinent in the constructivist perspective. According to constructivist researcher Charmaz, more emphasis
should be placed on values, belief systems, morals, and social viewpoints of individuals (including the researcher) than on specific methodology (as cited in Creswell, 2007).

The constructivist perspective and grounded theory research are similar entities. Grounded theory has underlying assumptions about reality being a construct of symbolic and social interactions. In grounded theory, as in the constructivist framework, there is a focus on the researcher and participants developing the self within the social context in which they live and dwell daily (Grbich, 2007).

There is tremendous variation in the types of products that may come out of qualitative research. There is no one best way to conduct this type of research other than to utilize a clear understanding of the chosen theoretical framework. By understanding the framework, the researcher can begin to construct a plan for the study. Constructivism can serve as a type of sociological underpinning for understanding other researchers’ approach to the study of disproportionate placement. This study of administrators’ perspectives utilizes the theoretical framework, in all of its organic nature, to theorize possible steps educators can take to improve outcomes for student groups overrepresented in the SED category of special education.
Chapter 3

Research Methodology

Introduction.

Research methodology must be designed based on the research questions of a particular study. For this study, the main research question is as follows: *What is the public school administrator’s perspective on the placement of African American students in the category of Serious Emotional Disability?* An underlying question is, *How do public school administrators describe their experiences of student placement in classes for students with Serious Emotional Disabilities?* To ensure students’ needs are properly met, educators must better understand the perspectives of Principals, Assistant Principals, and Directors of Special Education Programs, and how these perspectives impact decision-making in American public schools.

This study utilizes a grounded theory approach to qualitative research. Grounded theory research focuses on developing a theory based upon the qualitative methodology. This approach works well when the researcher intends to generate the theory from the view of the study participants. Grounded theory is well suited “when there is a need for new theoretical explanations built on previous knowledge to explain changes in the field” (Grbich, 2007, p. 70).

**Constructivist Grounded Theory**

This grounded theory study evolves using a social constructivist framework. Grounded theory is a type of qualitative research that uses a continual interchange between
the researcher’s data collection and the researcher’s data analysis to eventually develop a theory (Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2008). According to Mills et al. (2008), Glaser and Strauss are the originators of this method of conducting qualitative research. In the years since its conception by Glaser and Strauss in 1967, grounded theory has developed into three main versions: constructivist, objectivist, and post positivist.

Rather than being distinct types of grounded theory versions, constructivist, objectivist, and post positivist are terms that frame the changing beliefs behind grounded theory research. The constructivist version of grounded theory has evolved from recent transformation of the original ground theory methods of Glaser and Strauss (as cited in Bryant & Charmaz, 2014). The constructivist version is more flexible and allows for not only construction of theories but also the construction of methods in relation to data, the context, and the researchers’ interaction and beliefs (Bryant & Charmaz, 2014). Glaser and Strauss, favoring the objectivist or positivist, perspectivist placed an emphasis on using the scientific method to develop theory (as cited in Bryant & Charmaz, 2014). The positivist version focuses on “correspondence of theories of truth, of objective inquirers, and processes of discovery” (Denzin, 2014, p. 455). According to Denzin (2014), post positivist versions of grounded theory move away from the idea of objective researchers and more toward a constructivist viewpoint. The post positivist grounded theorist, according to Denzin (2014), stays true to the scientific method but brings a new definition for what is “good science” (p. 575).
For this study, the researcher’s choice of a constructivist version of grounded theory is due to the significance placed on the researcher using “inductive analysis” (Mills et al., 2008, p. 13). Inductive analysis is the method of developing themes and categories during the actual research, from the data collection, rather than determining themes and categories before any data collection has occurred. The use of a constructivist framework is most appropriate for this research. The focus on administrative perspectives lends itself to the ideals of constructivist grounded theory. Constructivist grounded theorists believe that knowledge is derived in a specific place in time and is dependent not only on the situation but also on the researcher’s interpretation of it (Charmaz, 2008).

**Importance of Perspectives in Qualitative Research**

Traditionally, qualitative research has been a broad category used to describe a unique type of research. The definitions of qualitative research are as wide as the number of leading scholars in the field. Whether one is reading about conducting qualitative research from Wolcott (2001), Creswell (2007), Grbich (2007), or Denzin and Lincoln (2011), the authors make readers aware that there are a number of ways to approach qualitative research. Wolcott (2001) affirms that qualitative research and meaning-making are indeed impacted by a researcher’s very humanity and social contexts. Grbich (2007) guides us as researchers to familiarize ourselves with “…the knowledge traditions (called epistemologies) which you as qualitative researcher will need…in choosing the approach you will take in your own research study” (p. 3). Denzin and Lincoln (2011) discuss the complexity of qualitative research as dwelling primarily on two polar ends with an emerging search for a comfortable
middle ground. Ultimately, these texts guide novice researchers to be cognizant that there remains an ongoing debate about which approach, or epistemology, works best for their projects. For the qualitative researcher, there are no definitive right or wrong approaches. The researcher must determine only a right approach for his or her research project.

This novice researcher has determined that the best approach for this study is grounded theory, framed by the constructivist sociological perspective. Denzin (2014) wrote that part of the allure of grounded theory is that it is multifaceted. Charmaz (as cited in Denzin, 2014) explained, “It is all grounded. It is two things at the same time, a verb, a method of inquiry, and a noun, a product of inquiry” (p. 454). Denzin (2014) framed the definition of grounded theory in such a way to encourage new researchers to see it as how you do research and it is a thing to be created. By looking at administrative perspectives on disproportionate placement of African American students, primarily African American males, this study develops a theory grounded in the evidence derived from these perspectives. The study of a person’s perspectives appears to be the best approach for studying a phenomenon, disproportionate placement in special education, occurring within a social institution. Studying a person’s perspectives, or beliefs shall we say, is paramount to social psychology and finding meaning for the occurrences in our institutions.

In advocating for the very need for social psychology and studying what occurs in our social institutions, renowned psychologist John Dewey (1917) discusses how social psychology is necessary. For those who wish to make meaning of educational organizations, we must begin to understand our basic human instincts, our environments, and our attempts
to control those environments. According to Dewey (1917), such need for understanding our institutions requires social psychology. An example of Dewey’s stance on looking at perspectives is as follows:

To form a mind out of certain native instincts by selecting an environment which evokes them and directs their course; to re-form social institutions by breaking up habits and giving peculiar intensity and scope to some impulse is the problem of social control in its two phases. To describe how such changes take place is the task of social psychology stated in generalized terms. (Dewey, 1917, p. 269)

In psychological theory, Dewey (1917) discussed how “mind”, our intelligence or knowing a thing, schools, etc. (p. 272). Dewey (1917) believed we ultimately act according to our attitudes and beliefs, and life’s direction, as constructed from our social interactions. If we give credence to Dewey’s assertions on how we come to know a thing, we must come to know disproportionate placement of African American males through the attitudes and beliefs, and life’s trajectory of school administrators.

Following the premise of Dewey’s work, Pajares (1992) posits that our study of teachers’ beliefs and attitudes will ultimately do the most to inform us of what and why things present themselves as benefits and problems within our schools. The work of Nespor (as cited in Pajares, 1992) stated the following:

in spite of arguments that people’s “beliefs” are important influences on the ways they conceptualize tasks and learn from experience . . . little attention has been
accorded to the structure and functions of teachers’ beliefs about their roles, their
students, the subject matter areas they teach, and the schools they work in. (p. 317)
These arguments that people’s basic belief systems inform how they understand anything
they do and eventually how they act lead this researcher to believe a study of school
administrators’ perspectives on special education placement is justified. Administrators, at
the district and school level, often dictate the policies and procedures that guide teachers’
instruction and expectations in the classroom. Special education services often originate, to
varying degrees, from teacher referrals based on the teacher’s perception of a student’s need.
This study explored how a school administrator views his or her role in supervising teacher
instruction, teacher expectations, and teacher participation in the special education referral
process in hopes of making more meaning of the disproportionate placement conversation.

The idea that there is much to learn from understanding administrative perspectives is
further supported by the work of Frase (2005). Frase (2005) writes that it is an agreed fact
that educational leadership and supervision serve the dual purposes of improving teacher
behaviors and increasing student growth (p. 432). Frase (2005), however, does not believe
school leadership has done a good job of this. In his study, he expresses the belief that school
leaders have not developed supervisory practices that motivate teachers to better performance
but instead continue to maintain the status quo (p. 432). As researchers look at undesirable
situations in our schools, Frase (2005) focuses on the role of the supervisors or
administrators, and their understanding of how they impact teacher practices, student growth,
or the lack thereof, through supervisory practices.
Site Selection and Sample

The site for this grounded theory study is a suburban school district in the Piedmont region of North Carolina. This district can be categorized as suburban due to the number of students, demographics, and affluence of the families. The term suburban schools describes schools that are generally populated by White, middle-class students and are located on the outskirts of major metropolitan areas. I selected the school district based on the student population, demographics, and the district’s data on IDEA (2004) services. I anticipated speaking with two administrators in three schools regarding their perspectives on student placement into special education.

The final project, however, changed slightly in sample size. In the change, I did achieve the goal of speaking with a principal and an assistant principal. I also anticipated speaking with two of the school district’s special education administrators about the district’s response to recent federal requirements for state-level monitoring and reporting of special education placement as well. Though I did speak with a number of the school district’s Central Services administrators, I formally interviewed one.

I hoped that the selection of two participants in each role would allow me to gain administrative perspectives on disproportionate placement from educators with variations in role, years of experience, and workplace location. After initial discussions with District officials, I had to rethink the number of interviews that would be used for the study. I also had to reconsider the value of observations inside the school prior to the interview. Despite these changes in the initial methodology, I was able to obtain administrative perspectives
from a diverse group of administrators in various roles within the district. The actual participants were chosen as a part of the emergent design of qualitative research without me having previously visited or conducted initial observations within the workplaces.

Data Collection

Qualitative research is about finding data in the participants’ natural setting. Staying true to this aspect of qualitative research, I utilized an amended methodology that is typical of grounded theory inquiry. According to Charmaz (2008), grounded theory engages researchers not only in the ‘how’ and ‘what’ questions of research, but also the ‘why’ questions that develop during the inquiry.

The main sources of data collection were interviews and conclusions about school culture and climate drawn from my informal interactions within the schools. I chose interviews as the primary research method due to the purpose of my study. Studying administrative perspectives is about understanding how the participants understand disproportionate placement and their roles in the process. Vgotsky (1987), wrote that “every word that people use in telling their stories is a microcosm of their consciousness” (as cited in Seidman, 2006, p. 7). This means that interviews give us a smaller view on the larger issues we feel compelled to investigate, like disproportionate placement of African American male students. Some, according to Seidman (2006), believe that all research methods should be more closely aligned with those used in the natural sciences. Seidman (2006) expresses an opinion that there is one major difference between research conducted by educators and social scientists that requires interviews as a sound qualitative method. Educators and social
scientists study human subjects who can talk, express feelings or emotions, and reveal a
glimpse into their very consciousness by telling their own stories.

The number of interviews came directly from the number of participants who
accepted the invitations. I used the research questions as general guidelines for the
interviews. I was able to realize the initial intent of engaging in probing questions and inquiry
that allowed follow-up to initial research questions. As administrators talked about their
experiences with special education programs, I realized that the richest data would come
primarily from the dialogue generated by the scripted questions.

I anticipated conducting six to eight interviews and completed four interviews in
total. Due to the reduction in the number of overall interviews, additional attention was given
to the participants’ responses to open-ended, thought-provoking inquiry. I listened intently to
the participants’ responses as I realized that I would have to develop themes and theories
from these interviews and my perspective as the researcher. Interviews were the substance of
this study because it is through the narrative or storytelling that we have recorded most of
human history (Seidman, 2006). As a result of the need for additional attention to the details
and nuance of the participants’ responses, each interview was recorded on a password-
protected device. The interviews and all identifying information remained confidential
throughout the study. True identities of the participants were not shared with anyone.

Data Analysis

I began with traditional Glaserian grounded theory analysis which utilized “open
coding, theoretical sampling and constant comparisons,” (Grbich, 2007, p. 72). Open coding
began this process by analyzing each of the interview transcripts line by line. Looking at the participants’ exact words helped me to determine the subsequent steps of the research. In addition to this illumination of interrelatedness, I anticipated the development of themes and motifs. In sum, this type of analysis allowed me to make predictions about other connections found in the data (Creswell, 2007).

I wanted to look at documents including data on student placement in special education and the school or district’s procedures for referrals and eligibility determination, however, I was not granted access to those documents. As the research process progressed, I realized that the documents with information about special education program enrollment dates, patterns of disability categories, and any trends among African American males would be useful but were not necessary. The participants’ responses were so fruitful until the documents were no longer a necessary source of data to gain insight on administrators’ perspectives.

My data analysis was inextricably linked to who I am as an administrator, an educator, and a researcher. Though I thought it would be necessary to use the entire spectrum of qualitative research to lead me to a theory on disproportionate placement of African American students in high-incidence category of SED, I discovered that the interviews and conclusions drawn from visiting the participants’ work places were sufficient in providing the themes necessary to generate a theory from administrative perspectives. The theory about how school and district administrators perceive disproportionate placement came directly from me using my experiences as an African American, female, career
educator of African American students and my perceptions of school leaders’ roles. With the bountiful input from the participants, I was able to fulfill the aim of this research study by generating a theory that summarized how administrators’ perspectives can and do impact school outcomes related to disproportionate placement in SED.

Research Validity and Reliability

Research validity and reliability are basic tenets of inquiry whether the approach is qualitative or quantitative. I was able to produce credible and reliable research by triangulating data, engaging in extended interviews, developing rich thick descriptions of the culture and climate of the district, and acknowledging and addressing the potential for my bias from the onset of this study. Denzin (2014) stated that credibility is sometimes questioned in ground theory research because of the subjective and “value-laden” aspect applied to the facts (p. 576). By clearly stating the conceptual framework and my subjectivity, I acknowledged the need for my analysis to be built on constant comparisons of the participants' word choices, tone, and additional commentary each participant offered during each interview. I analyzed the data by comparing responses from each participant before categorizing themes.

I used a variety of tools to ensure validity and reliability of this study. For example, by engaging in dialogue with the participants throughout the inquiry by asking follow-up questions, I was able to periodically check my own thinking. I utilized personal reflection and brainstorming during data collection and analysis. For instance, I placed myself back in the participants’ setting as I looked for themes from the responses. I remembered and made
handwritten notes about how the building culture felt. I placed myself in the same space and used my experience as an administrator to write down key impressions from the answers given as well as any unanswered questions. I asked Principal M about describing her school and she did not stick to a five word description. Principal M spoke about the school being different and people being there “because they want to,” and “wondering why people would choose such a hard place to work.” (Personal Communication, 2016) I interpreted that, as I listened to the interview with Principal M again, to be a reflection of how Principal M viewed her faculty, students, and school. This description, compared with Principal M responses as well as the interactions I witnessed, led me to believe the relationship piece of schooling was most important to Principal M. According to Denzin (2014), analysis is more than trying to figure out what someone is thinking. It is a performance task as well. Denzin (2014) writes about how analysis is a joint endeavor between the writer, the text, and the reader (p. 571). Analysis, in the Denzin (2014) interpretation, is about deciding not only how to write but also deciding what to write. Analysis, in qualitative research, involves the writer. For this reason, my engaging participants during the interviews and engaging in personal reflection during data analysis helped me to interpret the thematic similarities present in the responses.

I also triangulated the data by using data from participant interviews to verify or validate findings. I listened to all the interviews several times before beginning to establish the thematic categories. I then began to write down the key words from the interviews the third time I listened to them. After having spent an hour to two hours in the field conducting
interviews and pre-interview conclusions, I was able to brainstorm key impressions of the school’s culture as laissez-faire, highly-structured, collaborative, supportive, very traditional, etc. I spent an hour to two hours in each setting on the day of the interview though the longest formal interview lasted only forty-six minutes. I felt I was able to make informed conclusions about the participants and the validity of their comments based on the relationships I’d established as well as the relationships I’d connected through the analysis of the data.

Honest relationships with the participants helped to alleviate the potential for deficits in validity and reliability. Qualitative research studies, by virtue of the observations in the methodology, are often subject to the Hawthorne Effect (Fernald, Coombs, DeAlleanume, West, & Parnes, 2012). The Hawthorne Effect occurs when a participant’s behavior or study results are compromised and changed by the participant’s awareness of the research in which he/she is participating (Fernald et al., 2012; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). In their study, Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007) introduce the concept of reactivity. In their work, the authors examine how a study utilizing qualitative methods will have a lesser likelihood for objectivity (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). Reactivity, according to Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007) refers to the ways in which a qualitative study is conducted by researchers and the participants’ reaction to the study, the researcher, the conditions, etc. The Hawthorne Effect is a type of reactivity that can occur in qualitative research (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). Fernald et al. (2012) add an additional component to the Hawthorne Effect. In their work,
they point out that participants will likely behave differently if they believe they have received any special attention as a result of participating in the study.

My presence in the natural setting of the participants during this grounded theory study helped to lessen the Hawthorne Effect. As the administrators became comfortable with me in their buildings, they engaged in candid conversation about their perspectives. As a result of trusting relationships with the participants, rich dialogue emerged. Finally, a researcher subjectivity statement (see below) enlightened readers about the role I played and how who I am as a researcher actually impacts the interpretation of data (Creswell, 2007).

**Safeguards against Researcher Bias (Subjectivity Statement)**

I began this study as a novice researcher but a veteran administrator. As a mother of two African American males, I was often perplexed at the sheer proposition of disproportionate placement. Many of the students I deal with on a daily basis are identified within special education categories or they have recently been exited from the program. The phenomenon of disproportionate placement has intrigued me as I have grown as an educator. I really wanted to know how other school administrators perceive the placement of African American students in special education programs.

I’m an African American female born and raised in rural, coastal North Carolina. I am the middle child of five children born to simple and virtually uneducated parents. My parents provided a nice home with moral teachings and great value placed on education.
There was never a question in my household if my siblings and I would go to college. The only question was where we would go to college?

However, this family focus on education did not preclude me or any of my siblings from experiencing subtle discrimination and prejudice. My parents’ teachings and guidance did not shelter my siblings and me. I distinctly remember being a bit precocious and loquacious while in elementary school. Often times I would have to sit in the corner or miss recess due to some misstep from earlier in the day. By the end of elementary school, I began to receive accelerated and gifted services. I began to work more closely with my peers and more cooperatively with my teachers. The other identified students and I formed a close social group that remained a cohort until we graduated. My friends became the kids who were considered smart. My discipline issues at school lessened until they eventually ceased to exist. I was always too busy on some adventure, field trip, conducting some experiment, or participating in some type of performance. My life had completely changed.

I tell this brief narrative to enlighten readers about my potential biases. I am confident that students will ultimately live up to the expectations of those they love and trust. I believe educators have to set high aims for all students. There are too many students experiencing unfortunate future outcomes after high school and participation in special education programs. Educators should question, are the diminished future opportunities due to experiencing special education? This study will address this enigma.

If the selected administrators have read research on disproportionate placement, and have opinions on the disproportionate placement of African American students in the high-
incidence SED category, then, how do they perceive the site-based administrators’ role? That is why I conducted this study. But for the love, know-how and devotion of my mother, by third grade I could have been placed in special education classes for my pattern of misbehavior.

**Ethical Issues**

Potential ethical issues arise anytime there is contact between a researcher and participants. The researcher has to be careful to avoid pitfalls that diminish the quality of the research or that harm the participants. In this grounded theory research, potential for ethical issues include but are not limited to the following: exploitation of participants; misuse and release of confidential records; imposing my experiences on study participants; and alienating school-level and district administrators through inquiry methods.

I was able to avoid ethical concerns by maintaining the standards of good qualitative research. This research deals with human subjects. As such, I obtained a thorough review and approval by North Carolina State University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). I upheld the highest level of honesty and confidentiality when dealing with study participants. I also sought approval from the local school district to ensure ethical interactions with all study participants. I took additional measures to protect the identity of participants by creating pseudonyms.

I avoided any interviews with students and only addressed what I believed to be a few students’ perspectives gleaned from my conversations with administrators and informal observations of students prior to interviews. I addressed students, teachers, and
administrators with the highest level of respect and appreciation for their time and daily work. I did not share my personal experiences with participants prior to the interview protocol to avoid tainting their answers. I modeled fairness, integrity, and good judgment in every step of the research process from start to finish.

**Limitations of the Study**

The limitations of this study deal mainly with the study design. Grounded theory researchers receive criticism for not being able to distinguish between their own ideas and an emergent substantive theory. In the 1990s, critics of grounded theory began to view the method as “…fragmenting the respondent’s voice, relied on the authoritative voice of the researcher, blurred the difference…” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 13). This fine line presents a possible obstacle to presenting new and worthwhile research on disproportionate representation. The limited time available for this study also impeded my ability to gain numerous vantage points. There are so many diverse voices that could be heard on this topic that the fact that there was only one researcher involved in this study presented a limitation to the data collected in this study.

**Delimitations of the Study**

This study required me to make some choices about the research design. I had to utilize restraint in assembling participants and the number of interviews conducted. The time element was a serious factor in my ability to fully explore the issue of administrators’ perspectives on special education, disproportionate placement, and education policies through initially planned multiple observations. As the school year for the participants
became more and more demanding, I made a decision to minimize the amount of times I presented myself as a distraction to the daily functions at their workplaces. As I thought about the true purpose of the study, I realized that there was no need to interview students or teachers though they may certainly have perspectives to share. The time and level of disruption to the school’s processes led me to continue the focus on school and district-level administrators only. I also experienced constraints in the limited variables I could use in selecting administrators, to maintain confidentiality, within a medium-sized suburban district. Due to the smaller pool of administrators to choose from, I decided upon the four participants based on their level of interests and enthusiasm for the topic.

**Summary of Chapter**

Qualitative research methodology is based upon certain philosophical and theoretical approaches. In this grounded theory study, I researched under the umbrella of a constructivist framework. The initial stages of this research changed throughout the process and eventually evolved into the exact methodology described in this chapter. As is typical of qualitative research, I utilized interviews, and conclusions from brief pre-interview observations, to develop a theory on disproportionate placement. I further implemented various grounded theory procedures to conduct this research in the most ethical manner possible. I took special care to avoid harming study participants or the validity and reliability of the research itself.
Chapter 4

Findings

Introduction

This chapter will discuss the findings from interviews with school and district-level administrators. The purpose of this research study was to conduct an exploration into varied administrative perspectives on the disproportionate placement of African American males in the SED category of special education. This exploration, utilizing a constructivist grounded theory approach, sought to develop a theory about administrative perspectives while also discussing possible implications for future educational practice. The primary research question answered in the study is: What is the public school administrator’s perspective on the placement of African American students in the high incidence category of Serious Emotional Disability? Additionally, secondary research questions answered in the study are:

1. What are administrative perspectives on compliance with educational policies and monitoring requirements associated with the regulations of IDEA (2004)?
2. What is the administrator’s perspective on the relationship between public school policies and student placement in SED classes?
3. What variables do administrators believe affect student placement in SED classes?
This chapter will report findings through anecdotal methods, descriptive language, and some numerical data that organizes participant characteristics and responses into themes and motifs. The Thomas Theorem, as revisited in Merton (1968), states “if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (p. 193). The Thomas Theorem inspired me to not only study perspectives of administrators but to consider that valuable information for other educators could be gleaned from a concise theory about the importance of how humans construct meaning or definitions of situations within our schools. From the inspiration of the Thomas Theorem, this study’s focus became more about administrators’ constructed definitions in order to understand how each one defined disproportionate placement of African American males in the SED category of special education, and less about whether or not the school was documented as having disproportionate placement. From the literature, Merton (1968) points out that the Thomas Theorem suggested that though humans respond to objective evidence of a situation, like disproportionate placement percentages, it seemed to matter equally to human behavior what meaning they ascribed to the situation itself. I was interested in pursuing his line of thinking while conducting this study.

I utilized interviews and researcher conclusions or interpretations only. I waited to receive approval from District Executive Team before seeking interviews with individual administrators. My initial intentions of were to utilize document analysis, however, the research was conducted without a review of any of the participating district’s documents. As the interviews began, I determined document analysis would not significantly add to the goal of this research, generating the theory associated with administrative perspectives. As
mentioned earlier, the work of Merton (1968) on the Thomas Theorem influenced my decision to analyze data with less emphasis on objective district’s documents. The administrators’ perspectives and meaning-making was predominant. The interviews and researcher conclusions occurred in the natural setting of the participants.

**Participant Selection**

I conducted the study in a suburban district located in the Piedmont region of North Carolina. This area of North Carolina is often touted as the intellectual center of the state. There are five major universities within an eleven-mile radius. There are five public school districts that often collaborate on reform initiatives. The district selected could be characterized as a medium-sized, suburban district. The commonly accepted idea of a suburban district is that a majority of students are White, from middle-class families, and is less populous than urban districts with student enrollments that range in the tens of thousands. The district selected meets these criteria for suburban. In order to maintain confidentiality, the participating district will be identified as Blue City Schools.

I invited a pool of eight administrators in Blue City Schools to participate the study. I sent invitations to administrators in differing types of schools, with differing educational backgrounds and certifications. I made an effort to invite participants exhibiting racial and ethnic diversity. Of the eight invitations sent, four administrators agreed to be participants in both interviews and informal pre-interview visits. The interviews occurred over a three-week period on Blue City Schools’ campuses. The four participants included one high school principal, one high school assistant principal, one alternative school principal, and one
district-level special education administrator. I gave each participant a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality when reporting findings from the interviews.

Table 1

*Background Information for Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Pseudonym</th>
<th>Current Location</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Administrator C</td>
<td>Central Services</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Principal F</td>
<td>Alternative School</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal J</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal M</td>
<td>Alternative High School</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All four participants had experience working as educators in multiple settings. Principal J, Principal M, and Administrator C had experience in middle schools and high schools; Principal M and Assistant Principal F had worked in alternative settings with an emphasis on special education programming; and, Principal J and Administrator C had worked in elementary schools, high schools, and/or central services (see Table 1 above). This wide range of experience undoubtedly informed the perspectives of the participants.
Data Analysis

In earlier chapters, a survey of the literature provided a definition of perspectives as being someone’s opinion or beliefs about a situation based upon experience and personality. The participants in the study provided perspectives on disproportionate placement in the form of answers to the specific questions posed to them in a familiar professional setting. I used inductive analysis to develop themes during the data collection (interviews and observations) and data analysis to eventually develop a theory. Inductive analysis (Mills et al., 2008) allowed me to determine categories for the participants’ responses during and after the interviews as opposed to pre-determination of categories.

This chapter will give an anecdotal account of the data from the interviews. The anecdotal methods used for reporting results of this study will include the following: (1) my perspective on the participants and the school (or workplace) culture and climate as a general overview; (2) integration of insightful quotations from each interview; (3) categorization of those responses into five themes that emerged; and, (4) elaboration on how I determined each of the pertinent themes during the data collection and analysis. The five themes are: Importance of Educator Training, Importance of Strong Relationships, Significance of Race, Significance of Socioeconomics, and Importance of Educator Impact.

I intentionally began each interview with a period of informal, undocumented collegial conversations. While having these conversations with the participants, I was noting aspects of their environment and leadership style as evidenced by their work setting, displayed materials and resources, as well as observed interactions with those within their
immediate work environment. After a few minutes of building rapport and getting participants to feel comfortable hearing their own voices speaking openly on disproportionate placement, the interview commenced.

The participants were generous with their time and hospitality during the interview. Each period of observation and interviewing lasted between 45 minutes to two hours. I felt all participants were genuinely interested in the research project. As interviewees, each participant demonstrated an enthusiasm for the topics associated with disproportionate placement. Each participant seemed professionally eager to play a role in contributing to the literature on the topic.

**Administrator C**

Administrator C has been in education for over twenty-two years. Most of those years, she has served as a special education teacher in elementary schools. Administrator C, as Blue City Schools’ Chief Administrator of the Exceptional Children’s Program, assisted me in obtaining permission to conduct research this spring. Additionally, Administrator C was available for questions, observations, and follow-up interview as needed. Administrator C agreed to a visit in her Central Services office during regular work hours one afternoon. Administrator C has an office in an obscure location a few miles from the main Blue City Schools administrative building.

Upon arrival, the receptionist directed the researcher to Administrator C. The route required descent down a narrow corridor. Administrator C was standing in a renovated basement office. There were other Central Services administrators in adjacent offices. A few
of the ‘offices’ were reminiscent of work cubicles. Administrator C was talking with a colleague but ended that conversation to begin the interview.

Administrator C has the task of directing all the Exceptional Childrens’ programs in Blue City Schools. During my brief informal observation of the environment, Administrator C had very few support staff available to her in the office. Administrator C, when speaking before the interview, explained that Blue City Schools’ Exceptional Childrens’ programming was progressing. Administrator C also expressed the presence of challenges. It is at this moment, the researcher began the official interview.

**Assistant Principal F**

Assistant Principal F has been in education for seventeen years. He began his work career at the YMCA but quickly decided public education was his career route. Assistant Principal F agreed to speak with me confidentially about his perspectives on disproportionate placement as the acting Assistant Principal at an alternative learning environment. He also teaches students with disabilities in a Personal Development class.

I observed Assistant Principal F at his school as he led students during the day. I informally observed him having conversations with students and escorting them to various parts of the campus. The students demonstrated a sense of ease in their interactions with Assistant Principal F. The students were smiling and engaging in polite small talk with one another and Assistant Principal F. Assistant Principal F and the students demonstrated mutual respect and enthusiasm during the brief time I was there prior to the interview. In addition to the interactions he had with students, I observed Assistant Principal F in
conversations with his colleagues. The other faculty members discussed student concerns in what appeared to be an attempt to keep the acting Assistant Principal informed on a variety of student issues.

**Principal J**

Principal J has been in education for twenty years. He has worked at the middle school and high school level as an administrator. Principal J is currently leading at one of the older high schools in Blue City Schools. Principal J will move to Central Services during the 2016-2017 school year. During pre-interview observations at Principal J’s high school, the researcher was able to get a momentary picture of his school’s culture. The receptionist and guidance counselor were welcoming to the researcher as a visitor. Both of them had knowledge that Principal J was in a classroom doing an observation.

After waiting fifteen minutes for Principal J to complete his observation, he stopped to acknowledge the receptionist as he returned to the main office area. During this time, other faculty members came by the main office to speak with the receptionist casually or get information. From the observations prior to the interview, it was obvious the school was operating in a non-pressurized environment. When Principal J appeared for the interview, the faculty members provided him with a few updates and then left us to speak privately in his office.

**Principal M**

Principal M has twenty-five years as an educator, six of them as a middle school teacher. Principal M is currently serving at Blue City Schools’ only alternative school.
Principal M was the first to accept the initial invitation to participate in this research project. Principal M invited the researcher to her school to conduct the interview. During the pre-interview observations, the researcher noticed a fair amount of activity among the faculty in the main office area. The faculty members were conversing with Principal M. Principal M swiftly invited the researcher into her office to begin the interview. The researcher noticed a stack of books or professional reading on Principal M’s desk at the start of the interview.

**Emergent themes**

Though the findings are reported as excerpts from interviews with participants, I was able to find emergent themes in their responses. These themes provide insight into the administrators’ perspectives on not only disproportionate placement but also the condition of modern public schooling. As I listened to the participants, I began to hear recurrent words, themes, and motifs. The recurrent themes in the participant responses are *Significance of Educator Training, Significance of Strong Relationships, Significance of Race, Significance of Socioeconomics, and Significance of Leadership*. Each of these themes is uniquely derived from the administrators’ thoughts and opinions on school efficacy in achieving the mission of college and career ready graduates of the American public school system.

*The Significance of Educator Training* is a theme repeated in the interviews. Three of the four participants explicitly mentioned the need for educator training in special education, diversity, and high impact instructional practices. The participants seemed to believe that there was less evidence of outward malice by educators but rather more evidence to suggest training would alleviate some of the factors that impact disproportionate placement of
African American males in the high incidence categories of special education, particularly, SED.

Assistant Principal F expressed concern about the differences between today’s society and today’s classrooms. Assistant Principal F said, “how we do school might need to change a little bit, and not base school on the 1950s-60s classroom and begin to open the door for things like hands-on activities” (Personal Communication, 2016). Assistant Principal F continued to talk about how he was encouraged by collaborative learning strategies and then his subsequent disappointment when, in his opinion, that movement went away. Assistant Principal F summed up his thoughts on this topic by saying, “once we begin to design our curriculum, our hiring practices, design them around the people we’re serving, we’ll have less of the SED classrooms” (Personal Communication, 2016).

Likewise, Principal J expressed the need for educator training. When asked about recommendations he would give to other administrators to lesson the likelihood of disproportionate placement, Principal J stated, “immerse the staff in training. EC training but not only EC training, some form of diversity training” (Personal Communication, 2016). Principal J continued to describe the optimism he still maintained that a better prepared teaching and leading force in our schools would increase equitable educational outcomes for all students.

Principal M was must descriptive about how she did immerse her faculty in training. Principal M explained how her school size gave her an advantage in terms of teacher training. Principal M felt she had the ability to fully engage her teachers and broader school
community in book studies. Principal M continued by explaining the ways in which she accessed what her school community needed to study as a collective group. Principal M was animated as she discussed the literary circles she had with her team of teachers and support staff to increase the skill level of those in her building.

By reviewing interview notes, I documented on how often I heard participants speak implicitly or explicitly about the need for more educator training. This was a bit surprising to me as an administrator myself. I expected the administrators to be more protective of the professional skill level of their faculties and themselves. When I gave them the chance to speak directly to other administrators with suggestions, I heard three of them speak to the need for more training. There was no question this was a significant theme emerging.

Another prevalent theme was the *Significance of Strong Relationships*. Each administrator shared an example of how strong relationships assisted in making better decisions on behalf of students. According to the responses, all four participants placed value on the ways in which educators interacted with all school stakeholders. Each participant provided a brief narrative about the value constituents place on trust, outward expressions of appreciation, respect for individual difference, and effective communication skills. In the opinions of the participants, the relationships they have built and maintained in their respective roles have contributed to the successful matriculation of students within their school and school district. Administrator C suggested that relationships should be “student-centered and focused on the whole child” (Personal Communication, 2016). Administrator C
wanted to make sure I documented that students with disabilities are a part of the whole school.

Principal M gave me the most concrete example of strong relationships. Principal M is leading in a small, alternative secondary school. She leads fewer than twenty teachers and staff. There are fewer than fifty students transitioning in the school each academic year. Principal M had her entire school community study *The 5 Languages of Appreciation in the Workplace: Empowering Organizations by Encouraging People* by Gary Chapman and Paul White. Principal M invested a great deal of her political capital into this book study because she believed that the potential to take their relationships to the next level was boundless. Principal M explicitly stated that to her, “relationships are the most important factor” (Personal Communication, 2016). She expressed that her educational philosophy and leadership style was rooted in “making one out of the many” (Personal Communication, 2016). Principal M felt it was her responsibility to help her teachers by ‘filling up their up.’ Principal M sees her teachers as caregivers and openly acknowledged that she builds supportive relationships to make sure people in her organization avoid ‘burnout’ and stay energized.

Building strong relationships was often paired with the *Significance of Race* when discussing disproportionate placement. Race, according to the participants, was a significant predictor and factor in the identification process for special education services. The participants did not rave on and on about racism but rather about the ways in which racial differences may impact educator objectivity. Participants spoke openly about how racial
differences often are demonstrated in behavior patterns that may not be clearly familiar to or understood by the majority of White teachers.

Administrator C was always the most concise in her responses to the questions. She did say, however, that she knew disproportionate placement occurred in ethnic subgroups and that much work could be done to achieve equity. Assistant Principal F, an African American male himself, was most philosophical about race as a factor. Assistant Principal F revealed, “sometimes the invisible man shows up,” alluding to the iconic work by Ralph Ellison on racial identity. Assistant Principal F also gave me an analogy to summarize how race is a factor. He said, “when they say you are in a certain percentile for height and weight, well, is that based on Black males or White males or all males…I was told it was based on White males, so what does that mean for Black males” (Personal Communication, 2016).

Principal J responded to the question on the whether or not he thought there was disproportionate placement of African American males by saying, “from my experience as an Assistant Principal at middle school A, my experience at middle school B, my experience here, just eyeballing it, it looks like more African-Americans. Especially more African-Americans are in our self-contained classrooms” (Personal Communication, 2016).

From these types of responses, I concluded that these administrators’ emphasis on strong relationships in the school is evidence of not only his/her individual leadership style but also their willingness to confront racial disparities through dialogue, training, and awareness on race. The focus of this study is inherently a look into administrators’ underlying opinions on race so it is consistent with this exploration to have administrators
talk about our country’s history of racial inequality as a major factor in disproportionate placement in special education.

The participants continually spoke to the convergence of race and the Significance of Socioeconomics. This was a surprising outcome of the research. Though I expected school leaders to have opinions on race and socioeconomics, I expected more of the interview responses to continually isolate race when discussing disproportionate placement of African American males in SED. The participants spoke with relative certainty about the current socioeconomic state of many African American families. Participants repeatedly returned to the cases in which parents were working demanding, low-pay jobs with unenviable long hours. Three of the four participants believed that the larger numbers of African Americans in the lower to working class was a main factor in the larger numbers of African American males identified in the SED category of special education.

Because all those interviewed are in fact school leaders, it is unsurprising that the Significance of Leadership emerges as a consistent theme. This indicates that the administrators have been reflective about the impact educational leaders have on the culture and operations of American public schools. Three of the four participants spoke about Principals or administrators needing additional training in diversification of faculties to provide viable non-examples for African American school-aged children. The leaders themselves mentioned administrators’ strategic leadership, visibility, and knowledge of special education (or lack thereof) as contributions or mitigations for disproportionate placement.
Each of the aforementioned themes has relevance for the participants. When analyzed collectively, the emerging themes inform the insights that I offer in the future implications for practitioners. These themes, as expounded upon in the participants’ responses, suggest that the factors related to disproportionate placement are within educators’ locus of control. This means that educators, with appropriate training, can reverse the trends of disproportionate placement of African American males in the SED category of special education. The results of this study indicate there is reason for administrators in American public schools to be hopeful about ensuring equity in education.

**Summary of the Chapter**

This chapter presented the findings from interviews with school and district-level administrators in the Blue City Schools. The responses from the participants fulfilled the purpose of this research study by allowing an exploration into a diverse group of administrators’ perspectives on the disproportionate placement of African American males in high incidence categories of special education, primarily, Serious Emotional Disability. This exploration, utilizing a constructivist grounded theory approach, has helped me to develop a theory based on emerging themes from the interview respondents’ perspectives. The theory states, *Administrative Perspectives on Disproportionate Placement of African American males are directly related to one’s belief in the efficacy of School Leadership and the Leadership’s ability to overcome a self-fulfilling prophecy for low expectations of African American males in American Public Schools.*
I submit this theory in response to my understanding of the existing literature on educator perspectives and disproportionate placement in conjunction with the new data I learned from the participants’ perspectives. As is true of grounded theory approach, I knowingly embraced my beliefs, experiences, and interpretations in synthesizing all the information available to me as a researcher (Creswell, 2007; Charmaz, 2014). The time-tested sociological leanings from Thomas (1936) about defining situations, Bandura’s (1986) thoughts on self-efficacy and Merton’s (1968) assertions about self-fulfilling prophecy reinforce the theory on administrative perspectives. It is my interpretation that the five themes from the interview data are evidence of how the participants view themselves as educators, their roles as leaders, and their ability to lead transformative change related to disproportionate placement of African American males. The theory focuses on the participants’ responses that demonstrated high self-efficacy and sense of purpose, high understanding of how their opinions must come into submission to their professional training, and a great sense of optimism for future educational outcomes for African American males.

This chapter presented evidence about the primary research question: *What is the public school administrator’s perspective on the placement of African American students in the high incidence category of Serious Emotional Disability?*

The secondary research questions of the study were presented in the form of an interactive interview process. These questions were answered as administrators talked about
specific questions, outlined in this chapter. Secondary research questions answered in this chapter include:

1. What are administrative perspectives on compliance with educational policies and monitoring requirements associated with the regulations of IDEA (2004)?
2. What is the administrator’s perspective on the relationship between public school policies and student placement in SED classes?
3. What variables do administrators believe affect student placement in SED classes?

After a careful review of the anecdotal data, I determined that there are consistent streams of thought or themes that can be derived from the administrative perspectives on disproportionate placement. These themes can be categorized as Significance of Educator Training, Significance of Strong Relationships, Significance of Race, Significance of Socioeconomics, and Significance of Leadership. Each interview participant either explicitly stated or intimated that these five themes permeate their understanding of the existence of disproportionate placement. Each of these themes will be revisited in the next chapter.

Chapter 5 will serve as the conclusion of this research study. Chapter 5 will provide more information on administrative perspectives on disproportionate placement of African American males in the SED category of special education. Chapter 5 will also provide a brief summary of how a constructivist grounded theory framework produced a theory about administrative perspectives on disproportionate placement, leadership implications, and future research suggestions. The researcher will conclude the study with a theory about
administrative perspectives on disproportionate placement, implications for future practice, as well as suggestions for future research. It is the suggestions for future research that the researcher believes will provide opportunities for collective inquiry to enhance the viable literature on disproportionality.
Chapter 5

Conclusion, Implications for Practice, and Suggestions for Future Research

Introduction

This chapter concludes the research study on administrative perspectives on disproportionate placement of African American males in the SED category of special education. This chapter will revisit the original purpose of the study and the significance of perspectives to place my choices into proper qualitative research methodology. In addition, this chapter will discuss my use of a constructivist grounded theory framework and provide a summary of the research findings. Ultimately, this concluding chapter will elaborate on a theory that enlightens our understanding of administrative perspectives on disproportionate placement of African American males in special education and suggest future research opportunities.

The original purpose of this study was to conduct grounded theory (Charmaz, 2011) research regarding disproportionate placement of African American males, while exploring the emerging themes from school administrators’ perspectives on placement in special education categories. The study was designed to elucidate possible implications for American public schools. As alluded to in much of the literature (Skiba, Polani-Staudinger, Gallini, Simmons, & Feggin-Azziz, 2006; Sullivan & Artiles, 2011; Sullivan & Bal, 2013; Wright, et al., 2016), all research on disproportionality should begin with an examination of school-related factors. This research study focused on how an understanding of school
administrators’ perspectives would provide insightful suggestions for future practitioners and researchers.

The primary research questions that guided this study were:

1. What are administrative perspectives on compliance with educational policies and monitoring requirements associated with the regulations of IDEA (2004)?
2. What is the administrator’s perspective on the relationship between public school policies and student placement in SED classes?
3. What variables do administrators believe affect student placement in SED classes?

These questions were the driving force for the secondary and tertiary questions I posed to participants. Each of the research questions was intentionally broad to allow participants to explain their understandings, opinions, and eventually reveal the underlying philosophy for their work as educators.

The focus on administrators, their perspectives, and emerging themes served the purpose of developing a theory to explain disproportionate placement through the eyes of current school leaders. The purpose of my research was to ensure a theory was derived from a constructivist framework. The original aim of my research was to add to the knowledge base of those responsible for decisions about special education placement, classification, and the potential for disproportionate placement of African American males. The use of a constructivist grounded theory has helped me achieve my aim by adding a unique depiction
of administrators’ voices as well as a theory that can spark future researchers to expand upon when studying disproportionate placement of African American males.

**Constructivist Grounded Theory Framework**

These findings would not be possible if this study had been conducted under another qualitative method. Constructivist grounded theory, according to Bryant & Charmaz (2014), allows me, as the researcher, to design methodology and conduct data analysis while my beliefs and interactions are a guide. Grounded theory, as a qualitative methodology, has been attributed to work done by Glaser and Strauss (Mills et al., 2008) in the late 1960s. Since that time, grounded theory has allowed qualitative researchers to not only observe objectively but to also place data and findings in context, in the moment, with the researcher being a part of the research process. In this study, the presence of my beliefs and interactions with participants remained true to the constructivist grounded theory framework. The findings from the study and my opinion of the culture and climate of the participants’ work place intertwined in constructing the theory.

The theory on the administrators’ perspectives was essentially developed as I constructed meaning from the interview responses. Additionally, the theory remained grounded in placing all data in context before, during, and after the actual data collection and analysis. By constructing meaning and remaining grounded in the moment, I was able to develop a theory that embodies sound qualitative methodology and add value to educators’ search for answers on challenging disproportionate placement of African American males. The theory puts emphasis on administrators’ beliefs in their own humanity, their trust in the
power of their relationships, and their informed leadership capability. I believe this emphasis will give future educators the freedom to explore their own belief systems, their own definitions of ‘capable’ and ‘disabled,’ and strengthen their resolve to continue questioning the status quo as it pertains to the myriad factors related to disproportionate placement of African American males in special education.

**Significance of Perspectives**

As defined earlier, perspectives is a terminology used to describe how an individual’s ideas are fueled by their personality, beliefs, and life’s experiences. Studying administrative perspectives assists researchers in finding meaning and understanding basic human psychology. In Proverbs 23, we read that as a man thinketh, so he is. That can be interpreted to mean that the way one perceives a situation will undoubtedly influence one’s decisions and behaviors. The Thomas Theorem, as mentioned in Merton (1968), gives administrators the impetus to seek understanding of what individuals within our schools perceive as real as well as how impactful the consequences of subsequent actions by those individuals can be for others. By dissecting administrative perspectives on disproportionate placement, this study will lead to a more succinct understanding of how leaders make decisions that create the climate for placement in special education programs.

The diversity among the participants (educationally, experientially, and contextually) in this research study provided a variety of perspectives as responses to the same or similar questions by the researcher. Each participant was at liberty to highlight or avoid topics during the interviews. Careful inspection of their responses reinforces the belief that the
varied perspectives essentially are grounded in individual belief systems that are manifested in their leadership philosophy and style.

**Summary of Findings-Themes**

The findings about participant’s beliefs and opinions can be summarized through a brief discussion of the emergent themes from interview responses. As I looked at the participant responses, a few themes recurred and gave me information on not only participating administrators’ perspectives but also participating administrators’ values. The themes are: *Significance of Educator Training, Significance of Strong Relationships, Significance of Race, Significance of Socioeconomics, and Significance of Leadership.* In summarizing the findings into categories, it is a worthwhile endeavor to delve into how these themes are consistent with or contradictory to the vast body of literature on disproportionate placement.

*Significance of educator training*

All the school level participants mentioned the need for educator training. The administrators felt that educators were predominately in the business of schooling for the right reasons. They suggested that current educators largely do their best with the limited information and resources at their disposal. Administrator C, for instance, talked about how the bigger societal issue of mental health crises was impacting decisions to classify students in the high-incidence categories of special education. Administrator C stated, “The larger issue is the lack of available resources to confront mental health issues that show up in our schools” (Personal Communication, 2016). Likewise, Assistant Principal F and Principal J
repeatedly mentioned the need for diversity training as well as training to assist teachers in ensuring all students have the necessary supports to learn.

This theme is consistent with the work of Camangian (2015) and Wright, Crawford, & Counsell (2016). In a study on humanizing the pedagogy, Camangian (2015) discusses how current teaching practices are inadequate for educating Black children. In his work, Camangian (2015) urges educators to “develop effective practices and disrupt dehumanization. This study puts emphasis on mutually respectful interactions between teachers and students of color. In the study, they note that it is possible for Likewise, Ford & Moore (2013) support teacher training that integrates an “equity-based and culturally responsive approach” (p. 1) when confronting myriad issues involving disparate negative school outcomes for African American males.

Significance of strong relationships

Participants expressed a need for strong relationships and that learning occurs for students in relationship with the environment and others in their surroundings. All participants spoke to the researcher about increasing the odds that all students will learn by increasing the strength of relationships. Administrator C responded, “Relationships go farther when you lead that way” (Personal Communication). Principal M provided extended commentary on how her school’s focus on understanding human needs and behavior has helped to propel students and parents into a trusting relationship that makes learning a community process. Principal M responded, “To build an effective team, you’ve got to make one out of the many” (Personal Communication, 2016).
Camangian (2015) also places importance on teachers finding the best way of helping students by building strong, trusting relationships. Teachers are encouraged to force students to think critically in a safe environment and to inspire hope in students through liberating their voices to feel anger at societal problems, articulate their feelings, and display compassion for others (Camangian, 2015). Gregory et al. (as cited in Wright et al., 2016), recommend that teachers strengthen or modify their interactions with students in order to improve learning outcomes.

**Significance of race**

All participants felt disproportionate placement of African American males in special education categories such as SED does exist and similarly, race was a significant factor in disproportionality. Administrator C stated, “I believe disproportionate placement does exist among ethnic subgroups” (Personal Communication). Assistant Principal F stated, “I think we still have some racial issues that play out, are manifest through the teacher, they are racist and may be more partial to the White kids and a little less partial to the Black kids” (Personal Communication, 2016). Principal J stated, “Well, as an African-American myself…I feel like, yes. EC tilts toward African-Americans” (Personal Communication, 2016). Principal M was most illustrative in her explanation by saying, “…the discrepancy between who the educators are and sometimes they don’t look like the ones they’ve identified” (Personal Communication, 2016). All four participants were confident that race indeed was a factor in disproportionate placement of African American males and armed with this knowledge,
continued to advocate for training to combat the presence of un/intentional racism among educators.

**Significance of socioeconomics**

As seen in the findings in Chapter 4, the theme of socioeconomic status was more prevalent in the summary of administrators’ comments than even the theme of race. The administrators often coupled socioeconomic status with race. This remark from Principal J, “I also think there are other resources out there that might be helping Caucasian students divert the EC process…in the younger grades they’re able to put resources into tutoring” (Personal Communication, 2016) is evidence of the dichotomy of race and unequal resources. The administrators all spoke to how lower income or access to resources impacted student success and eventual disproportionate placement along racial lines.

**Significance of leadership**

The need for strong leadership permeated the interview responses. As educators in leadership positions, each had little difficulty providing their educational philosophy. This illustrates that each participant was reflective about his/her role in education and that they each could do something positively impactful. Administrator C spoke about how the school-level leadership and district-level leadership needed clarity in their responsibilities for students with disabilities to ensure opportunities for postsecondary student success. Assistant Principal F spoke candidly about how districts needed to be careful about Principal and Superintendent selections. Principal J explained that an administrator is always present at every EC eligibility meeting. Principal J has committed to that process to minimize the
likelihood of school liability and to make sure the appropriate questioning occurs to avoid inaccurately identifying a student for special education services. Principal M discussed how leadership has a responsibility to take care of all constituents. Principal M stated, “In an environment like this, I need to know, how do you fill the cup? What motivates people” (Personal Communication, 2016). This suggests that Principal M believes and acts in a way to inspire those under leadership to continue the hard work involved in the alternative, public school setting.

The emergent themes from the findings provide a cumulative view of the administrative perspectives revealed in this research study. The participating administrators valued educator training, strong relationships, awareness of racial bias, acknowledgment of socioeconomic disparity, and multifaceted leadership. These themes provided the researcher with the information needed to synthesize all the literature and data to generate a theory about administrative perspectives on disproportionate placement of African American males in SED category of special education. As mentioned by Sabornie, Evans, and Cullinan (2016), Emotional/Behavioral Disturbances or SED is one of the most discussed high-incidence categories of special education.

**Proposed Theory on Administrative Perspectives on Disproportionate Placement**

A survey of the literature on disproportionate placement of African American males in the high incidence categories of special education and a careful review of the findings from this current research lead to a coherent theory about administrative perspectives on the topic. The literature on disproportionate placement and the results from this study indicate
that very few administrators believe that there is intentional mistreatment and misidentification of African American males. The same evidence does suggest that administrators believe that a clearer understanding of race, cultural difference, socioeconomic factors, and one’s level of expectations will allow American public schools to adequately address the needs of students with verified disabilities and social maladjustment.

This is consistent with existing research already discussed in Chapter 2 of this study (Sullivan & Artiles, 2011). A careful reading of the research findings, combined with the existing literature base leads me to a plausible theory to summarize administrative perspectives on disproportionate placement of African American males. I conclude that the theory that best coincides with the research findings is as follows: Administrative Perspectives on Disproportionate Placement of African American males are directly related to one’s belief in the efficacy of School Leadership and the Leadership’s ability to overcome a self-fulfilling prophecy for low expectations of African American males in American Public Schools.

This theory adds to the research base in a number of ways. The theory, with its root in administrators’ beliefs and perspectives, gives other researchers information that will be useful when engaging educators on the subject of disproportionate placement. The theory also marries concepts from social cognitive theory to educational philosophy to ensure administrators begin to practice reflection and self-awareness. Lastly, the theory is thought-provoking and will undoubtedly gain the attention of other theorists who are interested in the
odd coupling of social cognitive theory and longstanding educational philosophy that all students can learn.

**Implications for Practice**

This theory has a number of implications for school and district administrators when facing the issues related to disproportionate placement of African American males. The implications are as explored below with some connections to the literature base to provide clarity in how the responses and literature served as the data for the practical implications.

1. School leaders must recognize the relationship between educators’ expectations and students’ ability to achieve at high levels.
2. School leaders must educate themselves and their faculty on differences between indicators of emotional/behavioral disorders and social maladjustment related to socioeconomic status and cultural norms.
3. School leaders must believe in the ability of all children, even those with disabilities, to achieve at high levels with the right level of effort and support.
4. School leaders have the ability to combat disproportionate placement of African American males by focusing resources on the causes of misbehavior, low achievement, and unsuccessful academic performance.
5. School leaders must combat self-fulfilling prophecy of low expectations for African American males and other students disproportionately impacted by poverty or low socioeconomic status.

**Implications and the literature**
The aforementioned implications are a result of creating the themes from participant responses in conjunction with what exists in the literature already. Wright et al. (2016) conducted a study to focus on how educators can rethink the ways in which we envision the possible beneficial aspects of special education. The discussion points in the study encourage educators to reject the deficit framework for special education and adopt a belief that intelligence, for all, is not innate but malleable (Wright et al., 2016).

Recent research supports the connection between students’ socioeconomic status, cultural norms, and educators’ expectations. According to Juarez and Hayes (2015), most American public school teachers are trained to teach students who are a part of a fading demographic-White, middle-class, and Protestant Christian. Research by Suitts and Trueba & Bartolome (as cited in Juarez & Hayes, 2015) acknowledges that public school students are poorer and coming from racially, socially, structurally, and culturally diverse backgrounds.

Juarez and Hayes (2015) believe that this gap in teacher preparation for the changing demographics of American public schools has negative implications for students who are a part of the changing diverse landscape. Additionally, Boser, Wilhelm, and Hanna (as cited in Gershensan, Holt, & Papageorge, 2015) found it troubling that there is reason to believe teachers have lower expectations of students who are from lower socioeconomic and racially diverse families. School leaders need to ensure teachers have a better understanding of what are some norms, values, and characteristics of students from different types of families.

These implications for practitioners are consistent with the literature on teacher expectations and student achievement. According to Gershensan et al. (2015), “More
concerning, teacher beliefs can affect students’ performance,” (p. 1). These authors were referring to the famous experiment conducted by Rosenhal and Jacobson in 1968. In that experiment, the researchers gave teachers false information about which students were advanced and which were lower achieving. The researchers discovered higher gains for the students who’d been falsely identified as “growth spurters” (Gershansan et al., 2015, p. 1). From that evidence, the authors conclude there is a link between teacher beliefs about students’ abilities and the continued disparity in educational achievement along sociodemographic stratas (Gershansan et al., 2015).

The most surprising piece of literature that aligns with these implications is an interesting phenomenological study regarding cultural responsiveness in special education (Jones-Goods & Grant, 2016). This study presents the perspectives of three white teachers in North Carolina on working with racially, culturally and ethically diverse students or RCED students (Jones-Goods & Grant, 2016). The perspectives from the teachers lead to the creation of five reasons for the persistent disproportionate placement in North Carolina schools.

The reasons are inadequate teacher preparation, cultural dissonance, lack of instructional strategies, cultural considerations for Response to Interventions (RtIs), and apparent disconnect between the home and school cultures (Jones-Goods & Grant, 2016, p. 7). The five reasons noted in the study are consistent with the implications of my research that derived from a study of administrative perspectives. The parallel studies of educator perspectives suggest there is a need for expanding the research base by implementing new
practices from the data obtained by looking at educator perspectives, the reality in North Carolina public schools, and disproportionate placement of African American males in special education.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The recommendations for future research related to administrative perspectives on disproportionate placement include:

1. Study the outcomes (i.e., special education referrals and identifications) of school administrators who graduated from universities where the inclusion of social psychology, particularly the self-fulfilling prophecy, was included in administrative training programs.

2. Conduct a quantitative study that tests the theory. This current research is qualitative in nature and by design examined the perspectives of a small number of administrators. Future researchers can conduct quantitative research that examines a larger representation of administrators across multiple districts or differing regions. By using quantitative methods, future researchers can generate a statistical analysis of the frequency of administrators’ positive and negative perspectives on self-fulfilling prophecy and self-efficacy.

3. Study the social psychology behind the orientation of administrators’ self-fulfilling prophecy and how it manifests itself in American public schools.

These three areas of research would provide educators with a frame of reference for improving the overall experience of African American males and other historically
disenfranchised student populations in our schools. By focusing on education for educators, this type of research could extend the work previously done to identify other commonalities among administrators who are leading in schools with/without disproportionate placement in special education programs. Additionally, the study of leadership’s belief in one’s ability to positively impact disproportionate placement and other issues of racial equity would provide practitioners with a broader knowledge base on how to inspire all students to learn in the schools they lead.
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APPENDICES
Appendix A

North Carolina State University
INFORMED CONSENT FORM for RESEARCH

Title of Study: An Exploration of School Leadership Perspectives on the Disproportionate Placement of African American Males in the High-Incidence Categories of Special Education

Principal Investigator: LaVerne Mattocks  
Faculty Sponsor: Paul Bitting

What are some general things you should know about research studies?
You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty. The purpose of research studies is to gain a better understanding of a certain topic or issue. You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in a study. Research studies also may pose risks to those that participate. In this consent form you will find specific details about the research in which you are being asked to participate. If you do not understand something in this form it is your right to ask the researcher for clarification or more information. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you. If at any time you have questions about your participation, do not hesitate to contact the researcher(s) named above.

What is the purpose of this study?
The purpose of this study is to explore administrators’ perspectives on the placement of African American males in Special Education.

What will happen if you take part in the study?
If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to complete a brief survey regarding your experience as an educator. You will also participate in an interview to answer carefully designed questions about Special Education in your organization. The interview will likely include an audio recording for the purpose of accurately collecting data.

Risks
There are no physical or emotional risks to participants. Though results of the participants’ interviews will remain confidential, there is a potential risk of coded interview comments being viewed by unauthorized persons in the unforeseen event of a data breach. The primary researcher will take precautions to minimize this risk through data security measures involving password protected storage devices and coded participant information during transcription.

Benefits
This research will add to the current literature on placement in Special Education from the educator’s perspective. This research will provide a voice to educators who participate in making Special Education placement decisions as well as those who ensure compliance with guidelines of IDEA.

Confidentiality
The information in the study records will be kept confidential to the full extent allowed by law. Data will be stored securely in specific coding to protect the anonymity of participants. No reference will be made in oral or written reports which could link you to the study.

Compensation
You will not receive anything for participating.
What if you have questions about this study?
If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, LaVerne Mattocks, at 400 Bear Creek Path, Morrisville, NC, 27560, or [919-418-1758].

What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?
If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Deb Paxton, Regulatory Compliance Administrator at dapaxton@ncsu.edu or by phone at 1-919-515-4514.

Consent To Participate
“I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I may choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled.”

Subject's signature_______________________________________ Date _________________

Investigator's signature____________________________________ Date _________________
Appendix B

Background Information Participant Questionnaire
Briefly answer the following questions. This information is for data collection and analysis only. All information will maintain participant confidentiality.

1. List your current professional license(s) and certification(s).

2. List the number of years experience you have as:

3. Explain any other work experiences that inform your current educational philosophy.

4. Gender:

5. Race/Ethnicity:

6. Age Range: 22-32 _______ 33-43 _______ 44-54 _______ 55-65 _______

*Adapted from an earlier survey conducted by Aida M. Ramos in Overrepresentation of African American Males in Classrooms for emotionally disturbed students: Race discrimination or social expectation.
Appendix C

Interview Protocol

Title of Study: An Exploration of School Leadership Perspectives on the Disproportionate Placement of African American Males in the High-Incidence Categories of Special Education

Content of Interviews: Here are the anticipated questions for participants in the study based on leadership role.

Interview Questions for Principals/Assistant Principals

1. Why did you become an administrator?
2. Briefly describe your educational philosophy?
3. What is the most challenging aspect of leading teachers? The most rewarding?
4. Describe your school in five words or less. Why did you choose those terms—elaborate?
5. Tell me something you know about special education policies and legislation. How do these policies impact the classification of students in Special Education in your professional opinion?
6. Do you think there is disproportionate placement of students in Serious Emotional Disability classification or classrooms? Why or why not?
7. What factors do you believe impact disproportionate placement of African American males in special education classrooms?
8. What are three suggestions you would make for the special education program in your school and/or district?
Appendix D

Interview Questions for District Administrators

1. What route did you take to become a central office administrator?

2. What is your philosophy on education?

3. How does special education fit into that philosophy?

4. Are you familiar with the term disproportionate placement or overrepresentation?
   Explain what you know about it.

5. Have you ever taught special education students?

6. Are there differences between special education students and regular education students? Explain.

7. How does the district confront issues involving special education policy and legislation?

8. Final comments?

Protection against Potential Risks: The only potential risks associated with the interviews include (1) someone familiar with the study being able to identify comments of participants and (2) unauthorized persons obtaining and publishing interview notes or comments. To minimize these risks, participant responses and transcription will occur without any identifiers. The participants will receive pseudonyms for the purpose of transcription at the onset of the interview protocol.

Data Storage: All data from interviews will be stored securely on password-protected devices. Transcripts and interview results will only be synthesized on a password protected personal computer without identifiers. The Primary Investigator, upon Dissertation Committee approval of the final proposal, will destroy the data from the interviews.

Number and Selection of Participants: This study will include a total of 6-8 participants based on accessibility. This study will occur in a suburban school district in the Piedmont region of North Carolina. This district can be categorized as suburban due to the number of students, demographics, and socioeconomic characteristics of the families. Within this
district, the primary investigator will select an elementary, middle, and high school. The primary investigator will select the schools based on the student population, demographics, and the district’s data on IDEA services. The primary investigator will speak with two administrators in each school regarding their perspectives on student placement into special education. The researcher will begin to discuss placement in special education in general and specifically mention African American students later in the interviews. The goal is to speak with a principal and an assistant principal. The primary investigator will also speak with two of the school district’s special education administrators about the district’s response to recent federal requirements for state-level monitoring and reporting of special education placement as well.

**Recruiting Participants:** The primary investigator will recruit participants from one medium-sized school district using phone and email correspondence. A sample correspondence for district permission and interview participants is as follows:

Hello fellow educator. My name is LaVerne Mattocks, Doctoral student, at North Carolina State University. My dissertation study aims to provide school leadership perspectives on the disproportionate placement of African American males in Special Education. The study is designed to add to the existing literature on this topic to assist school leaders in dealing with the potential for disproportionate placement issues present within their learning organization. The goal of this program is to enhance the understanding of disproportionate placement and provide insights into Special Education placement decision-making from the practitioner’s perspective.

As I am conducting this study, I invite you to participate in a one time interview about: 1) how school leaders perceive the existing reality of disproportionate placement in Special Education, 2) their beliefs and regarding placement decisions for Special Education, 3) any associated concerns about disproportionate placement, and 4) their organizations’ Special Education placement procedures. I am seeking volunteers to participate in these brief interviews. The interviews will take approximately 30 minutes to one hour. All comments made during the interviews will be kept confidential and no names will be associated with your response. Participation is strictly voluntary.

If you are interested in participating in an interview for this study or have clarifying questions, please respond to this email with additional contact information. Thank you for your consideration and advancing the knowledge base for public school leaders.

**Resources or Support for Participants:** The primary investigator does not anticipate the need for additional resources or supports for participants.

**Compensation for Participants:** There is no monetary compensation for participants. Participants will receive thank-you notes and a $5.00 Starbucks gift card as a small token of appreciation.

**Interview Locations:** The participants will have the opportunity to select the interview location at a neutral space to preserve anonymity.
May 4, 2016

Ms. LaVerne Mattocks
400 Bear Creek Path #417
Morrisville, NC 27560

Dear Ms. Mattocks,

This letter is to inform you that your research proposal entitled, “An Exploration of Administrative Perspectives on Disproportionate Placement of African American Males in High-Incidence Categories of Special Education” has been approved. Please contact Ms. Connie Crimmins, Director of Exceptional Children’s Services at 919-245-4006 to work out the logistics of your research.

We appreciate your interest in conducting research in the Orange County School System.

Sincerely,

Dr. Jake Henry
Chief Academic Officer

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Attachment

pc Ms. Connie Crimmins
   Director of Exceptional Children’s Services