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Critical Conversations with Suburban Administrative Leaders on Special Education Disproportionality: Case Studies of Suburban School Districts

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS WITH SUBURBAN ADMINISTRATIVE LEADERS
ON SPECIAL EDUCATION DISPROPORTIONALITY

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

PROGRAM IN ADMINISTRATION AND SUPERVISION

BY

JENNIFER C. STERPIN

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

MAY 2018

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this research study to the memory of my father, Michael Francis McEvoy and my mother, Janice Katherine McEvoy. My father valued education and made sure his children received the best education, so we could increase our knowledge to contribute to the world in meaningful ways. My mother, a college graduate, taught us that lifelong learning is an approach to living life consciously and deliberately. Because of my parent's dedication and support of education, I pursued graduate and doctoral studies in order to make a difference in the lives of others. I hope this study inspires educators to take the next steps in creating a plan to reduce racial disparities in the school system. All children deserve to receive a high quality education.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation study explored high school administrators' beliefs about why racial disproportionality exists, sought to understand the local practices that contribute to disproportionality, and identified interventions and supports that impact disproportionality in the special education referral, eligibility and placement process. Research shows that students who are disproportionately represented in special education are negatively affected by factors such as stigmatization, substandard instruction, zero tolerance policies, and isolation from the general education setting (Sullivan, Kozleski, & Smith, 2008). Administrators were invited to participate in this study because they have a significant impact on student achievement and system wide changes in schools.

This research study focused on three high schools in the suburbs of Chicago, Illinois. Three administrative leaders participated in a face-to-face semi-structured interview and completed a questionnaire via Opinio (ObjectPlanet, Inc, 2018). The Constant Comparative Method (Olson, McAllister, Grinnell, Walters, & Appunn, 2016) was utilized to perform data analysis and make meaning of administrators' beliefs. Major themes emerged as to why racial disproportionality existed in their schools, which included sociodemographic factors, biases, and perceived student deficits by teachers. Three major themes emerged by administrators regarding the practices that contribute to racial disproportionality, which included absent school wide systems, hopeless beliefs about student failure, and decisions affected by implicit bias. The heart of this qualitative

study was to move beyond the causes, and to hear from local administrators which steps they will implement to address the unjust practices that contribute to disproportionality.

Three major themes emerged for eliminating disproportionality, which included developing a systematic plan, collaborating with stakeholder groups, and increasing resources to help school personnel meet the needs of all students.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

All children, regardless of their backgrounds, are entitled to a high quality education including research-based practices and access to the Common Core curricula (National Association of School Psychologists, 2013; Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2017). “In a field grounded in the principle of nondiscrimination, the disproportionate representation of minority students represents a central and continuing challenge for the field of special education” (Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, & Ortiz, 2010; Skiba, Simmons, Ritter, Kohler, Henderson & Wu, 2006, p. 1424).

Disproportionality “refers to a group’s representation in a particular category that exceeds our expectations for that group, or differs substantially from the representation of others in that category” (National Association of School Psychologists, 2013, p. 1).

Specifically, the Illinois State Board of Education (2012) defines disproportionality as:

Students in a particular racial/ethnic group (i.e., Asian, Black, Hispanic, Native American, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, White, or Two or More races) being at a considerably greater risk of being identified as eligible for special education and related services overall or by disability category (i.e., Autism, Intellectual Disability, Emotional Disability, Other Health Impairment, Specific Learning Disability, and Speech Language) than all other racial/ethnic groups enrolled either in the district or in the state. (p. 1)

Disproportionality occurs when a particular group is unevenly identified for special education (Blanchett, 2006), is subject to higher rates of discipline (Losen & Skiba, 2010), and is marginalized from the general education setting and taught in self-contained special education classrooms (Sullivan, Kozleski, & Smith, 2008) beyond what would be expected for the representation of the subgroup in the population. According to the United States Department of Education (2016),

Racial discrimination that leads to inappropriate identification in special education, and the provision of unnecessary special education services and inappropriate placement in more restrictive special education settings, not only unlawfully limits the educational opportunities of individual students who are subject to inappropriate placement, but also deprives all students in that school, who are thereby consigned to learn in a discriminatory and racially segregated environment. (p. 5)

Disproportionality may also apply to students who are overidentified and underidentified; however, the overrepresentation of minority students who qualify for special education remains a significant issue (Dyson & Gallannaugh, 2008; Gravois & Rosenfield, 2006; Reschly, 2009; Salend & Garrick Duhaney, 2005; Sullivan, 2011). Concern is magnified for minority students because there is evidence that special education services and supports are not always effective for improving academic achievement (Carlberg & Kavale, 1980; Detterman & Thompson, 1997; Gartner & Kerzner Lipsky, 2005, as cited in Noltemeyer & McLoughlin, 2012).

Early Federal Special Education Cases

Since the civil rights movement in the 1950s, advocates of children with disabilities have considered their rights an urgent civil rights matter (Artiles et al., 2010). In *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the court ruled that separate but equal for racial minorities was no longer constitutional. Concerns regarding racial disproportionality and the misuse of special education labeling was the focus of *Mills v. Board of Education of District of Columbia* (1972), an early court case, which eventually led to the enactment of the *Public Law 94-142 Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975* (Skiba, 2013). In *Mills v. Board of Education of District of Columbia* (1972), seven children with disabilities sued the District of Columbia Board of Education because they were excluded from their public school. In the Mills' case, the Court ruled that children were entitled to a free and appropriate education (Yell, Rogers, & Rogers, 1998).

Despite advocacy by parents, lobbyists and civil rights' groups in the 1960s, it was clear that federal legislation was needed to equalize educational opportunities for students with disabilities across the country since many children were institutionalized or segregated. Even 16 years after *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), students with disabilities continued to experience segregation and receive their instruction in inferior classroom locations (Noltemeyer & McLoughlin, 2012). In 1975, Congress passed the landmark Public Law 94-142 Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA). The (EAHCA) is one of the most important special education court cases in the history of United States legislation (Center for Education & Employment Law, 2008). This was the first time the federal government accepted responsibility for educating students with

disabilities, and required states to be in compliance with the new federal requirements (Kirk, Gallagher, Coleman, & Anastasiow, 2012). The purpose of (EAHCA) was “to assure that all handicapped children have available to them a free and appropriate public education which emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs” (U.S. Department of Representatives, 1975, p. 35, cited in Kirk et al., 2012, p. 34). From the 1960s through the mid-1980s, schools in the United States became more integrated; however, research shows that trend has dissipated and issues of equity remain a central problem (Noltemeyer, Mujic, & McLoughlin, 2012).

While federal special education legislation was enacted to ensure that all students have access to a free and appropriate public education, racial and ethnic disproportionality has remained a consistent concern among educators and policy makers. Students who are disproportionately represented in special education are negatively affected by factors such as stigmatization, substandard instruction, lowered expectations, zero tolerance policies, and isolation from the general education setting (National Education Association, 2007; Sullivan et al., 2008). In particular, African American students are overrepresented in special education in the eligibility categories of mental retardation and emotional disabilities (Artiles et al., 2010). Other racially, culturally, ethnically, and linguistically (RCELD) diverse learners are underrepresented in gifted programs (National Education Association, 2007). The U.S. Department of Education placed an increased emphasis on addressing the challenges of disproportionate identification of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in special

education as part of the IDEA 2004 reauthorization. According to the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services of the U.S. Department of Education (ED) (2016),

Under Part B of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), states must collect and examine data to determine whether significant disproportionality on the basis of race and ethnicity is occurring in the state, or its school districts, with respect to identification, placement and discipline of students with disabilities. (p. 4)

Yet despite court challenges, federal and state policy initiatives, and research studies, disproportionate practices in special education remain a critical problem (Noltemeyer et al., 2012) and concern in the field.

Special Education Disproportionality Rates Across States

When examining disproportionality data across the country, it is difficult to draw comparisons and conclusions because the manner in which states calculate disproportionality varies (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). Research studies show that one of every three children enrolled in school is of a different racial or ethnic background (Griner & Stewart, 2013). The U.S. Department of Education (ED) (2016) has recently developed a document that highlights “the number and percentage of school districts that would be identified with significant disproportionality if ED’s example risk ratio thresholds were adopted by all 50 states” (p. 4). The document includes 15 tables which highlight the school years 2011-12, 2012-13, and 2013-14 which include the number and percentages of each local educational agency (LEA) with a risk ratio that

exceeds two median absolute deviations (MADS) above the national median of (LEA) risk ratios.

These tables detail the number and percent of LEAs in each state with a risk ratio that exceeds two MADs above the national median, with a minimum of 10 students for three consecutive years, within each race/ethnicity and specific category (i.e., identification of students with specific learning disabilities, total number of disciplinary removals, and separate settings, etc). (U.S. Department of Education, 2016, p. 4)

For example, the state of Illinois has 878 school districts and 483 of those school districts (or 55%) have a risk ratio for at least one race/ethnicity in at least one disability category, educational environment, or discipline category that exceeds the US Department of Education thresholds for three or more years (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). The data reported in these tables further demonstrate that disproportionality continues to be a problem in the Illinois education system. Educators in Illinois must examine how school systems continue to play a role in disproportionate practices in order to identify the next steps for developing a plan to eliminate these disparities. Consequently, addressing disproportionality in schools benefits students' lives and academic success. Students who spend the majority of their day taught in a self-contained special education classroom are impacted negatively both, personally and psychologically, due to lowered expectations, fewer opportunities to learn, and substandard instruction (National Association for School Psychologists, 2013). This research provides critical information that may change the trajectory for students with disabilities.

Role of School Administrators in Special Education Racial Disproportionality

In a school system, school administrators make decisions every day that affect student learning. The research findings indicate that disproportionality is complex and school administrators' insights are critical for understanding the root causes of disproportionality. "Literature on school effectiveness has long concluded that strong leadership is a key to good urban schools" (Edmonds & Frederiksen, 1978; Jackson, Logsdon, & Taylor, 1983; Weber, 1971 cited in Klingner, Harry, & Felton, 2003, p. 23). Administrative leaders' beliefs, values and philosophies impact the school culture (Klingner et al., 2003). Some research indicates that implicit bias may potentially play a role in disproportionate practices (Fiarman, 2016; Staats, Capatosto, Wright, & Jackson, 2016). Unconscious bias or "implicit bias" is when a person shows preference for one group over another group while not consciously aware of their behavior (Fiarman, 2016). According to Staats et al. (2016),

our implicit biases are the result of mental associations that have formed by the direct and indirect messaging we receive, often about different groups of people. When we are constantly exposed to certain identity groups being paired with certain characteristics, we can begin to automatically and unconsciously associate the identity with the characteristics, whether or not that association aligns with reality. (p. 14)

"These implicit biases may contrast with explicit egalitarian intentions, thereby creating a challenging gap between educators' intentions and outcomes" (Staats et al., 2016, p. 34). Including the voices of key stakeholders such as administrative leaders helped them

explore their beliefs about why racial disproportionality in special education exists at their high school, explore the local factors and school processes that play a role in contributing to racial disproportionality, and identify the interventions and supports that will reduce or eliminate racial disproportionality in special education referral, eligibility and placement procedures.

Background

Despite four decades of research and legal cases focused on reducing disproportionality at the local, state, and federal level through the implementation of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and its amendments, there continues to be only a few research studies that address the factors that create and maintain the conditions that cause disproportionate practices in schools (Skiba, 2013). “The overrepresentation of minority students in certain disability categories continues to be one of the most persistent and complex issues in the field of special education and has received a great deal of attention over the past 20 years” (Chinn & Hughes, 1987; Dunn, 1968; Finn, 1982; Hosp & Reschly, 2002; Losen & Orfield, 2002; National Research Council [NRC], 2002; Parrish, 2002 as cited in Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Gallini, Simmons, & Feggins-Azziz, 2005, p. 411). African American students are the most overrepresented group identified for special education in every state (Parrish, 2002). In addition, racial disproportionality occurs more frequently in disability categories under IDEA that are considered more subjective in nature such as emotional disturbance (ED), other health impairment (OHI), and intellectual disabilities

(ID) (Losen & Orfield, 2002) relative to other special education categories such as a visual impairment.

Factors Hypothesized to Account for Racial Disproportionality

There are several contributing factors of disproportionality cited in the research, including a lack of culturally responsive curriculum, implicit bias, inequity in the general education environment, test bias in the psychological assessments, and special education referral, as well as eligibility and placement procedures that must be addressed through a comprehensive plan (Bal, Sullivan, & Harper, 2014; Barton & Larson, 2012; National Association of School Psychologists, 2013; Skiba, 2013; Staats et al., 2016).

Furthermore, qualitative studies suggest that less trained teachers refer more students for special education (Losen, 2011). Current theories identify four major categories that impact disproportionality: (1) Socio-demographic issues, (2) unequal educational opportunities, (3) discrimination or implicit bias within the school system, and (4) special education referral, eligibility decisions and IEP placement (Hernandez, Ramanathan, Harr, & Socias, 2008). There are only a handful of research studies that explore disproportionality across educational environments (Hosp & Reschly, 2002; Skiba, Wu, Kohler, Chung & Simmons, 2001).

Interventions Targeting Racial Disproportionality

There are only a few research studies that examine outcomes of interventions to reduce disproportionate practices such as MTSS and culturally responsive teaching practices. Several steps are suggested to address disproportionality, including examining and reducing implicit or explicit biases, implementing research based approaches such as

MTSS, engaging in culturally responsive teaching practices, analyzing academic and behavioral data, sustaining alternative approaches that promote access to the core curricula, and developing benchmarks to monitor progress (National Association of School Psychologists, 2013).

Multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) “is an approach for redesigning and establishing teaching and learning environments that are effective, efficient, and relevant for all students, families, and educators that matches instructional and intervention strategies and supports to student needs” (Illinois Personnel Development Grant, 2016, p. 1). Interventions aligned with multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) and culturally responsive teaching practices have shown to reduce problematic behaviors, to increase instructional minutes in the classroom, and increase educational outcomes (National Association of School Psychologists, 2013); however, research studies are needed to determine whether MTSS and culturally responsive teaching practices reduce disproportionality. The complex nature of racial disproportionality in special education suggests the need for individualized approaches at different schools as well as multifaceted interventions.

Rationale for the Study

The U.S. Department of Education data demonstrate that disproportionality is a problem in the state of Illinois education system. The data show that Illinois has a significant problem to address; however, the current research does not address administrators’ perception of disproportionality. It is critical that administrators in Illinois examine how school systems continue to play a role in disproportionate special

education practices in order to make recommendations for the next steps in future work, such as creating an implementable action plan to eliminate these disparities if they exist in their school districts. Involving key stakeholders through learning administrative leaders' beliefs about why racial disproportionality exists at the high school level, exploring the local factors and processes that contribute to racial disproportionality in special education, and identifying interventions and supports that will reduce or eliminate racial disproportionality in special education referral, eligibility and placement procedures will be the starting point for understanding disproportionality at the local level and for implementing important components of an equity action plan to impact disproportionate practices. The goal is to learn from administrators how best to serve students with disabilities including minority students in the general education setting to the maximum extent possible. As educators, we know that the research shows that minority students do not have the same access and instruction in the general education environment as their White peers; however, "the meaning and cause of minority disproportionality is not clear" (Skiba et al., 2005, p. 413).

Significance of the Study and State Considerations

In 1975, the federal government enacted Public Law 94-142: The Education for All Handicapped Children Act to ensure that children with disabilities receive special education services in the school setting which later became IDEA (Skiba, 2013; Wright, 2010). Congress established a series of procedures and processes called "procedural safeguards" to protect the rights of students with disabilities (Wright, 2010). IDEA has been amended multiple times since 1975. In 1997 and again in 2004, IDEA was

amended and made special education disproportionality one of the top priorities (Skiba, 2013). The IDEA 2004 Act mandates that school districts focus on prevention in the general education setting instead of just procedural compliance with the disproportionality indicators (Skiba, 2013). Research indicates that racial disproportionality in special education is reflective of problems that begin in the general education classroom (Abramovitz & Blitz, 2015). In addition, IDEA 2004 expanded its attention to the number of students with disabilities who are subjected to suspension and expulsion practices (Skiba, 2013).

In 2012, “the Illinois State Board of Education received its State Education Agency (SEA) Determination letter on the implementation of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) from the U.S. Department of Education and the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP)” (Weekly State Superintendent Report, 2012, p. 7). The letter indicated that Illinois was placed in the “Needs Assistance” category mainly due to disproportionate practices by racial subgroup in special education (Weekly State Superintendent Report, 2012). The Weekly State Superintendent Report from (2012) cites specific factors affecting the OSEP determination of “Needs Assistance” for Illinois which includes disproportionality as a significant factor:

The specific factors affecting the OSEP determination of “Needs Assistance” for Illinois were: (1) the State’s FFY 2010 data for State Performance Plan (SPP) Indicator 13, which measures compliance with secondary transition requirements, reflects 86.4 percent compliance, and the State did not report that it corrected all FFY 2009 findings of noncompliance as one finding remains open; and (2) the

State's FFY 2010 data for SPP Indicator 17, which measures the timeliness of impartial due process hearing decisions, reflects 58.3 percent. OSEP also noted areas that reflect a high level of performance in Illinois, including SPP Indicators 4B (suspension/expulsion by race/ethnicity), 9 (disproportionality), 10 (disproportionality in specific disability categories), 11 (evaluation), 12 (transition from Part C to Part B), 15 (correction of noncompliance), 16 (complaints) and 20 (state-reported data). (p. 1)

Illinois Disproportionality Calculation Procedures and Requirements

Since 2012, the State has examined and determined that disproportionate representation exists using a risk ratio of 3.0 or higher resulting in overrepresentation for a particular racial/ethnic group for three consecutive years (Illinois State Board of Education, 2012). The risk ratio indicates the risk of one racial group being disproportionately represented in a specific category (e.g., special education) compared to the risk for a comparison group (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). "The general equation for risk for identification is: Risk = number of children from racial/ethnic group in disability category divided by the number of enrolled children from racial/ethnic group multiplied by 100" (Data Accountability Center, 2011, p. 15).

The Illinois State Board of Education (2012) provides formulas for calculating the risk ratio for the percentage of children from a specific racial/ethnic group who receive special education and related services, who receive special education and related services in a particular educational environment, or who experience particular types of suspensions and/or expulsions. In addition, the U.S. Department of Education has

identified risk ratio thresholds (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). If a school district meets the threshold for disproportionate practices, they must complete a self-assessment. The self-assessment requires school districts to review policies, practices and procedures to determine whether or not the disproportionality is caused by inappropriate referral and eligibility practices (Illinois State Board of Education, 2012). In addition, school districts must set aside 15 percent of its total IDEA Part B flow-through monies to implement coordinated early intervening services (CEIS) in order to address significant disproportionate practices (Illinois State Board of Education, 2012). Specifically, these IDEA funds may be used to provide professional development to teachers on research based academic and behavioral interventions and to purchase progress monitoring tools and research based interventions to evaluate and assess students (Illinois State Board of Education, 2012). Any school district identified with disproportionality must develop a school improvement plan which includes resources, timelines, and persons responsible for implementing the improvement activities (Illinois State Board of Education Special Education Services Division, 2015).

Disproportionality concerns continue to exist at federal, state and local level (Cavendish, Artiles, & Harry, 2014). Since there are multiple variables impacting disproportionate practices, it is significant that school districts review policies, practices and procedures, and engage in conversations concerning the potential contributing factors impacting disproportionate practices.

The current research examined whether administrative leaders' perceptions offer insight into disproportionate practices and identified potential interventions that public

high schools may implement to tackle these ongoing inherently unequal practices. The high school setting was chosen as an area of focus because there is a lack of current research with older adolescent students; however, high school is the last opportunity where administrators may address disproportionality and potentially change the trajectory for students who are negatively impacted by disproportionate practices. Additionally, there are only three qualitative research studies that include administrators as respondents regarding why disproportionality exists (Bal et al., 2014; Hardin, Mereoiu, Hung, & Roach-Scott, 2009; Skiba et al., 2005). This study provided authentic voices from administrators as well as detailed stories about the referral, eligibility and placement procedures of students identified for special education at the high school level.

Methodology Overview

The Constant Comparative Method using three high school cases was utilized to glean information about why disproportionality exists, to explore the beliefs and practices that contribute to racial disproportionality, and to identify interventions and supports for reducing racial disproportionality. A total of nine high school administrators participated in the study. Each administrative leader who consented, participated in a face-to-face semi-structured interview and completed a written questionnaire via Opinio (ObjectPlanet, Inc, 2018). Once the participants for the study were identified, each administrative leader was scheduled to participate in a 60-80 minute individual interview. Each meeting was conducted in a private office at the administrators' workplace or in a neutral location. The researcher reviewed the informed consent process, shared the purpose of the study, and explained the potential risks and benefits of participating in the

study, the confidentiality parameters, and the timeline of the study. (Refer to Appendix A for a full copy of the informed consent, reviewed and signed with each participant.) Questions were used to explore school administrators' perspectives regarding why disproportionality exists, their beliefs and practices that may contribute to racial disproportionality in the high school setting in the Midwestern state of Illinois, and the interventions needed to be implemented to reduce racial disproportionality in special education [within their district, if it exists]. When necessary, additional probing questions were asked of the participants. After the interview was completed, the researcher emailed the questionnaire for the participant to complete via Opinio (ObjectPlanet, Inc, 2018). (See Appendix C for a full copy of the disproportionality questionnaire.) The questionnaire allowed the researcher to gather information that supplemented the interview questions.

Administrators Perceptions and Beliefs About Racial Disproportionality

According to Harry and Fenton's (2016) review of literature, there are seven research studies from 1968 to 2014 that focus on stakeholders' perspectives and beliefs regarding the root causes of disproportionality. There are no known qualitative research studies that specifically explore only administrative leaders' beliefs regarding why disproportionality exists at the high school, nor are there any known studies that seek to understand the beliefs of high school administrators' practices that contribute to racial disproportionality. Administrators play a key role in the special education referral, eligibility, and placement processes and procedures. For example, high school deans are responsible for enforcing and applying School Board policies and Illinois School Code

provisions regarding the maintenance of discipline and attendance within the school. Often times, deans are an integral part of identifying students to the referral process when their behavior impacts their academic growth. Additionally, the assistant principal for student services is responsible for helping all students to achieve personal, social, and academic success. When a student is not making progress in the academic or social-emotional realm, the assistant principal coordinates interventions and monitors the progress of the student. When a student does not demonstrate academic or social emotional growth despite interventions and supports, the student is often referred by the assistant principal or one of their department members for a special education referral. Once a referral is made, the director of special education or special education administrator plays an integral role in the eligibility process and placement process that may cause and maintain special education disproportionality. Key researchers including Artiles (2014) and Harry and Fenton (2016) call for more rigorous qualitative studies to examine the complex interactions and processes that impact disproportionality.

Research Questions

This research study will seek to answer the following questions:

1. According to high school administrators, why does racial disproportionality exist in their high school district?
2. According to high school administrators, what beliefs and practices contribute to racial disproportionality in their school district?

3. According to high school administrators, what interventions and/or practices need to be implemented to reduce or eliminate racial disproportionality in special education [within their district, if it exists]?

Definition of Key Terms

To assist the reader in understanding this dissertation study, key terms and abbreviations have been provided.

Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP): “A plan developed by educators which focuses on antecedents to the difficult behavior, the actual behavior observed, and the consequences of the behavior in order to overcome the challenging behavior” (Kirk et al., 2012, p. G-1).

Child Find: “Public awareness activities, screening, and evaluation designed to locate, identify, and refer as early as possible all young children with disabilities” (Kirk et al., p. G-2).

Colorblindness: “Racial colorblindness is when race is noticed but not considered” (Skiba, Eckes, & Brown, 2009, p. 1106).

Differentiated Instruction: “Refers to the changes in teacher strategies and curriculum made necessary by the characteristics of the exceptional child” (Kirk et al., 2012, G-3).

Disproportionality: “Refers to a group’s representation in a particular category that exceeds our expectations for that group, or differs substantially from the representation of others in that category” (National Association of School Psychologists, 2013, p. 1).

Evaluation:

Evaluation is defined as procedures used to determine whether a child has a disability and the nature and extent of the special education and related services that the child needs. The school district must assess the child in all areas of suspected disability including: academic performance, health, vision, hearing, social and emotional status, communication, motor abilities, general intelligence, functional performance, other areas as needed. (Illinois State Board of Education Special Education and Support Service, 2009, p. 20).

Evidence Based Interventions: “Intervention strategies which research has demonstrated to be effective” (Kirk et al., 2012, p. G-4).

Grounded Theory: Grounded theory is when “the investigator is the primary instrument of data collection and the analysis assumes an inductive stance and strives to derive meaning from the data” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 31).

High Incidence Disabilities: “The categories of disability that are most prevalent in the U.S., comprising at least one percent of the school population” (Kirk et al., 2012, p. G-5).

Implicit Bias: Is when a person shows preference for one group over another group while not consciously aware of their behavior (Fiarman, 2016).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA): “The law originally passed in 1975 as PL 94-142 and reauthorized in 2004 addressing the school’s responsibility to children with exceptionalities in the classroom” (Kirk et al., 2012, p. G-5).

Inclusion: “The process of bringing children with exceptionalities into the classroom” (Kirk et al., p. G-5).

Individualized Education Plan (IEP): “A program written for every student receiving special education. It describes the child’s current performance and goals for the school year, the particular special education services to be delivered and the procedures by which outcomes are to be evaluated” (Kirk et al., 2012, p. G-5).

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE): “The educational setting in which a child with special needs can learn that is as close as possible to the general education classroom” (Kirk et al., 2012, p. G-6).

Low Incidence Disabilities: “The categories of disability that comprise less than one percent of the school population in the U.S.” (Kirk et al., 2012, p. G-6).

Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS):

(MTSS) is an approach for redesigning and establishing teaching and learning environments that are effective, efficient, relevant, and durable for all students, families, and educators. RtI/MTSS involves an education process that matches instructional and intervention strategies and supports to student needs in an informed, ongoing approach for planning, implementing, and evaluating the effectiveness of instruction, curricular supports, and interventions. (Illinois Personnel Development Grant, 2016, p.1)

No Child Left Behind PL 107-110: “This law enacted in 2001 requires that schools must show that not only are students as a group meeting state standards, but that

individual categories (e.g., children with exceptionalities) are as well” (Kirk et al., 2012, p. G-7).

PL 94-152: The original law passed in 1975 known as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act and later became renamed as IDEA (Kirk et al., 2012).

Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS): “An approach to intervention based on behavior science principles and meant to replace punitive measures for behavior control. Includes functional assessments, positive interventions, and evaluative measures to assess progress” (Kirk et al., 2012, p. G-7).

Progress Monitoring: “Using data (such as test results or performance on screening measures) on student's achievement, performance, and other needs to monitor progress, guide decision making, and plan for future needs” (Kirk et al., 2012, p. G-7).

Referral: “Referral in the context of special education services is a process asking the school district to evaluate a student to decide if the student qualifies to receive special education services” (Illinois State Board of Education Special Education and Support Service, June 2009, p. 16).

Response to Intervention (RtI): “RtI is a tiered approach that provides the structure needed to support the collaboration between general education and special education to address the strengths and needs of children with disabilities” (Kirk et al., 2012, p. G-8).

Resource Classroom: “The student receives specially designed instruction through a special education class for less than half of the school day. The student is

included, to the maximum extent appropriate, in general education classes” (Illinois State Board of Education Special Education and Support Service, 2009, p. 53).

Self-Contained Room: “The student receives specially designed instruction through a special education class for the majority of the school day. The student is included, with support (using some of the above methods) in those parts of general education classes when appropriate” (Illinois State Board of Education Special Education and Support Service, 2009, p. 53).

Social Emotional Learning (SEL):

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is the process through which children and adults acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills they need to: recognize and manage their emotions, demonstrate care and concern for others, establish positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle challenging situations constructively. (Illinois State Board of Education, 2016, p. 1)

State Performance Plan (SPP):

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA 2004), requires each state to develop a State Performance Plan. This SPP describes how the state will improve educational outcomes for students with disabilities, ages 3-21, and comply with IDEA 2004. Illinois' Part B SPP was first submitted to the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), in December 2005. (Illinois Statewide Technical Assistance Collaborative, n.d., p. 1)

White Privilege:

White privilege as it exists in American society or in the American educational system is defined as any phenomena, whether individual (e.g., biased teacher attitudes/perceptions), structural (e.g., curricular and pedagogical practices geared toward White, middle-class students), political (e.g., biased educational policies), economic (school funding formulas that contribute to inequality), or social (social constructions of race and disability), that serve to privilege Whites while oppressing people of color and promoting White supremacy. (McIntosh 1990, cited in Blanchett, 2006, p. 24)

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction to the Literature Review

The purpose of Chapter II is to provide a summary of all relevant literature related to the history of special education including the federal laws and policies that impact racial disproportionality in special education, to review relevant literature regarding administrative leaders' beliefs about disproportionality and ways to address it, to identify research studies that examine the factors that contribute to disproportionality, and provide an overview of interventions and practices that address disproportionality. This chapter will provide a literature context related to the following research questions:

1. According to high school administrators, why does racial disproportionality exist in their high school district?
2. According to high school administrators, what beliefs and practices contribute to racial disproportionality in their school district?
3. According to high school administrators, what interventions and/or practices need to be implemented to reduce or eliminate racial disproportionality in special education [within their district, if it exists]?

Historical Perspectives on Special Education Reform and Advocacy

To understand racial disproportionality in special education, it is important to understand the historical context of special education. Much of the available literature on

the history of special education reform focuses on the civil rights movement in the 1950s when advocates of children with disabilities fought for equal rights, suggesting that special education is a fairly young field. However, there are accounts of disability advocacy dating back over a century ago and as early as the 1800s. In a review of literature, Spaulding and Pratt (2015) identify three eras that help readers understand the history of special education reform which include: “(a) Early Reform (1800-1860), (b) Stagnation and Regression (1860-1950), and (c) Contemporary Reform (1950 to Present)” (p. 92). There are notable themes that have emerged and are explained in each of the eras through societal attitudes, legislative rulings, and laws which are described in detail in the first part of this chapter.

Despite educational reform and the enactment of Public Law (P. L.) 94-142 in 1975, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and its amendments, No Child Left Behind, and most recently the Every Students Succeeds Act (ESSA), there continues to be discriminatory practices, under-resourced schools, exclusionary special education placement procedures, and an overrepresentation of minority students in specific disability categories resulting in disproportionality (Cavendish et al., 2014). According to Patton (1998):

The current reality of the overrepresentation of African Americans in special education classes perpetuates this socio-historical legacy by allowing the general and special education enterprises to continue the creation of programmatic and classroom arrangements that jeopardize the life chances of large numbers of African American youth. (p. 25)

While the factors that contribute to disproportionality are complex, school administrators' insights are critical for understanding the root causes of disproportionality and implementing equitable practices to improve student's outcomes for every student (Barton & Larson, 2012). Much of the research on disproportionality indicates it is a long standing problem, but less attention has explored administrators' beliefs about why there continues to be disparate practices.

Disproportionality occurs when a particular group is unevenly identified for special education (Blanchett, 2006) relative to their representation in the population, is subject to higher rates of discipline (Losen & Skiba, 2010), or is marginalized from the general education setting (Sullivan et al., 2008). Despite four decades focused on reducing disproportionality at the local, state, and federal level through the implementation of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) and its amendments, there continues to be only a few research studies that address the factors that create and maintain the conditions that cause disproportionate practices in schools (Skiba, 2013).

Since the reauthorization of the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act* (IDEIA) in 2004, there has been an emphasis on interventions and supports such as the use of school wide multi-tiered prevention services and culturally responsive teaching practices to improve the academic and social emotional outcomes for all learners including students identified with disabilities and to reduce disproportionate practices (De Pry & Chessman, 2010). Although there are few research studies that address outcomes from efforts to reduce disproportionate practices, interventions aligned

with culturally responsive teaching practices, multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) and prevention efforts have been found to reduce problematic behaviors, to increase instructional minutes in the classroom, and to increase educational outcomes for students (National Association of School Psychologists, 2013).

Literature on the Historical Context of Special Education

During the early 1800s, people with disabilities experienced many hardships including exclusion, expulsion, and even execution (Crissy, 1975; Heller, 1979; Winzer, 1989). Many families had to hide their children with disabilities in order to escape these hardships or they institutionalized them. Society saw people with disabilities as inhuman and deviant (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). The outlook for people with disabilities began to improve in the mid-1800s as a result of disability advocates. Despite advocates' efforts, the population began to increase in the mid-1800s which caused an increase in institutional costs and an increase in resident labor (Crissy, 1975).

In the latter part of the 1800s, economic pressures and philosophical thought resulted in people trying to find ways to eradicate disability. Charles Darwin's thoughts and the philosophy of eugenics sought to exclude individuals with disabilities by institutionalizing them (Carey, 2009; Van Drenth, 2005). People with disabilities were perceived as deviants and the eugenicists sought to eliminate people with disabilities. In the early 1900s, there were approximately ten million children who met the criteria for special education services; yet, only one million were given limited services (Paul, French, & Cranston-Gingras, 2001). After World War II, there began to be a positive shift in how society viewed people with disabilities resulting in educational reform.

The trend to integrate students with disabilities into the larger society became a focus after World War II and during the civil rights movement. Likewise, Americans were more sensitive toward individuals with disabilities since many war veterans became disabled after the war. President Kennedy was also instrumental in the fight for people with disabilities. One of President Kennedy's sisters, Rosemary, had a disability and her siblings fought for research and teacher training specific to the category of Mental Retardation (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). As a result, he established the President's Panel on Mental Retardation and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development in 1962 to advocate for people with disabilities (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015).

During the 1960s, parents became more involved in advocating for children due to medical advances for individuals with disabilities (Carey, 2009). Also, during the 1960s and the 1970s, there was a movement referred to as deinstitutionalization, which resulted in students with disabilities moving home to be raised by their families (Hallahan & Kauffman, 2003). In addition, parents and lobby groups fought for special education services through litigation and legislation (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). The Supreme Court case of *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954) opened doors for students with disabilities.

Literature on Key Special Education Legislation

Since the 1950s there have been several key legislative initiatives and Supreme Court rulings that have forced states to be in compliance with federal law and to educate individuals with disabilities. Although, *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 did not solely focus on individuals with disabilities, it highlighted injustices experienced by students with disabilities.

Brown v. Board of Education 1954

Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Shawnee County, Kansas (1954)

signaled an end to school segregation in United States schools and provided the legal impetus for special education. The Supreme Court ruled that “school segregation by race deprives minority students of equal protection which is guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States” (Braun, 2014, p. 206). “By ruling state-sanctioned segregation based solely on a person’s unalterable characteristics (e.g., race, gender, disability) was unconstitutional, the Supreme Court set a legal precedent that dual systems for education were neither fair or equal” (McLaughlin & Henderson, 2000, cited in Spaulding & Pratt, 2015, p. 101). After the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, Gunnar Dybward surfaced as an advocate and began to challenge the legal systems (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015).

Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children (PARC) v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania 1972

PARC continued to instigate changes in the public school system for individuals with disabilities. The Court ruled in favor of PARC and required schools to individualize instruction for students with intellectual disabilities (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). Dybward was successful in seeking civil rights for individuals with disabilities (Carey, 2009). This court case opened the doors for other states’ legislation specific to educating students regardless of their disability type.

These court cases instigated movements of normalization and deinstitutionalization for persons with disabilities. Individuals with disabilities were

placed in educational settings similar to their nondisabled peers and received treatment approaches as close as possible as their peers (Hallahan & Kauffman, 2003). Both movements increased public awareness about the needs of individuals with disabilities which resulted in more acceptance and advocacy.

Unintended and Deleterious Outcomes of Special Education Legislation and Advocacy

Although these movements and court cases improved the outlook for individuals with disabilities, unintended consequences of segregation and isolation continued in the public school systems. Many students with disabilities received their education in basements, closets and the resource room which promoted segregation (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). Although special education is designed to meet the individualized needs of students with disabilities, research supports that inclusion in the general education setting is preferred (Bean, 2011).

The deleterious outcomes for students of color are particularly noteworthy. “The fact that disproportionately large numbers of African Americans are being persistently diagnosed as disabled and placed in special education programs constitutes a problem--for many of these students are inappropriately placed” (Patton, 1998, p. 25). The consequences of inappropriate special education placements for youth of color include stigmatization, missed general education and social curricula, decreased likelihood of achievement and post-secondary education (Patton, 1998). Many authors argue that the years following *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954) resulted in the systematic tracking

and disproportionality of African American students into special education (Cavendish et al., 2014; Shealey, Lue, Brooks, & McCray, 2005).

Mills v. Board of Education 1972

The federal ruling of *Mills v. Board of Education of District of Columbia* (1972) was significant because it paved the way for the enactment of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) (Yell et al., 1998). In *Mills v. Board of Education of District of Columbia* (1972), seven children with disabilities sued the Board of Education of District of Columbia because they were denied special education services. In this case, the Court ruled that children were entitled to a free and appropriate education and ordered that the Board of Education develop a remedial plan in order to ensure that the children received their right to equal protection (Yell et al., 1998).

PL 94-142 Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) 1975

Despite advocacy by parents and lobbyists, it was clear that federal legislation was needed to equalize educational opportunities for students with disabilities across the country. In 1975, Congress passed PL 94-142 Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA). The (EAHCA) is one of the most important special education court cases in the history of United States legislation (Center for Education & Employment Law, 2008). This was the first time the federal government accepted responsibility for educating students with disabilities and required states to be in compliance with the new federal requirements (Kirk et al., 2012). The purpose of (EAHCA) was “to assure that all handicapped children have available to them a free and appropriate public education which emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique

needs” (U.S. Department of Representatives, 1975, p. 35, cited in Kirk et al., 2012, p. 34). In 1990, Congress passed an amendment renaming the Education for All Handicapped Children Act as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Since 1990, IDEA has been amended several times.

More Recent Special Education Reforms

Since the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975, Congress has amended and renamed IDEA several times to ensure children have equal access to educational resources. In 1990, 1994, 1997, and again in 2004, IDEA was amended and made special education disproportionality a major priority (Skiba, 2013). The IDEA 2004 Act mandates that school districts focus on prevention in the general education setting instead of just procedural compliance with the disproportionality indicators (Skiba, 2013). The 2004 reauthorization strengthens provisions and expanded its focus to the inequities among students with disabilities subjected to discipline and expulsion (Skiba, 2013).

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

In 2001, the federal government passed a significant piece of legislation, Public Law 107-110 known as No Child Left Behind Act. President George W. Bush had just been elected and he pushed for No Child Left Behind in order to hold schools accountable for educating all students including students with disabilities (Kirk et al., 2012). No Child left Behind required that schools must maintain adequate yearly progress (AYP) on state academic standards or they would have to implement corrective action and face consequences such as loss of federal funds (Center for Education and

Employment Law, 2008). Although the purpose of No Child Left Behind was to help all students reach a certain level of competence, it fell short when all schools became a failure, since not all students could meet this level of achievement. Although educators do not agree on the positive impact of NCLB, there is broad agreement that NCLB did not increase student achievement and may have even increased the achievement gap for minority students (United States Department of Education, 2008) further impacting disproportionality in our public schools.

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

On December 10, 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) became effective and replaced No Child Left Behind which provides states greater flexibility and a more structured approach to using research to guide programs and policy (Klein, 2016). The purpose of ESSA is “enhance the authority of states and school districts that had long chafed at the strictures of ESSA’s predecessor, the No Child Left Behind Act” (Klein, 2016, p. 1). ESSA requires each state to develop a plan for the 17-18 school year that addresses the following major school education issues: “accountability and testing, teacher quality, research, regulation, funding, early-childhood education, and student groups that often lag behind their peers” (p. 1).

Despite four decades focused on improving education for students with disabilities at the federal, state and local level, disproportionate practices in schools continue to be a presenting problem as evidenced by legislative initiatives and litigation since the 1950s (Noltemeyer, Mujic, & McLoughlin, cited in Noltemeyer & McLoughlin,

2012). The next section of the literature defines disproportionality and identifies the impact of disproportionate practices.

Literature on Disproportionality

All children, regardless of their backgrounds, are entitled to a high quality education including research-based practices and access to the Common Core curricula (National Association of School Psychologists, 2013). “In a field grounded in the principle of nondiscrimination, the disproportionate representation of minority students represents a central and continuing challenge for the field of special education” (Dunn, 1968; Skiba, Simmons, Ritter, Kohler, Henderson & Wu, 2006, p. 1424).

Definition of Disproportionality

Disproportionality “refers to a group’s representation in a particular category that exceeds our expectations for that group, or differs substantially from the representation of others in that category” (National Association of School Psychologists, 2013, p. 1).

Specifically, the Illinois State Board of Education (2012) defines disproportionality as:

Students in a particular racial/ethnic group (i.e., Asian, Black, Hispanic, Native American, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, White, or Two or More races) being at a considerably greater risk of being identified as eligible for special education and related services overall or by disability category (i.e., Autism, Intellectual Disability, Emotional Disability, Other Health Impairment, Specific Learning Disability, and Speech Language) than all other racial/ethnic groups enrolled either in the district or in the state. (p. 1)

Disproportionality occurs when a particular group is unevenly identified for special education (Blanchett, 2006), is subject to higher rates of discipline (Losen & Skiba, 2010), is marginalized from the general education setting (Sullivan et al., 2008), and when the rate is not proportional to the rate of minorities in the population in question (Blanchett, 2006). Disproportionality may apply to students who are overidentified and underidentified; however, the overrepresentation of minority students who qualify for special education remains at the forefront (Dyson & Gallannaugh, 2008; Gravios & Rosenfield, 2006; Reschly, 2009; Salend et al., 2005; Sullivan, 2011). According to Thorius and Stephenson, as cited in Noltemeyer and McLoughlin (2012):

most often, disproportionality manifests itself as the overrepresentation of students from underserved racial and ethnic groups (e.g., Black, Latino, American Indian) as compared to students from racial and ethnic groups (e.g., White) and is further observed in conjunction with lower income levels and underserved geographies (e.g., urban, rural). (p. 26)

Research indicates that culturally and linguistically students are found to be vulnerable to disproportionate practices both by race and disability category (Losen & Welner, 2002). National data from the US Department of Education reveals that minority students are overidentified for special education programs in all 50 states (Parrish, 2002) and are more likely to be eligible for mental retardation (MR) and emotional disturbance (ED) (Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, & Higareda, 2002). Also, American Indian and Alaska Native students are overrepresented in the eligibility category for a specific learning disability (Skiba, Simmons, Ritter, Gibb, Rausch, Cuadrado, & Chung, 2008). Other

research studies indicate that Asian Americans are underrepresented in special education (Yoon & Gentry, 2009).

When examining disproportionality data across the country, it is difficult to draw comparisons and conclusions because each state may choose the methodology to identify significant disproportionality (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). In 2010-2011, approximately 6.4 million children received special education services and supports in the United States (Castro-Villarreal, Villarreal, & Sullivan, 2016). Research studies show that one of every three children enrolled in school is of a different racial or ethnic background (Griner & Stewart, 2013). The U.S. Department of Education (ED) (2016) has recently developed a document that highlights “the number and percentage of school districts that would be identified with significant disproportionality if ED’s example risk ratio thresholds were adopted by all 50 states” (p. 4). The document includes fifteen tables which highlight the school years 2011-12, 2012-13, and 2013-14 and which include the number and percentages of each local educational agency (LEA) with a risk ratio that exceeds two median absolute deviations (MADS) above the national median of (LEA) risk ratios.

These tables detail the number and percent of LEAs in each state with a risk ratio that exceeds two MADs above the national median, with a minimum of 10 students for three consecutive years, within each race/ethnicity and specific category (i.e., identification of students with specific learning disabilities, total number of disciplinary removals, and separate settings, etc.). (U.S. Department of Education, 2016, p. 4)

For example, the state of Illinois has 878 school districts and 483 of those school districts or 55% have a risk ratio in at least one race/ethnicity, in at least one disability category, educational environment, or discipline category that exceeds the example thresholds for three more years (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). The data reported in these tables further demonstrate that disproportionality continues to be a problem in the Illinois education system.

Despite court challenges, federal and state policy initiatives, and research studies, disproportionate practices in special education are unresolved. Research shows that students who are disproportionately represented in special education are negatively affected by factors such as stigmatization, substandard instruction, lowered expectations, zero tolerance policies, and isolation from the general education setting (Sullivan et al., 2008). There is no single cause for the disproportionate practices in special education (Skiba, 2013). The next section of this literature defines how administrative leaders are key players in changing the trajectory of racial disproportionality.

Role of Administrative Leaders in Reducing Disproportionality

In the education system, school administrators make decisions every day that affect student learning. “Educational leaders must be bold if they are to authentically and successfully confront the situations in our schools that cause inequalities” (Barton & Larson, 2012, p. 6). Most practitioners and administrative leaders concur with the problematic nature of disproportionality; however, across the country it continues to plague our school systems (Dunn, 1968; Losen & Orfield, 2002; National Research Council, 2002). While the factors that contribute to disproportionality are complex,

school administrators' insights are critical for understanding the root causes and contextual factors that yield disparate practices (Skiba et al., 2016; Barton & Larson, 2012).

Much of the research on disproportionality indicates it is a long standing problem, but less attention has explored administrators beliefs' as well as the local processes that contribute to disparate practices. Skiba et al. (2006) state, "data are needed about local perspectives on the influence of race/ethnicity itself on disproportionality" (p. 1427). In a review of disproportionality literature by Harry and Fenton (2016), they found 15 research studies examining factors that contribute to special education disproportionality. Only six studies relied on questioning to discover the perspectives and voices of practitioners and parents. Of these six studies, three used qualitative approaches only and three used both quantitative and qualitative methods combined. The three qualitative studies involved face-to-face interviews or qualitative surveys which further highlights the need for more qualitative studies to explore the root causes of disproportionality from an administrative leaders' perspective. None of these studies focused on administrators' beliefs solely.

In one of the three qualitative studies by Skiba et al. (2006), they interviewed 66 educators (7 Special Education Directors, 9 school psychologists, 20 Principals and Assistant Principals, and 28 classroom teachers) about their perspectives on special education, school resources, and disproportionality. Skiba et al. (2006) found that all four groups of educators tended to be more similar than different when responding to the factors that contribute to disproportionality. Poverty stood out as a central theme for all

groups as explanation for disproportionality. Also, respondents in this study strongly believed that state accountability testing creates pressures that increase inappropriate referrals for special education. In addition, respondents in this study all complained of the excessive proceduralism of special education. Some classroom teachers noted that in some cases they made fewer referrals because of the long and complicated special education referral process. Also, all groups indicated a serious gap in preparation and resources for addressing classroom behaviors resulting in over-referral for special education. Lastly, “implicit bias was directly acknowledged in this study as the researchers explained that White participants, who were the majority in the sample, were reluctant to express opinions about race” (Harry & Fenton, 2016, p. 20). In summary, the results from Skiba et al. (2006) “suggest that successful remediation efforts will avoid simplistic or linear solutions, increase resources to address learning and behavior problems in general education, and seek methods to use data on racial disparity as a stimulus toward reflection and action” (p. 1424).

In a study by Hardin et al. (2009), they utilized focus groups involving parents, teachers and administrators to ascertain perspectives on disproportionality. The themes of parental involvement, special education policies and procedures, and resources for adequate bilingual assessments and services were echoed as reasons for disproportionality.

Another study involving administrators went beyond gathering their beliefs about why disproportionality exists and investigated how their beliefs might be addressed through professional development. In a study by Bal et al. (2014), they used a mixed-

method collaborative case analysis in order to examine the patterns of disproportionality in the Flen School District in the state of Wisconsin which is the second largest school district in the state. The purpose of the research study was to examine the topography of disproportionality in the district and to study how the qualitative data analysis of disproportionality informed Flen's Leadership Team's understanding of disproportionality and its efforts to address disproportionality. During the collaborative action research, the researchers used a cyclical model involving stakeholders throughout the process in a variety of roles based on the needs and interests of the Leadership Team. They conducted descriptive analyses of the student level factors. For example, the researchers estimated the risk indices (RIs) which provides a proportion of each racial group identified with a disability. After the Leadership Team engaged in a deep examination of disproportionality and related practices, they were able to move forward in planning organizational change. Bal et al. (2014) state the following:

The Leadership Team determined that adaptive solutions were necessary instead of continued reliance on purely technical solutions such as compliance activities (e.g., procedural checklists, new documentation systems, evaluation guidelines, brief professional development seminars from external experts and other obligatory requirements). (p. 10)

As a result of iterative data analysis, the Leadership Team engaged in a series of critical conversations. Based on the emerging theory of action, the Leadership Team identified five key priorities: (a) improve the instructional core and provide evidence based supports through the MTSS process, (b) redesign the K-12 scope and sequence to align with the

Common Core, (c) integrate culturally responsive curriculum, (d) implement a kindergarten program for 4-year olds, and (e) incorporate universal design for learning in the curriculum design and instructional delivery. “To maintain the evidentiary adequacy, immersion, and member checking, the researchers had approximately 15 meetings with the Leadership Team” (Bal et al., 2014, p. 7). This article is critical to this research study because it highlights the need for involving key stakeholders such as administrative leaders in understanding disproportionality. Also, the researchers call for more research on local practices such as the impact of RTI on reducing disproportionate practices, creating a need to examine interventions and supports that reduce and/or eliminate disproportionality.

In a dissertation study by Park (2010), she examined “special education teachers’ awareness of the disproportionality, their causal theories, and the effectiveness of Response to Intervention (RTI) to regulate disproportionality” (p. 3). In her study, Park found that most teachers were aware of disproportionality problems, identified the root causes as poor teacher training and student home environment, and the teachers believed that RTI would reduce the number of minority students eligible for special education. In order to extend Park’s research, this study will examine another stakeholder groups’ perceptions regarding the potential causes of disproportionality and potential solutions at the local level. Skiba et al. (2006) cites “the absence of local interpretive data may be in fact a critical barrier to understanding and remediating disproportionate representation” (p. 1427). The next section of the literature describes the major contributing factors of disproportionality cited in the literature including beliefs and practices.

Beliefs and Practices that Contribute to Disproportionality

According to Skiba (2013), there is no single cause for disproportionality; however, “racial and ethnic disparities in special education are likely due to complex interactions among student characteristics, teacher capabilities and attitudes, and the structural characteristics of schools” (p. 110). Rather, there are several contributing factors including the inability of schools to appropriately address students’ individual needs, subjective referral process, inappropriate placements in restrictive settings, test bias in psychological assessments, and implicit bias within the special education eligibility process that must be addressed with a comprehensive plan (Bal et al., 2014; Barton & Larson, 2012; National Association of School Psychologists, 2013; Skiba, 2013). “Research suggests that if schools implemented practices that were fair and free of bias, the overall representation of minority students in special education would be proportional to their representation in the larger student population” (Ahram, Fergus, & Noguera, 2011, p. 2236).

Inequitable Opportunities to Learn

The inability of schools to address student's’ individualized needs is the crux of issues related to disproportionate practices. It is critical that all students have access to high quality teachers, curriculum and educational supports to avoid risk of failure and referral for special education (Sullivan, 2012). School leaders can prevent racial disproportionality within special education by ensuring that students receive quality instructional and evidenced based practices (Sullivan, 2012). Having high instructional practices can reduce the number of students referred for special education.

Referral Process

Researchers have found that the special education referral, eligibility and the placement process is highly subjective (Hosp & Reschly, 2002). The referral process for special education varies at each school district. Schools that have inappropriate or ineffective procedures and process may lead to more students referred and eligible for special education. If administrators or other team members rely on personal judgement rather than the student's academic or behavioral data, then there may be an increase in referrals (Harry & Klingner, 2006).

Restrictive Special Education Placements

Not only are there concerns noted in the research regarding discrimination and implicit bias and subjective practices in the special education referral and eligibility procedures, there are disproportionate practices for minorities being placed in more restrictive placements (Castro-Villarreal et al., 2016). Concerns and litigation have emerged in the last decade over the operationalization of the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) mandate. According to the LRE mandate, individuals with disabilities should be educated with their non-disabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate (Thorius & Maxcy, 2015). Once students are found eligible for special education, they are more likely to be placed in more restrictive special education instructional and resource settings which may not be the least restrictive environment (Artiles et al., 2010). Additionally, once a child is placed in special education, there is little movement out of it (Harry & Klingner, 2006). Research shows that African American students are twice as likely to be placed in more restrictive special education

placements than their White peers with the same disability label (Cartledge, Singh, & Gibson, 2008; Fierros & Conroy, 2002). Once labeled, African American students are less likely to change educational placements for their educational careers (Fierros & Conroy, 2002).

In a longitudinal review of five years of data from (2004-2008) by Zhang, Katsiyannis, Ju, and Roberts (2014), they found that minorities continue to be overrepresented in special education and that the order of representation by five racial groups has not changed in the last ten years. Also, after reviewing the major disability categories of specific learning disabilities (SLD), intellectual disabilities (ID) and emotional disabilities (ED), African American students show the greatest representation in all categories with the highest in the ID category (Zhang et al., 2014). “Indeed there is a growing focus on school and instructional factors, not just student factors and the efficacy of special education services in general” (Algozzine, 2005, cited in Zhang et al., 2014, p. 119). Disproportionality is a complex problem impacted by restrictive placements but also test bias in psychological assessments.

Test Bias in the Psychological Assessments

Another potential contributing cause of disproportionate practices is test bias in the psychological assessments used to refer students for special education, especially with students of color. It is important that the assessments used in the evaluation process are valid for all students regardless of race (United States Department of Education, 2016). Research shows that students are often penalized by test items that call for background knowledge that may be lacking by some cultural groups (Barton & Larson, 2012). The

Office of Civil Rights states that school districts “must not treat similarly situated students differently based on race in interpreting test results, evaluating student files, and considering any information relevant to placement decisions” (United States Department of Education, 2016, p. 20). In addition to restrictive placement practices and test bias in psychological assessments, concerns are noted in the research regarding the discrimination in special education referral and eligibility procedures and the excessive placement of minority students in instructional courses.

Implicit Bias Within the Special Education Eligibility Processes

Disproportionality is described as the paradox of special education by Donovan and Cross (2002). The goal of special education is to provide additional programming and related services to help students with disabilities; however, the special education eligibility process may be the result of biases within the referral and evaluation processes (Artiles et al., 2010; Skiba et al., 2008). School resources, practices and formal district policies as well as unwritten practices, such as implicit bias may impact the disproportionate number of students eligible for special education. Unconscious bias or “implicit bias” is when a person shows preference for one group over another group while not aware of their behavior (Fiarman, 2016).

In a school system, educators make decisions every day that affect student learning, and research indicates that implicit bias potentially plays a role in disproportionate practices (Fiarman, 2016; Staats et al., 2016). “These implicit biases may contrast with explicit egalitarian intentions, thereby creating a challenging gap between educators’ intentions and outcomes” (Staats et al., 2016, p. 34).

In a study by Hernandez et al. (2008), the Los Angeles Unified School District was found to be in noncompliance with Individuals with Disabilities Education Act due to the disproportionate number of African American students found eligible under the category of Emotional Disturbance (ED). As a result of a lawsuit, the school district was audited and monitored by the Office of the Independent Monitor (OIM) and found that the referral and identification process for emotional disabilities was deficient for all races (Hernandez et al., 2008). Specifically, questions were raised about the weaknesses in the lack of prereferral interventions, the minimal evidence to justify an ED eligibility, and the poor parent involvement in the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) eligibility process (Hernandez et al., 2008). Based on these findings, the school district developed a “standardized comprehensive evaluation process for all students evaluated and identified as having emotional disturbance” (p. 66). This evaluation process was implemented starting in 2004 and through the 2006-2007 school year and was evaluated to determine if the new evaluation process reduces disproportionate practices (Hernandez et al., 2008). The sample for the study was drawn from a database provided by the school district which included all initial evaluations and some reevaluations of students found eligible for ED. After three years of implementing the new evaluation procedures, the Los Angeles School District significantly reduced the number of students who qualified for ED and placed less students in the most restrictive placements (Hernandez et al., 2008). This finding is important since there is little research on solutions for reducing disproportionate practices at the high school level.

The United States Department of Education (2016) states that school districts must ensure that school staff do not discriminate during the special education referral process by “relying, explicitly or implicitly, on stereotypes or biased perceptions in their decisions about students” (p. 11). The Office of Civil Rights has observed school districts developing practices such as providing staff members written procedures regarding the referral process, providing professional development to implement these procedures, assigning school administrators to monitor the process for potential bias, and proactively review data to explain for potential discriminatory practices (United States of Education, 2016). The last section of the literature review identifies possible interventions to reduce racial disproportionality.

Interventions and Practices to Reduce Disproportionality

While direct outcomes on disproportionality are yet to be realized, when implemented as planned, supports such as culturally responsive teaching practices and multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) have shown to reduce discipline referrals and improve student engagement (National Association of School Psychologists, 2013). The next section of the dissertation will describe the culturally responsive teaching practices and MTSS practices as potential interventions that specifically address disproportionality.

Culturally Responsive Teaching Practices

Many researchers argue that the divide between home and school cultures is one of the major causes of disproportionality and the under-achievement of racially, culturally, ethnically and linguistically (RCELD) students (Griner & Stewart, 2012). There are nearly 55 million students attending public and private schools in the United

States and these students are more diverse than ever (Sullivan, 2012). Children of immigrants now make up the largest growing segment of the population and are projected to make up more than one-third of all young Americans living in the United States (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008) which has increased the diversity of families coming to our schools. Griner and Stewart (2012) state that the lack of student and teacher connectedness in the classroom is the result of the cultural divide in communities. Many students of diverse backgrounds struggle to make the same connections in school as their peers from the more dominant culture group. Additionally, students of color are more likely to be educated in more restrictive placements despite the research that supports integrated settings (Sullivan, 2012).

Griner and Stewart (2012) highlight the importance of culturally responsive teaching practices to address disproportionality and to effectively instruct students of diverse backgrounds. Gay (2000), cited in Griner and Stewart (2012), defines culturally responsive teaching as “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance systems of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them” (p. 589). According to Gay (2000, cited in Griner & Stewart, 2012), culturally responsive teaching practices “acknowledges the legitimacy of the cultural heritages of different ethnic groups, bridges meaningfulness between home and school experiences, it uses a variety of instructional strategies, and it incorporates multicultural materials in all the subjects routinely taught in schools” (p. 29). “At its most basic level, culturally responsive practices (CPR) requires that all students have access to well-trained teachers who are experts in their subject matter and skilled

instructors knowledgeable in the interactions of culture, learning, and teaching” (Sullivan, 2012, p. 191).

Leaders, teacher pre-service programs, and researchers must continue to provide educators with practical strategies for implementing culturally responsive teaching practices to reduce achievement gap and disproportionate practices observed in classrooms. Furthermore, school leaders should reflect on their school culture and who they define as disabled (Sullivan, 2012). Family members must play a role in intervention and evaluation processes to help the school team understand how culture and language may or may not contribute to academic struggles (Sullivan, 2012). As Skiba et al. (2008) notes, “a comprehensive evaluation of culturally responsive teaching practices should focus on positive academic and social outcomes; but as importantly, on the ability of those practices to reduce inequalities such as disproportionality, drop-outs, and underachievement” (De Pry & Chessman, 2010, p. 43). Additionally, De Pry and Chessman offer suggestions for embedding culturally responsive teaching practices into Multi-Tiered Systems of Support models which will be described next as an intervention for reducing disproportionality.

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

In addition to culturally responsive teaching practices, Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) and Response to Intervention (RtI) incorporate school wide supports to address academic and behavioral challenges before they occur in the school setting. Since the 2004 IDEA reauthorization, there has been significant attention on the use of Response to Intervention (RtI) and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) models to

address disproportionality in schools (National Association of School Psychologists, 2013; Thorius & Maxcy, 2015). In the literature, “Response to Intervention”, is commonly referred to as RtI, and “Multi-Tier System of Supports” is abbreviated to MTSS; although, they are often phrases used interchangeably, in reality they are different. MTSS is more comprehensive than RtI because it focuses on meeting the unique learning needs and goals of all students. In this dissertation study, the researcher uses the terms RtI and MTSS interchangeably since most educators do not understand the nuances of each model.

Both RtI and MTSS models challenge educational leaders to focus on early detection and prevention efforts in order to address the disproportionate practices of minority students placed in special education and the inequity in general education (Forness, Kavale, MacMillian, Asaranow, & Duncan, 1996 cited in Serna, Foreness, & Nielsen, 1998). Specifically, RtI models allow educators to address students’ learning needs without identifying them for special education services (Artiles & Kozleski, 2010). In the first tier, the RtI framework focuses on collecting baseline data on all students through a universal screener and providing evidence based general education core curriculum (Castro-Villarreal et al., 2016). Baseline data is then used to determine if students are in need of additional academic or social emotional supports made available in tier 2. Finally, there are some students who continue to struggle despite evidence based interventions in tier two and who are in need of tier three intervention (Castro-Villarreal et al., 2016). Tier three supports are for students with notable deficits who need intensive supports (De Pry & Cheesman, 2010).

“The three-tiered RtI model is also a part of special education eligibility decision-making required by Illinois School Code 34 CFR 300.309 and 23 IAC 226.130” (Illinois State Board of Education, 2008, p. 3). IDEA allows states to utilize alternate methods through RtI for determining if a student meets the criteria for a specific learning disability (SLD) rather than using the traditional aptitude-achievement discrepancy model (Artiles & Kozleski, 2010). In Illinois, school districts are required to use the RtI process when evaluating if a student meets the criteria for a specific learning disability (SLD) since the 2009-2010 school year. “When implementing an RtI process, school teams use student progress data collected at each tier to document a student’s response to scientific, research-based interventions as part of the evaluation process in order to consider eligibility for special education services” (Illinois State Board of Education, 2008, p. 4). Such eligibility decisions typically occur after interventions have occurred at both the tier two and three level and when the student does not make progress despite interventions.

“Many from the special education research community viewed RtI as a promising policy development to reduce inappropriate referral of students of color to special education because of an emphasis on high quality opportunities to learn in general education settings” (Thorius & Maxcy, 2015, p. 117). Given decades of disproportionality practices despite legislative initiatives and litigation, educators need to be creative and implement research based programs such as RtI and MTSS which include culturally responsive teaching practices that meet the needs of all students (Bottiani, Bradshaw, Rosenberg, Hershfeldt, Pell & Debnam, 2012; De Pry & Cheesman, 2010; National Association of School Psychologists, 2013).

The use of MTSS models may help to address racial disproportionality because educators can “become actively involved in determining how racially/ethnically diverse students are identified to receive appropriate interventions to meet their needs, rather than assuming a need for special education or harsh disciplinary actions” (National Association of School Psychologists, 2013, p. 6). In a study by Bottiani et al. (2012), the researchers implemented a professional development series called Double Check which is a complementary approach to RtI. The framework emphasized culturally responsive teaching practices, behavior management techniques, and teacher self-reflection (Bottiani et al., 2012). The data from the initial pilot suggests that the professional development series taught teachers new skills, it aligned with their school’s Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) program, and served as a broader behavioral and organizational context for the training (Bottiani et al., 2012, p. 97).

Conceptual Framework

The critical practice theoretical approach will be used in the current dissertation because it provides a framework from which to view the contributions of local dynamics and practices which contribute to disproportionality in special education at the high school level. Using a critical practice theoretical approach allows school districts to “draw attention to actors’ agency and structural forces” that affect disproportionality (Thorius & Maxcy, 2015, p. 116). Thorius and Maxcy assert that instead of studying whether disproportionality policies work, they suggest using critical practice approaches in order to improve the lives of students with or at risk for disabilities. The authors state that using a critical practice approach may “provide insight into the apparent

immutability of certain equity concerns such as the disproportionate representation of students of color in special education, along with contextual considerations for those who develop policy and introduce it into local sites” (p. 122).

The critical practice approach provides a framework for approaching the topic of disproportionality and emphasizes that “actors” play a critical role which reinforces the importance of exploring the voices of administrator leaders to decrease disproportionate practices. In the current dissertation, high school deans, assistant principals and special education administrators will provide insight into why educational disparities exist at their local high schools and identify potential interventions in order to improve outcomes for students at risk for disabilities.

CHAPTER III
OVERVIEW OF METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This qualitative study explored high school administrators' beliefs about why racial disproportionality in special education exists, sought to understand administrators' beliefs about the practices that contribute to disproportionality in their school district, and identified the interventions and/or practices to reduce or eliminate racial disproportionality in special education within and across three high school districts in Illinois. The current research study examined whether administrative leaders' perceptions offer insight into the disproportionate practices as well as the interventions that public high schools implement to tackle these ongoing inherently unequal practices. Semi-structured interviews and a questionnaire were the measures utilized.

The research questions in this qualitative study were as follows:

1. According to high school administrators, why does racial disproportionality in special education exist in their high school district?
2. According to high school administrators, what beliefs and practices contribute to disproportionality in special education in their high school district?
3. According to high school administrators, what interventions and/or practices need to be put in place to reduce or eliminate racial disproportionality in special education [within their high school district, if it exists]?

Research Design and Methodology

The Constant Comparative method was utilized for research design and for data analysis. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore high school administrators' beliefs about why disproportionality exists, to identify the local practices and beliefs that contribute to racial disproportionality, and to identify interventions and supports that impact or eliminate racial disproportionate practices in special education referral, eligibility and placement procedures within their district if it exists.

Participants

Creswell (2015) recommends between three and ten participants for a qualitative study. Three high school districts and nine administrators from the suburbs of Chicago, Illinois working in a high school setting with students with disabilities were included in the sample after an initial screening.

Eligibility Criteria

Administrators were able to participate in the study if they worked in high schools that met specific risk ratio criteria. The risk ratio indicates the risk of one racial group compared to the risk for a comparison group (U.S. Department of Education, 2016) falling into a particular category (e.g., special education). "The general equation for risk for identification is: Risk = number of children from racial/ethnic group in disability category divided by the number of enrolled children from racial/ethnic group multiplied by 100" (Data Accountability Center, 2011, p. 15). First, school districts were eligible to participate in the study if the risk ratio value of students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) was higher than 1.0 for any of the race/ethnicity subgroups (e.g., Hispanic,

Asian, Black, etc.) in their district, based on the 2015-2016 Illinois Special Education Profile. Administrators within school districts that had risk ratio values higher than 1.0 for a racial/ethnic subgroup across educational environments were also eligible for the study (based on the 2015-2016 Illinois Special Education Profile). Once a high school district was identified and met the risk ratio criteria, purposeful and snowball sampling were used to recruit administrative leaders (e.g., special education directors, assistant principals of student service and deans) within the schools for the interviews.

Interview Participants

Participants were eligible to participate in this qualitative study if they had at least two or more years of experience as an administrator working with students with disabilities in the selected school district. Three administrative leaders from each school district including a dean, an assistant principal for student services, and a special education administrator were included in the sample for each identified school district. A dean, an assistant principal for student services and a special education administrator were chosen as the key participants because each administrator plays a key role in the referral, identification and eligibility of students for special education. For example, high school deans are responsible for enforcing and applying School Board policies and Illinois School Code provisions regarding the maintenance of discipline and attendance within the school. Often times, deans are an integral part of identifying students to the referral process when their behavior impacts their academic growth. Additionally, the assistant principal for student services is responsible for helping all students to achieve personal, social, and academic success. When a student is not making progress in the

academic or social-emotional arenas, the assistant principal coordinates interventions and monitors progress. When a student does not demonstrate academic or social emotional growth despite interventions and supports, the student is often referred by the assistant principal or one of their department members for a special education referral. Once a referral is made, the director of special education or special education administrator plays an integral role in the eligibility and placement process that may cause and maintain special education disproportionality. A total of nine high school administrators participated in the study.

Demographics of the High School Districts

The high schools recruited for this qualitative case study were located within a 60-mile radius of each other in the northern suburbs of Chicago in Cook County and Lake County. The researcher began by reviewing Illinois Special Education Profiles from 2015-2016 of high school districts with two high schools. Three school districts were initially selected based on meeting the criteria for having a risk ratio value of students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) higher than 1.0 for any of the race/ethnicity subgroups (e.g., Hispanic, Asian, Black, etc.) in their District and/or having a risk ratio value of students across educational environments by race/ethnicity higher than 1.0. Once a high school district was identified and met the risk ratio criteria, purposeful and snowball sampling was used to recruit administrative leaders (e.g., special education directors, assistant principals of student service, and deans) for the interviews.

The researcher emailed the special education administrator and the assistant principal at each of the three school districts and requested their participation in the study

using a recruitment email. All three of the school districts agreed to participate in the study. During interviews with the special education administrator, the researcher asked for the name and email of a dean to participate in the study since all of the districts had multiple deans.

During each interview, each participant shared their title, roles, number of years as an administrator and educator, gender, and race as well as provided an overview of the student and staff populations. Specific district demographic data was obtained from the Illinois Special Education Profile from the 2015-2016 school year.

Demographics of School District 1

School District 1 is a two-high school district located in Lake County, Illinois. Its student population is 3,739, consisting of 79% White, 1.4% Black, 14% Hispanic, 2.5% Asian, and 2.8% two or more races. Of the 3,739 students, 592 of the students have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or 15.5%. The school district has a disproportionate number Black and Hispanic students eligible for special education services and underrepresentation of Asian students. Fifty percent of eligible Hispanic students spend 80% or more of their day in the general education setting, whereas 36% spend 40-79% of their day in the general education setting and 6.1% spend less than 40% of their day in the general education setting. Eight percent (7.9) of Hispanic students eligible for special education are out-placed in the most restrictive setting. Data was not available for Black and Asian students since they make up only 1.5% of the total special education population.

All three participants from district 1 identified themselves as White. Two participants were male and one participant was female.

Demographics of School District 2

School District 2 is a two-high school district located in Cook County, Illinois. Its student population is 4,726 consisting of 44% White, 7.9% Black, 14% Hispanic, 33% Asian, and .6% two or more races. Of the 4,726 students, 591 of the students have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or 12.5%. The school district has a disproportionate number Black and Hispanic students eligible for special education services and underrepresentation of Asian students. Hispanic and Black students have a risk ratio higher than one. Forty percent (39.6%) of eligible Hispanic students spend 80% or more of their day in the general education setting, whereas 35% spend 40-79% of their day in the general education setting and 9.9% spend less than 40% of their day in the general education setting. Fifteen percent (15.3%) of Hispanic students eligible for special education are out-placed in the most restrictive setting. Thirty-three percent (33.3%) of eligible Black students spend 80% or more of their day in the general education setting, whereas 37.6% spend 40-79% of their day in the general education setting and 8.6% spend less than 40% of their day in the general education setting. Twenty percent (20.4%) of Black students eligible for special education are out-placed in the most restrictive setting. Forty-two percent (41.8%) of eligible Asian students spend 80% or more of their day in the general education setting, whereas 35.5% spend 40-79% of their day in the general education setting and 10% spend less than 40% of their day in the

general education setting. Thirteen percent (12.7%) of Asian students eligible for special education are out-placed in the most restrictive setting.

All three participants from district 2 identified themselves as White. All three participants identified themselves as female.

Demographics of School District 3

School District 3 is a two-high school district located in Cook County, Illinois. Its student population is 5,078, consisting of the following demographics: 69.1% White, 1.3% Black, 9.4% Hispanic, 16.8% Asian, and 3.3% two or more races. Of the 5,078 students, 623 of the students have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or 12.3%. The school district has a disproportionate number of Black and Hispanic students eligible for special education services and an underrepresentation of Asian students. Hispanic and Black students have a risk ratio higher than one. Thirty-nine (35.8%) of eligible Hispanic students spend 80% or more of their day in the general education setting, whereas 39.5% spend 40-79% of their day in the general education setting and 19.8% spend less than 40% of their day in the general education setting. Five percent (4.9%) of Hispanic students eligible for special education are out-placed in the most restrictive setting. Twenty-three percent (22.7%) of eligible Black students spend 80% or more of their day in the general education setting, whereas 40.9% spend 40-79% of their day in the general education setting and 9.1% spend less than 40% of their day in the general education setting. Twenty-seven percent (27.3%) of Black students eligible for special education are out-placed in the most restrictive setting. Thirty-five percent (35.2%) of eligible Asian students spend 80% or more of their day in the general education setting, whereas

27.8% spend 40-79% of their day in the general education setting and 18.5% spend less than 40% of their day in the general education setting. Eighteen percent (18.5%) of Asian students eligible for special education are out-placed in the most restrictive setting.

All three participants from district 3 identified themselves as White. Two participants were female and one participant was male.

Table 1

Total Participants

	Special Education Administrators	Assistant Principal of Student Services	Dean
Interviews	3	3	3
Questionnaires	3	3	3

Table 2

Participant Demographics for High School 1

	Special Education Administrator 1	Special Education Administrator 2	Special Education Administrator 3
Gender	Female	Female	Female
Race	White	White	White
Years as an educator	24	18	19
Years as an administrator	12	8	9

Table 3

Participant Demographics for High School 2

	Assistant Principal 1	Assistant Principal 2	Assistant Principal 3
Gender	Male	Female	Female
Race	White	White	White
Years as an educator	23	17	20
Years as an administrator	13	3	10

Table 4

Participant Demographics for High School 3

	Dean 1	Dean 2	Dean 3
Gender	Male	Female	Male
Race	White	White	White
Years as an educator	10	20	15
Years as an administrator	4	15	5

Instruments

Interview Protocol

The interview protocol was developed by the researcher of this study who has worked in the field of special education as a special education high school administrator for the past sixteen years in consultation with her Dissertation Chair, Dr. Pamela Fenning.

The interview protocol contains 19 questions which are aligned to the research questions. (See Appendix B for a full copy of the Interview Protocol.) The interview questions were derived based on the possible contributing factors of racial disproportionality cited in the research from Bahr, Fuchs, Stecker, & Fuchs, 1991; Dyson & Gallannaugh, 2008; Gravios & Rosenfield, 2006; Hernandez, Ramanathan, Harr, & Socias 2008; Losen & Skiba, 2010; Noltemeyer & Mcloughlin, 2012; Podell & Soodak, 1993; Salend & Garrick Duhaney, 2005; and Sullivan, Kozleski, & Smith, 2008. Dr. Pamela Fenning is a professor at Loyola University Chicago, and a licensed clinical and school psychologist in Illinois. Her research and clinical work focuses on multi-tiered academic and behavioral interventions at the high school level, equity and ethnic disproportionality in school discipline policy, evaluation of alternatives to suspension programs, and high-risk behaviors of adolescents. She is an expert in understanding disproportionality and has provided consultation in the development of the interview questions.

Questionnaire

Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire which consisted of thirty-four statements designed to learn more about racial disproportionality in their school district via Opinio (ObjectPlanet, Inc, 2018). The questionnaire was adapted from Daniel Losen and the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (2008). Per the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction disclaimer, the questionnaire may be reprinted in whole or part with credit to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (Losen, 2008). The questionnaire was adapted by the researcher of this study who has worked in the field of special education as a special education high school administrator for the past 16 years in

consultation with her Dissertation Chair, Dr. Pamela Fenning. The questionnaire gathered information regarding why disproportionality existed, the local practices that impact disproportionality within their school district, and the interventions and supports needed to eliminate disproportionality. (See Appendix F for a full copy of the disproportionality questionnaire.) The questionnaire allowed the researcher to gather information that supplanted and supplemented the interview responses. The purpose of the questionnaire was to elicit information that the participants may not have been comfortable sharing in the interviews, as well as to allow the participants more time to think about their responses. All nine participants completed the questionnaire. For each statement, the participant was asked to mark whether they almost always, frequently, sometimes, almost never, or if the statement was not applicable to their school district. Each statement also had a space for the participant to write a brief response.

Data Collection Procedures

This qualitative study began with an application to the Institutional Review Board of Loyola University for review. An application was submitted that outlined the purpose and significance of the study. After approval was received, the researcher invited administrative leaders from three high schools to participate in the study who worked in high schools that demonstrated a risk ratio of students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) higher than 1.0 in any of the race/ethnicity groups (e.g., White, Hispanic, Asian, Black, etc.) as compared to the students without IEPs in their District according to the 2015-2016 Illinois Special Education Profile. School districts were also eligible to participate in the study if the risk ratio of students across educational environments by

race/ethnicity were higher than 1.0 compared to their peers according to the 2015-2016 Illinois Special Education Profile.

The researcher invited administrators who have worked with students with disabilities for at least two years at one of the selected schools to participate through email outreach. The researcher emailed local high school special education directors and assistant principals of student services in the Northern Suburbs of Chicago and provided an explanation of the study and asked them if they were willing to participate. They were also asked to identify the names and contact information for the deans from their high school, so this researcher could contact them to participate. Some of the high schools had district policies which required a proposal and approval for their administrator(s) to participate, as well as proof of Loyola University Chicago IRB approval to participate and share information. District procedures for research were followed and permission was granted, when needed, for schools who participated in the dissertation study. (Please refer to Appendix C for a copy of the email sent to administrators requesting their participation.)

Prior to the in-person meeting, each person was assigned a confidential identification number instead of using their name. The identification number was used on all forms, protocols, and digital recordings to maintain confidentiality. Also, all data was coded with the identification number to ensure confidentiality. The interviewee's name and the high school district's name was not used in the data analysis nor was their name identified in any component of the study. The school board and other school personnel were not notified of staff participation in the study.

This researcher, her dissertation chair as well as the hired professional transcriber of the digital recordings were the only individuals who had access to the data. The hired professional transcriber from Rev.com met the requirements set by the IRB. All digital files were destroyed after they were digitally transcribed. All paper copies will be destroyed after two years (i.e., interview notes, interview summary sheets, and transcripts). The transcriptions, along with the consent forms, will be stored in a locked location until they are destroyed two years after the acceptance of the study by the dissertation committee.

Once the participants for the study were identified, each administrative leader was scheduled for 90 minutes to participate in a 60-80 minute interview. Each meeting was conducted in a private office at the administrators' workplace. The researcher reviewed the informed consent process, shared the purpose of the study, and explained the potential risks and benefits of participating in the study, the confidentiality parameters, and the timeline of the study. (Refer to Appendix A for a full copy of the informed consent reviewed and signed by each participant.)

After each administrator signed the consent form, they participated in a semi-structured interview. Interview questions were established to establish rapport, slowly engage in the topic and strategically ensure the questions were appropriately designed to investigate the issue of racial disproportionality in special education. (See Appendix B for a copy of the Interview Protocol.) Questions were used to explore school administrators' perspectives regarding beliefs and practices that may contribute to racial disproportionality in the high school, and the potential interventions that may reduce

and/or eliminate disproportionality in the Midwestern state of Illinois. When necessary, additional probing questions were asked of the participants. Probing questions gathered participants' view of the resources, procedures and policies in the building that impact special education referral and disproportionality as well as the potential sociocultural factors that empower or disempower families to be involved in their child's education. During the interview, the researcher collected handwritten notes. (Refer to Appendix D for a copy of the notes template.) The interviews lasted between 60 and 80 minutes and were digitally recorded and transcribed. All participants agreed to be digitally recorded via the consent process. A hired professional transcriber from Rev.com transcribed each digital recording verbatim after the interview session. All participants were given an honorarium in the form of a \$15 gift card at the end of the interview for their time.

The researcher completed an Interview Summary sheet directly following each interview she conducted. The summary sheets included notes, main points of the interview, questions that arose during the interview and a reflection of potential biases. (Refer to Appendix E for a copy of the data collection reflection document.)

After the consent was signed and the interview completed, the researcher emailed each administrator a 30-minute questionnaire to complete via Opinio (ObjectPlanet, Inc, 2018). After the interview was completed, the researcher emailed a questionnaire to each of the nine participants to complete via Opinio (ObjectPlanet, Inc, 2018). The questionnaire gathered information regarding why disproportionality existed, the local practices that impact disproportionality within their school district, and the interventions and supports needed to eliminate disproportionality. (See Appendix F for a full copy of

the disproportionality questionnaire.) The questionnaire allowed the researcher to gather information that supplanted and supplemented the interview responses. The purpose of the questionnaire was to elicit information that the participants may not have been comfortable sharing in the interviews, as well as to allow the participants more time to think about their responses. The questionnaire was adapted from Daniel Losen and the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (2008). Per the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction disclaimer, the questionnaire may be reprinted in whole or part with credit to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (Losen, 2008). All nine participants completed the questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of thirty-four statements designed to learn more about racial disproportionality in their school district. For each statement, the participant was asked to mark whether they almost always, frequently, sometimes, almost never, or if the statement was not applicable to their school district. Each statement also had a space for the participant to write a brief response.

Data Analysis

In order to establish rigor and trustworthiness for this qualitative research study, the researcher followed the recommendations of several key qualitative researchers in the field for collecting and analyzing data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The section explains how the findings were analyzed using the Constant Comparative Method (Olson, McAllister, Grinnell, Walters, & Appunn, 2016), explains how the researcher utilized member checking, memo writing and triangulation to ensure reliability and validity, and highlights the study's limitations and ethical considerations.

In order to analyze the data, each interview was transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriber from Rev.com, reviewed by the researcher two times and shared with the interviewee to ensure valid interpretations. The researcher coded and analyzed the interviews using the Constant Comparative Method (Olson et al., 2016), engaged in memo writing and shared the transcription for individual review with the interviewee. The Constant Comparative Method of data analysis was used to generate findings which was first proposed by Glasner and Strauss (1967, cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The Constant Comparative Method “uses a systematic approach to review participant views collected from an experience in order to allow patterns and themes to emerge over multiple passes of the data” (Olson et al., 2016, p. 26). Using cross case analysis, the coding process included multiple stages in order to develop reliable coding schemes. The first stage included the researcher and a second coder (Dissertation Chair) reading each of the nine transcripts two times and then identifying codes for each interview question individually. Multiple codes were developed for each question by both coders. After the first stage, intercoder reliability was calculated using a simple method by dividing the total number of agreement for all codes by the total number of agreements and disagreements for all codes combined (Campbell, Quincy, Osserman & Peterson, 2013). According to Miles and Huberman (1984), there is no agreed upon threshold for what constitutes a numerically satisfactory level of agreement among coders; however, the literature suggests that the aim should be 80 to 90% reliability. The interrater reliability for this study was calculated to be 81%, so it met the acceptable threshold suggested in the literature.

During the second stage, the researcher and the second coder met to compare codes generated and to develop a code book. We discussed each code generated and dropped any codes that were not representative of 50% of the participants or codes that were not relevant to the research questions. We agreed to keep twenty codes which were not representative of the 50% of the participants because they provided a counter voice. Patton (1998) states that special education research has not included voices of those marginalized. By maintaining these less frequent codes, additional insights for finding a solution for eliminating racial disproportionality may be captured by individuals most affected and less likely to be included in research with educators, given the homogeneity of the field as being predominantly White and female. After adjudicating the remaining codes, the two coders were 100% in agreement with the final 44 codes. This process ensured that codings were done with minimal bias and there was consistency.

During the third stage, the researcher reviewed each of the nine transcripts and assigned quotes and/or segments of a quote from the transcripts to the forty-four codes. Almost 90% of the quotes from the transcript applied to a code. Some coded units were a sentence, some were a full paragraph and some were more than a paragraph. The researcher and the second coder met again to review the quotes assigned to each code. The second researcher audited 20% of the quotes and was 100% in agreement with their placement. Lastly, the researcher and the second coder then developed three themes based on code families for each of the research questions.

Validity

This researcher took multiple measures to ensure trustworthiness and the validity of the study. These included triangulation, memo writing, member checking, and coding by a second researcher. Triangulation is one of the best known strategies to ensure validity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study, the questionnaire responses helped to triangulate the interview data. After each interview, the researcher completed an interview reflection/memo to collect thoughts, wonderings, and other insights that occurred based on participant body language, impressions, and the interview process. Member checks were also conducted, which expanded the researcher's understanding and allowed the participants to review the initial data. Member checking is a way to solicit feedback from participants and it ensures credibility. According to Schwandt (2014), member checking is important for collaborating or verifying findings. "Member checking also known as respondent validation is when the researcher solicits feedback on the preliminary or emerging findings from some of the people interviewed" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 246). In this study, the participants were provided an opportunity to verify their responses to the interview questions. The researcher shared the transcribed verbatim notes so the participants could check that the notes represented their beliefs and their perceptions. After re-reading their own responses, none of the participants volunteered additional information nor did they refute information. This process helped to validate the findings and ensured that the themes and codes reflect the interviewees' beliefs and perceptions. All of the interviews were coded a second time by Dr. Pamela Fenning, Dissertation Chair, to increase validity and reliability of coding. The researcher

and a second coder (Dissertation Chair) coded and analyzed the interviews using the Constant Comparative Method (Olson et al., 2016). This process ensured that codings were done with minimal bias and there was consistency.

Ethical Considerations

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) state that it is important that the researcher establish rapport by finding common ground and showing interest in the participant. Since this researcher is a Director of Special Education, the researcher gained rapport and was able to engage in probing questions during the interview. Participants were interviewed in locations chosen by them to increase their comfort level.

The administrative leaders who participated in the study were affirmed that their participation was anonymous, and the data was analyzed using a confidential identification number. The participants were informed that the information gleaned was not discussed with their school district. In order to respect the confidentiality of each participant, they were assigned a random identification number that was written on all protocols. In addition, the questionnaire and interview response sheet listed the participants' number instead of their name. In the findings section of this study, the researcher referred to the participants by their assigned number to maintain confidentiality.

CHAPTER IV
ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Introduction

This qualitative case study explored high school administrators' beliefs about why racial disproportionality exists, sought to understand administrators' beliefs regarding the practices that contribute to disproportionality in their school district, and identified the interventions and/or practices to reduce or eliminate racial disproportionality in special education within and across three high school districts in Illinois. The current research study examined whether administrative leaders' perceptions offer insight into the disproportionate practices as well as the interventions that public high schools implement to tackle these ongoing inherently unequal practices. The research questions in this qualitative study were as follows:

1. According to high school administrators, why does racial disproportionality exist in their high school district?
2. According to high school administrators, what beliefs and practices contribute to racial disproportionality in their district?
3. According to high school administrators, what interventions and/or practices need to be implemented to reduce or eliminate racial disproportionality in special education [within their district, if it exists]?

The resulting data gathered and analyzed from the interview and questionnaire responses offered insight into the research questions. [See Appendix G for a summary of the descriptive statistics collected for each statement from the questionnaire including the number (n) of participants for each scale and the percentage of responses from the participants grouped into seven columns: almost always, frequently, sometimes, almost never, not applicable to their school district or did not respond.] Emerging from the data gathered were three major themes for each research question. Additionally, each statement is aligned one of the three research questions this research sought to answer. The major themes will be discussed in more detail in this chapter as they relate to the purpose of this study and the research questions. Table 5 below provides an overview of the major themes for each of the research questions. The aim of this research was to identify interventions and/or policies that will eliminate racial disproportionality in special education referral, eligibility and placement within specific districts in Illinois. In addition, the goal is to arm school administrators with more practical tools. Skiba et al. (2006) cites, “the absence of local interpretative data may be in fact a critical barrier to understanding and remediating disproportionate representation” (p. 1427). The findings of this study are critical for understanding and reducing disproportionality locally. The purpose of chapter four is to provide a summary of the results from the interviews and questionnaire aligned to the research questions.

Table 5

Major Themes Aligned to the Research Questions

Research questions	Theme 1	Theme 2	Theme 3
According to high school administrators, why does racial disproportionality exist in their high school district?	Administrative leaders believe that sociodemographic factors associated with poverty explain why disproportionality exists in their high school.	Administrative leaders believe that personal biases explain why disproportionality exists in their high school.	Administrative leaders believe that students' deficits in academic and behavioral skills explain why racial disproportionality exists.
According to high school administrators, what beliefs and practices contribute to racial disproportionality in their district?	Administrative leaders believe that absent school wide systems, limited tiered interventions and underutilized culturally responsive curriculum contributes to racial disproportionality.	Administrative leaders believe that educators' beliefs and fears about students failing contributes racial disproportionality.	School administrators believe that educators' biased interpretations of school policies contribute to racial disproportionality.
According to high school administrators, what interventions and/or practices need to be implemented to reduce or eliminate racial disproportionality in special education [within their district, if it exists]?	Administrative leaders believe that school districts need to develop a systematic plan led by strong leaders to reduce racial disproportionality.	Administrative leaders believe a committee should be formed that includes multiple stakeholder voices in order to tackle racial disparities.	School administrators believe that additional resources (i.e., human resources and capital tied to equity) are critical to meet the needs of all students.

Results

All nine administrators participated in a semi-structured interview and completed a questionnaire to explore high school administrators' beliefs about why disproportionality exists, to identify the local practices and policies that contribute to racial disproportionality, and to identify interventions and supports that impact or eliminate racial disproportionate practices in special education referral, eligibility, and placement procedures within their district. Each participant answered a minimum of nineteen questions during the interview process aligned with the three research questions. Additionally, each participant completed a 34 question questionnaire. The questionnaire responses helped to triangulate the findings from the interviews. The section below summarizes the themes that emerged from the interviews as well notes data from the questionnaire that supported the interview findings. The themes are organized into three themes for each of the three research questions. The Constant Comparative Method of data analysis was used to generate findings which was first proposed by Glasner and Strauss (1967, cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The Constant Comparative Method "uses a systematic approach to review participant views collected from an experience in order to allow patterns and themes to emerge over multiple passes of the data" (Olson et al., 2016, p. 26). Cross case analysis was utilized across all three school districts due to their similarities in size, resources, and academic performance. The coding process included multiple stages in order to develop reliable codes and eventually themes. Analyses showed the perspectives of the administrators tended to be more similar than different with the exception of one administrator who did not see concerns with their

practices, procedures and beliefs surrounding disproportionality. Responses from all three high school districts are included within each theme; any significant differences that emerged between administrators will be described specifically.

In examining three school districts, the first research question examined how each of these high school districts understood racial disproportionality. Through close examination, three major themes emerged for why racial disproportionality exists in their school district which included: (1) sociodemographic factors, (2) biases, and (3) students' academic and behavioral skill deficits.

Research Question 1: According to high school administrators, why does racial disproportionality exist in their high school district?

Theme 1: Administrative leaders believe that sociodemographic factors associated with poverty explain why disproportionality exists in their high school.

Seven of the nine administrators interviewed in this qualitative study described sociodemographic factors such as family values, community factors and poverty as major factors for why disproportionality exists within their high school. For example, below are excerpts from the interviews where administrators cited factors associated with the culture poverty related to the problem of racial disproportionality:

[Participant 1] I also think that, given our socioeconomic level in the community, that our parents, some of our parents, are extremely savvy. And again, the haves come in and, you know, wreak havoc, so to speak, if they don't get what they want. And so some of these students, I think some of our white population, is also disproportionate to our numbers of special education students overall. I mean, we're at 16%. So I think that we have an over-representation of white students who don't need special education services either, but they're getting services because of entitlement issues.

[Participant 4] They have too much baggage... without providing the students' opportunities or interventions then we would not be able to level the playing field.

[Participant 5] I think there are family pieces that are at play as students come to us.

[Participant 6] I do also believe that we have families who move to our district because they know that we have really good services, so not that that's necessarily racially motivated, but I do believe it is also why we do have a higher population of special education students because people do know that it is a good district for special education services.

[Participant 7] I think that in our community we have a lot of Section 8 housing, or low income housing areas that we pull from in terms of our enrollment. Specific to our high school versus our sister school, I think we have a more diverse population due to the section 8 housing. I think with that comes a greater variety of ethnic backgrounds that have moved into this community.

[Participant 8] I would say that several of our Latino students have numerous discipline log entries. Maybe it's that they struggle with the structure of the classroom, or school hasn't been a priority maybe in the past, or school hasn't been valued at home.

[Participant 9] Having come from the inner city of Chicago and living in an urban environment, I think that there's been an evolution over the past few decades. I believe that there are a lot of people, a lot of families that have grown tired of some of the challenges in some of the schools and circumstances of neighborhoods in Chicago. There's been an extensive exodus and effort for families to relocate to find safer places to educate their children. I think that a lot of those people are people that have students that need supports within special education. With the greater availability of information on school reporting and through the internet, I believe that people have made wise decisions to move to places that have schools that can better service their students that have more intensive needs if they have the means. I think that we've seen this increase over the past 10 to 20 years because of that.

Although all seven administrators cited family values, community factors, and poverty as reasons why there is racial disproportionality in their school districts, their individual perceptions varied significantly. For example, one administrator described a disproportionate number of students eligible for special education due to white privilege.

She was the first participant to refer to white privilege and discuss how white students are overrepresented in special education at her school district. McIntosh (1990, cited in Blanchett, 2006) explains the role of white privilege in public education:

White privilege as it exists in American society or in the American educational system is defined as any phenomena, whether individual (e.g., biased teacher attitudes/perceptions), structural (e.g., curricular and pedagogical practices geared toward White, middle-class students), political (e.g., biased educational policies), economic (school funding formulas that contribute to inequality), or social (social constructions of race and disability), that serve to privilege Whites while oppressing people of color and promoting White supremacy. (p. 24)

Whereas four other administrators blamed families and cited family baggage, poverty, and a lack of parental involvement as major factors for why racial disproportionality exists. Additionally, two other administrators stated that families moved to their school districts to receive quality special education services for their children; thus, increasing their racial disproportionality.

Theme 2: Administrative leaders believe that personal biases explain why racial disproportionality exists in their high school.

In addition to sociodemographic factors, seven of the nine believe that biases explain why racial disproportionality exists. For example, four administrators openly talked about not doing anything to address racial disproportionality exhibiting a color blind approach; even though, they know it exists and impacts student learning. Also, four administrators described in detail how they believe that racial disproportionality is the

direct result of ingrained systems of racism and unconscious biases. Furthermore, five of nine participants reported that administrators and staff in the district are reluctant to discuss the possibility that unconscious bias may be the contributing factor for overrepresentation via the questionnaire. Below are excerpts from the interviews where administrators discussed various forms of biases as factors including colorblind attitudes and unconscious biases for why racial disproportionality exists.

Color Blind Attitudes

[Participant 1] Yeah, I think we look at the data. I'm not sure what has been done so far as to change anything with regard to that, although we know disproportionality exists. I think there has been an acceptance or an excuse that we are not the cause of eligibility for these kiddos.

[Participant 2] We are no longer conducting an annual district report. I think it was one of those things that the dynamic of the board of education changed. The dynamic of the superintendent changed. In the past, looking at disproportionality data was always seen as a very time consuming yet useful aggregate of data and a way to hold a mirror up to our practices; however, the new superintendent and the board of education conceded that it was time we could give back to the administration.

[Participant 7] I'm not aware in my five years here that we have had a dedicated team that's sat down to take a look at disproportionality data. We have not had a formal forum in which to discuss racial disproportionality at this point.

[Participant 9] I think that we have a specific focus at looking at a student's race or background and how we're giving service. I think that through multi-tiered systems of support, we're doing best practice. We're looking at everyone as an individual and making a determination on what their need is and working through a spectrum and not jumping from one step to another and labeling blindly and/or quickly without review. It is very much a team approach. It depends on the area of need, but we look at any and all data available. A student may be in review for some kind of support and there could be various different reasons. It could be an emotional reason, it could be behavioral, it could be academic and for various other reasons. We look at any and all data that is available. We're not looking at one snapshot, one test or one instance of behavior in one setting. We come together, we triangulate information, share, and try to make the best determination possible in conjunction with families. Reports are manufactured and information

is made available. Data is available that explains exactly by subgroup who's receiving services and so we have an understanding. There is a dashboard, if you will, to describe these details.

Unconscious Bias

[Participant 1] I believe that we have a culture of haves and have-nots in our district, and I think that we participate in that through a segregated models of education. Meaning that we have general education students and then we have all of these pull-out programs or interventions or whatever we're calling that at the point in time, if you are not in this general education environment and you need some kind of certain service, then we have a pull-out model of instruction for those services. So we contribute in that we are speaking volumes by saying and sending the message to students, as well as staff and our community, that if you stay in general education with no services, then you are part of this sense of belonging; and when you are not and you are pulled out, then that says something to both groups. That says something to the kids that are pulled about who is included, and it says something to those who are remain in general education about who does not belong.

[Participant 1] Our focus this year is to look at our disproportionality data and talk about what it means and talk about how we are perpetuating the disproportionality, how we are perpetuating racism, and examine our contributions to perpetuating racism.

[Participant 2] We are no longer conducting an annual district report. I think it was one of those things that the dynamic of the board of education changed. The dynamic of the superintendent changed. In the past, looking at disproportionality data was always seen as a very time consuming yet useful aggregate of data and a way to hold a mirror up to our practices; however, the new superintendent and the board of education conceded that it was time we could give back to the administration.

[Participant 4] Not just in my high school, but probably in many high schools, disproportionality is ingrained and then becomes systemic. The policies that the school district has developed over time has created a system that is really automatic, probably subconscious, but includes day-to-day interactions and day-to-day decisions which are not meant to overtly harm or be racially biased; however, those decisions have contributed to the layers that we see in schools now. To add to that, people have these unconscious biases and implicit biases that happen every day within the classroom, within the hallway, that are not, again, intentional or to intentionally harm students, but they exist. I think that has impacted the percent of students who are excluded from the general education setting. There is this belief that the student can't do it, or this would be too

difficult, or they have too much baggage without providing the student opportunities or interventions to give them access, to level the playing field.

[Participant 4] We're continually looking at the disproportionate number of students being placed at our public therapeutic day, for example, there is a high number of African-American male students outplaced. We're looking and analyzing that data. We're also looking at disproportionality with respect to eligibility categories, specifically the emotional disturbance category. There's a disproportionate number of African-American and minority students found eligible for the category of emotional disturbance. These are some barriers that we are starting to look at, having conversations about why that trend is continuing and what are some of the things that we can do to maybe change that trend.

[Participant 5] I think it's a number of systematic things, and I think it goes beyond the systems that exist here in our district. I think that there are systems. I think there are pieces that are at play as students come to us. In addition, I also feel that it has to do with the systems that we create to support all students (i.e., meaning the learning environments in which we create, the learning environments that we have need to be able to support all students, to engage students, to foster student achievement) that needs to be monitored on a regular basis, and instruction needs to be modified and adapted as it relates to student achievement.

The participants in this study believe that color-blind attitudes and implicit biases impact racial disproportionality in special education. Racial colorblindness is when race is noticed but not considered (Skiba, Eckes, & Brown, 2009). Furthermore, unconscious bias or “implicit bias” is when a person shows preference for one group over another group while not consciously aware of their behavior (Fiarman, 2016). All three high school districts in this research study think biases affect racial disproportionality.

Theme 3: Administrative leaders believe that students' deficits in academic and behavioral skills explain why racial disproportionality exists.

Lastly, six administrators identified that students of color lack academic and social emotional readiness skills for the general education classroom which results in racial disproportionality. Educators raised concerns about the extent to which students

can learn, how they as teachers can teach despite the significant needs and lack of tiered interventions in the general education classroom. Additionally, five of the nine participants reported that certain disability labels seem to always yield the same level of removal from the general education environment as well as certain racial or ethnic groups are less likely to be in an inclusive setting regardless of disability category via the questionnaire. Below are excerpts from the interviews where administrators believe that significant academic and behavioral deficits explain why disproportionality remains an issue at their high schools.

Academic and Behavioral Deficits

[Participant 2] Another responsibility that I should have mentioned was running the problem-solving teams during the last several years. In my opinion, the resulting disproportionality came through many of the conversations in problem-solving team amongst other places but really problem-solving team was the conduit through which most students ended up in special education. We worked very hard to always reflect upon our conversations and practices, and really tried to be as objective as possible when looking at the data and presenting the data, but we struggled because oftentimes students of color were coming through with pre-existing and considerable skill deficits in reading, math, processing, organizational and executive functioning.

[Participant 2] In addition to academic deficits, often, came compensatory behaviors that students would exhibit in class that could be construed as disruptive. Often we were dealing with students that were struggling academically based on preexisting skill deficits or existing skill deficits and manifesting themselves in more significant or obvious behavioral symptoms.

[Participant 3] I can think of a couple of examples particularly with reading comprehension, and how lower performance regarding reading comprehension, sometimes in my opinion, can lead to frustration or disengagement from class which leads to disruptive behaviors, which leads to referral. As the dean, I get the referrals saying that they are disruptive. I think it is because they don't have the educational confidence and I think some of that plays a part in their behaviors. Sometimes when we see a student repeatedly in trouble in our office for disruptive behaviors then we bring it to our problem solving team.

[Participant 6] I also think we have a large population that transfers from our feeder schools who may have been identified for special education services at an earlier age and passed along. I also think middle schools pass the students along. Students do not have to graduate 8th grade, so students don't believe that they actually have to earn credits to graduate.

[Participant 7] I also think that we are kind of in a tricky spot with our students who are identified as having ELL needs and who also have a learning disability, or students who have a mild disability when examining their standardized testing and considering what types of services are offered to those students to measure success.

[Participant 8] I think those that haven't been, if they continue with some of those same academic struggles, tend to get identified once here. I do think poor attendance is a huge part of why racial disproportionality exists.

Administrative leaders believe that students' academic and behavioral skill deficits contribute to why racial disproportionality exists. Six administrators stated that significant delays in academics make it difficult for teachers to teach. Administrators' responses in this study were consistent with other research findings which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter V.

The next section of this paper will explore themes that emerged from examining data from interviews and the questionnaire responses from three school districts specific to the second research question which examined the beliefs, practices, and policies that contribute to racial disproportionality in a high school setting. Administrative leaders believe that (1) absent school wide systems, (2) fears regarding student failure, and (3) implicit biases impact the beliefs practices that contribute to racial disproportionality in a high school setting.

Research Question 2: According to high school administrators, what beliefs and practices contribute to racial disproportionality in their district?

Theme 1: Administrative leaders believe that absent school wide systems, limited tiered interventions and underutilized culturally responsive curriculum contributes to racial disproportionality.

In this qualitative study, five of the nine researchers believe that a lack of clear systems contribute to racial disproportionality in special education at the high school level. Only four of the nine participants marked that issues regarding the cultural responsiveness of the curriculum and instruction are considered at the pre-referral intervention stage via the questionnaire. Below are excerpts from the interviews where three of the nine administrators discussed how inadequate systems including limited Tier 1 interventions and a lack of culturally responsive curriculum contribute to racial disproportionality in their school districts.

Lack of Systems for Addressing Disproportionality

[Participant 1] So, you know, these kids probably at some point in time started in general education and worked their way to more and more restrictive environments, and we have definitely contributed to that. So, that is something we are currently looked at. I mean, we went and looked at the data in June and had a little retreat on that and we're going to continue to look at the data throughout the school year to talk about our role in the process, what that looks like, and what we need to do.

[Participant 1] I think we do a nice job with our MTSS model and our RTI model. I mean, we have great problem solving teams; however, I think we are problem solving on a deficit model because that's the way our system is setup right now. I'm looking to change that system, but right now at this point in time, we really do have a deficit model of instruction, and we have a deficit model of problem solving. So, that definitely contributes to disproportionality.

[Participant 2] Basically a lot of closed systems, systems that basically the students of color would never ever be able to access whether it'd be diagonal movement academically through our curriculum, or whether it be the whole college tracking and post-secondary transition planning. Certain systems require financial ability to access. Well, certainly our students who are of a lower socioeconomic status tend to be our families of color and who wouldn't have the means to reach outside the school and get tutoring or supplementary tutoring support when they were struggling. Those families also, when their students begin to struggle, they do not have the means to reach out and get a private evaluation in order to move them through the system. So those are two examples of access to outside resources that have a cost. I think also our students and their families that are of lower socioeconomic status, for them, college was a very, daunting, if not a completely unrealistic option. One thing our counselors have done really well in the last few years is have very honest conversations about college with all of our students of color, especially through the Dreamer's Act. To get them to believe that it is a viable option and start those conversations early in their freshman year rather than waiting until their junior year because those students who never truly believed it was an option really quit trying freshman year.

[Participant 6] I also think there just needs to be more criteria; not just a placement decision of, "Oh, this student is going to be outplaced because this teacher or this team thinks they should be. We need to consider...What is happening in the classroom? How would they benefit from that?" Having some criteria and some goals when they're there to reintegrate back to the building is also important.

[Participant 7] I guess from my perspective, and my level of involvement within those decisions, I think that the practice that's contributing to it is that there's not a practice in place in terms of specific discussion around disproportionality. We're very good at looking in depth at individual students for the problem-solving process for example, and identifying what their needs are and taking a look at what interventions are available within the school and within the community for the student, for the parents, for the guardians, for the family, and really wrapping around the student. There's not a forum or a great opportunity to take a step back and take a look at that information in an accurate way, and assess it from different angles considering the student's ethnic background, race, gender, disability-type, or financial status.

[Participant 8] I would think, some of the things we have in place actually have the opposite effect. We have a two-tier problem solving system here, where the guidance counselor, psychologist, social worker and dean are the first level of problem solving. Oftentimes that group will get involved if the student is eligible for ELL, or other supports, they'll definitely invite those members to team to problem solve. This year we wound up having, I would call a super-duper large

problem solving team, and it really was focused in on not just one guidance counselor's Latino students, but several. It was a whole class of kids that we were struggling with. So we invited our clinical team and our guidance counselors and ELL to try and problem solve and come up with some other solutions, because you hate to lump that whole group together, but I think, sometimes we do that. And I think, sometimes there's behaviors here in the building that perpetuate stereotypes. We had a pretty nasty physical fight in the building last school year with a couple Hispanic students, and unfortunately, that doesn't help the stereotype at all. But in order to even go through a special education evaluation, you have to really work, the students work their way through both problem solving levels. The second level includes myself and our special education instructional supervisor. I think, both she and I are cognizant of the fact of our disproportionality, and not that we let that drive our decision making, but I do think it's in the back of our minds quite a bit. And I think, we both try to exhaust, to the extent possible, different interventions, different out-of-the-box ideas of how we can help some of these kids be successful without special education.

Lack of Tier 1 Interventions

[Participant 1] Yeah, I think (referencing general education Tier 1 curriculum, multi-tiered systems of support, referral process for initial evaluations, and eligibility determination guidelines) this is our biggest tipping point. We don't have Tier 1 supports at all because we pride ourselves in the autonomy given to teachers in the classroom. All of our supports are Tier 2 supports. And again, I think it's with the best of intentions that our Tier 2 interventions are always pretty restrictive, and because there are no Tier 1 supports, struggling students receive a la carte and pull-out services to the general education curriculum. So, I think that's really difficult for students.

[Participant 4] I think, probably, the biggest contributor has less to do with the referral process and more to do with the difficulty in understanding by our general education teachers what are Tier 1 supports and what does differentiation look like for students. I think there's an expectation that here's the bar for an algebra class, and if you do not meet that bar, well, then you don't belong. Rather than moving the bar to the individual child and evaluating growth, that if the child moves the bar, then that's growth, and that's showing that something is working and that we should continue to work with that child in the general education class even though they are not where everyone else is. I think that's the perception of, not all, clearly, but for a lot of general education teachers that there is a strong belief that they have to have kids at a certain level, and when they don't have kids at a certain level, then those kids don't belong.

[Participant 4] I think the rigidity in the core curriculum, the rigidity or the belief that if kids are not meeting learning targets, then they can't be in the course. That

could be pressures from their department directors, their principals, their superintendent for performance and not living up to that standard, pressure for kids to perform on AP tests, pressure for kids to perform on the SAT. I think those, then, impact the kinds of kids that general education teachers believe should be in their classroom.

[Participant 6] I think one thing is students who are low in Reading or low in Math need a second class of support. If they are low in English, they're in a Reading class. If they're low in Math, they have an Algebra extension. Part of it is their schedules are so filled with academics that they're not able to take electives that they enjoy so there's no love of learning. They just get beaten down.

[Participant 6] I think staff not being trained in classroom management and not on the newest trends and things they could be doing in their classrooms to help kids as individuals. What's the word I'm looking for? They need to be differentiating their curriculum to address the needs of all of the students in their classrooms.

Lack of Culturally Responsive Curriculum

[Participant 5] I think that we need to look at curriculum, too. I think that students and staff need to have a voice in the curriculum and it should represent all students, their histories, and they should be able to make connections and meaning with what they are learning.

[Participant 6] I do think the curriculum definitely is geared towards white students. I think the teachers teach a white curriculum and have a hard time changing that. I always go to the example of like a farmer's market, like when they refer to something and who knows what a farmer's market is. The kids of color who maybe were raised in the city and then moved here when they were 12 or 13, are they exposed to a farmer's market? We need to be culturally sensitive and be culturally aware of differences.

[Participant 7] I think we're looking at some curriculum revision. We have some programs that are in place that I think we're starting to examine the data for our students who are the neediest or at risk. Many of whom are from very diverse backgrounds, or who have significant needs, leading to a 504 plan or an IEP or who have ELL needs, are within this program for freshman and sophomore year with the hopes that they will move into more of the general education track of courses as they get older.

Five of the nine administrative leaders in this study identified that school systems create unjust conditions that contribute to racial disproportionality. They raised concerns

about problem solving on a deficit model and not having enough resources in the classroom to help struggling students. Three of the nine administrators acknowledge that their school districts lack high quality Tier 1 and Tier 2 interventions, and they think special education referral is the preferred solution to help struggling students. Eight of nine participants indicated that students with academic issues get consideration for both special education support and ELL support via the questionnaire. Also, three of the nine administrators report there is a mismatch between the curriculum and the culture and experiences of the non-white students. The administration spoke of the lack of cultural awareness with respect to students of color, and the curriculum does not consider the diversity of the students.

Theme 2: Administrative leaders believe that educators' beliefs and fears about students failing contributes racial disproportionality.

In addition to absent school wide practices, administrative leaders also believe that educators' hopeless beliefs contribute to racial disproportionality. Four administrative leaders discussed how fears and hopeless beliefs about student success contribute to racial disproportionality including why students of color are placed in more restrictive special education placements. Below are excerpts from the interviews where administrators discussed their own sense of hopelessness about students failing. Also, administrative leaders believe that some students have significant needs which require more than what a public school may provide.

Hopeless Beliefs

[Participant 2] The number one belief {that contributes is disproportionality} was we could not let kids fail. If the students were failing, not having success, in many respects we looked at it as a failure on our part to provide them access to whatever they need, whatever the resources were, whether they would be academic, social-emotional, and medical, and we were constantly looking at those options. So that's first and foremost: a belief that no student should fail on our watch.

[Participant 2] Another belief that absolutely was being espoused to a greater degree from the district office, which I don't disagree with, was we're a public school. We're not a therapeutic day school. Some of the supports and the resources that our students were demanding to a greater degree than they ever had before, we were just simply unable to provide. So there was a belief that we needed to reach back to families to say, "This is what we recommend. We cannot provide them, and we need you to look to do some of this stuff outside the framework of the school day." I think are looking and saying, "Are we over-identifying?" because every problem or every issue we see is something that we have to fix.

[Participant 4] Then this idea continued to facilitate or trickle into staff's beliefs that, "certain students can't go to this general education class because they are not ready or they are not capable or they may fail." It's just a long cycle of beliefs that have built up by the administrators, teachers, psychologists, and social workers that maybe a student is not capable of doing it or they are afraid that the student's going to fail. The rigor is too difficult and that it's impossible for that child. I think it just develops through a continued cycle.

[Participant 7] I think that we struggle with our students who've had more externalizing behaviors. Prior to me coming here six years ago, there was very much a culture of specific students not fitting into the perceived norms of the building, and the response was what do we need to do to get them out of here, versus how do we help them be successful here. Or what skills do they need to develop to be successful? We've spent a great deal of time on education particularly by our Dean's office with regards to discipline referrals and the problem-solving process. I think that there's still some in the building who feel that others can do it better, that these are students that they know who have very intensive needs and are successful within those small inclusive settings, and are not as prone to push for them to reintegrate into general education classes. But on the flip side, when we do make that push, we're finding that students are successful. I think some of that has declined over time due to staff members retiring and having different perspectives.

[[Participant 8] I do think, for some staff, they think we've tried everything else. What else is there to try? We should try special education. And as I say that, I think a lot of staff will say special education is not this magic bullet. It's not like they're going to cure them, but I think, it's this helpless feeling of what more could we be doing to try and save some of these kids. And I think, our time is so limited with them, in terms of some of the issues that they come to high school with, and that they've demonstrated for years in elementary and middle school. So I think, it's kind of a hopeless belief of what can we do differently.

[Participant 8] You know, this kid definitely needs more restrictive, or this student has done something that might be considered violent or concerning that many staff will believe, they need a smaller, structured environment, where that school can focus on the individual needs, more so than our building. I think, there's a large belief out there we're a building of almost 3,200 students, it's easy to get lost in. It's easy to struggle in unstructured situations in this building, because of the amount of students. And so, I do think there's this belief like we can't handle some kids sometimes. They need a smaller structured environment, typically outside of the building, or that the student is so mentally ill that we're not equipped to deal with it and they need more of a therapeutic day program where they can have a consult from the psychiatrist and the family therapy component.

Almost half of the administrators in this qualitative study identified that they fear that students would fail without the support of special education. Administrative leaders believed that special education services and therapeutic schools provided an advantage in determining a way to provide intentional supports to maintain the most struggling students in the building. Across all three school districts, the administration think that schools had been operating in a way where they do not know how to serve the neediest learners which contributes to racial disproportionality.

Theme 3: School administrators believe that educators' biased interpretations of school policies contribute to racial disproportionality.

Eight of the nine administrators in this qualitative study mentioned that their school district has examined school attendance and behavior policies during the past few years due to increased attention on restorative practices (National Association of School

Psychologists, 2013; Osher, Fisher, Amos, Katz, Dwyer, Duffey & Colombi, 2015).

Also, eight of the nine administrators explicitly stated biased interpretations of policies and unconscious biases that happen in your day-to-day that you're not even aware of that perpetuate racial disparities. Six of nine participants marked frequently and sometimes parents have expressed that they believe that some staff members in the district have racial bias via the questionnaire. Below are excerpts from the interviews where administrators discussed how educators' biased interpretations of school policies contribute to racial disproportionality.

Biased Interpretation of Policies

[Participant 1] You know, and again I don't think it is overt. I think staff has the best of intentions. I think that we have been under the steady belief that we are helping kids and so what we have not looked at, why do we think that kids of color need more help than white kids? And so that's the bottom line. We have to look at those numbers. We have to look at why do all of, you know, the majority of our black and brown kids need this level of special education services and self contained environments? And how are we contributing to that cause? I do think, you know, one of the best attributes of our district is that, as crazy as this sounds, they are steeped in equity. Almost all of our staff has been trained in Courageous Conversations. We had, up until this year, a director of equity for the past 12 years. We have an equity plan. We have an equity team. So we have knowledge. I'm just not sure we're looking in the mirror to know and figure out why and how we're contributing to racism.

[Participant 3] I'm forgetting the term. It is that bias exists. It exists in education. I have my own biases. It appears in the data. When we have our referral data, the majority of our referrals are for our students of color. That hasn't changed since I've been the dean either, so clearly there's an issue that I'm not getting to. I think trying to raise the awareness and this could be in a professional development opportunity but to raise the awareness of personal bias in the classroom is something that is not very commonly addressed and it's something that's a major factor. A lot of times with our referrals, we tend to see, it's the same teacher that refers students. I'm getting the same referrals for a similar demographic. It leads me to believe that maybe that teacher is biased... I haven't done the observations in the classrooms but maybe the teacher is constantly looking at that student. Anything that student does might be deemed more of a behavioral fraction than

another student who's talking. A white student who's talking in the back that is doing the same thing but is not being looked at because of their racial bias, right? I mean we want to be aware of these racial biases that we might have. I know that's a big factor and I know it's not addressed.

[Participant 4] All of the above, discipline, the dropping of courses, and the rigid attendance policies that all school districts have [contribute to racial disproportionality]. I think you need to have policies on these areas, but you also have to individualize for the student, you have to look at the individual circumstances for students, for example, with attendance. Maybe the student has to take care of a sibling in the morning, and that's why they're late to school because their parent works nights. When you look at policy just for policy sake and say that this is the rule and now you're going to have this consequence and your class is going to be dropped, then you're continuing to perpetuate the cycle. But when you start to individualize and look at what's the reason behind what's happening, then you're starting to take into account the individual student. A lot of minority families have different circumstances that need to be considered, and when not, it just contributes to the cycle.) As I mentioned earlier, it's those subconscious or unconscious biases that happen in your day-to-day interactions that you're not even aware of that perpetuate that disparity, your interaction with the student in the hallway, how you interact with a particular student of color, for example, that staff aren't even always aware of, which, then, in turn, changes or impacts how they discipline a student or write a referral for a student, versus a student who is not of color.

[Participant 4] I think I would probably say for our district, discipline, although we have made a lot of growth in our practices, we may have just changed the location. We really need to take a deeper dive on in-school suspensions and what that disproportionality looks like. I think that's probably the easiest place for you to look at racial disparities with respect to discipline.

[Participant 5] I don't think the policies in and of themselves [contribute to racial disproportionality]. I think how we apply the policies, how we indiscriminately apply those policies might contribute at times. People's interpretation of the policies or the lack of adherence to policies and their own personal bias contribute to disproportionality. All of these pieces come into play.

[Participant 6] I think one of the beliefs is that this community has changed too much and that the staff do not know how to work with these kids. I think just staff not being trained in classroom management and not trained on the newest trends of things they could be doing in their classrooms to work with kids as individuals, but really teaching to a classroom of 30 students and not ... What's the word I'm looking for? Differentiating for their needs. Their curriculum needs to address all of the students in their classrooms.

[Participant 6] I think I always go to the example of if there is a loud group of black girls versus a loud group of white girls and people not approaching or approaching and how they approach the groups. I don't even know if it's the policies as much as it is people's ideas of what it looks like. It's an interesting question. It's an attitude or a mindset. I think there are certain things that people... [stops]... I can speak to the discipline policy and the attendance policy, when I look at the policies, they're not racially unfair. They're not unjust but what people have in their mindset is, so when two kids get into a verbal argument, how that's handled by the people that are standing there, how it's either de-escalated or escalated based on their mindset determines how they end up in our office and what that looks like and how it's handled down here.

[Participant 7] I think we've found by pushing some of these students out into the higher level courses that they are finding success, and that's made us question our programming and re-assess how we deliver instruction to those students who require more intensive intervention.

[Participant 8] Discipline feels somewhat out of our hands in the sense that we have definitely had more drug and alcohol violations with our Latino students. I don't have the numbers in front of me, but I feel very confident that's accurate. And why is that? You know what I mean? If that's something intentionally we are doing. Why do more of our Latino students get caught, when I believe, there's students using drugs across the building. That's always not a feel good. We have definitely expelled more Latino students than we have of any other race.

[Participant 9] No. In fact, the systems that are in place within general education, the resources that we have offering general education at varying different levels, if anything, I believe could be a contributor to avoid mislabeling students and contributing to disproportionality.

In this qualitative study, eight administrators spoke candidly about how biased interpretations of school policies impact racial disproportionality. Six of the eight administrators believed that educators' unconscious biases when interpreting and applying school policies contributes to racial disproportionality. Additionally, three of the nine participants indicated that school administrators and teachers are heard to make disparaging, or negative remarks about culturally diverse and/or economically disadvantaged people via the questionnaire. Unconscious bias or "implicit bias" is when a

person shows preference for one group over another group while not consciously aware of their behavior (Fiarman, 2016). According to Staats et al. (2016),

our implicit biases are the result of mental associations that have formed by the direct and indirect messaging we receive, often about different groups of people. When we are constantly exposed to certain identity groups being paired with certain characteristics, we can begin to automatically and unconsciously associate the identity with the characteristics, whether or not that association aligns with reality. (p. 14)

Throughout the interviews and the questionnaire responses, administrators acknowledged an overrepresentation of students of color eligible for special education services, harsher discipline including more referrals, higher rates of expulsion and more restrictive special education placements outside the general education classroom. The tangled combination of absent school wide systems, hopeless beliefs regarding student failure, and biased interpretations of school policies contribute to racial disproportionality which will be discussed further in Chapter V.

Research Question 3: According to high school administrators, what interventions and/or practices need to be implemented to reduce or eliminate racial disproportionality in special education [within their district if it exists]?

The next section of this paper will explore themes that emerged from examining data from the interviews and questionnaire responses from three school districts specific to the third research question which examined the supports that are available to meet the struggling academic, behavioral and social emotional needs of all students. Until recently,

most of the research on disproportionality focused on understanding the causes of disproportionality. The heart of this qualitative study is to move beyond the causes and to hear from local administrators regarding the next steps in addressing the problematic and unjust practices that contribute to disproportionality. Three major themes emerged for eliminating disproportionality included: 1. developing a systematic approach, 2. collaborating with multiple stakeholders groups, and 3. increasing resources for staff to meet the needs of all students.

Theme 1: Administrative leaders believe that school districts need to develop a systematic plan led by strong leaders to reduce racial disproportionality.

The last research question in this qualitative study asked the participants to identify the supports and resources needed to change the racial disparities that exist. Six of the nine administrators believe it is critical to develop and commit to a systematic plan. Below are excerpts from the interviews where administrators discussed the importance of reflecting on their current failures in order to develop a systematic approach led by strong leaders to reduce racial disproportionality.

Systematic Approach

[Participant 1] We have to start in Tier 1. I'm meeting with the superintendent today and putting together a presentation for him to discuss our disparities. It's so ironic that we're doing this interview today, because I'm talking to him today about this exact thing and my vision. This is just my proposal to him. The end result would be that we would have very few self-contained classrooms. We would have very few classrooms where kids receive this additional support outside of general education classroom but instead we would have teams of individuals devoted to a content department. In other words, your social studies department would have a few special education teachers to support struggling students... we could also do it by grade level, but there would be a team of people devoted to that department. Like we would have areas of expertise, so you would have your special ed teacher, a speech pathologist, EL supports, and a reading

specialist, all devoted to help students across the curriculum. During our late start time we need to really begin to look at our data and consider push-in supports into general education instead of just having pull-out supports into all of these silos that we have created to give kids extra outside of the general education setting. So that's my plan, what the end result of my vision would be.

[Participant 1] I would love to see our union back this plan. I would love to see our superintendent back this. Our strategic plan definitely mirrors what this vision would be....So I think that's a huge problem, but that's where I would love to see more support. I would love to see buy-in from our staff to understand their role in racial disproportionality.

[Participant 2] Personally for me, I felt like we really need to look at our academic model if we're talking about racial disproportionality and discuss our trackings. We need to really consider the possibility of blowing up tracking in every classroom... essentially destroying the racial predictability. If every student has to take US history and you have four levels, why can't we have x number of sections of US history so every student has access to the course and it's a rigorous and robust curriculum. That's obviously changing the mentality of the staff, but that's truly, in my opinion, what would eliminate disproportionality.

[Participant 4] I think in order to impact systemic change, you need to start looking at some of the policies they we have in place. That's really one way to start looking at having a systemic change that is through a systems based approach...I think to speak to the previous question about what do you need to make a change, and it's not about money. It's about having people working towards a common goal, not just within the district, but outside as well. Having a common belief, this is not something that one person can change. You need everybody. You need those of color, and you especially need those not of color to support making changes.

[Participant 5] I think that we need to continue to look at the information and data that we have. We need to look for gaps and to gather whatever additional information that we need. The process needs to evolve, not just a snapshot in time, and we need a commitment to outcomes. Having identified that, I will speak for this building in particular, our need to focus on racial equity, a commitment to what it is we determined at this given moment in time, and it must be a priority based on the needs identified, and there must be the commitment to address those needs.

[Participant 6] I think just making staff aware of the disparities and really understanding them and looking at why we have them and also making staff understand that this problem isn't going to go away unless we make it go away. It really is us looking at ourselves and how are we part of the problem and how can

we help solve the problem. I think that's a huge component of it, but I also think that it has to really be seen as something that's worthwhile and not just the flavor of the month. Not just, Oh, you can participate in Beyond Diversity or you can do this or you can do that; but instead people understanding what the issue is and why they believe disproportionality exists.

[Participant 7] I think we have work to do. What are the facts? I think, you know, we've started the conversations about how to reduce disproportionality which I think is the first step. I think, kind of admitting there is a problem, again, is the first step, which I think many of us are already saying, "Yes, we're really concerned." I think, that next step is getting all the people who have that same concern around the table and be intentional about what we do next. I just think until recent years, it wasn't talked about here. I think it's been happening for a very long time. I just think, there have not been many conversations about it and a lot of intention or actually doing something about it. I think, we have all the right players now. We just need a plan.

[Participant 9] I think continuing to be data-driven and ensuring that the work we do is based on the premises of multi-tiered systems of support and that we just do not unilaterally move students from one support to the most restrictive support without a true individual look at the student. Collaborating with family in genuinely understanding the student's needs and the why. Really looking at why a student has a need. Why do they have a need? Digging in deeply. If you are in consideration of identifying a student for special education support as an example for an academic area, you must ensure that you have provided any and all interventions prior to moving to that step in order to avoid mislabeling by accident with all the general education offerings and tutoring. You should work through those layers if possible unless one's needs are so discrepant and so that you would be doing a disservice by not moving more quickly.

A significant theme that emerged from the interview data was the importance of systematic structures which include a solid RtI plan with a focus on Tier 1 interventions. According to the administrative leaders in this study, part of developing a systematic plan also involves examining the segregating tracking practices that exist in the various course levels at the high school. In the final chapter of this study, this researcher will examine the research aligned to transforming education systems in order to change student outcomes.

Theme 2: Administrative leaders believe a committee should be formed that includes multiple stakeholder voices in order to tackle racial disparities.

In addition to developing a systematic plan, six of the nine administrators reported the significance of developing plan which includes more stakeholders in the conversation about racial disproportionality. Two administrators noted that commitment from their superintendent and Board of Education was critical for success. Three administrators stated the importance of including students in the plan to address racial disproportionality. Additionally, one of the three administrators spoke of the role of White privilege among staff, students and families as an issue that needed to be tackled. Two administrators spoke of collaborating with families to “dig deeply” to understand the problem locally and develop processes that can lead to interventions. Below are excerpts from the interviews where administrators cited the significance of including more stakeholders in the conversation about racial disproportionality.

Unheard Stakeholder Voices

[Participant 1] I'm meeting with the superintendent today, and putting together a presentation for him to discuss our disparities. It's so ironic that we're doing this interview today, because I'm talking to him today about this exact thing and my vision. This is just my proposal to him. The end result would be that we would have very few self-contained classrooms.

[Participant 2] A lot of the conversations we have had are very superficial in nature about how we could expand student involvement in certain areas, how we could change the shape and design of our buildings to try to create more student interaction with heterogeneous environments within the school.

[Participant 3] I also feel with the times that we're in right now that there needs to be some form of educational opportunity [that includes students]. We're working on this in the dean's office but it's quite a difficult task, as how do we educate our students of color. This is part of what we learned with the Beyond Diversity training; that our whiteness is a factor and your awareness of it is pretty

important. Right now, we have students who aren't aware [of their whiteness]. Educating, particularly our white students, about white privilege and how that plays a part in the lives of everybody in this building needs to be part of the process. I don't know how to go about doing that. When we do have racial issues; however, we work on a restorative component as much as possible. There does need to be a punitive consequence for racism because we want to keep a very hard stance that we do not allow racial comments or racism, but ultimately we need to work on educating students as to why what they did is so wrong. That can range from either reading different forms of articles or literature about racial issues or watching YouTube videos that might be beneficial for students to read. Sometimes we can get a student to get to the point where they realize it [their racism], along with their parents. It's difficult because sometimes the parents don't feel that what the student did was wrong either and that's part of the problem. Really the educational component, I think is something that needs more attention.

[Participant 4] We also need to make sure the Board of Education is in support of the initiatives that we have been doing with reducing disproportionality. This is a relatively new Board of Education for us, and the board goals that were developed were from the previous board, which focused on racial equity. It's hard to know exactly where our current board is with respect to the former goals because they have not developed their own goals. There's definitely a mentality that was the old board's goals. We're going to continue them, but then we're going to start to look to develop new goals, and will equity still fit?

[Participant 7] I think step one is to have some open discussions about our student population, about who we are servicing. How are those students performing? Identify what disproportionality is there and effective strategies for reduction.

[Participant 9] Collaborating with family in genuinely understanding their student's needs and why. Really looking at why a student has a need. Why do they have a need? Digging in deeply.

Six of the nine administrators recognized and believed that it is critical to include multiple stakeholder voices when identifying a plan to tackle racial disparities. The administrative leaders spoke in detail about how White privilege, segregation of students of color, racism, and not understanding individual students' needs were central issues as to why racial disproportionality needed to be addressed by including more voices in the process for developing a shared sense of commitment. Attitudes, mindsets, systems of

racism, and perceptions were words used to describe barriers to addressing disproportionality.

Theme 3: School administrators believe that additional resources (i.e., human resources and capital tied to equity) are critical to meet the needs of all students.

Lastly, all six of the nine administrators believe that ongoing professional learning steeped in equity and well as additional school resources are critical to foster equitable outcomes for students of color. Below are excerpts from the interviews where administrators cited the significance of additional resources to meet the needs of their students.

Resources

[Participant 1] At least, in my opinion. I think it doesn't require a ton of new resources. In fact, my plan is probably cheaper. I think that there needs to be a reallocation of resources, and I think it will be a long journey because a lot of people are afraid to let go of the very things that they have.

[Participant 2] I think it takes that district leadership team to provide evidence-based supports for professional development at the building level that will ultimately lead to deep examinations of current practices and the ability to implement evidence-based changes that contribute to the disproportionality.

[Participant 5] I think the most powerful supports are the ones that provide time, resources, and opportunity to continue to identify it, to communicate about it, and to develop a shared commitment.

[Participant 6] I think from a dean's perspective that teachers need to be provided more professional development on how to work with the different types of kids within their classrooms and being given a toolbox that they could really reach into and feel empowered to deal with different types of kids and not be afraid to deal with it. I do think our teachers are getting better at that. I would like to see them require everyone to do some type of Beyond Diversity or some type of training about race and the racial disparities and really make people understand racial disproportionality so that they are more invested in our kids of color.

[Participant 8] I always think we could use more clinical staff. I'm not saying that's the only answer, but I do think, many of our minority populations have had struggles in the past. They're coming in with different types of baggage, with post traumatic stress, and different issues. And you know, we're at a point that the clinical services we can provide are for those students with IEPs and those students in crisis. We don't have a lot of extra time left over to service our general education students. So I guess, on my wish list, we would add additional clinical staff to really focus on that. I really believe that a mentor program is the direction to go. I think getting some of the students even before they walk into high school connected with an adult. I think we would make such a difference; somehow to connect these students with this building, whether it's an adult, an activity in athletics, something to connect them, because, I think, many of them have never felt a connection to a school. So I'm hopeful for that. And I do think we need more professional involvement.

[Participant 9] I feel pretty confident in our processes. I feel that we're identifying students for the right reasons and giving the right support. If there is a metric or tool available to look at how we're administering services and to look at our systems in a different manner to better ensure that we are imparting the best practices, I would like that tool to be made available.

Summary

In summary, this qualitative research study sought to understand administrative leaders' beliefs as to why racial disproportionality existed at the high school level, explored the local factors and processes that contribute to racial disproportionality in special education, and identified interventions and supports that will reduce or eliminate racial disproportionality in special education referral, eligibility and placement procedures. The goal was to learn from administrators how to best serve students with disabilities including minority students in the general education setting to the maximum extent possible in order to make recommendations for the next steps in future work, such as creating an implementable action plan to eliminate these disparities.

The Constant Comparative Method was utilized to code the data and to allow themes to emerge (Olson et al., 2016). The coding process included multiple stages in

order to develop reliable codes and eventually themes. Analyses showed the perspectives of the administrators tended to be more similar than different with the exception of one administrator who did not see concerns with their practices, procedures, and beliefs surrounding disproportionality.

While gathering administrators' thoughts regarding the first research question [Why does racial disproportionality exist in your high school?], the participants believed that (1) sociodemographic factors, (2) biases, and (3) students' academic and behavioral skill deficits contribute to racial disproportionality. As the interviews progressed, administrators shifted their focus when discussing the second research question [What beliefs, practices and policies contribute to racial disproportionality in your high school district?] and accepted increased responsibility for contributing to disproportionality, and identified factors such as (1) absent school wide systems, (2) fears regarding student failure, and (3) implicit biases contribute to racial disproportionality in a high school setting. The last research question in this qualitative study was focused on participants' views of the supports and resources needed to change the racial disparities that exist. Administrators believe that it is significant that to develop and commit to a systematic plan, involve all stakeholder voices in the conversation, and to increase resources to help needs of all students. The purpose of this qualitative study was to help school districts identify strengths and weaknesses within their existing beliefs, practices and policies as well as collaborate to identify the next steps for improving their procedures in order to significantly reduce the number of students of color referred for special education.

In conclusion, both the interview descriptions and the questionnaire data supported the themes developed. Chapter V will further explore the steps for reducing racial disproportionality in special education as well as discussing the overall conclusions and recommendations. The themes that emerged in this qualitative study are critical for school practitioners to consider in order to reduce the racial disparities across all three high school districts.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The present qualitative research study provided a preliminary examination of high school administrators' beliefs regarding why racial disproportionality exists and identified potential next steps to eliminate these disparities. High school administrators, including a dean, assistant principal for student services, and the director of special education were chosen as the key participants because each leader plays a critical role in the referral, identification, and eligibility of students for special education. Although the research on racial disproportionality suggests it is a complex and long-standing problem, there has been less attention examining the perspectives and voices of high school administrators. Much of the research focuses on the root causes of racial disproportionality and only a few studies address solutions to eliminate racial disproportionality. In a review of literature by Harry and Fenton (2016), they found 15 studies examining the factors that contribute to special education disproportionality; however, none of the studies focused only on high school administrators' beliefs. The aim of this study was to capture the rich and sophisticated descriptions of the beliefs and practices that contribute to racial disproportionality and the interventions and supports needed to reduce racial disproportionality that administrators are capable of sharing. By utilizing semi-structured interviews and a disproportionately questionnaire, this study

provided practical data that can be used by high school administrators seeking to reduce and/or eliminate racial disproportionality in secondary settings.

Chapter IV shared the major themes that emerged from the disproportionality questionnaire as well as the semi-structured interviews. Emerging from the data gathered were three themes for each of the three research questions. This qualitative research study examined the following research questions:

1. According to high school administrators, why does racial disproportionality in special education exist in their high school district?
2. According to high school administrators, what beliefs and practices contribute to disproportionality in special education in their district?
3. According to high school administrators, what interventions and/or practices need to be put in place to reduce or eliminate racial disproportionality in special education [within their district, if it exists]?

Chapter V will provide an interpretation of the findings which are organized to correspond with the major themes identified in Chapter IV and are tied to the research questions. Additionally, Chapter V will share implications for other high schools seeking to reduce racial disparities. The study will conclude with recommendations for future research and specify the limitations of the study.

Interpretation of the Findings

In examining three school districts, the first research question in this study examined how school districts understand racial disproportionality. Through careful analysis, three major themes emerged as to why racial disproportionality existed in their

school district which include: family values, community factors, and a culture of poverty, unconscious biases and color blindness, and perceived student deficits by teachers resulting in special education referrals.

Research Question 1, Theme 1: Administrative leaders believe that sociodemographic factors associated with poverty explain why disproportionality exists in their high school

Administrative leaders' responses in this study were consistent with findings of previous research that examined the relationship between poverty and school readiness (Darling-Hammond, 2009; National Research Council, 2002, Skiba et. al., 2005; Skiba et al., 2006). The relationship between poverty and racial disproportionality is complex and studies that have examined the relationship between poverty and racial disproportionality have yielded inconsistent results. Poverty and racial disproportionality studies are confounded by other variables including biological and social stressors, restricted educational opportunities, and reduced resources (Skiba et al., 2005). Similar to other research studies, the participants in this research study blamed student's families for student's learning difficulties (Harry, Klingner, Sturges, & Moore, 2002; National Research Council, 2002; Shippen, Curtis, & Miller, 2009) which highlights the role of cultural deficit thinking. According to Valencia (1997), deficit thinking includes the process of blaming the student, genetic pathology, the culture of poverty, the family environment, and poor parenting as causes of school failure and racial disproportionality. For example, participants cited deficiencies in students' home lives as an issue that negatively affects their student's education. Several administrators made it clear that the

needs of the students from poverty are significant and they require intense supports. Participants described how minority students pose significant challenges to classroom teaching and blame families for children's learning and behavioral difficulties. "It has been argued that this emphasis on individual socioeconomic disadvantage serves to distract attention from continuing structural inequalities in education that serve to replicate disadvantage in our society" (Sleeter, 1995, cited in Skiba et al., 2005, p. 141). Some scholars argue that educators are more comfortable blaming poverty because it is less emotionally charged than speaking about their own or the school's racism (Skiba et al., 2006). Blaming poverty also has an effect of pathologizing academic difficulties of minority students resulting in more referrals for special education (Skiba et al., 2006). School processes must guard against cultural deficit thinking and intensify their supports for struggling students in order to provide a more inclusive education for all students (Skiba et al., 2006).

Research Question 1, Theme 2: Administrative leaders believe that personal biases explain why disproportionality exists in their high school

A significant concern is that all the administrators in this study spoke of the various methods by which they review, discuss, and analyze disproportionality data; yet, none of them has implemented a plan to address the inequalities that exist which results in continued racial disproportionality. Similar to research conducted by Skiba et al., (2006), three participants took the colorblind perspective and they simply did not pay attention to the racial disproportionality that exists in their high school. Racial

colorblindness is defined as when race is noticed but not considered (Skiba et al., 2009).

For example, one participant stated,

Yeah, ... we look at the data. I'm not sure what has been done so far...although we know disproportionality exists. I think there has been an acceptance or an excuse that we aren't the cause of eligibility for these kiddos" (Participant 1).

Additionally, participants spoke of how unconscious biases influence teacher behaviors toward students of color. For example, one participant stated,

People have these unconscious biases... that happen every day within the classroom, within the hallway, that are not, ... to intentionally harm students, but they exist. I think that has impacted the percent of students who are excluded from the general education setting" (Participant 4).

Additionally, participants reported via the questionnaire that sometimes administrators and staff in the district are reluctant to discuss the possibility that unconscious bias may be the contributing factor for overrepresentation. For example, five of nine participants reported that administrators and staff in the district are reluctant to discuss the possibility that unconscious bias may be the contributing factor for overrepresentation via the questionnaire. Research from Artiles et al. (2010) cited that color-blind practices and policies continue to justify racial disproportionality in special education. The conversation of race tends to be invisible in the literature, and scholars Harry and Fenton (2016) state that

poverty is often used as a proxy for race, and we contend that it is problematic because it allows continued use of the argument that poverty accounts fully for overrepresentation and defies honest appraisal of the role of racism in decision making or special education placement. (p. 27)

Becoming aware of one's unconscious biases leads to increased awareness; as a result, individuals are more likely to address their biases (Fiarman, 2016) which has significant implications for reducing racial disproportionality. School leaders must be brave enough to encourage courageous conversations about unconscious practices and procedures if schools are ever going to eliminate racial disparities (Tenney, 2018).

Research Question 1, Theme 3: Administrative leaders believe that students' deficits in academic and behavioral skills explain why racial disproportionality exists

Educators in this study raised concerns about the extent to which students can learn, how teachers can teach when the needs are so great as well as they expressed frustration with the middle schools passing students along. Administrators noted a lack of academic readiness skills necessary for high school success especially among students of color which also highlights the role of cultural deficit thinking. For example, one administrator noted, "Often we were dealing with students that were struggling academically based on preexisting skill deficits or existing skill deficits and manifesting themselves in more significant or obvious behavioral symptoms" (Participant 2). Another administrator stated that teachers brought struggling students to the problem solving committee often requesting a case study for special education. Additionally, administrators spoke of the school not having adequate Tier 1 and Tier 2 interventions in the building. Deficit thinking related to student needs and socioeconomic status serves as a driving force for teachers to refer students for a special education case study evaluation (Ahram et al., 2011).

Since the 2004 IDEA reauthorization, there has been significant attention on the use of Response to Intervention (RtI). “RtI is a service delivery approach to providing supports and interventions to students at increasing levels of intensity based on progress monitoring and data analysis” (Sansosti, Goss, & Noltemeyer, 2011, p. 9). Specifically, RtI models allow educators to address students’ learning needs without identifying them for special education services (Artiles & Kozleski, 2010). RtI is not a curriculum, but rather an educational change initiative. Instead of blaming the student for not succeeding, the schools in this study would benefit from examining supports and assure that high quality programs are available for all students. “Such a perspective necessitates that schools foster a structure that builds the capacity of the educational professions and the system in which they work to sustain effective practices” (Schaughency & Ervin, 2006, cited in Sansosti et al., 2011, p. 9). Data from this study helps illustrate the need for significant educational change and teacher professional development regarding Response to Intervention as a solution to address issues of racial disparities in special education. Schools must focus on remedies that establish institutional procedures and practice and work to change beliefs. Response to Intervention practices will foster early interventions for supporting struggling students that will help reduce the number of students referred for special education. These changes align with the themes generated from the third research question which addresses the next steps that school districts must take to tackle racial disparities which will be discussed later in this section.

The second research question examined high school administrators’ thoughts regarding the beliefs, practices, and policies that contribute to racial disproportionality in

a high school setting. Through a rigorous process of coding data, three major themes emerged regarding the beliefs, practices, and policies that contribute to racial disproportionality in a high school setting which included: absent school wide systems, hopeless beliefs about student failure, and biased interpretation of policies.

Research Question 2, Theme 1: Administrative leaders believe that absent school wide systems, limited tiered interventions and underutilized culturally responsive curriculum contributes to racial disproportionality

Researchers De Pry and Cheesman (2010) state that schools' struggle to address students' academic and social emotional concerns is the crux of racial disproportionality. The administrators in this study identified that absent school systems create unjust learning conditions that contribute to racial disproportionality. The participants in this study raised concerns regarding problem solving on a deficit model and not having enough systems wide systems and resources in the classroom to help teachers assist struggling students. In contrast to the first research question where administrators focused on blaming sociodemographic factors and students for racial disproportionality, administrative leaders discussed how schools share the responsibility for students' successes and failures through their implementation of intervention systems during discussions aligned to the second research question. For example, several administrators acknowledged that their school districts lack high quality Tier 1 and expressed that special education referral is the preferred solution to help struggling students. Too often, educators view the student as the problem; however, as the interviews progressed,

participants started to increase their conceptualization of disproportionality to include more systemic variables.

Many researchers argue that the divide between home and school cultures is one of the major causes of disproportionality and the under-achievement of racially, culturally, ethnically and linguistically (RCELD) diverse students (Griner & Stewart, 2012). The administration in this qualitative study also spoke of the lack of cultural awareness with respect to students of color, and how the curriculum often does not consider the diversity of the students. The administrators cited the need for embedding culturally responsive teaching practices within RtI implementation efforts. For example, one administrator stated,

I think that we need to examine our curriculum. I think that students and staff need to have a voice in the curriculum and it should represent all students, their histories, and they should be able to make connections with what they are learning (Participant 5).

Gay (2000, cited in Griner & Stewart, 2012) defines culturally responsive teaching as “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance systems of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them” (p. 589). Educators would benefit from practical strategies for implementing culturally responsive teaching practices to reduce the achievement gap and disproportionate practices observed in classrooms. As Skiba et al. (2008) notes, “a comprehensive evaluation of culturally responsive teaching practices should focus on positive academic and social outcomes; but as importantly, on the ability of those practices to reduce inequalities such as disproportionality, drop-outs, and underachievement” (De Pry & Chessman, 2010, p. 43).

An instructional consultation approach by Gravios and Rosenfield (2006) offers general education teachers coaching with culturally responsive teaching design and delivery as well as provides problem solving strategies. In their study, the instructional consultation model helped reduce case study evaluations for special education (DePry & Cheesman, 2010). Gravios and Rosenfield (2006) conclude that more emphasis should be placed on the role of instruction related to addressing racial disproportionality. The schools in this qualitative study could benefit from instructional coaching similar to the approach cited by Gravios and Rosenfield with a focus on creating differentiated material, implementing modifications, and designing culturally responsive teaching lessons to reduce racial disproportionate practices. Teachers need more support and training on culturally responsive teaching practices to develop their professional capacity to raise achievement levels and ultimately reduce racial disproportionality (Ahram et al., 2011). Researchers Cartledge, Garner, and Ford (2009) stated that placing students with poor academics in classes where teachers are unprepared to incorporate students' cultural backgrounds can result in negative educational outcomes, including racial disproportionality in special education programs (Artiles et al., 2010).

Research Question 2, Theme 2: Administrative leaders believe that educators' beliefs and fears about students failing contributes racial disproportionality

Teachers play a significant role in the referral of struggling students for special education eligibility. Core beliefs exposed by administrative participants in this qualitative study were their fears of students failing and their hopes that special education will "save them." Participants in this study stressed student failures are the core issue in

the referral to placement process. Participants noted that school resources were insufficient to meet the needs of some students with mental illness. The culture across all three schools supported special education as the solution for struggling students. Teachers perceived special education as the magic bullet for helping struggling students. This belief that special education is viewed as valuable is similar to findings from a study conducted by Skiba et al. (2006). In the Skiba et al. study, teachers viewed special education as the only resource for students with learning and behavior problems; however, special education administrators viewed over referral as a negative outcome for school districts. Research by Harry and Klingner (2006) suggest, “for teachers working with struggling learners, special education becomes a safety valve that teachers can pull to get additional services” (p. 2257). “Until a range of other resources that can support students with academic or social needs becomes widely available, teachers cannot be blamed for continuing to use, and perhaps overuse, one of the only reliable resources at their disposal” (Skiba et al, 2006, p. 1451). As a result, it is significant that school districts have processes and interventions and resources available to teachers to guard against misuse of special education placements (Ahram et al., 2011). Processes include strong problem solving teams, coaching teachers about culturally responsive teaching practices, and professional development on RtI. According to Ahram et al., “once district leaders began to take an active role in shaping district programs to address the needs of their struggling learners, they were able to transform from passive echoing to a more active role supporting student growth” (p. 2257).

Research Question 2 Theme 3: School administrators believe that educators' biased interpretations of school policies contribute to racial disproportionality

According to Staats et al. (2017), the term implicit bias has gained attention in both the public discourse and school setting in recent years. The term implicit bias is defined as, “the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner, activated involuntarily, without awareness of emotional control” (p. 10). In this qualitative study, participants spoke candidly about how educators' implicit biases impact racial disproportionality especially regarding the implementation of discipline policies. Administrative participants noted increased scrutiny of discipline policies, since zero tolerance practices have faded. Despite changes in policies and increased restorative justice practices, students of color are still more likely to be suspended for alcohol and drug violations, to receive harsher discipline than their peers for similar behaviors, and more likely to be placed in more restrictive special education placements than their White peers, which in turn, has impacted their academic performance. Participants reported that the stand alone policies did not contribute to racial disproportionality; however, educators' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors related to policy implementation resulted in more disparities.

There has been a significant amount of research documenting the effects on implicit bias in the education arena. A study by Wright (2015) examined whether teachers' rating of problematic behaviors were different if they were the same racial group as the student (matched) versus if they were a different race. Results suggest that Black students exhibited less externalizing behaviors when they were paired with a Black

teacher (Wright, 2015). In this study, the author concluded that improved student behaviors were the result of teachers' perceptions (Wright, 2015). Additionally, research by Staats et al. (2017) found that although Black students with disabilities were disciplined a similar amount of times as their non-disabled Black peers; however, Black students with disabilities were disciplined 40% more than White students with disabilities (Staats et al., 2017). This study further illustrates the complex relationship with race and ability levels (Staats et al., 2017). Research supports that participants' implicit biases impact racial disproportionality and calls attention to practical solutions to mitigate implicit bias in education.

The administrators in this study must recognize the significance of implicit bias for reform efforts to gain momentum at the local level. Although most of the participants acknowledged how implicit bias impacts their decision making, these understandings have not resulted in decreased disparities. "Taking action against implicit biases through training, professional development, and other awareness raising strategies can serve as a first step to ensuring equitable discipline that is both fair for all students and effective at addressing the problematic behavior" (Staats et al., 2017, p. 16). The high schools in this study would benefit from training on cultural competency, the impact of implicit bias, and data based decision making. Additionally, administrators need to cultivate an environment focused on implementing solutions to reduce bias and racial disparities. It is imperative that schools examine implicit bias blind spots and implement strategies to foster more inclusive programs to address racial disparities. The next section explores the supports that will assist educators in positively impacting students' life trajectories.

The third research question explored the supports that are available to meet the struggling academic, behavioral and social emotional needs of all students. The heart of this qualitative study is to move beyond the causes and to hear from local administrators the next steps they will implement to address the problematic and unjust practices that contribute to disproportionality. Three major themes emerged for eliminating disproportionality, which included developing a systematic plan, collaborating with multiple stakeholder groups, and increasing resources for staff to help school personnel meet the needs of all students.

Research Question 3, Theme 1: Administrative leaders believe that school districts need to develop a systematic plan led by strong leaders to reduce racial disproportionality

The last research question in this qualitative study was focused on the participants' identification of supports, resources, and next steps for eliminating the racial disparities that exist. Administrators asserted that it is critical to develop and commit to a systematic plan which is supported in the research as an important step for addressing the root causes that impact students' opportunities to learn. "High level support in schools and districts provides legitimacy; access to the necessary resources for collecting, reporting, and using data; and the authority to prioritize resources to change policies and practices after root causes of disparities are identified" (Osher et al., 2015, p. 13). All of the school districts in this study called for increased high level leadership committed to supporting racial disproportionality change. The high schools in this study would benefit from systems that support high quality instruction that produces positive student

outcomes (Swain-Bradway, Loman, & Vincent, 2014). According to the rich descriptions provided by the participants, the high level administrative support seemed to ebb and flow. Research by Hernandez et al. (2008) maintained that consistent oversight by their state monitoring office contributed to their positive findings in reducing racial disproportionality. Although schools feel overburdened today by state mandates, increased racial disproportionality compliance may help propel schools to address these racial disproportionality concerns that plague school systems if they provide resources, coaching and funding to support systems change. IDEA 2004 mandates that local agencies monitor disproportionality and hopefully this monitoring will create a feedback loop that helps reduce racial disparities (Skiba et al., 2006).

Osher et al. (2015) stated that there are strategies for reducing racial disproportionality; however, often times these strategies only address the symptoms and not the underlying causes. Osher et al. have developed a guide titled, *Addressing the root causes of disparities in school discipline*, which outlines the steps for educators to improve the learning conditions and reduce racial disparities. In their guide, they state “leadership committed to fully supporting this work is vital for both an effective process and for change to occur” (p. 13). Their three step systematic process includes identifying, analyzing the data and developing preliminary findings, exploring and generating the root causes of racial disproportionality, and lastly, developing and implementing an action plan. This guide can serve as an important resource for high schools to develop an implementable systemic plan that is strategic and sustainable.

Further support for developing a systematic plan led by strong administrative leaders aligned with current research by Bal et al. (2014). In a research study by Bal et al., educators participated in a collaborative action research study which examined patterns of disproportionality in a high school setting. The researchers used a cyclical model involving various stakeholder groups throughout the process based on the needs and interests of the Leadership Team. After the Leadership Team engaged in a deep examination of disproportionality and related practices, they were able to move forward in planning organizational change. Bal et al. concluded that adaptive solutions were necessary to develop a new understanding of racial disproportionality. As a result of iterative data analysis, the Leadership team engaged in a series of critical conversations.

Based on the emerging theory of action, the Leadership Team identified five key priorities for developing a systematic plan for addressing racial disparities: (a) improve the instructional core and provide evidence based supports through the RtI process, (b) redesign the K-12 scope and sequence to align with the Common Core, (c) integrate culturally responsive curriculum, (d) implement a kindergarten program, and (e) incorporate universal design for learning in the curriculum design and instructional delivery. (p. 11)

The leadership team in this school district developed a systematic plan for reducing disproportionality which included improving their Response to Intervention practices, developing curriculum guides aligned to standards, implementing culturally responsive curriculum, and promoting universal design for learning. Change did not occur until the team participated in a process of continuous inquiry, collaboration, and critical reflection

(Bal et al., 2014). Teachers need a range of resources at their disposal in order to support struggling students. As the research suggests, culturally competent teaching methods, Tier 1 interventions for academic and behavioral problems, and classroom management techniques need to be the highest priorities to reduce racial disparities (Bal et al., 2014; Skiba et al., 2006).

Research Question 3, Theme 2: Administrative leaders believe a committee should be formed that includes multiple stakeholder voices in order to tackle racial disparities

The administrative leaders in this qualitative study echoed the importance of including more stakeholder voices including ethnic minority teachers, community members, families and students in the racial disproportionality conversation which is supported in the research for tackling racial disparities (Ahram et al., 2011; Osher et al., 2015; Sansosti et al., 2011). Several administrators asserted that any action plan developed must include various stakeholders in the conversation about racial disproportionality. A team for addressing racial disproportionality should include students, educators, administrators, bus drivers, families, other support personnel, teaching assistants and anyone else affected by racial disproportionality (Osher et al., 2015). “It is vital to have at the table people with diverse perspectives that represent your entire school community, who should all have significant opportunities for input and decision making” (p. 15). Involving students in these committees can provide meaningful student voice regarding the impact on their learning. Along with students, families and

community members should be active participants who can bring real world experiences to the table.

The political nature of schools can mean that reform initiatives, particularly those which are locally led, are more easily overturned than those on the district or state level if it is unpopular with community members or receives varying levels of buy-in from school personnel. (Staats et al., 2017, p. 15)

Administrative leaders who facilitate courageous conversations among all stakeholders must foster a shared commitment to tackle racial disproportionality and create an environment of trust in order to facilitate effective problem solving and an equitable action plan. “With planning and thoughtful facilitation, your school district team can thoroughly and non-defensively examine how policies and practices are implemented and experienced, logically leading to how to address the root causes of disparities” (Osher et al., 2015, p. 19). The school districts in this study expressed the importance of a shared vision among all stakeholders. This view is supported by the research that for positive and systemic outcomes, there must be a common philosophy among all stakeholders impacted by racial disproportionality (George et al., 2007; Kincaid et al., 2007, cited in Sansosti et al., 2011). Significant cohesive team membership is critical to support ongoing systemic change.

Research Question 3, Theme 3: School administrators believe that additional resources (i.e., human resources and capital tied to equity) are critical to meet the needs of all students

The results of this qualitative research study align with previous research demonstrating that the success of building school wide structures rests on the future support of having additional resources for educators and students (Artiles et al., 2002; Sansosti et al., 2011). The administrators in this study identified the need for a Director of Equity to help lead this equity work, increased support from student services to help struggling students, and requested ongoing professional development steeped in equity, culturally responsive teaching practices, and interventions to help struggling students. The participants specifically called for human resources and capital tied to equity such as leadership developed to address racial disparities. Although there are not any available research studies that specifically examine the impact of hiring district leadership focused on reducing racial disparities, research by Bal et al. (2014), illustrates that district leadership fostered by critical reflection that challenged prevailing practices contributed to new understandings for reducing racial disproportionality.

Patton (2015) stresses that new ways of knowledge are needed to guide future work in reducing racial disparities. He states we need “knowledge producers who would script the disproportionality problem with an ethic of critique, justice and caring and who would offer hope of replacing special education paradigms of dominance and control with ones of liberation and emancipation” (p. 29). Hiring a director of equity may assist in employing “ a language of ethical critique, justice, and caring in their work and inject

social, political, economic, historical and ethical discourse into all that they do” (Patton, 1998, p. 30). Patton (2015) calls for a system that brings to center stage the voices of minorities. Leadership devoted to addressing racial disproportionality may be the answer to bring multiple stakeholders together to engage in courageous conversations for developing an equitable action plan. Additionally, the administrative leaders in this study occupy high level positions and impact students’ lives daily. It is critical that these administrators reflect on their role in the school setting and consider their next steps in disrupting racial disproportionality in their schools. The result may be a new story that eliminates racial disproportionality.

Additionally, the participants called for increased school psychologists to help struggling students. Research supports that high schools need additional resources for general education interventions to be successful (Castro-Villarreal et al., 2016). Having additional school psychologists would allow them to spend more time on RtI activities in the classroom, supporting teachers while reaching more students. Resources are also needed to provide training for staff on RtI and culturally responsive teaching practices which aligns with the vision of the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) (National Association of School Psychologists, 2013). NASP calls for increased school psychologist involvement in employing practices and interventions such as culturally responsive practices and interventions aligned to response to Intervention to reduce racial disproportionality (National Association of School Psychologists, 2013). School psychologists have knowledge and understanding of Response to Intervention that can be instrumental with addressing racial disparities. They can help the team review data,

develop and implement interventions, provide training and coaching on integrated supports in the general education setting, and assist with evaluating prevention programming (National Association for School Psychologists, 2013). “The potential tradeoff to committing more money for additional personnel would be an increased number of diverse students (both with and without disabilities) would receive appropriate services for their academic and behavioral challenges” (Castro-Villarreal et al., 2016, p. 18). Increased resources offer great promise for improving student outcomes, promoting equity and reducing racial disproportionality.

Recommendations and Next Steps

This research study offers seven recommendations for school teams to advance social justice for all students. Without a systematic approach for addressing teachers’ beliefs and providing job embedded equity professional development, disproportionality will continue to be a complex problem.

1. District administration must set the tone that all children can and will learn with the appropriate instruction and supports (National Association for School Psychologists, 2013).
2. District leadership builds a team with all stakeholder groups to reduce racial disproportionality (Osher et al., 2015).
3. As a team, all stakeholders review and analyze disproportionality data, develop findings, and identify disparities (Osher et al., 2015).
4. Stakeholders create an action plan which may include changing practices, policies and procedures (Osher et al., 2015).

5. District administration supports ongoing job embedded training, coaching, and resources so that all students have an opportunity to learn (Castro-Villarreal et al., 2016; Griner & Stewart, 2012; Osher et al., 2015).
6. Undergraduate programs need to focus on preparing educators to differentiate instruction, implement evidence based practices including Response to Intervention strategies as well as culturally responsive teaching practices to meet the needs of all students in the general education classroom. Graduate programs need to focus on providing continuing education on racial disparities in education, and teach the steps that educational leaders must take to minimize the overrepresentation of students of color found eligible for special education services and related services (Reschley, 2009).
7. School leaders need to provide training on culturally relevant instructional modifications and training on the mitigation of implicit bias (Gravios & Rosenfield, 2006).

Implications for Practice

The implications for this study's findings are important for secondary schools who exhibit racial disproportionality and who seek to eliminate these disparities. Federal and local educational agencies allocate financial assistance and provide professional development workshops in order to assist schools who exhibit significant disproportionality; however, this assistance is not enough. Educational opportunities for students with disabilities and students of color have been inferior for over 100 years despite federal legislation, state oversight, lobbyists' efforts, and parent groups

(Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). Racial disproportionality is prevalent across the state of Illinois and the research shows that students of color and students with disabilities are impacted negatively both academically and psychologically due to lowered classroom expectations, fewer opportunities to integrate with general education students, and poor instruction (National Association for School Psychologists, 2013). In this qualitative study, all of the nine administrators cited racial disproportionality as a complex problem within their school district; however, none of the schools had a systematic plan to tackle the problem. Two of the three high schools acknowledged that equitable practices were a priority in the past; however, it was no longer specifically mentioned in their current strategic plan. The third high school stated that racial disproportionality is rarely a topic of conversation. The participants in this study recognized that the task of eliminating racial disproportionality can only be achieved by strong administrative leaders who build an infrastructure from the ground-up involving participation from all stakeholders, and who creatively utilize resources in the school to provide training and professional development for all faculty.

According to Bal et al. (2014), “disproportionality is a runaway object that is partially shared and determined by multiple interacting social systems: schools, families, districts, and state educational agencies” (p. 329). The participants in this research study recognized that disproportionality is impacted by a number of systems and suggested reflection among local stakeholders. Additionally, collaboration and dialogue among all the systems was stated as a necessary first step including teachers, administrators, parents, students and the community in order for change to happen. Lived experiences

and perspectives that students, families, and community members bring to school can serve as a resource for administrative leaders to build more inclusive schools. Also, various stakeholder groups may cite different reasons for racial disproportionality. Involving key stakeholders, examining the disproportionality data, and engaging in courageous conversations will be the starting point for developing a plan for reducing racial disproportionality.

Another significant theme that emerged from this study that has practical implications was the significance of building systematic structures including a solid Response to Intervention (RtI) plan which is aligned to systematic equity reform. Full implementation of RtI was expected by the 2010-2011 school year in the state of Illinois (Illinois State Board of Education, 2008); yet, all three high schools in this qualitative study reported teachers were struggling to implement Tier 1 interventions and differentiate instruction almost seven years later. Apparent across all three school districts were inconsistent practices in the implementation of intervention systems for struggling students. Administrators reported that teachers often referred students of color for a special education referral due to fear of students failing and student behavioral challenges. School leaders and faculty would benefit from examining system wide data regarding how students are performing academically, behaviorally, and socially disaggregated by race and ethnicity to identify trends which aligns with Response to Intervention practices and research (Osher et al., 2015). Teachers worry the students will fail in high school without the instructional support of a special education classroom due to concerns noted in motivation, work completion, attendance, and observed behaviors.

Struggling students should be receiving interventions prior to referral, and the student's progress should be monitored weekly before considering special education eligibility. Additional interventions or new research based interventions should be added if the student continues to struggle before engaging in the eligibility process for special education. During the interviews, administrators stated that teachers often become frustrated with the student's failing grades or behavioral issues and some quickly suggest the need for special education. Ongoing training and professional development for teachers is necessary to address the learning needs in the classroom. Teachers lacked an understanding that it is their responsibility to implement Tier 1 interventions in the classroom before considering more restrictive supports outside the classroom. Since administrators are a part of the referral process, it is their obligation to provide training, resources and support for struggling teachers. If teachers are armed with more resources and strategies to help diverse learners, then more students are likely to succeed in the general education classroom. High school administrators must make it a priority to ensure general education teachers have the training, supports, and resources to provide quality instruction to all students with fidelity. Lastly, it is critical that administrators establish institutional safeguards to prevent unnecessary special education referrals, and provide teachers the support and professional development needed to meet the needs of all learners.

Addressing cultural deficit thinking must be intertwined with the implementation of Response to Intervention. "Research has demonstrated that teachers' judgements about their students' behavior, actions, and even appearance influence their judgements about

their students' ability" (Ahram et al., 2011, p. 2256). Teachers' judgements can trigger a referral for a special education case study. In this qualitative study, participants blamed students, families and their community for student failures, resulting in more referrals for special education which is similar to findings from other researchers such as Skiba et al. (2006). Implementing successful student interventions may reduce racial disproportionality; however, it does not change cultural deficit thinking. Cultural deficit thinking highlights the need for professional development specific to understanding equity, cultural differences, and unconscious bias. It is important that the teachers examine their own biases so they do not act in ways that overtly or covertly exclude students from the general education setting. More attention is needed related to how teachers develop judgements about students' ability levels and act on those judgements.

Furthermore, the administrators in this qualitative study cited that teachers lack the skills for implementing culturally responsive teaching practices that would aid them in addressing struggling students more effectively in their classrooms. One of the biggest challenges facing our country today is the widening of the achievement gap resulting in more disparities for minority students (Sobel, Gutierrez, Zion & Blanchett, 2011).

"Skillful teaching that affirms students, regardless of their academic abilities or linguistic, ethnic, religious or cultural backgrounds, is a daunting task for the teacher who is inadequately prepared for the student diversity that exists in today's schools" (p. 436).

Teacher preparation programs and school administrators must engage teachers in professional development on culturally responsive teaching practices in order to build

more inclusive schools. All students deserve to receive an education that is culturally responsive and highlights the strength of the student.

Implications for Future Research

This research study suggests opportunities for continued investigation related to eliminating racial disproportionality. A replication of this study across other high school settings in the state of Illinois with different demographics is recommended to examine if the findings are generalizable. A study similar to this one which includes more stakeholder groups involving parents, students, and teachers would be valuable for ensuring all potential interventions are explored before devising a systematic plan. This study only included the perceptions of the specific administrative leaders (i.e., dean, assistant principal and director of special education) at the three high schools. Additionally, it would be beneficial to replicate this study and include other administrators including District office leaders as well as teachers to see if the same perceptions exist as to why racial disproportionality continues to be a complex problem. Furthermore, additional findings may be drawn with the current data utilizing a case study approach that compares themes between the three school districts and within each of the school districts. Lastly, all of the participants in this study were White. Seeking to include more racially diverse administrative participants may shed light on different themes for eliminating racial disproportionality.

Also, the administrative leaders in this qualitative research study indicated there was a lack of Response to Intervention at the high school level. Special attention should be paid to studying high schools who implement a systematic RtI plan and the impact on

reducing special education referrals and student outcomes. Continued research is needed to seek feedback from high schools regarding what they needed to make RtI successful.

Furthermore, this researcher believes two of three school districts in this study have started to address the racial disparities that exist, but need assistance to build momentum to take action for improvement. Both of these high schools reported needing strong leadership to guide them, a strategic plan focused on reducing racial disproportionality, more stakeholder voices included in the development of the plan, and access to more resources to support teachers. These school districts would benefit from coaching through an action research cycle in order to tackle the next steps to address racial disproportionality systematically.

Action research is critical work that engages stakeholders in an empowering process of inquiry conducted by and for those taking action for improvement (Stringer, 2014). Action research “provides a process or context through which people can collectively clarify their problems and formulate new ways of envisioning their situations” (p. 55). As educators, action research is exciting because it is related to educator’s everyday experiences in the classroom and it has immediate effects while giving people a voice in the process. Action research engages all key stakeholders and the researcher is part of the process; yet, he/she is not seen as an expert. Stringer highlights that action research promotes relationships, communication, participation and inclusion, and these key components support this research study of examining and decreasing disproportionality at a local level. Without relationships, communication, participation

and inclusion, courageous conversations would not happen and segregation models would continue. Barton and Larson (2012) state:

Educational leaders must be bold if they are to authentically and successfully confront the situations in our schools that cause inequalities. Leaders must examine the root causes of disparities and question the fundamental assumptions of our current educational practices within which inequalities thrive. (p. 6)

These schools would benefit from participating in a collaborative process that promotes purpose and provides a means for accomplishing goals and implementing solutions that impact the lives of students, families, and educators. Without coaching and direction for the administration, it is this researcher's belief that racial disproportionality will continue to plague these high schools.

Limitations of the Study

Although this research study aimed to address the complexities of disproportionality and explored interventions that reduce and/or eliminate racial disproportionality, there are some unavoidable limitations in this study. A major limitation of the study is that all of the administrators who participated identified themselves as White; therefore, the study lacks diverse perspectives from administrators of color. It is critical to have diverse perspectives that represent the entire school community to ensure all voices who may be involved or affected by the racial disproportionality have input. Although several of the participants mentioned unconscious bias impacts racial disproportionality, the leaders may not be aware of their own prejudices which could limit the findings of this study. Diverse perspectives in any

research study are desired to assure that the responses are representative of the school community.

Another limitation of this study is the lack of diverse perspectives from other stakeholder groups besides administrative leaders. For example, only administrative leaders were chosen to participate. Involving other stakeholder groups such as teachers, parents, and students may have offered additional insights for tackling racial disparities. Engaging in meaningful conversations about racial disproportionality data may be enhanced by having many perspectives, and provide important input on how racial disproportionality affects them.

Additionally, another limitation is that conclusions cannot be drawn as to how the findings from this study may generalize to other schools in Illinois, to other schools throughout the country, or even at other schooling levels such as elementary or middle school since this study focused on high school schools in the northern suburbs of Chicago.

Lastly, this qualitative study is impacted by this researcher's, as well as, the second coder's (e.g., dissertation director) unconscious biases who helped review the data. According to Fine (1994), researchers must "work the hyphen" and acknowledge the various positions they occupy and consider how these various positions impact their qualitative study. My research interests are intertwined with my own identity as a former special education teacher and as a Director of Special Education in a high school setting. After each interview, I engaged in memo writing in order to examine my own identity, including my biases and preferences and how these implicit biases may have affected my

interactions with the participants during the interview process. I examined my thoughts, wonderings, and other insights that occurred based on participant body language, impressions, and the interview process.

Summary and Conclusion

The aim of this qualitative research study was to identify interventions and/or policies that will eliminate racial disproportionality in special education referral, eligibility and placement. In addition, the goal was to arm school administrators with more practical tools to develop systems that emphasize prevention, teaching and inclusion rather than removal and restrictive interventions associated with racial disproportionality. It is clear from this study that historical, societal and educational contexts influence how educators view students; which in turn, creates problematic classroom arrangements, and misidentification for special education that jeopardizes the life of students. The administrators in this study spoke in detail about how the current structures in schools foster racial disproportionality. The participants identified the next steps to resolve racial disproportionality which align with the action steps suggested by the United States Department of Education (2015). Although students face many challenges in the school system, the administrators in this study are invested in helping all students engage in learning by intervening effectively. The administrative leaders are ready to use their racial disproportionality data to understand the root causes of their disparities and develop an action plan; however, they identified needing more administrative guidance. Federal and state agencies, higher education institutions, and current Superintendents need to reflect on their practices and make a commitment to

develop an action plan. These leaders need to persevere through the tension, engage in courageous conversations, and empower students and families to develop a strategic and sustainable action plan. It is this researcher's hope that,

American schools are continually developing, and teachers, students, parents and all individuals have the capacity to learn. Thus, roadblocks can become opportunities, and overcoming them can bring the goal of an equitable education system, one that helps each person achieve his or her aspirations. (Reef, 2009, cited in Noltemeyer & McLoughlin, 2012, p. 19)

APPENDIX A
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Project Title: Critical Conversations with Administrative Leaders on Special Education Disproportionality: Case Studies of Suburban School Districts

Researcher: Jennifer Sterpin

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Pamela Fenning

Introduction:

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Jennifer Sterpin for a dissertation research project under the supervision of Dr. Pamela Fenning in the School of Education at Loyola University of Chicago. A total of nine administrators will participate in this study.

You are being asked to participate because you have experience as a high school administrator working with students with disabilities and work in school district who exhibits racial disproportionality in special education. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before deciding whether to participate in the study.

Purpose:

This qualitative study will explore high school administrators' beliefs about why disproportionality exists, and their views about the local practices and policies that contribute to racial disproportionality. The study aims to identify interventions and policies that impact or eliminate racial disproportionate practices in special education referral, eligibility and placement procedures within specific districts in Illinois.

Procedures:

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

1. Complete a 30-minute questionnaire on why disproportionality exists, to explore the local practices and policies that contribute to racial disproportionality, and to identify interventions and supports to reduce disproportionality.
2. Participate in a 60-80 minute interview regarding why disproportionality exists, the local practices and policies that contribute to racial disproportionality and interventions, and the supports needed to reduce disproportionality. The interview will be digitally recorded if you consent to do so. This interview will be conducted in a private office at your workplace or in a neutral location.

Risks/Benefits:

There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this research beyond those experienced in everyday life. Although there are no foreseeable benefits to you as an individual, there are potential benefits to the field of special education through this research. Gathering information from special education administrators is critical in order to better understand why disproportionality exists and which supports are needed to reduce and eventually eliminate racial disparities. Your participation may lead to more

research in the field and new understandings for designing proactive interventions to reduce disproportionality.

Compensation:

Participants will receive a \$15 gift card for their participation in the study which includes completion of the interview and the questionnaire.

Confidentiality:

The information gathered will be destroyed after the study is accepted. All audio files will be destroyed after they are digitally transcribed. All paper copies will be destroyed after two years. All interview and survey data will be coded with a participant number to protect your confidentiality. Administrator information (name, location and name of school district) will remain confidential. Your name will not be used in data analysis or named in the study. The transcriptions along with the consent forms will be stored in a locked location.

Voluntary Participation:

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you do not wish to participate in this study, you may decline to participate. Even if you decide to participate, you do not need to answer every question. You may withdraw from participation at any time without penalty. You will receive the \$15 gift card even if you do not answer all questions via the questionnaire or if you do not answer all questions during the interview. Voluntary withdraw prior to completion of all data collection activities will result in not receiving the gift card.

The school board and other school personnel will not know if you participate or decline to participate in this study.

_____ I agree for the interview to be digitally recorded.

_____ I do not agree for the interview to be digitally recorded. If you do not agree to the interview being digitally recorded, the interview will be documented via written notes taken by the researcher.

Contacts and Questions:

If you have questions about this research study, please feel free to contact Jennifer Sterpin at jsterpin@luc.edu or 847-800-7464. In addition, you may contact the faculty sponsor, Dr. Pamela Fenning at pfennin@luc.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Loyola University Office of Research Services at (773) 508-2689.

Statement of Consent:

Your signature below indicates that you have read the aforementioned information, have had an opportunity to ask questions, and agree to participate in this research study. You will be provided a copy of this consent form to keep for your records.

Participant's Signature Date

Researcher's Signature Date

APPENDIX B
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Dissertation Study: Critical Conversations with Administrative Leaders on Special Education Disproportionality: Case Studies of Suburban School Districts

Researcher and Interviewer: Jennifer Sterpin

Interviewee Number: _____
 Pseudonym: _____ Interviewee Position _____
 Gender: _____
 Race _____
 Date: _____ Time: _____ Location: _____

Data Collection

Participant Introduction to Study:

Participants will be introduced to the study and asked to participate in person. The participants will be informed that the study is for a dissertation study conducted by Jennifer Sterpin under the supervision of Dr. Pamela Fenning in the School of Education at Loyola University of Chicago.

They will be informed that the study is a qualitative study to explore high school administrators' beliefs about why disproportionality exists, to identify the local practices and policies that contribute to racial disproportionality, and to identify interventions and supports that influence or eliminate racial disproportionate practices in special education in the high school setting in the Midwestern state of Illinois.

They will be affirmed that their participation is confidential. All interview and survey data will be coded with a participant number to protect their confidentiality. Administrator information (name, location and name of school district) will remain confidential. The study consists of the participant completing a questionnaire and participating in an interview and will be in a convenient location for approximately 120 minutes. Participants will be asked to interview in a comfortable space for them, which may be their office or a neutral location.

Questions will be asked in order to ensure that they flow in a manner that is appropriate and will gradually increase in depth. Question specificity and depth will gradually increase through the sequence of questions.

PROTOCOL QUESTIONS

Introduction

1. What is the name of your position at your high school?
2. What is your role in the school district?
3. What are your roles and responsibilities as a [Director of Special Education, Assistant Principal or Dean]?
4. Describe your student and staff populations (e.g. demographics).

Research Question 1: Why does racial disproportionality exist in your high school district?

5. How is racial disproportionality defined in your district?
6. What practices, if any, exist in your district for examining disproportionality data?
7. According to your ISBE special education profile, your district has a high risk ratio for certain racial groups identified for special education and/or a high risk ratio for percent of time in special education compared to their peers by race. (show special education profile). From your perspective, what factors contribute to racial disproportionality in your high school district?

Research Question 2: What beliefs and practices contribute to racial disproportionality in your district?

8. What staff beliefs contribute to racial disproportionality in your district? (prompt for administrator, teachers, school psychologists and IEP team members)
9. What school practices and procedures contribute to racial disproportionality in your district (e.g. general education and curriculum, tier 1/general education and tier 2 supports, MTSS/RtI, special education referral procedures, eligibility determination, placement decisions and review of placement, determination on LRE)?
10. In what ways do policies in the building influence special education referral and disproportionality? (discipline policies, dropping courses, attendance policies)
11. How are data utilized throughout the referral, eligibility and placement process and review of response to interventions and supports (e.g., decision rules for MTSS continuum)?
12. What types of culturally appropriate assessments are used when determining eligibility?
13. What beliefs contribute to increased restrictiveness of placements?

Research Question #3: What supports are available to meet the struggling academic, behavioral and social emotional needs of students?

14. Describe your systems of support for students with academic, behavioral and social emotional challenges.
15. What opportunities are available for faculty members to collaborate (e.g. coaching, collaboration, resources and consultation/technical assistance)?
16. For new teachers or staff, what types of mentoring opportunities are available?
17. What types of professional development have been offered during the last four years (e.g., district goals and school improvement)?
18. What steps or practices do you think your school district needs to address to impact change for reducing racial disparities if they exist?
19. What supports do you wish you had to help reduce racial disproportionality?

APPENDIX C

EMAIL TO PARTICIPATE IN THE RESEARCH STUDY

Dear

I am contacting you to see if you would consider participating in my research study. As a doctoral student majoring in School Administration and Supervision at the Loyola University, Chicago, I am conducting a research study titled *Critical Conversations with Administrative Leaders on Special Education Disproportionality: Case Studies from Suburban School Districts*. You are being asked to participate because you have experience as a high school administrator working with students with disabilities and work in school district who exhibits racial disproportionality in special education. The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore high school administrators beliefs about why disproportionality exists, to identify the local practices and policies that contribute to racial disproportionality and to identify interventions and supports that impact or eliminate racial disproportionate practices in special education referral, eligibility and placement procedures within their district if it exists in the high school setting in the Midwestern state of Illinois.

Your participation in the confidential and the information gleaned will not be shared with your school district. In the study, neither you or the school district would be personally identified. Also, the data will be analyzed using a participant number assigned to you in order to ensure confidentiality. If you agree to participate in this study, you would be asked to complete a questionnaire and participate in an interview about your experiences with disproportionality and the needed the supports to address disproportionality for a total of approximately 90-120 minutes. The interview will take place in a comfortable space, which may be your office or a neutral location. Once participation is completed, you will receive a \$15 honorarium gift card.

Please notify me via email or telephone if you agree to meet to review the consent process as well as which dates and time work for you. During the meeting, I will explain the consent procedures, confidentiality procedures, ask you to complete the questionnaire, and conduct the 60-80 minute interview.

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

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Please remember that participation in this study is voluntary. If you do not wish to participate in this study, you do not have to participate. Even if you decide to participate, you do not need to answer every question. You may withdraw from participation at any time without penalty. Thank you again for your participation and please do not hesitate to contact me with questions. I can be reached at jsterpin@luc.edu or 847-800-7464. In addition, you may contact the faculty sponsor, Dr. Pamela Fenning at pfennin@luc.edu.

Sincerely,

Ms. Jenny Sterpin
Researcher

APPENDIX D
INTERVIEW NOTES

Interview Date	
Name of the Researcher	
Interviewee ID Number	
Gender	<input type="checkbox"/> Male <input type="checkbox"/> Female
Type of School Administrator	<input type="checkbox"/> Director of Special Education <input type="checkbox"/> Assistant Principal <input type="checkbox"/> Assistant Director of Special Education <input type="checkbox"/> Department Chair of Special Education <input type="checkbox"/> District level Special Education Administrator <input type="checkbox"/> Dean <input type="checkbox"/> Other_____
Race	<input type="checkbox"/> Black or African American <input type="checkbox"/> White <input type="checkbox"/> Hispanic or Latino <input type="checkbox"/> American Indian or Alaskan Native <input type="checkbox"/> Asian <input type="checkbox"/> Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander <input type="checkbox"/> Two or more Races
Notes from the Questions	
Question 1	
Question 2	
Question 3	
Question 4	
Question 5	
Question 6	
Question 7	
Question 8	
Question 9	

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

APPENDIX E
DATA COLLECTION REFLECTION FORM

Researcher Name:

Interviewee ID:

Date:

Methodological Reflections:

1. How would you describe the affective tone of the meeting?
2. Do you think the participant was genuine in their responses or did you think the participant provided socially desirable responses? If so, in what ways? What gave you that impression?
3. Did my own biases influence the participants' responses? If so, in what ways? What were my own biases that might have influenced the participant?
4. Was this interview representative of the other interviews? Why or why not?
5. Overall, how would you describe the quality of the data collection?
6. Based on the data collection, what ideas do you have for future data collection (e.g., other people to interview, timeframes for interviews, probing questions to ask, etc.)?

Analytic Reflections:

1. What emerging ideas, themes, or working hypotheses relevant to my research questions were evident in the data? What evidence supports these working hypotheses?
2. In what ways does my racial and cultural background influence how I experience the world and how I evaluate and interpret my participants' experiences? How do I know? (Milner, 2007)
3. How do I balance this researcher's interests with the participant's ideas which may be divergent from this researcher? How do I know? (Milner, 2007)

APPENDIX F
DISPROPORTIONALITY QUESTIONNAIRE

Directions: This questionnaire was adapted from Daniel Losen and the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (2008). Per the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction disclaimer, the questionnaire may be reprinted in whole or part with credit to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. Below are a list of statements designed to learn more about racial disproportionality in your school district. For each question, there a scaled response for you to check and a place for you to write a brief response in the space provided.

1. Racial disproportionality exists in my school.

- Almost Always
- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Almost Never
- Not applicable
- Other:

1a. Racial disproportionality exists in my school. Please write 1-4 sentences explaining your scaled response.

2. Administrators have been trained to understand and use data on special education referral, identification and placement.

- Almost Always
- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Almost Never
- Not applicable
- Other:

2a. Administrators have been trained to understand and use data on special education referral, identification and placement. Please write 1-4 sentences explaining your scaled response.

3. All administrators and staff understand district procedures and requirements regarding referral, evaluation, identification, placement, discipline, and the student's right to be educated in the least restrictive environment.

- Almost Always
- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Almost Never
- Not applicable
- Other:

3a. All administrators and staff understand district procedures and requirements regarding referral, evaluation, identification, placement, discipline, and the student's right to be educated in the least restrictive environment. Please write 1-4 sentences explaining your scaled response.

4. Special education and regular education are allotted time for collaboration on a routine basis.

- Almost Always
- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Almost Never
- Not applicable
- Other:

4a. Special education and regular education are allotted time for collaboration on a routine basis. Please write 1-4 sentences explaining your scaled response.

5. Educational environmental data is reviewed jointly by both regular and special education staff at the district and school levels.

- Almost Always
- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Almost Never
- Not applicable
- Other:

5a. Educational environmental data is reviewed jointly by both regular and special education staff at the district and school levels. Please write 1-4 sentences explaining your scaled response.

6. Regular and special educators regularly meet to discuss issues of racial disproportionality in regular and special education, pre-referral intervention strategy and efficacy, and/or early intervening services aimed at reducing racial disproportionality.

- Almost Always
- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Almost Never
- Not applicable
- Other:

6a. Regular and special educators regularly meet to discuss issues of racial disproportionality in regular and special education, pre-referral intervention strategy and efficacy, and/or early intervening services aimed at reducing racial disproportionality. Please write 1-4 sentences explaining your scaled response.

7. Administrators and staff members have been trained on how to foster more effective inclusion.

- Almost Always
- Frequently
- Sometimes

- Almost Never
- Not applicable
- Other:

7a. Administrators and staff members have been trained on how to foster more effective inclusion. Please write 1-4 sentences explaining your scaled response.

8. Administrators and staff members have been trained in racial bias in instruction and assessment.

- Almost Always
- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Almost Never
- Not applicable
- Other:

8a. Administrators and staff members have been trained in racial bias in instruction and assessment. Please write 1-4 sentences explaining your scaled response.

9. Administrators and staff members have high levels of training, experience, and education with regard to working with diverse learners.

- Almost Always
- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Almost Never
- Not applicable
- Other:

9a. Administrators and staff members have high levels of training, experience, and education with regard to working with diverse learners. Please write 1-4 sentences explaining your scaled response.

10. There are effective supports for inexperienced and struggling teachers.

- Almost Always
- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Almost Never
- Not applicable
- Other:

10a. There are effective supports for inexperienced and struggling teachers. Please write 1-4 sentences explaining your scaled response.

11. All regular and special education teachers have been trained to effectively participate in prereferral interventions and Response to Intervention (RtI).

- Almost Always
- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Almost Never
- Not applicable
- Other:

11a. All regular and special education teachers have been trained to effectively participate in prereferral interventions and Response to Intervention (RtI). Please write 1-4 sentences explaining your scaled response.

12. School leaders use data in a consistent manner to understand and identify issues, discuss remedies with staff, and evaluate interventions.

- Almost Always
- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Almost Never
- Not applicable
- Other:

12a. School leaders use data in a consistent manner to understand and identify issues, discuss remedies with staff, and evaluate interventions. Please write 1-4 sentences explaining your scaled response.

13. Special education data is collected on racial disparities and other factors in all of the required categories and restrictiveness of interventions.

- Almost Always
- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Almost Never
- Not applicable
- Other:

13a. Special education data is collected on racial disparities and other factors in all of the required categories and restrictiveness of interventions. Please write 1-4 sentences explaining your scaled response.

14. School administrators and teachers are heard to make disparaging, or negative remarks about culturally diverse and/or economically disadvantaged people.

- Almost Always
- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Almost Never
- Not applicable

- Other:

14a. School administrators and teachers are heard to make disparaging, or negative remarks about culturally diverse and/or economically disadvantaged people. Please write 1-4 sentences explaining your scaled response.

15. Parents have expressed that they believe that some staff members in the district have racial bias.

- Almost Always
- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Almost Never
- Not applicable
- Other:

15a. Parents have expressed that they believe that some staff members in the district have racial bias. Please write 1-4 sentences explaining your scaled response.

16. Administrators and staff in the district are reluctant to discuss the possibility that unconscious bias may be the contributing factor for overrepresentation.

- Almost Always
- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Almost Never
- Not applicable
- Other:

16a. Administrators and staff in the district are reluctant to discuss the possibility that unconscious bias may be the contributing factor for overrepresentation. Please write 1-4 sentences explaining your scaled response.

17. School Psychologists have ample time to conduct culturally responsive evaluations.

- Almost Always
- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Almost Never
- Not applicable
- Other:

17a. School Psychologists have ample time to conduct culturally responsive evaluations. Please write 1-4 sentences explaining your scaled response.

18. Teachers have a system of support in place for when they feel they are struggling to meet the needs of students with disabilities.

- Almost Always

- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Almost Never
- Not applicable
- Other:

18a. Teachers have a system of support in place for when they feel they are struggling to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Please write 1-4 sentences explaining your scaled response.

19. Members of the IEP team that conduct evaluations are knowledgeable about cultural differences and culturally appropriate assessments.

- Almost Always
- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Almost Never
- Not applicable
- Other:

19a. Members of the IEP team that conduct evaluations are knowledgeable about cultural differences and culturally appropriate assessments. Please write 1-4 sentences explaining your scaled response.

20. A student's eligibility could change after an IEP team considers possible cultural bias, or after adding a culturally sensitive assessment.

- Almost Always
- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Almost Never
- Not applicable
- Other:

20a. A student's eligibility could change after an IEP team considers possible cultural bias, or after adding a culturally sensitive assessment. Please write 1-4 sentences explaining your scaled response.

21. Racially disproportionate numbers of students are being identified for possible special education eligibility in more than one category.

- Almost Always
- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Almost Never
- Not applicable
- Other:

21a. Racially disproportionate numbers of students are being identified for possible special education eligibility in more than one category. Please write 1-4 sentences explaining your scaled response.

22. The eligibility rate for students referred for an evaluation is the same rate for the racial, ethnic, and gender groups in the school building or district.

- Almost Always
- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Almost Never
- Not applicable
- Other:

22a. The eligibility rate for students referred for an evaluation is the same rate for the racial, ethnic, and gender groups in the school building or district. Please write 1-4 sentences explaining your scaled response.

23. Certain disability labels seem to always yield the same level of removal from the general education environment.

- Almost Always
- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Almost Never
- Not applicable
- Other:

23a. Certain disability labels seem to always yield the same level of removal from the general education environment. Please write 1-4 sentences explaining your scaled response.

24. Certain racial or ethnic groups are less likely to be in an inclusive setting regardless of disability category.

- Almost Always
- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Almost Never
- Not applicable
- Other:

24a. Certain racial or ethnic groups are less likely to be in an inclusive setting regardless of disability category. Please write 1-4 sentences explaining your scaled response.

25. Every year there is a serious reconsideration for every placement in a disability category to be sure that each student is educated in the least restrictive environment.

- Almost Always

- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Almost Never
- Not applicable
- Other:

25a. Every year there is a serious reconsideration for every placement in a disability category to be sure that each student is educated in the least restrictive environment. Please write 1-4 sentences explaining your scaled response.

26. Prereferral interventions are rigorously designed to help the teacher and the school meet the educational needs of the student.

- Almost Always
- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Almost Never
- Not applicable
- Other:

26a. Prereferral interventions are rigorously designed to help the teacher and the school meet the educational needs of the student. Please write 1-4 sentences explaining your scaled response.

27. Students with apparent, but mild, behavioral issues receive the supports or services they need from school counselors prior to the referral for evaluation.

- Almost Always
- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Almost Never
- Not applicable
- Other:

27a. Students with apparent, but mild, behavioral issues receive the supports or services they need from school counselors prior to the referral for evaluation. Please write 1-4 sentences explaining your scaled response.

28. Students with academic issues get consideration for both special education support and ELL support.

- Almost Always
- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Almost Never
- Not applicable
- Other:

28a. Students with academic issues get consideration for both special education support and ELL support. Please write 1-4 sentences explaining your scaled response.

29. The district has a process in place to assist teachers who are resistant to inclusion of students with disabilities in the regular education classroom.

- Almost Always
- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Almost Never
- Not applicable
- Other:

29a. The district has a process in place to assist teachers who are resistant to inclusion of students with disabilities in the regular education classroom. Please write 1-4 sentences explaining your scaled response.

30. Issues regarding the cultural responsiveness of the curriculum and instruction are considered at the pre-referral intervention stage.

- Almost Always
- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Almost Never
- Not applicable
- Other:

30a. Issues regarding the cultural responsiveness of the curriculum and instruction are considered at the pre-referral intervention stage. Please write 1-4 sentences explaining your scaled response.

31. There are supports in place to identify and meet the needs of the students who have experienced trauma.

- Almost Always
- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Almost Never
- Not applicable
- Other:

31a. There are supports in place to identify and meet the needs of the students who have experienced trauma. Please write 1-4 sentences explaining your scaled response.

32. Schools have access to data collection methods and analysis tools.

- Almost Always
- Frequently

- Sometimes
- Almost Never
- Not applicable
- Other:

32a. Schools have access to data collection methods and analysis tools. Please write 1-4 sentences explaining your scaled response.

33. Data is collected, analyzed, and discussed soon after it is collected.

- Almost Always
- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Almost Never
- Not applicable
- Other:

33a. Data is collected, analyzed, and discussed soon after it is collected. Please write 1-4 sentences explaining your scaled response.

34. Data collected is used and discussed regularly by general and special educators.

- Almost Always
- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Almost Never
- Not applicable
- Other:

34a. Data collected is used and discussed regularly by general and special educators.

Please write 1-4 sentences explaining your scaled response.

APPENDIX G
QUESTIONNAIRE DATA

Question	Relates to Research Question #	Almost Always	Frequently	Sometimes	Almost Never	Not Applicable	No response
Racial disproportionality exists in my school.	1	n=2; 22.22%	n=3; 33.33%	n=4; 44.44%			
Administrators have been trained to understand and use data on special education referral, identification and placement.	1		n=2; 22.22%	n=6; 66.67%	n=1; 11.11%		
All administrators and staff understand district procedures and requirements regarding referral, evaluation, identification, placement, discipline, and the student's right to be educated in the least restrictive environment.	2	n=2; 22.22%	n=4; 44.44%	n=3; 33.33%			
Special education and regular education are allotted time for collaboration on a routine basis.	3	n=2; 22.22%	n=2; 22.22%	n=3; 22.22%	n=2; 22.22%		
Educational environmental data is reviewed jointly by both regular and special education staff at the district and school levels.	1	n=1; 11.11%	n=3; 33.33%	n=4; 44.44%		n=1; 11.11%	
Regular and special educators regularly meet to discuss issues of racial disproportionality in regular and special education, pre-referral intervention strategy and efficacy, and/or early intervening services aimed at reducing racial disproportionality.	3		n=1; 11.11%	n=6; 66.67%	n=2; 22.22%		
Administrators and staff	3		n=5;	n=2;	n=2;		

members have been trained on how to foster more effective inclusion.			55.56%	22.22%	22.22%		
Administrators and staff members have been trained in racial bias in instruction and assessment.	3	n=1; 11.11%	n=2; 22.22%	n=4; 44.44%	n=2; 22.22%		
Administrators and staff members have high levels of training and experience and education with regard to working with diverse learners.	3	n=1, 11.11%	n=5; 55.56%	n=3; 33.33%			
There are effective supports for inexperienced and struggling teachers.	3	n=6; 66.67%		n=3; 33.33%			
All regular and special education teachers have been trained to effectively participate in prereferral interventions and Response to Intervention (RTI).	3		n=4; 44.44%	n=4; 44.44%	n=1; 11.11%		
School leaders use data in a consistent manner to understand and identify issues, discuss remedies with staff and evaluate interventions.	1	n=2; 22.22%	n=4; 44.44%	n=3; 33.33%			
Special education data is collected on racial disparities and other factors in all of the required categories and restrictiveness of interventions.	2	n=2; 22.22%	n=4; 44.44%	n=1; 11.11%	n=1; 11.11%		n=1; 11.11%
School administrators and teachers are heard to make disparaging, or negative remarks about culturally diverse and/or economically disadvantaged people.	2			n=3; 33.33%	n=5; 55.56%	n=1; 11.11%	

Parents have expressed that they believe that some staff members in the district have racial bias.	2		n=1; 11.11%	n=5; 55.56%	n=2; 22.22%	n=1; 11.11%	
Administrators and staff in the district are reluctant to discuss the possibility that unconscious bias may be the contributing factor for overrepresentation.	2	n=1; 11.11%	n=1; 11.11%	n=3; 33.33%	n=3; 33.33%		n=1; 11.11%
School Psychologists have ample time to conduct culturally responsive evaluations.	2	n=3; 33.33%		n=4; 44.44%	n=1; 11.11%		n=1; 11.11%
Teachers have a system of support in place for when they feel they are struggling to meet the needs of students with disabilities.	3	n=6; 66.67%	n=1; 11.11%	n=2; 22.22%			
Members of the IEP team that conduct evaluations are knowledgeable about cultural differences and culturally appropriate assessments.	2	n=5; 55.56%	n=2; 22.22%	n=1; 11.11%		n=1; 11.11%	
A student's eligibility could change after an IEP team considers possible cultural bias, or after adding a culturally sensitive assessment.	3	n=2; 22.22%		n=1; 11.11%	n=4; 44.44%	n=2; 22.22%	
Racially disproportionate numbers of students are being identified for possible special education eligibility in more than one category.	2		n=4; 44.44%	n=2; 22.22%	n=2; 22.22%	n=1; 11.11%	
The eligibility rate for students referred for an evaluation is the same rate for the racial, ethnic, and gender groups in the school building or district.	2		n=6; 66.67%	n=2; 22.22%	n=1; 11.11%		

Certain disability labels seem to always yield the same level of removal from the general education environment.	2		n=3; 33.33%	n=2; 22.22%	n=1; 11.11%	n=3; 33.33%	
Certain racial or ethnic groups are less likely to be in an inclusive setting regardless of disability category.	2			n=5; 55.56%	n=1; 11.11%	n=3; 33.33%	
Every year there is a serious reconsideration for every placement in a disability category to be sure that each student is educated in the least restrictive environment.	2	n=4; 44.44%	n=2; 22.22%		n=1; 11.11%	n=2; 22.22%	
Pre-referral interventions are rigorously designed to help the teacher and the school meet the educational needs of the student.	3	n=1; 11.11%	n=6; 66.67%	n=1; 11.11%		n=1; 11.11%	
Students with apparent, but mild, behavioral issues receive the supports or services they need from school counselors prior to the referral for evaluation.	3	n=5; 55.56%	n=2; 22.22%	n=1; 11.11%	n=1; 11.11%		
Students with academic issues get consideration for both special education support and ELL support.	3	n=4; 44.44%	n=4; 44.44%		n=1; 11.11%		
The district has a process in place to assist teachers who are resistant to inclusion of students with disabilities in the regular education classroom.	3	n=1; 11.11%	n=3; 33.33%	n=2; 22.22%	n=1; 11.11%	n=1; 11.11%	n=1; 11.11%
Issues regarding the cultural responsiveness of the curriculum and instruction are considered at the pre-referral intervention stage.	3	n=2; 22.22%		n=2; 22.22%	n=3; 33.33%	n=2; 22.22%	

There are supports in place to identify and meet the needs of students who have experienced trauma.	3	n=4; 44.44%	n=3; 33.33%	n=2; 22.22%			
Schools have access to data collection methods and analysis tools.	1	n=3 33.33%	n=4; 44.44%			n=2; 22.22%	
Data is collected, analyzed, and discussed soon after it is collected.	1	n=2; 22.22%	n=6; 66.67%		n=1; 11.11%		
Data collected is used and discussed regularly by general and special educators.	1	n=; 1; 11.11%	n=3; 33.33%	n=3; 33.33%	n=1; 11.11%	n=1; 11.11%	

Figure 1: Race and Ethnicity Categories and Definitions

Race/Ethnicity Categories	Definitions
White	A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa.
Hispanic or Latino	A person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race.
Black or African American	A person having origins in any of the black racial groups of Africa.
Asian	A person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam.
American Indian or Alaskan Native	A person having origins in any of the original peoples of North and South America, including Central America, and who maintains tribal affiliation or community attachment.
Two or more races	A person having origins in more than one race.
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, or other Pacific Islands.

Figure 2: 13 Disability Categories Under IDEA Special Education Guide (2016)
<http://www.specialeducationguide.com/disability-profiles/deafness/>

Disability Categories	Definitions
Autism	Autism, as defined by Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), refers to “a developmental disability significantly affecting verbal and nonverbal communication and social interaction, generally evident before age three that adversely affects a child’s educational performance.”
Deafness	The official definition of deafness from the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is “a hearing impairment that is so severe that the child is impaired in processing linguistic information through hearing, with or without amplification.”
Deaf-Blindness	Deaf-blindness refers to a child with both hearing and visual disabilities. The Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) officially defines the term as “concomitant [simultaneous] hearing and visual impairments, the combination of which causes such severe communication and other developmental and educational needs that they cannot be accommodated in special education programs solely for children with deafness or children with blindness.”
Emotional Disturbance	The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act’s (IDEA) definition reads: “A condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a child’s educational performance:

	<p>(A) An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors.”</p> <p>(B) An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers.</p> <p>(C) Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances.</p> <p>(D) A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression.</p> <p>(E) A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems.</p> <p>The term includes schizophrenia. The term does not apply to children who are socially maladjusted, unless it is determined that they have an emotional disturbance.</p>
Hearing Impairment	<p>The definition of a hearing impairment by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is “an impairment in hearing, whether permanent or fluctuating, that adversely affects a child’s educational performance but is not included under the definition of ‘deafness.’”</p>
Intellectual Disability	<p>Intellectual disability, formerly labeled “mental retardation,” is defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) as “significantly sub average general intellectual functioning, existing concurrently [at the same time] with deficits in adaptive behavior and manifested during the developmental period, that adversely affects a child’s educational performance.”</p>
Multiple Disabilities	<p>According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act’s (IDEA), multiple disabilities refers to “concomitant [simultaneous] impairments</p>

	(such as intellectual disability-blindness, intellectual disability-orthopedic impairment, etc.), the combination of which causes such severe educational needs that they cannot be accommodated in a special education program solely for one of the impairments.”
Orthopedic Impairment	An orthopedic impairment is defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) as “a severe orthopedic impairment that adversely affects a child’s educational performance.”
Other Health Impairment	The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) names several such disorders in OHI’s official definition: “having limited strength, vitality, or alertness, including a heightened alertness to environmental stimuli, that results in limited alertness with respect to the educational environment, that— (a) is due to chronic or acute health problems such as asthma, attention deficit disorder or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, diabetes, epilepsy, a heart condition, hemophilia, lead poisoning, leukemia, nephritis [a kidney disorder], rheumatic fever, sickle cell anemia, and Tourette syndrome; and (b) adversely affects a child’s educational performance.”
Specific Learning Disability (SLD)	The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) defines a specific learning disability as “a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations.”

Speech or Language Impairment	The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) officially defines speech and language impairments as “a communication disorder such as stuttering, impaired articulation, a language impairment, or a voice impairment that adversely affects a child’s educational performance.”
Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)	The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) defines TBI as “an acquired injury to the brain caused by an external physical force, resulting in total or partial functional disability or psychosocial impairment, or both, that adversely affects a child’s educational performance.” The definition continues to specify, “Traumatic brain injury applies to open or closed head injuries resulting in impairments in one or more areas, such as cognition; language; memory; attention; reasoning; abstract thinking; judgment; problem-solving; sensory, perceptual, and motor abilities; psychosocial behavior; physical functions; information processing; and speech.”
Visual Impairment	The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) officially defines the category as “an impairment in vision that, even with correction, adversely affects a child’s educational performance. The term includes both partial sight and blindness.”

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VITA

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