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Equal But Separate: The Disproportionate Representation of African American Students in Special Education

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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African American students are 4 times more likely to be placed in special education than are their European American peers. The purpose of the study was to determine whether the application of professional development (PD) would change teachers' attitudes toward African American students who were achieving below grade level. Teachers in one school district received PD; the teachers in a separate school district did not receive PD. Bandura's social learning theory and Kunjufu's Afrocentric curriculum served as the theoretical framework. A preexperimental design and a static group comparison were used. The sample comprised 83 teachers, with 52 (63%) from the school district that received PD and 31 (37%) from the other school district. An amended version of the 21-item Teacher Attitude Survey, which measures teachers' attitudes toward low-achieving students, PD, and special education, was given to both groups after the treatment was applied to the first school district. Survey results were used to test 4 hypotheses: (a) There were no differences in teachers' attitudes toward achievement by district, (b) the amount of training on cultural sensitivity did not relate to teachers' attitudes toward achievement, (c) there were no differences in the average number of students referred to special education for each teacher by district, and (d) the amount of training on cultural sensitivity did not relate to the number of students referred to special education. Spearman's rho, *t* tests, and Mann-Whitney U test were applied. All but Null Hypothesis 3 failed to be rejected. Implications for positive social change begin with educating teachers about the effect of attitudes on the academic futures of African American students. Engagement in PD will begin the work of ensuring equity for all students in public education in the United States.

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Dedication

This research is dedicated to all the marginalized students in our public school system. May you always know that there are more educators championing for your greatness than those who have lost their passion for teaching. Stay encouraged: We will hold a light for you until you find your way out of the darkness. Everything you need to succeed is already inside of you!

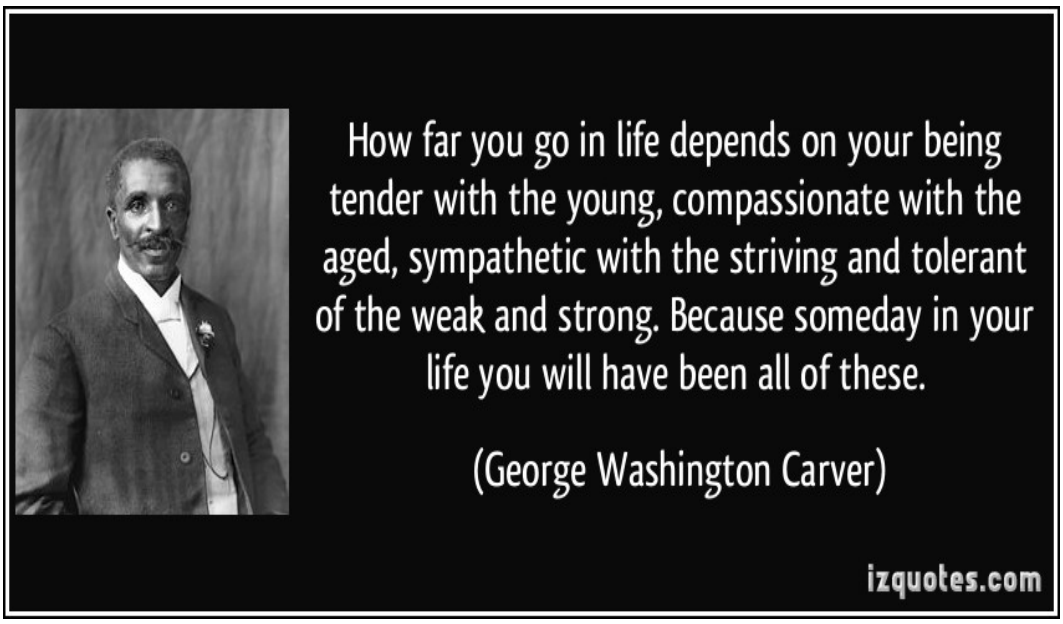

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Section 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

For more than 3 decades, researchers have disaggregated data to reveal more referral rates and placement into special education for African American students, particularly in comparison to their European American peers. The Harvard Civil Rights Project (CRP, 2002) reported that "African American students are four times more likely to be placed in special education relative to their Caucasian peers" (p. 2). This trend has plagued legislators, educators, and parents alike in not ensuring that all students receive educational parity. In the survey, the initial term used was Caucasian; however, for the purposes of this study, the terms *Caucasian* and *European American* were used where appropriate and were maintained in this context throughout the study.

Hosp and Reschly (2003) investigated the reason for disproportionate representation being problematic. They focused on examining the macroproblem of special education through a microlens and reported:

> Although this number may not appear extraordinary in isolation, when applied to an aggregation of 1 million students (approximately 1 out of every 50 U.S. students), 160,000 more African-American students than Caucasian students are expected to be placed in special education programs. (p. 70)

The focus of this study was to determine the possible causes of the disproportionate number of African American students in special education and whether professional development (PD) for teachers on cultural sensitivity and special education would decrease the over- or underrepresentation of minority students in special education

by measuring teachers' attitudes toward students achieving below grade level. Salend and Duhaney (2005) acknowledged that "a critical challenge facing educators and school districts is the disproportionate representation of students of color in special education" (p. 219). Typically, African American and Hispanic American students are overrepresented in special education, and Asian American students are underrepresented. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1997) specified that this disproportion needs to be addressed by state and local districts (as cited in Reschly, 2005).

History and personal experiences often shape how individuals perceive the world. The field of education is not as diverse as the student populations served; therefore, serving clientele (i.e., students) whose experiences are different often gives way to misunderstandings and premature judgments. Receiving PD on these intangibles might change the attitudes of teachers toward African American students who are not achieving at grade level. As stated by the CRP in Losen and Orfield (2002):

> The process of identification and placement is rife with subjectivity: Qualitative research indicates that subjective decisions creep into all elements of the evaluation process, including whom to test, what test to use, when to use alternative tests, and how to interpret the results. (p. 2)

Consideration of cultural differences, poverty, and student achievement should be noted by the referring teachers and administrators during the identification process. Hosp and Reschly (2003) reported that 90% of educators are European American, with 66% being female. They also noted, "The most commonly cited factor, however, is cultural

differences" (p. 68). In a different study of special education disparity, Oswald, Couthinho, Best, and Singh (1999) stated, "Minority children with disabilities who live in urban and high-poverty environments are believed to be at particularly high risk for educational failure and poor outcomes because of inappropriate identification, placement, and services" (p. 194). With so many data available on disproportion, educators should review their initial practices when referring students to special education.

Since the desegregation of public education, overrepresentation of African American students in special education has been a problem in the U.S. public school system. The *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) Supreme Court ruling (as cited in K. Alexander & Alexander, 2005) was designed to end cultural differences in educating American youth, yet unequal propensities remain. The controversy regarding disproportionate numbers of African American students in special education has roots in the negative history of race relations in the United States. Consequently, 6 years after the Supreme Court's ruling to desegregate public schools, PL 94-142, the Education of All Handicapped Children (EAHC) Act, was passed, and it arguably became one way to keep African American children, who were misunderstood by predominantly female European American teachers, isolated; the law became a sophisticated form of de facto segregation (Porter, 1997).

According to West (2001):

> Today, 86 percent of white [*sic*] suburban Americans live in neighborhoods that are less than 1 percent black [*sic*], meaning that the prospects for the country depend largely on how its cities fare in the hands of a suburban electorate. There

> is no escape from our interracial interdependence, yet enforced racial hierarchy dooms us as a nation to collective paranoia and hysteria—the unmaking of any democratic order. (p. 8)

With the highest percentage of teachers being female Caucasians, it is necessary for teachers to understand interracial interdependence and cultural sensitivity when teaching in urban districts. Coutinho and Nagle (2003) studied gender disproportion in special education and found that male students had higher referral rates than female students did. Their results suggested that teacher bias could have played a role in the referral process. Although I did not investigate gender disproportion, in past studies of special education, not directly related to race, teacher bias was a theme related to the premature placement of African American students in special education. The impact of students' low achievement, that is, performance below grade level, should be understood and felt by their classroom teachers. Hale (2001) stated, "The most reliable path, in my opinion, is to center school reform on the school and, more specifically, on the relationship between teacher and student—the basic building block of education" (p. 9). Much research has been published on disproportion in special education and on low student academic achievement, but few researchers have concentrated on the student-teacher relationship as the nucleus to increasing achievement.

This notion of accountability and academic learning being intimately linked to teacher expectations traditionally had not received congressional backing until former President George W. Bush and his administration embarked upon an innovative attempt to close the achievement gap and establish equity for all students. With enactment of the

No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), President Bush made a policy modification that courts, state legislatures, parent advocacy groups and the U.S. Congress had endeavored for decades to rectify through the passage of the EAHC and the IDEA.

Conventionally, IDEA was to guarantee that students with disabilities would receive a free and appropriate public education (FAPE). Jourard (1971), a psychologist, discussed in great detail his disdain of the traditional training approach of the United States toward educating its youth, noting that "we have not had education in this nation. We have had institutions which indoctrinate an ideology, a way to experience and a way to behave" (p. 113). Although 3 decades have passed since Jourard's writings, his concern for education remains relevant, particularly in regard to the training of teachers. Marshall and Oliva (2006) stated:

> Schools, according to Giroux's perspective, are sites where the intellectual activity taking place in them is inextricably linked to broader social and cultural concerns. For example, curriculum content, special education, and other class placement based on race, class, gender, and disability may reflect society's discrimination perceptions and practices. (p. 21)

Their book on social injustice likened schools as microcosms reflecting many of our societal beliefs. As solutions to overrepresentation are sought, it has become evident that school districts could begin by reevaluating how teachers relate to and are accountable for their students' achievement. Detroit, the largest city in Michigan, has the highest number of impoverished African American students enrolled in public education.

Skiba, Staudinger-Poloni, Simmons, Azziz-Feggins, and Chung (2005) sought to determine whether poverty is a factor in special education racial disparity. They concluded:

1. Minority students are disproportionately poor and hence more likely to be exposed to a variety of sociodemographic stressors associated with poverty.
2. Factors associated with living in poverty leave children less developmentally ready for schooling and ultimately yield negative academic and behavioral outcomes.
3. Students who are low achieving or at risk for negative behavioral outcomes are more likely to be referred to, and ultimately found eligible for, special education services.
4. Therefore, poverty is an important contributing factor that increases the risk, presumably in a linear fashion, of special education placement for minority students. (p. 131)

Although previous researchers have linked the factors related to poverty and lack of resources, it remains inconclusive whether poverty is a predictor of African American students' placement in special education (MacMillan & Reschly, 1998; Oswald et al., 1999; Skiba et al., 2005). My study will add to the body of knowledge by exploring possible weaknesses in the prereferral process that can lead to the overrepresentation of African American in special education and rare opportunities for them to return to the general education classroom. Oswald et al. (1999) stated, "Minority children with disabilities who live in urban and high-poverty environments are believed to be at

particularly high risk for educational failure and poor outcomes because of inappropriate identification, placement, and services" (p. 194). The findings derived from this study can precipitate action in eradicating disproportion.

Problem Statement

There has been a gap in the literature regarding tangible solutions to explain why African American students are referred to and overrepresented in special education programs. The problem is that even though African American children comprise the smallest demographic of students currently attending public school in Michigan (Wayne Regional Educational Servicing Agency [Wayne RESA], 2007), they represent the highest number of special education students in the state. Disproportion is unambiguous when an ethnic group in a general school population has a higher representation in a subgroup or category; when that disproportionate group is minority, disproportion could possibly exist as the result of discrimination (MacMillan & Reschly, 1998).

Legislation, such as IDEA of 1975 and the NCLB of 2001, has historically attempted to guarantee academic equity for all students. However, although legislation is in place, school districts, administrators, and teachers appear to be following the mandates minimally. External and internal monitoring to control disproportion has not yielded a decrease in referrals or student placement in special education (Kunjufu, 2005). Since the passage of IDEA, researchers (e.g., Hosp & Reschly, 2004; Oswald et al., 1999; Skiba et al., 2005) have disaggregated data to identify the thematic factors and variables related to racial disproportion of placement in special education. I examined PD as an independent variable (IV) that if conducted effectively might change teachers' attitudes

toward African American students being referred to special education because they are achieving below grade level. Furthermore, correlations among discipline, poverty, gender, environment, and familial structure also have been examined by researchers seeking to understand the reasons for the overrepresentation of African American students in special education (Monroe, 2005). Hosp and Reschly (2004) stated, "The consistency of the findings, despite variations in sampling procedure and more than 25 years of attention to the issue, demonstrates its importance and the urgency with which solutions are needed" (p. 186). The current study looked at the longstanding problem while offering a solution that educators can understand.

In accordance with federal and state legislation, school districts must aggressively begin to clearly define daily practices and monitor their data to determine what screening or prereferral processes are needed to reduce the disproportion number of African American students in special education. In each local school, teachers are the most important factor affecting student achievement (Marzano, 2001). Therefore, educators should seek internal solutions rather than allow experts from various external disciplines to determine the most effective teaching practices for African American children (Porter, 1997). Blanchett, Mumford, and Beachum (2005) stated, "The building level is ground zero for educational change. Educators (principals and teachers) will ultimately make or break any change effort and hold the power for facilitating student success or failure" (p. 74). With effort and training, teachers who develop diverse lesson plans that reflect African American students' world often will often see results manifested in the students' appreciation and willingness of such effort (Monroe, 2005).

Bennett (1975) wrote poignantly about the historical degradation of education in the United States for African American students by contextualizing education and the significant role it played on African American workers:

> This process was clearly understood by the powerbrokers of the North and South, who went to extraordinary lengths to limit the economic development of Black America. The evidence on this point is overwhelming, and is crucial to an understanding of the underdevelopment of the black community and the marginal position of the black worker. The manipulation of the educational structures of the black community was a prime example of the process. In the 1880s and 1890s, there were repeated attempts to destroy or limit the effectiveness of black schools. It was clear to almost everyone that these attempts were motivated primarily by a desire to keep blacks ignorant so they would accept the least desirable occupations. (p. 253)

Bennett (1975) conveyed the urgency of establishing educational strategies that would close the achievement gap for African American students. As students matriculate and become adult citizens engaged in all aspects of society, any skills not attained through their compensatory education will be detrimental to their success as adults. Hosp and Reschly (2004) stated, “Once a student has been referred, it is likely that he or she will be found eligible for special education” (p. 187). Therefore, reformative actions should begin by informing teachers through PD about unintentional cultural and academic biases and by providing them with the tools to help African American students who appear to have academic deficits.

Nature of the Study

With a high concentration of urban children receiving free and/or reduced-price lunches, poverty appears to be one factor in the overrepresentation of African American students in special education. Skiba et al. (2005) conducted a thorough analysis of the link between poverty and ethnic disproportionality in special education. They concluded:

> In sum, the relationships among race or ethnicity, poverty, and the disproportionate placement of minority students in special education are highly complex, and their directionality often defies expectation. These data are consistent with previous investigations suggesting that poverty is only one part, and perhaps not a very central part, of a complex of factors predicting African American overrepresentation in special education. (p. 142)

Table 1 depicts data reported in 2008 from national, state, and local public records. African American students were identified as the lowest percentages in the nation attending public school, but the highest percentages in special education and free or reduced-price lunch programs. To assure equity in education for all students, the objective of this study was to closely examine the internal practices of the prereferral processes of educators in School District A in identifying students who should be tested for special education. The training received in School District A had a positive effect on teachers' attitudes toward African American students who were not achieving at grade level. PD on cultural sensitivity and special education disproportion, as well as the protocol for the referral process, are conducted in the early fall of each new school year; which might be a factor in the lower rates of African American students being referred to

and placed in special education when compared to local, state, and national data. The table illustrates special education data reported in 2008 and shows that the practices in School District A had lower percentages than the city, state, and national averages.

Table 1

Average Percentages of Students in Public School

National and local school districts	% of African American students	% of European American students	% of all students with disabilities	% of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch
United States	16.8	60.3	11.8	-----
Michigan	21.2	71.5	14.4	10.15
City of Detroit school district at large	91.7	2.8	16.4	76.0
School District A	98.4	2.6	10.4	82.3
School District B	100	n/a	12.6	86.9

Note. Data taken from Mi-CIS.org and Ed.gov websites

As stated by MacMillan and Reschly (1998),

> The underlying assumption is that the proportion of different ethnic groups in any category or program should be equal to the proportion of that ethnic group in the general school population if there is no discrimination. When the proportion of a given ethnic group enrolled in a given category exceeds the proportion of that ethnic group in the school population (i.e., in a district, state, or nationally), the interpretation suggested is that the disproportion is due to discrimination. (p. 15)

Their study defined disproportion in general in terms of the relationship of each ethnic group to the whole; more unfortunate than a misdiagnosis is the placement of children in categorical special education classrooms that separates them from their general education peers. Rarely are students mainstreamed back into the general education population during their educational years. This outcome directly affects their self-esteem and ability to achieve (West, 2001).

District A practices an inclusive model for students who are diagnosed as special education; they are in classrooms with their general education peers and are being taught by teachers who have had training in differentiated instruction, cultural sensitivity, effective accommodations and the prereferral process of special education. The training has helped the teachers to improve deficit areas in learning for all students, not just those with a special education diagnosis.

District B practices inclusion as well as offers a resource room for students in special education. Some students work in the classroom, the least restricted environment (LRE), with general education peers, and others work in the resource room for 4 to 5 hours each day. Teachers in District B receive internal training offered by their district and external training in special education laws by their local intermediate school district (ISD).

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The study was guided by four research questions (RQs) and their hypotheses:

1. Are there differences in teachers' attitudes toward achievement by district?

   H_{01}: There are no differences in teachers' attitudes toward achievement by district.

   H_{a1}: There are differences in teachers' attitudes toward achievement by district.

2. Does the amount of training on cultural sensitivity relate to teachers' attitudes toward achievement?

H_{02}: The amount of training on cultural sensitivity does not relate to teachers' attitudes toward achievement.

H_{a2}: The amount of training on cultural sensitivity does relate to teachers' attitudes toward achievement.

3. Are there differences in the average number of students referred to special education for each teacher by district?

   H_{03}: There are no differences in the average number of students referred to special education for each teacher by district.

   H_{a3}: There are differences in the average number of students referred to special education for each teacher by district.

4. Does the amount of training on cultural sensitivity relate to the number of students referred to special education?

   H_{04}: The amount of training on cultural sensitivity does not relate to the number of students referred to special education.

   H_{a4}: The amount of training on cultural sensitivity does relate to the number of students referred to special education.

A review of the RQs and the statistics used to measure teachers' attitudes is explained in Section 3.

Purpose of the Study

By means of a static group comparison, the purpose of this quantitative research was to determine whether the PD intervention in District A would yield a significant difference in teachers' attitude toward African American students who were achieving

below grade level when compared to District B, which did not receive PD. When the analysis was compiled, Districts A and B were measured and evaluated by (a) any differences in teachers' attitudes toward achievement; (b) whether the amount of training on cultural sensitivity was related to their attitudes toward achievement; (c) whether the number of students being referred to special education was more, less, or equal in both districts; and (d) whether the amount of training on cultural sensitivity was related to the number of students referred to special education. Any difference in teachers' attitudes in District A and District B might have prevented students from being referred to special education.

Published data on the topic of disproportion has had little effect on decreasing the overrepresentation of African American students in special education, Oswald et al. (1999) stated, "Despite long-standing public concern, professional debate, and a number of analyses of ethnic representation in special education, the actual proportions and causes of the apparent disproportionality are not understood" (p. 195). Historically, minimal changes to district practices have been attempted in an effort to ensure educational parity for all children, regardless of race, class, or religion, and lower the referral rates of African American students to special education (Losen & Orfield, 2002).

Salend and Duhaney (2005) suggested that PD strategies be supported to increase teachers' sensitivity toward students of color:

> These activities can provide educators with opportunities to reflect upon their own cultural perspectives as well as those of others and examine how their cultural

> assumptions and values impact their expectations, beliefs, and behavior, and may differ from those held by students and their families. (p. 218)

Addressing disproportion in special education for African American students has to begin with their teachers, who are frequently the first to refer or place students in special education (Monroe, 2005). Dealing with disproportion will entail presenting data reflecting the rates at which African American students are placed in special education programs in comparison to their counterparts; being proactive with special education data also might defray some defensive posturing of teachers and administrators because most special education data have reported the demographics of students, not teachers (Wayne RESA, 2007). Using the results gleaned from the analysis of the treatment provided to District A will determine whether PD was successful in lowering the number of African American students in its special education program.

According to Anderson and Harry (1994), "The entire process is seriously biased against African-American male students, from their first experiences in regular education through their disproportionate referral to, assessment for, and placement in special education programs" (p. 602). Although they discussed the entire special education process as subjective and faulty, I examined the referral process as one way to address disproportion.

Although 80% of the teaching staff in District A are European American, 90% of the student population are African American. The problem that I studied does not exist only in District A. As illustrated earlier in Table 1, District A has the lowest number of African American students in special education. The data analysis in Section 4 further

explains whether the intervention was significant, particularly in the comparison of the results of the survey to District B. The goal in conducting the study was to present the practices of District A as an intervention that can be used by other districts as motivation to change the internal referral and special education placement practices toward African American students. The next section includes an analysis of the related theories that guided this study.

Theoretical Base

The theoretical base guiding this study was Kunjufu's (2005) Afrocentric curriculum model and Bandura's (1977) social learning theory (SLT). These theories posit that if cultural identity and positive internal stimuli are incorporated by teachers into the educational environment, students will achieve academic success. A positive student-teacher relationship is vital to the learning process (Marzano, 2001). When developing intervention strategies to address student achievement, the process should begin with the teachers. Harwell (1989) stated, "I believe that early intervention is the key to preventing difficulties from becoming disabilities" (p. 5). A healthy student-teacher relationship is paramount to academic mastery.

Bandura (1977), a psychologist who observed human behavior, stated:

> Learning would be exceeding laborious, not to mention hazardous, if people had to rely solely on the effects of their own actions to inform them what to do. Fortunately, most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling: from observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action. (p. 22)

The four principles underlying Bandura's (1977) SLT are attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation. Students can learn a great deal simply by observing other people (e.g., teachers) in the educational setting. Encompassing the four principles of SLT while integrating culture into lesson planning will engage African American students in the learning process and improve their likelihood of academic success (Hale, 2001).

Kunjufu (2005), a social activist, researched the correlation between the disproportionality of African American elementary male students in special education and such futuristic social problems as incarceration and illiteracy. He developed an Afrocentric curriculum to instill cultural pride into academia and help to defray social ills. He considered the elementary years fundamental in the overall success of African American students' educational outcomes. Once students matriculate to Grade 4, an academic shift from memorization to application occurs. With this new challenge, African American students often begin the subconscious process of either embracing or rejecting education (Kunjufu, 2005). Kunjufu's Afrocentric theory aligned with my study and offered practical strategies based upon best practices for African American students' styles of learning. Teachers who gain a clearer understanding through PD into the ways in which students learn might then make fewer referrals to special education.

Understanding the prereferral process is imperative in researching overrepresentation. Teachers can help to decrease disproportion in special education. The current study examined the causal effect of teachers' attitudes and cultural awareness in relation to referrals to special education.

Definitions of Terms

The following terms are defined as they were used in the study.

Cultural sensitivity: The ability to adjust one's perceptions, behaviors, and practice styles to effectively meet the needs of different ethnic or racial groups (Stafford, Bowman, Ewing, Hanna, & Lopoes-De Fede, 1997).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA): A federal law mandating that all children with disabilities have available to them FAPE, which emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for employment and independent living (K. Alexander & Alexander, 2005).

Learning disability: Specifically, by both federal law (PL 94-142) and statutes in most states, a learning disability is presumed to exist when achievement (measured by proper tests) falls a specific level below ability (measured by proper test), provided that a number of specific causal factors have been excluded (Swiercinsky, 1985).

Prereferral: The purpose of the prereferral process is to ensure that students have reasonable accommodations and modifications before they are referred for special education assessment. Often, a change in the classroom can turn their performance around and make it unnecessary to consider special education services. Teachers should try using strategies that draw on children's strengths and meet their educational needs. This change might be all that is necessary to put students back on the road to success (Stump, 2002).

Special education: Specially designed instruction, at no cost to the parent or parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability, including instruction

conducted in a classroom, in the home, in hospitals, in institutions, and in other settings and instruction in physical education (Special Education Glossary of Common Terms, 2008).

Title I: The purpose of this title program is to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments. This purpose can be accomplished by (a) ensuring that high-quality academic assessments, accountability systems, teacher preparation and training, curriculum, and instructional materials are aligned with challenging state academic standards so that students, teachers, parents, and administrators can measure progress against common expectations for student academic achievement; (b) meeting the educational needs of low-achieving children in the country's highest-poverty schools, limited English proficient children, migratory children, children with disabilities, Indian children, neglected or delinquent children, and young children in need of reading assistance; (c) closing the achievement gap between high- and low-performing children, especially the achievement gaps between minority and nonminority students, and between disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers (U.S. Department of Education [USDoE], 2008).

Assumptions

This study involved ethnicity, a subject often attached to sensitivities and biases. Losen and Orfield (2002) concluded, "We need to reach the point at which every child is treated as if he or she were our own child, with the same tirelessly defended and

protected life possibilities" (p. xxxi). The following external factors were assumptions in this study:

1. The survey respondents had earned national or state certification in the areas in which they teach.
2. Participants have a novice level or prior knowledge of special education laws.
3. Participants gave honest responses to the questions.
4. Participants had background knowledge of cultural differences.
5. The difference in African American students referred to or placed in special education was due to the lack of PD for teachers.
6. The two school districts had similar characteristics in demographics, so any differences in referral rates would result from the IV of PD.

Limitations

The following list presents weaknesses in the study that I could not control:

1. The survey instrument was a forced-choice survey, so omission of a neutral answer limited the participants' choices.
2. The theoretical basis of Bandura's (1977) SLT confined the research to how the participants viewed the world and made decisions from introspective positions.
3. The theoretical base of Kunjufu's (2005) Afrocentric curriculum was used to strengthen the understanding of African American children in the academic setting. Kunjufu's theory and research might not be as familiar to persons outside of urban areas or the Midwestern United States.

4. The target population was restricted to public charter school teachers employed in a major city in the Midwestern United States.

Delimitations and Scope

Historically, national, state, and local research has been conducted on African American students and their disproportionate representation in special education programs; this research is examined more closely in Section 2. With such a broad topic, I chose to apply PD as an intervention to District A to determine whether its application would result in a significant decrease in the number of students being referred to special education. To be in the study, the teachers had to be teaching children in Kindergarten to Grade 8 at either of the two selected public charter schools. Teacher attitudes' were measured on a variation of a Likert-type scale with an instrument designed solely for this study.

Significance of the Study

Efforts to amend the EAHC Act of 1975 have not addressed the overrepresentation of African American students in special education programs. I conducted this study to test a practical intervention (i.e., PD) used in District A and compared it to District B, which did not receive the intervention. I analyzed the survey results to determine whether the PD had an effect on teachers' attitudes toward African American students who were achieving below grade level and their overrepresentation in special education.

Annual data gleaned from research performed by national, state, and local school districts have shown staggering results. For example, the CRP (as cited in Losen &

Orfield, 2002) reported that African American students are 4 times more likely to be placed in special education than their European American counterparts. Research linking poverty, discipline, and cultural bias has been conducted on the disproportionate rates of referrals to special education (MacMillan & Reschly, 1998; Monroe, 2005; Skiba et al., 2005), yet practical solutions to address disproportion have been negligible. Skiba et al. (2008) stated, "Central to such an approach is a process that moves from data collection and examination, to interpretation, to culturally competent intervention and evaluation" (p. 279). I investigated the overrepresentation of African American students in special education and the potential to decrease the numbers by using an established prereferral process through PD for teachers as an intervention.

The inclusion model used by District A has improved the deficit areas of students in special education because all staff members are trained annually in differentiated instruction, sensitivity, and social biases. Of the teaching staff at the academy, 80% are European American, but 90% of the student population is African American. However, the problem reflected in this study does not appear to exist on this microlevel. Creswell (2003) stated, "Meso-level theories link the micro and macro levels" (p. 121). This study can be modeled as an intervention on a macrolevel as motivation to change the subjective practices of school districts placing disproportionate numbers of African American students in special education. Statistics have shown that by Grade 4, African American male and female students have lost their enthusiasm for learning. However, by middle school, female students have recaptured their zeal, but it takes longer, if ever, for African American male students to regain their zeal for learning (Kunjufu, 2005).

As stated in the Racial Inequity in Special Education Executive Summary for Federal Policymakers (2002),

> The process of identification and placement is rife with subjectivity: Qualitative research indicate [*sic*] that subjective decisions creep into all elements of the evaluation process, including whom to test, what test to use, when to use alternative tests, and how to interpret the results. (p. 2)

Children who are placed in categorical classrooms are alienated from their general education peers, and rarely are they mainstreamed back into the general student population. The separation directly affects their self-esteem and emotional intelligence; informing teachers of such matters through PD can begin the process of understanding how African American students might learn differently from their European American students from middle class backgrounds (Skiba et al., 2008).

Salend and Duhaney (2005) suggested:

> The professional development plan also can include a variety of activities to enhance cross-cultural competence and the ability to interact with others in culturally sensitive ways. These activities can provide educators with opportunities to reflect upon their own cultural perspectives, as well as those of others, and examine how their cultural assumptions and values impact their expectations, beliefs, and behaviors, and may differ from those held by students and their families. (p. 218)

These types of interactive PDs can be held before students return at the beginning of the school year to enhance teacher practice and highlight the positive elements of diversity.

Diversity is the fiber that mended and built this rich country that we live in today, public education is a birthright of every citizen, and teachers are the trustees of our future; taking an equitable approach to educating all students can lead to positive social change for African American children. Similarly, addressing this negative historic fact in public education with practical solutions can have a positive impact on the future lives of these children (Hale, 2001; West, 2001).

Summary

As Michigan prepares to add more rigor, quality, and accountability to its public school curriculum, it has become increasingly evident that not all students are receiving equity in public education (USDoE, 2009; Wayne RESA, 2007). Research has yielded annual data showing disproportionate rates in special education among African American students; however, practical solutions to decrease these numbers have been minimal (Hale, 2001; Porter, 1997; Reschly, 2005). Decreasing the disproportionate number of African American students in special education will help to increase their immediate and future self-worth as adults and support their efforts to make a positive impact on their communities and society at large.

Included in Section 2 is the literature review, which details and critically analyzes research on the focus of my study. Also included is a historical perspective of race, poverty, and special education in the United States. A chronological listing of landmark legislation that led to equity in public education for all students is presented. The section further discusses the IV of PD and concludes with a summary and a transition.

In Section 3, the methodology is introduced, followed by the research design and approach. The setting, sample, and instrumentation are described to explain how the research was conducted, followed by details about the data collection and analysis protocols. Section 4 presents the data analysis using descriptive and inferential statistics. Responses to the survey tool from 83 participants were coded numerically and are depicted in tables and graphs. Lastly, Section 5 discusses the findings and offers recommendations for future research, along with a call to social action for all stakeholders.

Section 2: Literature Review

Introduction

I examined research in this literature review relevant to my study on disproportion in special education. I conducted this study to determine whether the PD applied as the intervention to District A had an effect on teachers' attitudes toward African American students who were achieving below grade level. I searched textbooks; public records; and scholarly articles from peer-reviewed journals, psychology journals, and special education journals. I conducted research at several local traditional libraries (e.g., Wayne State University and the public libraries in Farmington and Detroit); Harvard University's online and traditional libraries; and Walden University's online library. I also gathered information and research from dissertation databases and several local, state, and national conferences.

The keyword search included *special education*, *special education and disproportion*, *African American disproportionate rates*, *socioeconomic status (SES) and special education*, *inclusion*, and *special education prereferral process*. Special education is a broad topic, so disaggregating it with specific topics such as disproportion, African American, discipline, and low SES was crucial in allowing me to obtain information from previous studies and articles. An Internet keyword search yielded several government studies from the USDoE (2008, 2009); the U.S. Department of Justice (2010); and the CRP (as cited in Losen & Orfield, 2002), subsequently referred to throughout the literature review, adding robustness to the need to study how long referral rates of

African American students to special education have existed, with gaps increasing over several decades.

The review begins with a historical perspective of the desegregation of U.S. schools and the legislative history of special education to contextualize important events in public education. The review is followed by a discussion of the relevance of previous studies and literature on special education. Although many studies have been conducted on race and poverty, there has been a paucity of research on PD as an influence on teachers' attitudes toward the special education process and cultural sensitivity. The next section examines previous studies on the correlation of race and poverty to the high rate of African American students in special education. I analyzed the literature to link teachers' awareness of race and poverty to improve their attitudes toward students who are not achieving at grade level and to help them to improve academically rather than continue to decline or be identified as needing special education.

Blanchett et al. (2005) focused on students of color in urban districts. They noted:

> More important, the failure to provide students in urban settings, a disproportionate number of whom are poor and students of color, with a high-quality, equitable education has been identified as a major contributing factor to the overrepresentation of students of color in special education. (p. 73)

Similarly, the section on poverty critically examines poverty and race outside of urban settings and the United States. The global examination includes the results of the 2009 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which assessed 15-year-old adolescents internationally on the application of skills mastered in math, reading,

critical thinking, and science literacy. Students were randomly selected from 65 countries; the research is conducted every 3 years. The results released in December 2010 ranked countries in order of top scores to lowest scores. Few studies have been conducted on preventative measures, such as PD, during the prereferral process regarding special education. For example, students not performing academically at grade level might need catch-up growth rather than placement in special education. The section ends with a summary and a brief introduction to Section 3.

Historical Perspective of Race, Poverty, and Special Education

Since the desegregation of public education in the United States, efforts to reduce the overrepresentation of African American students in special education have been a challenge for school districts. Literature on the effect of race and poverty on the referral rates of African American students, along with the question whether PD for teachers on the topics of special education and cultural sensitivity would decrease the achievement gap between African American and European American students, has been scant. Salend and Duhaney (2005) acknowledged that "a critical challenge facing educators and school districts is the disproportionate representation of students of color in special education" (p. 219). The problem is that even though African American children represent the smallest demographic of students attending public school in Michigan, they represent the highest number of students in special education in the state (Wayne RESA, 2007).

The *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) Supreme Court ruling was a fundamental victory for African Americans and arguably became the cornerstone for the civil rights movement in the United States (Marable, 2006). The National Association for

the Advancement of Color People's Legal Defense and Education Fund (LDF) challenged the constitutionality of the "separate but equal" laws that had been established and maintained as a way of life in the country. Notably, the LDF team established its case based upon the 14th amendment, using the ruling of *Plessy v. Ferguson's* (1896) opposition of the Jim Crow "separate but equal" laws that stressed separate facilities for "Whites," the language of the time, and people of color, especially African Americans, in public facilities.

This need to maintain European American dominance and African American inferiority polarized every facet of American society in the 19th and 20th centuries, but the brave act of one Black man, Adolph Plessy, who sat in the White section of a public train, became the foundation some 50 years later for *Brown v. Board of Education* (Blanchett et al., 2005; Marable, 2006). The case led to the federal government upholding the 14th Amendment, calling segregation in public schools unconstitutional and a violation of the rights of African American children.

Spring (2005) stated:

> The Supreme Court argued in the *Brown* decision, "In the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal." To support this argument, the Supreme Court wrote one of the most controversial single sentences ever to appear in a Court decision: "Whatever may have been the extent of psychological knowledge at the time of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, this finding is amply supported by modern authority." (p. 408)

Although the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) Supreme Court ruling was supposed to end segregation in the publicly funded education of U.S. youth (K. Alexander & Alexander, 2005), little research has been published on preventative measures to keep African American students from being placed in special education or ascertaining the proportion ratio that reflects their European American counterparts. Blanchett et al. (2005) discussed the historical facts and legislative cases that attempted to shape parity in public education. Their central focus was on educational parity for students of color in urban schools. They discussed the practical recommendations obtained from an inclusive focus group of 15 participants. They also delved into the negative history of special education and students of color, stating that "segregation on the basis of race or ethnicity and disability is still a pervasive problem in our educational system as a whole and in special education programs in particular" (p. 73).

West (2001) asserted that the controversy surrounding the disproportionate number of African American students in special education had its beginnings in the negative history of race relations in the United States and income distribution. West discussed the unequal power distribution in the country while urging readers to recognize and embrace diversity in a democratic society. Efforts to improve schools in urban districts should focus on parity, regardless of SES, rather than race.

Marable (2006) commented on efforts to diminish the SES divide, stating, "A color-blind new racial domain has emerged in the United States in the post-Civil Rights era. This is not a restoration of Jim Crow segregation, but the reconfiguration of deep-seated structures of power" (p. 215). Income distribution and the lack of resources have

seemingly marred equitable education and quality instruction for students in urban districts. Skiba et al. (2008) stated, “In an educational system in which poor students of color routinely receive an inferior education, the possible contributions of the schooling itself to disparities in special education service must also be considered” (p. 274).

Twenty-one years after the Supreme Court’s ruling to desegregate public schools, Congress passed the EAHC. This law, according to research on the number of African American boys in special education (Porter, 1997), became one way to keep African American children who were culturally misunderstood by predominately European American female teachers isolated from other students in the general classroom. The new law essentially became a more sophisticated form of segregation. *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) was the first legal attempt to address and correct inequity in education (Marable, 2006). It appears that this historic case set the precedence for litigation rather than secure educational equity (Spring, 2005).

MacMillan and Reschly (1998) stated, “Nevertheless, overrepresentation data have figured prominently in court cases (e.g., *Larry P. v. Riles*, 1972, 1974, 1979, 1984, 1986) when introduced to support allegations of de facto segregation” (p. 15). Moreover, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was enacted to ensure equality of public services to all citizens, regardless of race or color (U.S. Department of Justice, 2010). In 1963, President John F. Kennedy, regarding what later became Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, stated, “Simple justice requires that public funds, to which all taxpayers of all races [colors, and national origins] contribute, not be spent in any fashion which

encourages, entrenches, subsidizes or results in racial [color or national origin] discrimination" (p. 1).

In the 19th and 20th centuries in the United States, voting rights were given only to strategic groups of male citizens and were denied to minorities and women. As a result, municipalities had significant power to enforce, enact, and interpret laws (Spring, 2005). Because of this local control (elected officials were from the communities that upheld segregation), the federal government was met with defiance when it attempted to legislate equity for students; however, because discrimination was not clearly defined, the interpretations of what it actually meant were left to individual states; the effort failed locally.

The U.S. Supreme Court did not mandate the desegregation of schools until 1969, 15 years after the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling (Skiba et al., 2008). In *Alexander v. Homes County Board of Education* (1969), the Supreme Court ruled "due deliberate speed" to end segregation in public schools immediately (K. Alexander & Alexander, 2005). The *Brown* decision was the beginning of a lengthy litigious process to desegregate schools and assure equity in education for all students. However, there has been a gap in the research in identifying intervention or preventative measures at the state and local district levels to ensure that disenfranchised students are receiving quality instruction and are not being prematurely referred to special education when challenges occur in the general education setting.

Special education placement and the discrimination of African Americans have parallel histories. More than 40 years have passed since desegregation was declared

unlawful; however, minimal progress has been made at the federal or state level to address preventative strategies to defray the overrepresentation of minority populations in special education (Hale, 2001; Kunjufu, 2005; Varlas, 2005; West, 2001). Receiving a public education in a democratic society is a right that is supposed to be granted to all citizens.

The goal of a K-12 compulsory education is to prepare young people to be active and positive contributing members of society (Spring, 2005). However, from Reconstruction until the 1950s, educating African American students to achieve equal citizenship was considered outrageous because of the belief that their IQ levels were low and that they should hold only low-ranking positions and menial jobs in society (Marable, 2006; Skiba et al., 2008; Spring, 2005).

In the post-*Brown* era, Marable (2006) stated:

> Most crucially, *Brown's* legacy did not adequately or sufficiently address the steadily deepening crisis experienced by the children of the African-American working class and the poor. *Brown's* failure to address the issue of class would loom large as the empire began to strike back. (p. 200)

Positive legislation for public schooling was one legacy of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children (PARC) was established in the 1950s to help the families of students who had physical or mental disabilities to fight to have their children educated in public institutions (Spring, 2005). PARC was fundamental in lobbying for change in state laws; *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded*

Children (PARC) v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania was as monumental as the *Brown* case in ensuring equal rights in education.

PARC's victory laid the groundwork for the federal government's enactment in 1970 of the Education of the Handicapped (EHA) Act, which provided FAPE for students with disabilities (Jacobs, 2008). In an effort to further equalize parity for all students in education, the EHA became more defined in 1975 and offered individualized services for students with disabilities through enactment of the EAHC in 1975. Parents and advocacy groups had accomplished significant victories for children with disabilities in public education, and the development and implementation of individualized education plan (IEPs) would now allow parents to play a major role in programs that were the most benefit to their children (Spring, 2005). Ultimately, the EAHC became the cornerstone for current special education laws in the United States (Jacobs, 2008; Skiba et al., 2008). It was amended in 1990 to become IDEA.

In an attempt to understand why African American children were consistently placed in the learning disability (LD) and mental retardation (MR) categories of special education more frequently than their European American counterparts, the USDoE's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) gathered and studied national data throughout the 1980s. The research collected by the OCR became the foundation for the reauthorization of IDEA in 1997, which supported inclusion to prevent special education students being isolated from their general education peers (Jacobs, 2008).

Another major milestone was the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004. This law became the turning point for special education legislation. After almost 30 years of

extensive research and data collection and monitoring (1975-2004), the federal government placed accountability on states and local educational agencies (LEAs) to collect and disaggregate annual data on disproportionality and required those with significant amounts to devote 15% of Part B funds toward early intervention programs (Skiba et al., 2008). Consequently, the legislation did not define significant disproportion, leaving that definition to the individual states.

Comparatively, civil rights legislation and special education in public schools have had parallel journeys to social justice. However, the desegregation of public schools (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954) was not fully implemented until the *Alexander v. Homes County Board of Education* (1969) ruling of "due deliberate speed" (Skiba et al., 2008, p. 28), which mirrored the current trend of disproportionate representation in special education, with subjectivity not clearly defined in the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004.

Subjectivity has long been a factor in the referral process for African American children partly because of the number of students being referred from general education teachers in special education categories not needing medical or specialized documentation for diagnosis, such as speech and language impaired (SLI), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and hearing impaired (HI; Kunjufu, 2005). Similarly, Skiba et al. (2008) discussed the analysis of data in special education categories and race, stating that "disproportionate representation is greater in the judgmental or 'soft' disability categories of MR, ED [emotional impairment], or LD than

in the nonjudgmental or 'hard' disability categories" (p. 269). Table 2, taken from Skiba et al.'s study, shows the risk ratio for all special education categories:

Table 2

Risk Ratio for Special Education Categories

Disability	American Indian/ Alaska Native	Asian/Pacific Islander American	African American (not Hispanic)	Hispanic American	European American (not Hispanic)
Specific learning disabilities (LDs)	1.53	0.39	1.34	1.10	0.86
Speech/language impairments (SLDs)	1.18	0.67	1.06	0.86	1.11
Mental retardation (MR)	1.10	0.45	3.04	0.60	0.61
Serious emotional impairment (EI)	1.30	0.28	2.25	0.52	0.86
Multiple disabilities	1.34	0.59	1.42	0.75	0.99
Hearing impairment (HI)	1.21	1.20	1.11	1.20	0.81
Orthopedic impairments	0.87	0.71	0.94	0.92	1.15
Other health impairment (OHI)	1.08	0.35	1.05	0.44	1.63
Visual impairments	1.16	0.99	1.21	0.92	0.94
Autism	0.63	1.24	1.11	0.53	1.26
Deaf-blindness	1.93	0.94	0.84	1.04	1.03
Traumatic brain injury	1.29	0.59	1.22	0.62	1.21
Developmental delay	2.89	0.68	1.59	0.43	1.06
All disabilities	1.35	0.48	1.46	0.87	0.92

Skiba et al. (2008) reported gross disparities in the LD, MR, and EI categories that clearly showed that disproportion in special education remains a problem in U.S. public schools in the 21st century. Researchers (Frankenberg & Siegel-Hawley, 2008; Hosp & Reschly, 2004; Skiba et al., 2008) have outlined historical legislative victories, revealed racial and SES disadvantages in districts, and identified weaknesses in the prereferral process. The following two subsections examine studies on race and poverty.

Race

For more than 30 years, disproportionate representation along racial lines in special education has left researchers, legislators, and school districts perplexed. Many studies have been conducted on the issue (Hosp & Reschly, 2004; Monroe, 2005; Reschly, 2005), yet few have examined the referral process for racial bias. The complexity of race and bias often has been suppressed because teachers in urban schools are overwhelmingly European American individuals from middle-class families who do not want to appear prejudiced (Hale, 2001; Kunjufu, 2005; West, 2001).

The negative historical patterns of race and income in the United States must be placed in context, which might or might not reinforce racial stereotypes (Artiles, Kozleski, Ortiz, Osher, & Trent, 2010). Skiba et al. (2008) stated, "Thus, racial and ethnic disparities in special education identification appear to begin at the stage of initial teacher referral" (p. 276). Their comment about referrals beginning with teachers was the focal point of this study, which was conducted to add to current research (Frankenberg & Siegel-Hawley, 2008; Hale, 2001) on racially disproportionate representation in special education in that the steps prior to making special education referrals need to be reexamined for clarity, accountability, and equity for all students. The hiring practices in the U.S. public school system continue to support Frankenberg and Siegel-Hawley's (2008) findings that most teachers' backgrounds and experiences are extremely different from those of their African American students. European American, middle-class female teachers currently represent the largest group of teachers in urban districts (West, 2001).

In their study on teacher preparation for racially changing schools, Frankenberg and Siegel-Hawley (2008) concluded:

> Most teachers believe that they can just treat all students the same and everything will work out. This is related to the fact that many teachers come from segregated white backgrounds where they have not been trained to understand and deal with other cultures effectively. Treating everyone the same translates into simply assuming that all children will understand and respond to the methods and approaches that their teachers are familiar with, an assumption not supported by research and experience. (p. 3)

In my analysis of previous studies, I found that racial disparity was a consistent factor in findings that the judgmental categories of special education placement such as LD, MR, and EI, along with the more concrete categories of HI, vision impaired (VI), and SLI, are more proportional to various ethnic groups (Hosp & Reschly, 2004; MacMillan & Reschly 1998; Skiba et al., 2008). The aforementioned studies were not designed to negatively depict race; in fact, for several of them, I had retrieved the data from nationally reported databases. Skiba et al. (2008) stated, "Yet, it also seems likely that a teacher's judgment of appropriateness for referral is conditioned by that teacher's self-efficacy with respect to instructing or interacting with students from a class or cultural background different from his or her own" (p. 281).

Very few researchers have investigated the link between racial bias and disproportionate representation of minorities in special education, as well as on the need for practical PD to understand different cultures and best practices for African American

students. Hosp and Reschly (2003) explored the comparative referral rates of three racial groups of students: African American, European American, and Hispanic American. They used relative risk to compare the risk index of one group to another while using the large group (European American students) as the consistent denominator or group being compared. Their methodology was dissimilar to traditional studies on disproportion in special education in that historical data from public school districts and the USDoE's OCR were used qualitatively (i.e., based upon people judgments) through vignettes. The quantitative data that they used were derived from the composition index (i.e., comparing the percentage of racial groups within a special education category). Traditional studies using quantitative and qualitative methods were not adequate in seeking solutions to the historic problems in previous studies; instead, they appeared merely to be reporting trends.

Hosp and Reschly (2003) applied relative risk to national databases using quantitative analysis and interpretation to enhance previous qualitative judgments. The purpose of their study was to rule out factors related to bias as leading to students from different racial backgrounds being referred to special education more or less frequently. The results of their meta-analysis yielded 32 of 44 (73%) comparisons showing that African American students, given their proportion to the population, were 1.5 times more likely than their European American peers to be referred to special education services. They noted that further study of teachers' perceptions is needed because with 90% of teachers being European American, cultural misunderstandings regarding behavior might be increasing the referral rates of African American students.

MacMillan and Reschly (1998) examined and cited the USDoE's OCR national database for trends in racial disproportion in three special education categories: mild mental retardation (MMR), specific learning disability (SLD), and serious emotional disturbance (SED). They noted that the USDoE's OCR national database reported data only on these three subjective categories, not on biological categories such as VI, HI, or orthopedic disability. Kunjufu (2005), a pioneer in supporting African American students' equity in public education, agreed with MacMillan and Reschly's assertion that African American students are overwhelmingly overrepresented in MMR, followed by SLD, when compared to their percentage of the total student population. As with many previous studies comparing trends (Oswald, Best, Couthinho, & Nagle, 2003; Salend & Duhaney, 2005), MacMillan and Reschly reported that academic challenges might have more to do with students' SES, not their ethnicity. They commented, "Special education services should be provided according to a child's need and not according to a child's ethnicity" (p. 23).

Several researchers have studied the higher proportion of disciplinary infractions among African American students (Kunjufu, 2005; Monroe, 2005; Porter, 1997; Salend & Duhaney, 2005) and have observed that African American students are dealt with more harshly than their European American peers. Monroe (2005) studied race in relation to disproportion in school discipline in understanding why African American children with mild discipline issues are not given parity in punishment. Although Monroe's one-dimensional study focused only on racial gender bias (i.e., African American males' disciplinary referral and suspension rates), it is noteworthy because it yielded practical

strategies for educators and suggested that cultural sensitivity be part of PD to reverse the disproportion in negative behavioral incidences that often are a precursor to special education referral (Skiba et al., 2005).

West (2001) discussed the high percentage of European American female teachers working in urban public schools to highlight the need for interconnectedness of race in the classroom. West argued for the need to remove cultural differences and focus on the different SES backgrounds of European American female teachers who have urban students rather than pay attention to racism. In their discussion on racial disparities in special education, Skiba et al. (2008) stated, "Finally, there was clear discomfort among many respondents in discussing issues of race; although comfortable and even eloquent in describing the impact of poverty, many respondents seemed anxious to avoid talking about issues involving race or ethnicity" (p. 278).

In the final analysis, efforts to address practices that might lead to the overrepresentation of African American students in special education will continue to be stifled if educators are not made more aware of the issue. Artiles et al. (2010) stated, "Historically, this logic has evolved from the identification of correlational patterns to assumptions about the inherent nature of students from historically underserved groups living in poverty, assumptions that are ingrained in the general public's consciousness, including school personnel" (p. 283).

Poverty

Since the 19th century, poverty in the United States and its consequences have been long researched. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, large-scale poverty

crossed racial and ethnic boundaries for the first time; as a result, several government agencies were developed to equalize and ensure that citizens' basic needs (e.g., food and shelter) were being met. In the 1960s, President Lyndon B. Johnson initiated his "War on Poverty" and established federal funding to provide aid to the poorest members of society. However, when the Vietnam War began in the 1960s, government funding was reduced, resulting in budgetary cuts to programs meant to assist the poorest members of the population (Tough, 2008).

In addition, public education in the United States has been used to teach societal morals, history, and culture, and to prepare young people to become knowledgeable and productive citizens (Bennett 1975; Dewey 1990; West 2001). The passage of civil rights laws guaranteed public education to all American citizens (Hale 2001; Kunjufu 2005); however, in the 21st century, several unanswered questions about equal education for all children in the public school system remain. For example, does SES reflect student achievement, and more importantly, does high SES mean high student achievement and low SES mean low student achievement? Poverty has harsh consequences for the quality of life, diet, health care, and so on, but when held constant in the African American community, is it an indicator of the need for special education?

The city that was the focus of this study is the largest urban area in Michigan. It also has the highest number of students meeting the federal guidelines of poverty and the highest number of African American students enrolled in public education, with 76% qualifying for free and reduced-price lunch programs (Wayne RESA, 2007). West (2001), in discussing the interconnectedness between European Americans and African

Americans, stated that both groups have fundamental similarities in principles and shared practices. He detailed the need to remove cultural and ethnic differences in an effort to highlight that differences in SES (wealthy vs. middle class and the working poor) rather than race are the causes of the polarity. Although his research was not directly related to disparities in special education representation, West provided a framework for studying and understanding classism and inequality in income distribution in the United States, which was paramount in understanding poverty and its effects on student achievement. MacMillan and Reschly (1998) stated, "We believe strongly that the extant evidence points to [SES] rather than ethnicity as the risk factor for children encountering severe and persistent academic problems in our public schools" (p. 23).

Skiba et al. (2005) researched poverty as a factor in racially disproportionate representation in special education referrals. They identified three ethnic groups from the 2000 U.S. Census living at or below the poverty level: European American, 14.4%; Latino American, 29.2%; and African American, 30.4%. Based upon the poverty rates, when compared to population rates, if poverty were indicative of students' low achievement, referral rates would reflect ethnic proportions; however, Latino American students' rates for referral to special education were far less than those for African American students, even though their poverty rate was less than 1% of that of African Americans. Many researchers (e.g., Jacobs, 2008; Oswald et al., 1999; Salend & Duhaney, 2005; Skiba et al., 2005) have conducted research to determine whether poverty is indicative of African American students' achievement gaps, which often lead to referral and placement in special education programs.

Skiba et al. (2008) stated:

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

The findings from research on poverty and special education disproportionality for African American students have been inconsistent and have tended to be complex and inconclusive rather than absolute.

After Skiba et al. (2005) collected data from a district of 295 schools in a Midwestern state, they cross-analyzed the data using a multivariate approach. The results showed that when all categories and variables were held constant, race and poverty had an impact on disproportion. Furthermore, when poverty was held constant, race had the largest effect in racial disproportion across all special education categories. Skiba et al. studied poverty in more depth as an indicator of special education. The research was robust because the data were collected over 1 school year and represented 295 schools. They concluded that poverty was linked to racial disparity in special education referral rates:

1. Minority students are disproportionately poor and hence more likely to be exposed to a variety of sociodemographic stressors associated with poverty.
2. Factors associated with living in poverty leave children less developmentally ready for schooling and ultimately yield negative academic and behavioral outcomes.

3. Students who are low achieving or at risk for negative behavioral outcomes are more likely to be referred to, and ultimately found eligible for, special education service.
4. Therefore, poverty is an important contributing factor that increases the risk, presumably in a linear fashion, of special education placement for minority students. (p. 131)

Skiba et al. (2005) summarized that the significance of poverty, district resources, and disciplinary philosophy is complex and needs further research and that race, regardless of the controls, is a predictor of special education referral and placement. They stated, "To better understand and especially address the causes of ethnic disproportionality, it is critical that efforts continue to be made to identify both the individual and the systemic factors that create and maintain educational inequity" (p. 142). My study adds to the body of knowledge by highlighting weaknesses in the prereferral process that might lead to the overrepresentation of African American students in special education. Skiba et al. stated that poverty consistently overlaps with race, which tends to suggest that race is a factor for poverty. However, low SES is not an automatic reason to be referred to special education programs, nor is it indicative of students' academic achievement and ability.

The commonalities of poverty, as reported by Oswald et al. (1999), appear to be a social barrier to African American children's academic achievement. They focused their research on race and poverty by using a large, stratified random sample collected nationally from districts that had reported special education data to the USDoE's OCR in

1994. The study was significant in that the seven predictor variables of housing, income, poverty, at risk, dropout, limited English proficiency, and base rate (percentage of African American student enrollment), when tested in relation to the two special education categorical labels of SED and MMR, showed that poverty and MMR had a relationship that consistently increased across all ethnic groups; however, African Americans still had a higher overall representation.

When MMR was run against the variable of median housing, Oswald et al. (1999) found that fewer African American students were identified in wealthy communities, with the disproportionate rate in special education decreasing as housing value increased. Although Oswald et al. considered only the two special education categories of MMR and SED, their analysis was comprehensive and compelling in showing that poverty can influence the disproportionate rate of African American students in special education.

Skiba et al.'s (2005) research and analysis on poverty and its links to ethnic disproportionality were thorough and were summarized as follows:

> In sum, the relationships among race or ethnicity, poverty, and the disproportionate placement of minority students in special education are highly complex, and their directionality often defies expectation. These data are consistent with previous investigations suggesting that poverty is only one part, and perhaps not a very central part, of a complex of factors predicting African-American overrepresentation in special education. (p. 142)

Globalization in the 21st century has presented a challenge to prepare students to compete in a global society. In 2010, PISA (2009) released data showing that at the time,

the United States ranked 30th in math, 23rd in science, and 17th in reading. Clearly, the need for parity in education has become an important and urgent issue for the U.S. education system. PISA has been conducting research on 65 countries approximately every 3 years since 2000 to measure students' skills and knowledge as they culminate their learning experience in public education. The importance of the PISA surveys is that they test 15-year-old students in real-world scenarios in their use of math, science, and reading.

Table 3 shows how U.S. students compared to students in other countries with similar SES ranging from 10% to over 75% (PISA, 2009). The United States has the highest number of students living in poverty (21.7%), but there does not appear to be a relationship between poverty and student achievement in other countries. The table shows the summary PISA score, which comprises test results in math, science, and reading. It also summarizes the scores of American schools by poverty rates and compares them to countries with similar poverty rates (PISA, 2009). Notably, schools in the United States with less than 10% poverty had the highest achievement in the world, with a PISA score of 551. Korea was second with a score of 539, and Finland had a score of 536.

Table 3

PISA Comparison of U.S. Poverty Rates

Comparison of U.S.and otherPISA scoresbased uponpoverty rate	Poverty rate	PISA score
United States	< 10%	551
Finland	3.4%	536
Netherlands	9.0%	508
Belgium	6.7%	506
United States	10% -24.9%	527
Canada	13.6%	524
New Zealand	16.3%	521
Japan	14.3%	520
Australia	11.6%	515
United States	25%-49.9%	502
Estonia		501
Switzerland		501
Poland		500
United States	50%-74.9%	471
Austria		471
Turkey		464
Chile		449
United States	> 75%	446
Mexico		425

The PISA (2009) global study indicated that poverty is not a factor in student achievement. The data showed that even though the United States pays the most to educate its children, when poverty is held constant, there is a significant disconnection between funding and education. Comparatively, Canada, the northern neighbor of the United States, has a poverty rate of 13.6% and appears to be allocating resources equitably among impoverished and affluent districts. The next section examines studies that have been conducted to determine whether the IV of PD has any influence on teachers' attitude toward African American students who are achieving below grade level.

Independent Variable: Professional Development

The notion of academic achievement being intimately tied to teachers' expectations has been discussed for decades. In particular, the works of Dewey (1990) have been reprinted and compiled into a framework showing the importance of the teacher-student relationship in allowing students to access and combine the worlds of home and school. Dewey asserted that teachers must help students to connect core academic subject matter with the world outside of school, a process that ultimately will allow students to become independent and motivated contributors to society. Dewey's early 20th-century contributions to education were fundamental in changing teacher pedagogy. They also were radical for the era in championing the importance of the student-teacher relationship. What remains to be studied is the student-teacher relationship in regard to the further development of programs, PD, and strategies for teachers to employ in understanding African American students and their culture (Kunjufu, 2005).

Concerns about teachers in relation to students' academic progress have been studied in determining why there are disproportionate rates in special education (Skiba et al., 2008). Although the focus of this study was on PD as one way to decrease the referral rate of African American students to special education, Oswald et al. (2003) focused on trends in the identification rates, as reported by the USDoE's OCR. They focused their investigation on gender and the hypothesis that boys have a higher referral rate than girls to special education services. Oswald et al. discussed physiology as well as gender-linked genetic characteristics thoroughly as a biological basis to explain why gender disproportion is prevalent in special education. Although their results were inconclusive,

Oswald et al. suggested that in the initial phase, the teacher referral process might be biased. Their study referred to teacher attitudes but fell short in determining whether attitude affects the referral rate as well as the identification of the factors that cause the biases.

The benefits of inclusion programs in special education were researched by Jacobs (2008), who conducted a concurrent, nested, mixed methods study. Jacobs focused on the effectiveness and benefits of inclusion programs in the general education setting, as measured by interviewing elementary teachers and administering the Teacher Attitude Scale to assess the attitudes of 42 teachers toward inclusion. The findings in this robust study highlight the importance of teachers being trained for inclusion to be effective.

Jacobs (2008) commented:

> The staff development and training opportunities would address the skills and strategies teachers need to work as a team and to address the needs of students with disabilities. Because teachers would have to become more skilled at using a variety of instructional strategies and modifying and adapting the curriculum, they will be more equipped to meet the needs of all students. (p. 40)

After disaggregating the data, Jacobs (2008) found that the teachers overwhelmingly felt that inclusion was beneficial to all of their students. They also agreed that training is a necessary component in implementing inclusion effectively.

Further examination of previous research to determine whether training in special education referral protocols and disproportion rates would decrease African American

students' placement in special education led me to study the CRP and the University of California at Los Angeles (Losen & Orfield, 2002). The executive summary prepared by the CRP (Losen & Orfield, 2002) for federal policymakers reported national trends showing that minority students were tested and placed in special education programs overwhelmingly more frequently than their European American peers. The data, which were disaggregated from state databases, identified racial disparities in discipline, inequitable services rendered, gender (highest was African American males), and the identification process (subjectivity).

The CRP (Losen & Orfield, 2002) further suggested that disparities could be caused by such interconnected factors as subconscious racial bias, lack of district resources, and unjust reliance on IQ scores and culturally biased evaluative tools. Accordingly, even when poverty was considered a factor by the CRP, it was contradicted by national data trends. In the Recommendations section of the report, closer monitoring by federal and state compliance departments was mentioned, along with equitable funding to districts to attract and hire highly qualified teachers. In concluding, the CRP stated that more studies are needed on the practices that have led to racial disproportion in special education and that the focus of successful change should be on school leaders and teachers.

Frankenberg and Siegel-Hawley (2008) conducted a quantitative study on the connection between teachers' preparation and their practices relevant to student diversity. The researchers asked the sample of 1,000 randomly selected teachers to complete a survey. The research was noteworthy because studies that have included racially sensitive

questions have tended to be qualitative (Jacobs, 2008; Miner & Peterson, 2001; Monroe, 2005). Creswell (2003) argued that because participants might not feel comfortable and forthcoming in an interview setting or while being observed, the anonymity of responding to a questionnaire can help to reduce ethical issues.

Frankenberg and Siegel-Hawley's (2008) study also was one of few directly addressing national concerns in urban and suburban schools about the lack of preservice teacher training in diversity and in-service training through PD offerings. Frankenberg and Siegel-Hawley found that of the five ethnic categories represented in the study (European American, African American, Latino American, Asian American, and Mixed), the European American teachers reported the highest rate of nontraining in racial diversity in the classroom.

Frankenberg and Siegel-Hawley (2008) commented on schools with heterogeneous student populations. They also recommended that PD be used to help teachers to understand racial differences in an effort to increase student achievement:

> The survey asked teachers about their preparation in using one important proven method of improving both race relations and average achievement levels in diverse classrooms—the integrated grouping of students for academic tasks. Preparation in this technique is least common in heavily white schools, with only 29% of these teachers reporting a great deal of training in designing racially diverse groups. (pp. 6-7)

Hosp and Reschly (2004) investigated ways to increase the academic achievement of all students in an effort to decrease the rate of minorities being referred to special

education programs. Their research went further than other studies (Oswald et al., 1999; Salend & Duhaney, 2005; Skiba et al., 2005), whose focus had been only on external variables, such as demographic and economic factors, that teachers cannot account for. They added the internal variable of academic achievement, which had not been researched previously in relation to special education. A quantitative methodology was used. Hosp and Reschly collected data from three sources: the USDoE's Elementary and Secondary Schools Civil Rights Compliance Report, the National Center for Educational Statistics (2000) Common Core of Data, and district-level achievement data from 16 statewide assessment.

Once they had gathered the data, Hosp and Reschly (2004) disaggregated them and placed them in 12 relative risk ratios consisting of disability categories of the four minority racial categories of African American, Latino, Asian/Pacific Islander, and American Indian before comparing them to the disability categories of the race category of European American. These data were then computed as the response variables, which were then coded for each block of three predictors: academic, demographic, and economic.

Hosp and Reschly (2004) explored academic achievement, an area of special education that historically has been ignored, as a strong predictor of referral and placement in special education. Although they stated that future studies will require more complexity in their analysis methods, they provided solid evidence that teachers can help to close the disproportion rate in special education by noting that "however, because achievement can be influenced by educators, it provides a logical place to start

developing interventions that educators can implement that may reduce disproportionate representation. This may be accomplished through prevention or early intervention" (p. 195).

The literature has shown that educating teachers about the cultural norms of African American students and providing them with effective instructional strategies have helped to address this negative historical trend in special education (Hawley & Rollie, 2007; Kunjufu, 2005; Miner & Peterson, 2001; Monroe, 2005).

Delving deeper into examining the variables of overrepresentation in special education, MacMillan and Reschly (1998) stated:

> The underlying assumption is that the proportion of different ethnic groups in any category or program should be equal to the population of that ethnic group in the general school population if there is no discrimination. When the proportion of a given ethnic group enrolled in a given category exceeds the proportion of that ethnic group in the school population (i.e., in a district, state, or nationally), the interpretation suggested is that the disproportion is due to discrimination. (p. 15)

Over the past 10 years, researchers have sought to identify intervention and prevention strategies to address racial disproportion in special education. These efforts have been in contrast to those of the past 4 decades, when data were collected and disaggregated by ethnicity and SES. Hosp and Reschly (2004) added academic achievement as a variable, stating that although such external factors as ethnicity, demographics, and SES cannot be accounted for by educators, academic achievement is internal and is, therefore, controllable.

Salend and Duhaney (2005) suggested that PD strategies can increase teachers' sensitivity toward students of color:

> These activities can provide educators with opportunities to reflect upon their own cultural perspectives, as well as those of others, and examine how their cultural assumptions and values impact their expectations, beliefs, and behavior, and may differ from those held by students and their families. (p. 218)

PD for teachers can be the impetus to address this issue among students in urban schools.

Summary and Transition

Current and past trends developed to amend the EAHC have not addressed the overrepresentation of African American students in special education programs. Special education demographic and ethnic data collected annually and compiled by the USDoE (2008, 2009) have provided little evidence in raising the awareness of this issue or creating parity for all students. The purpose of the literature review was to connect the history of desegregation in public education to African American students' overrepresentation in special education and the student-teacher relationship through PD as a deterrent to disproportion.

The section included a discussion of previous research linking race and poverty as factors in African American students' placement in special education being higher than that of their European American peers, as well as the possibility of teacher bias. Oswald et al. (1999) stated, "Minority children with disabilities who live in urban and high-poverty environments are believed to be at particularly high risk for educational failure and poor outcomes because of inappropriate identification, placement, and services"

(p. 194). In reviewing the research, it became evident that addressing the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education should begin with the teachers because they frequently are the first ones to refer and place students. Salend and Duhaney (2005) stated, "Educators can help minimize the disproportionate representation of students of color in special education by delivering a wide range of effective, culturally sensitive educational services within the general education program that support student learning and family involvement" (p. 215).

Further research on teachers' cultural awareness and special education PD is needed. I conducted this study to determine whether the PD applied as the intervention to District A would yield a significant difference in teachers' attitude toward African American students who were achieving below grade level; such difference in teachers' attitudes might reduce the number of African American students being referred to special education, indicating that PD can deter the premature placement of African American students in special education programs. Artiles et al. (2010) stated, "Placement data suggest African Americans and Native Americans are overrepresented in high-incidence disability categories at the national level" (p. 280). Although 80% of the teaching staff at the academy where I am employed are European American and more than 90% of the student population are African American, the problem that was the focus of this study does not appear to exist at the microlevel in District A. The next section explains the quantitative methodology that I used to conduct the study.

Section 3: Research Method

Introduction

This section explains the rationale for conducting a quantitative, preexperimental study. Included is a description of the intervention applied to District A and the setting and sample; and explanations of the instrumentation and materials, the data collection and analysis protocols, and the ways in which I protected the participants' rights. The section concludes with a summary.

Gravetter and Wallnau (2005) stated:

> In the experimental method, one variable is manipulated while another variable is observed and measured. To establish a cause-and-effect relationship between the two variables, an experiment attempts to control all other variables to prevent them from influencing the results. (p. 13)

To identify what I was comparing, I considered the factors that governed the teachers' preferences (i.e., attitudes) with possible preconceived notions (i.e., behaviors) to determine whether a structured special program or specific activity, such as PD, would produce different outcomes regarding the number of African American students being referred to special education (Creswell, 2003; Fink, 2006). The purpose of this study was to determine whether the PD applied as the intervention to District A, but not to District B, would yield a significant difference in teachers' attitudes toward African American students who were achieving below grade level. I administered a survey to both groups to measure the teachers' attitudes toward African American students in relation to low academic achievement, their experience with special education training and cultural

sensitivity training. Hale (2001) stated, "The most reliable path, in my opinion, is to center school reform on the school and, more specifically, on the relationship between teacher and student—the basic building block of education" (p. 9).

Specifically, African American students outnumber European American students by a ratio of 4 to 1 in special education placement(CRP, 2002). Oswald et al. (1999) concluded, "Minority children with disabilities who live in urban and high-poverty environments are believed to be at particularly high risk for educational failure and poor outcomes because of inappropriate identification, placement, and services" (p. 194). The study was guided by four RQs and their hypotheses:

1. Are there differences in teachers' attitudes toward achievement by district?

H_{01}: There are no differences in teachers' attitudes toward achievement by district.

H_{a1}: There are differences in teachers' attitudes toward achievement by district.

2. Does the amount of training on cultural sensitivity relate to teachers' attitudes toward achievement?

H_{02}: The amount of training on cultural sensitivity does not relate to teachers' attitudes toward achievement.

H_{a2}: The amount of training on cultural sensitivity does relate to teachers' attitudes toward achievement.

3. Are there differences in the average number of students referred to special education for each teacher by district?

H_{03}: There are no differences in the average number of students referred to special education for each teacher by district.

H_{a3}: There are differences in the average number of students referred to special education for each teacher by district.

4. Does the amount of training on cultural sensitivity relate to the number of students referred to special education?

H_{04}: The amount of training on cultural sensitivity does not relate to the number of students referred to special education.

H_{a4}: The amount of training on cultural sensitivity does relate to the number of students referred to special education.

The participants were from two public charter schools that had similar characteristics in student and staff populations. I conducted this study to determine whether the PD applied as the intervention in District A would result in fewer African American students being referred to and placed in special education. A survey administered to both groups measured the teachers' attitudes toward African American students in relation to low academic achievement and their experience with special education training and cultural sensitivity training. Hale (2001) stated, "The most reliable path, in my opinion, is to center school reform on the school and, more specifically, on the relationship between teacher and student—the basic building block of education" (p. 9).

Research Design and Approach

Of the three research methods available, that is, qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods, I selected a quantitative research design for this study. I chose a preexperimental design to facilitate the comparison of data from the two schools while measuring the impact of the PD in District A.

Gravetter and Wallnau (2005) commented:

> The goal of the experimental method is to establish a cause-and-effect relationship between two variables. That is, the method is intended to show that changes in one variable are caused by changes in the other variable. To accomplish this goal, the experimental method has two distinguishing characteristics:
>
> 1. The researcher manipulates one of the variables. A second variable is observed to determine whether or not the manipulation causes changes to occur.
> 2. The researcher must exercise some control over the research situation to ensure that other, extraneous variables do not influence the relationship being examined. (p. 11)

Participant selection was not random because both charter schools had smaller teaching staff numbers in comparison to larger traditional public districts, where a true experimental design might have been more appropriate. To this end, I used a convenience sample. Creswell (2003) stated, “In many experiments, however, only a convenience sample is possible because the investigator must use naturally formed groups (e.g., a classroom, an organization, a family unit) or volunteers as participants in the study” (p.

164). The experimental design that I selected was a static group comparison or posttest only with nonequivalent groups, which is categorized under the pre-experimental design approach, according to Creswell (2003).

This design approach has the "X" representing the intervention of the IV (PD) that was measured by a posttest (survey) administered to the intervention group (District A) and the comparison group (District B), with "O" representing both.

District A X_____O

---------- (nonequivalent because District A had the intervention)

District B _____O

Comparatively, I considered a quasi-experimental design because both groups could have been selected through random assignment. However, for this study, I did not conduct a pretest with both groups, which differentiated preexperimental from quasi-experimental and made preexperimental more applicable to the study (Creswell, 2003).

Description of the Intervention: Professional Development

The intervention was a 6-hour PD presented in the early fall of the school year. Beyond the study and to further the effectiveness of the training as the school year progressed, teachers were refreshed quarterly with 1-hour sessions led by the special education director during the teachers' common planning time.

Salend and Duhaney (2005) suggested PD to improve teachers' sensitivity toward students of color:

> These activities can provide educators with opportunities to reflect upon their own cultural perspectives, as well as those of others, and examine how their cultural

assumptions and values impact their expectations, beliefs, and behavior, and may differ from those held by students and their families. (p. 218)

Table 4 illustrates the guide to the PD intervention applied to District A.

Table 4

Special Education PD Outline

Topic and time frame (6 hr)	Rationale
1. Historic and famous people with disabilities: 30 minutes	Establish empathy and importance of reaching all students.
2. What is IDEA?: 30 minutes	Define and explain the history of laws regarding special education.
3. The prereferral process: 1 hour	Define the overall process of determining why a student is achieving below grade level. Distribute and explain how to complete the prereferral forms.
*Break: 25 minutes	Restroom/stretch/etc.
4. Special education eligibility: 1 hour	Explain IQ scores, determination, disproportionate rates, forms, and statistical data /research of social ills linked to special education.
5. Cultural sensitivity: 1 hour	Provide practical information on African American culture and how students learn to assist in bridging cultural communication gap.
*Break: 25 minutes	Restroom/stretch/etc.
6. Lesson plans: 30 minutes	Sample lesson plan and rubric with multiple intelligences listed to enhance and engage various types of learners. List accommodations and modifications that can be made to assist students who are not performing at grade level. Provide real-life African American examples to enrich student learning.
7. Questions/Comments: 45 minutes	Discuss areas of concerns and/or suggestions.

The intervention applied to District A provided the teachers with strategies to identify students with academic difficulties. Skiba et al. (2008), in their discussion of strategies to reduce racial disproportion in special education, stated, "Central to such an approach is a process that moves from data collection and examination, to interpretation, to culturally competent intervention and evaluation" (p. 279). The intervention was not applied to District B; however, both districts were given the survey in the spring

semester, which gave the teachers sufficient time to build relationships with their students and develop an understanding of the routine of teaching. Glatthorn (1998) reported that in experimental research, "the two groups are then evaluated on the basis of the dependent variable, the consequence of the independent variable. The latter is the presumed cause of the dependent variable" (p. 35). Specifically, the static group comparison design was used to compare the impact of the intervention.

As illustrated previously in Table 4, the participants in District A attended a mandatory training session, where the special education coordinator and I applied the intervention (PD) once during the fall; a survey (the posttest) was administered electronically through SurveyMonkey to both school districts (Creswell, 2003) in the spring. According to Fink (2006), "Surveys are information collection methods used to describe, compare, or explain individual and societal knowledge, feelings, values, preferences, and behavior" (p. 1). Creswell (2003) argued that because some study participants might not feel comfortable and forthcoming during interviews or observations, the anonymity ensured in responding to a questionnaire can help to reduce ethical issues. Therefore, I used SurveyMonkey to e-mail the self-administered survey to the 134 participants. The survey used a cross-sectional, comparative, forced-choice item and Likert response scale.

Setting and Sample

The two school districts are located in the largest county in this Midwestern state. It has approximately 2.1 million residents, and the 365,000 students living in the county are enrolled in public school. The operating ISD comprises 34 districts that include

private, traditional public, and charter schools. The city where both districts are located holds 126,725 students attending public schools. Although 20,304 students were enrolled in the ISD's special education programs prior to 2007, 10,874 were reported solely from the city's district. The city's special education students represented more than half of all students in the entire county's special education programs (Wayne RESA, 2007).

The two districts selected to participate in the study are public school academies, also known as charter schools, that have similar in student populations. Both districts reside within the same county and ISD and are located in urban settings, with students identified ethnically as 99.9% African American and more than 80% qualifying for federally funded free and/or reduced-price lunch programs. The schools have been identified as Title I low-SES schools. Districts A and B have students enrolled in Kindergarten to Grade 12, but the primary focus of this study was elementary and middle school teachers.

District A has a student population of 1,164. It is located on the northeast side of the city and serves students in Kindergarten to Grade 12. The student population is 98% African American, with 77% of students qualifying for the federally funded free and/or reduced-price lunch programs (Michigan Compliance Information System [MI-CIS], 2009). Similarly, District B has a student population of 1,035. It is located on the west side of the city and serves students in Kindergarten to Grade 12. The student population is 100% African American, with 80% of students qualifying for the federally funded free and/or reduced-price lunch programs (MI-CIS, 2009). District A was administered the

intervention, namely, PD on cultural sensitivity and special education training in the early fall of the school year.

The use of convenience sampling was chosen due to nonrandomization and the availability of the participants (Creswell, 2003). In addition, because of my professional relationship to District A as an administrator, it was less complex to apply the intervention to this group of teachers in the fall. The intervention was applied once in the first semester of the school year and required approximately 6 hours in an informational workshop on special education designed to educate and enhance the teachers' exposure to different learning styles and cultural sensitivity. To be in the study, teachers in both districts had to be certified general education teachers of students in Kindergarten to Grade 8. District A has 80 teachers in of Kindergarten to Grade 8; District B has 95. My targeted response rate was 84% for District A (67/80 respondents) and 70% for District B (67/95 respondents). However, all 175 teachers in both districts were e-mailed the survey.

District A has a total student population of 1,164, and District B has a total student population of 1,035; the state average of students enrolled in a district is 2,031. Charter districts, in contrast to traditional public or private schools, were selected for this study partly because of the advantages of smaller classrooms and site base management, factors that give them more autonomy in establishing effective programs for students.

To assess the RQs, an independent sample *t* test, Spearman rho correlations, and a Mann Whitney U test were conducted. The Mann Whitney U test requires the largest sample size to find significance. G*Power 3.1.7 was used to assess the appropriate sample size to find significance (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2013). Using a

moderate effect size ($d = 0.50$), alpha of .05, and power of .80, the required sample size for a two-tailed Mann Whitney U test was 134. Therefore, data from at least 134 participants, approximately 67 participants from District A and 67 from District B, had to be collected.

To control for backyard research, research in which I had intimate knowledge about the subject being studied (e.g., work environment, family, friends, etc.; Creswell, 1998), the survey was anonymous and self-administered electronically via SurveyMonkey. The data came from two sources, namely, public records and survey responses, which diminished any biases or preconceived notions that I had about the phenomenon under study.

Instrumentation and Materials

Fogelman (as cited in Briggs & Coleman, 2002) stated, "The questionnaire, the most common method of data collection in a survey, is used to obtain factual information, attitudinal information or a mixture of both" (pp. 94-95). The survey design was based upon a survey instrument used in a previous mix methods study by Jacobs (2008) on teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. I desired more robust answers (aligned with the specific RQs), so the survey had three sections to measure actions (Section 1: Forced-choice responses; four items); attitudes (Section 2: Likert scale responses; nine items); and characteristics (Section 3: Demographics; eight items), respectively. The Likert scale responses ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*).

SurveyMonkey was chosen because of its popularity and the convenience of designing the tool using its templates. To distinguish between both districts' responses, I

developed two separate “collectors” (URL links) in the online survey tool before making the instrument live. This process differentiated the schools and facilitated the comparison and analysis of the data in Section 4. In developing the survey, I placed easy, engaging questions at the beginning; sensitive ones in the middle; and demographic questions near the end (Fink, 2006). Before I collected any data, I completed and submitted the proper documentation to Walden University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) to gain approval to conduct the study (IRB approval #06-12-15-004585). Table 5 depicts how the RQs aligned with the survey items.

Table 5

Research Questions Aligned With Survey Items

Research questions	Survey responses						
RQ1: Teachers' attitude toward achievement by district	When a student appear to achieve below grade level	Students who consistently have low grades	Parents of students who are achieving below grade level, are a greater problem for general education classroom teachers	Students who are below grade level should be given assignments that reflect their ability level rather than grade level	The needs of low-achieving students are best served through special separate programs or classrooms	Students who are low achieving most likely have a learning disability	Students who are low achieving are more of a burden to teach than their peers
RQ2: Cultural sensitivity training	I have attended a PD or in-service on cultural sensitivity						
RQ3: Average No. of students referred to special education for each teacher by district	This school year, how many students will you refer for special education testing						
RQ4: Amount of training on cultural sensitivity in relation to number of students referred to special education	I have attended a PD or in-service on cultural sensitivity						
Demographic questions	Please indicate your gender	Years teaching	Grade currently teaching	Ethnicity	Highest level of school or highest degree received		

One week prior to administering the actual survey, I distributed a cover letter via e-mail to explain the survey and the participants' rights. Immediately after, I sent an e-mail with the survey link to the participants and asked them to complete the survey, which would require no more than 10 minutes, within 2 weeks. To ensure the confidentiality of participants, membership on the SurveyMonkey website was upgraded from basic to professional, which guaranteed IP address anonymity as well as spam blockers. The posttest was cross-sectional and self-administered through the teachers' e-mail addresses by posting a link to the survey on SurveyMonkey. Selection of an electronic survey rather than postal mailing was made because of convenience, anonymity, and cost factors (Creswell, 2003).

To ascertain the reliability and quality of the survey, I conducted a survey field test with a group of administrators, teachers outside of both districts, and individuals with advanced competency in research methodology. The feedback enhanced the reliability of the instrument and ensured that the survey items flowed without biases or intrusiveness. After corrections were made to the protocol based upon the field test results, the survey link was sent to the participants. The program was initially set to close access to the survey after the 2-week time frame expired, but I obtained permission to remain open for 3 more weeks to collect more responses. I then converted the raw data into data portraits, removing all identifiable information. Because the survey was electronic (see Appendix), I did not have to collect and house the protocol; the software system has the capabilities to sort internally without any manipulation. School officials received a copy of all data

reported in Section 4 of the study; participants could receive a copy of the findings upon request.

Role of the Researcher

I have worked in several urban school settings for more than 15 years, and I have studied sociology, psychology, and education. Educational parity has been a professional and personal passion of mine for the past 10 years after I read several books and studies on the marginalization of African American males in society (Bennett, 1975; Hale, 2001) I decided to study the U.S. public education system in relation to special education programs and low-achieving students before they were tested for special education. My interest in the topic was fueled even more so after working in a local prison as a counselor before becoming an educator. During my sessions with the inmates, several themes that resonated with them began to emerge. I discovered that many of them had been in special education programs throughout their years in Kindergarten to Grade 8 and had dropped out of high school or had had negative experiences with teachers that basically turned them off learning.

The current professional relationship that I have with several teachers in District A is that of supervisor on the northeast junior high campus; however, the elementary building is located further east, so I have limited interactions with the teaching staff in that building. I also have a professional relationship with an administrator in District B, but I have no affiliation with the teaching staff on their northwest campus. To mitigate any potential researcher bias toward the participants in District A, once the online survey closed, I allowed SurveyMonkey to analyze the data and upload the findings into SPSS

v.21.0 with compatible features. This function further limited my affecting any of the data or protocols. Charts and graphs that I generated from the data analysis and are presented in Section 4 to diminish any biases in the data collection and interpretation even further.

Data Collection and Analysis

I used SPSS v. 21.0 to analyze the data. All Likert scale categories were converted into numeric values that ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). I presented the sample characteristics and variables with descriptive statistics. Frequencies and percentages on categorical data were presented as district and teacher type. Means and standard deviations were generated for continuous data such as retention rates and grades.

RQ1

Are there differences in teachers' attitudes toward achievement by district?

H_{01}: There are no differences in teachers' attitudes toward achievement by district.

H_{a1}: There are differences in teachers' attitudes toward achievement by district.

To examine RQ1, I conducted an independent sample *t* test to identify any differences in teachers' attitudes toward achievement by district. An independent sample *t* test is appropriate when the goal is to determine whether there are significant group mean differences in a continuous DV by a dichotomous IV (Pallant, 2010). In this case, the continuous DV was teachers' attitudes toward achievement, created by the average of the nine questions about teacher attitude in Section 2 of the survey after being converted

into Likert scale numeric responses ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). The dichotomous IV was district, measured by District A or District B. Prior to conducting the independent sample *t* test, I assessed the assumption of normality and equality of variance. Normality was assessed with a Kolmogorov-Smirnov (KS) test, and equality of variance was assessed with a Levene's test.

RQ2

Does the amount of training on cultural sensitivity relate to teachers' attitudes toward achievement?

H_{02}: The amount of training on cultural sensitivity does not relate to teachers' attitudes toward achievement.

H_{a2}: The amount of training on cultural sensitivity does relate to teachers' attitudes toward achievement.

To examine RQ2, I conducted a Spearman's rho correlation to determine whether the amount of training on cultural sensitivity was related to the teachers' attitudes toward achievement. A Spearman rho correlation is appropriate when the goal is to assess the relationship between two variables when both variables are at least ordinal in level (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2012). The amount of training on cultural sensitivity was an ordinal variable measured by Item 5 of the Demographic portion of the survey (ranking from 0-6 months, 1 year, 2 years, 3 years, or more). Teachers' attitudes toward achievement was a continuous variable, created by the average of the nine attitude items in Section 2 of the survey. The Spearman rho correlation did not assume the same assumptions, such as normality and homoscedasticity, as the Pearson correlation did

because it ranked the data and analyzed them in a nonparametric format (Morgan, Leech, Gloekner, & Barrett, 2007).

RQ3

Are there differences in the average number of students referred to special education for each teacher by district?

H_{03}: There are no differences in the average number of students referred to special education for each teacher by district.

H_{a3}: There are differences in the average number of students referred to special education for each teacher by district.

To examine RQ3, I conducted a Mann Whitney U test to determine whether there were differences in the average number of students referred to special education for each teacher by district. A Mann Whitney U test was appropriate when the goal was to identify significant group differences in an ordinal DV by a dichotomous IV (Pallant, 2010). In this case, the ordinal DV, the number of students referred to special education, was measured by Item 4 on the Demographic portion of the survey. The dichotomous IV was district, measured by District A or District B. The Mann Whitney U test did not assume the same normality and equality of variance assumptions that the independent sample *t* test did (Pallant, 2010).

RQ4

Does the amount of training on cultural sensitivity relate to the number of students referred to special education?

H_{04}: The amount of training on cultural sensitivity does not relate to the number of students referred to special education.

H_{a4}: The amount of training on cultural sensitivity does relate to the number of students referred to special education.

To examine RQ4, I conducted a Spearman's rho correlation to determine whether the amount of training on cultural sensitivity was related to the number of students referred to special education. In addition, data from both districts were combined into one data set to determine whether there was a relationship between cultural sensitivity and student referrals to special education. A Spearman rho correlation was appropriate when the goal was to assess the relationship between two variables when both variables were at least ordinal in level (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2012). The amount of training on cultural sensitivity was an ordinal variable and was measured by Item 5 of the Demographic portion of the survey. The number of students referred to special education was measured by Item 4 on the Demographic portion of the survey. The Spearman rho correlation did not assume the same assumptions, such as normality and homoscedasticity, as the Pearson correlation did because it ranked the data and analyzed them in a nonparametric format (Morgan et al., 2007).

Participants' Rights

I filed an IRB application with Walden University in accordance with the principles of academic and research integrity. The Internet software SurveyMonkey used in this study was upgraded to maintain the participants' e-mail addresses as well as secure their responses. The web provider guaranteed the same level of encrypted security as

online banking industries, which offer more confidentiality and anonymity. My role was limited in an effort to not bias the participants' data (Creswell, 2003). The solicitation and distribution of the survey was completed electronically through participants' work e-mail addresses to detach me from the study. The data will be stored electronically on a flash drive for 5 years and kept in a locked file cabinet in my office. After the 5 years, all documentation related to the study will be destroyed.

Summary

Section 3 began with explanations of the three methodologies available to researchers: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods (Creswell, 2003). After reading and reviewing several studies on the topic, a gap in the literature was identified, notably, in quantitatively measuring teachers' attitudes toward African American students being overrepresented in special education. Skiba et al. (2008) stated, "The influence of general educational quality on special education is still remarkably understudied" (p. 275).

The selected quantitative method was posttest only with nonequivalent groups. Creswell (2003) stated, "Experimenters use this design after implementing a treatment. After the treatment, the researcher selects a comparison group and provides a posttest to both the experimental group(s) and the comparison group(s)" (p. 168). Accordingly, the two school districts, District A and District B, have similar demographics. District A was given the intervention of PD, and then both districts received the survey. In addition, because of sensitivities around race and ethnicity, I opted to use an anonymous electronic survey as the best method to obtain data. Fink (2006) asserted, "The results will be useful if they are valid and if the survey device is one that users accept as the correct one" (p. 8).

To ensure the participants' comfort level while completing the electronic survey, a field test was administered to ensure the clarity of the questions and test the online SurveyMonkey tool. Section 4 presents the findings and analyzes the data.

Section 4: Analysis of Data

Introduction

In this section, I present the findings from the data collected from a 21-item survey that measured teachers' attitudes toward low-achieving students, PD, and special education. There has been a gap in the literature on tangible solutions to understand why African American students are referred to and overrepresented in special education programs. The problem is that even though African American children comprise the smallest demographic of students currently attending public school in the United States, they represent the highest number of special education students.

After obtaining permission from the school leaders in School Districts A and B, I sent them an e-mail link to the survey along with an introduction and consent form to distribute to 175 candidates (certified teachers who were teaching students in Kindergarten to Grade 8 in urban public charter schools at the time of the study). The response rate target was 134 of the 175 distributed surveys (85% rate). I was hoping to have 62 teachers (72%) from District A and 59 teachers (64%) from District B. Due to the slower response rate of District B, I kept the survey open for 3 weeks beyond the initial closing date and reached an overall completion rate of 65% (83/134). Notably District B had the lowest response rate of 31 (37%) of the projected 59 respondents, far fewer than the 52 (63%) District A respondents of the projected 62 respondents.

The collected data answered the RQs:

1. Are there differences in teachers' attitudes toward achievement by district?
2. Does the amount of training on cultural sensitivity relate to teachers' attitudes toward achievement?
3. Are there differences in the average number of students referred to special education for each teacher by district?
4. Does the amount of training on cultural sensitivity relate to the number of students referred to special education?

Descriptive Statistics

The final sample comprised 83 teachers from School Districts A and B. The majority of participants were from District A (52, 62.7%); the rest were from District B (31, 37.3%). Participants were asked to indicate gender: female (65, 78.3%); male (10, 12.0%); and no response (8, 9.6%). Participants were asked to indicate race: African American (34, 41%); Caucasian (39, 47%); Other (2, 2.4%); and No Answer (8, 9.4%). Participants were asked to indicate how many years they had been teaching: 1 year (6, 7.2%); 2 years (8, 9.6%); 3 years (7, 8.4%); 4 years (4, 4.8%); 5 years (7, 8.4%); 6 years (7, 8.4%); 7 years (8, 9.6%); 8 years (5, 6%); 9 years (1, 1.2%); 10 years (2, 2.4%); 11 years or more (20, 24.1%); and No Response (8, 9.6%). Participants were asked to indicate grade levels taught: Kindergarten (12, 10%); Grade 1 (6, 5%); Grade 2 (7, 5.8%); Grade 3 (11, 9.2%); Grade 4 (8, 6.7%); Grade 5 (11, 9.2%); Grade 6 (18, 15%); Grade 7 (23, 19.3%); and Grade 8 (23, 19.3%). Participants were asked to indicate their highest

level of education: bachelor's degree (29, 34.9%); education specialist (2, 2.4%); master's degree (41, 49.4%); and no response (11, 13.3%; see Table 6).

Table 6

Frequencies and Percentages of Participant Demographics

Demographic	*n*	%
School district		
A	52	63
B	31	37
Gender		
Female	65	78
Male	10	12
Not Indicated	8	10
Years of teaching		
1	6	7
2	8	10
3	7	8
4	4	5
5	7	8
6	7	8
7	8	10
8	5	6
9	1	1
10	2	2
> 11 years	20	24
Not indicated	8	10
Race		
African American	34	41
Caucasian	39	47
Other	2	2
Not indicated	8	10
Grade level taught[a]		
Kindergarten	12	10
1	6	5
2	7	6
3	11	9
4	8	7
5	11	9
6	18	15
7	23	19
8	23	19
Level of education		
Bachelor's	29	35
Master's	41	49
Ed Specialist	2	2
Not indicated	11	13

Note. Questions with more than one answer were categorized by the first response. [a]The frequency total is more than the actual total number of participants because the survey allowed for more than one response.

To illustrate differences in demographics by district, I prepared bar graphs for different characteristics. Figures 1 and 2 show the frequencies of special education referrals by teacher ethnicity in Districts A and B. Figures 3 and 4 represent the frequency of special education referrals by years of teaching experience in each district. It should be noted that years of experience were grouped into four categories: 1 to 3 years, 4 to 6 years, 7 to 9 years, and 10+ years. Figures 5 and 6 group teachers' race by gender for each district.

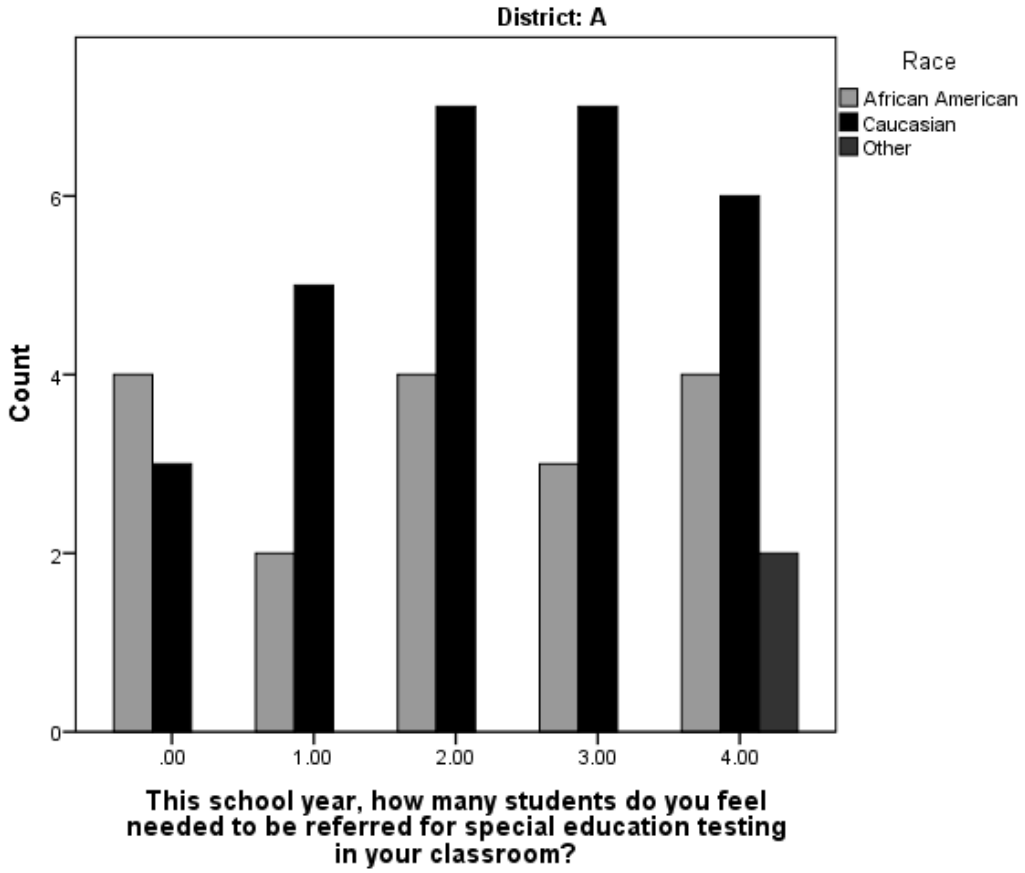

Figure 1. Special education referrals by race of teacher in District A.

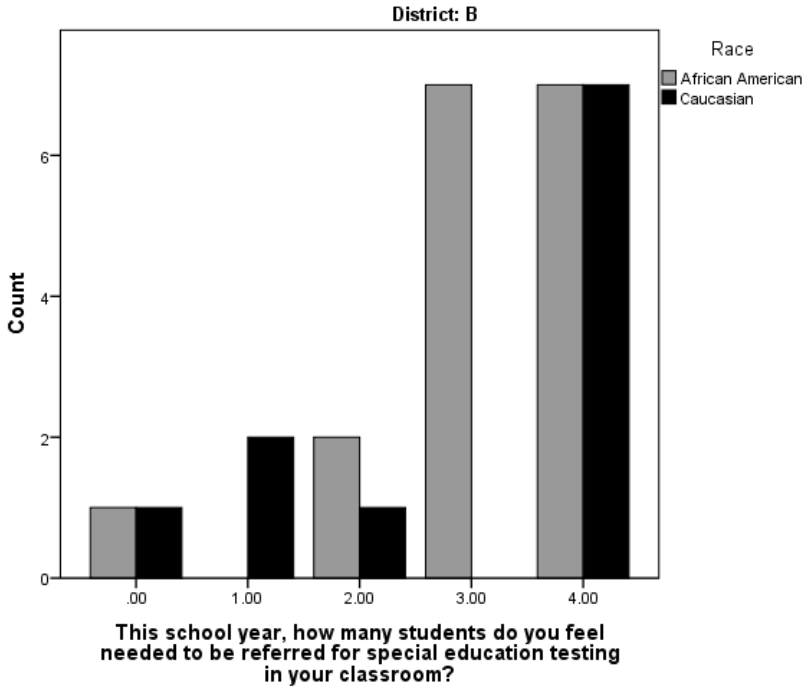

Figure 2. Special education referrals by race of teacher in District B.

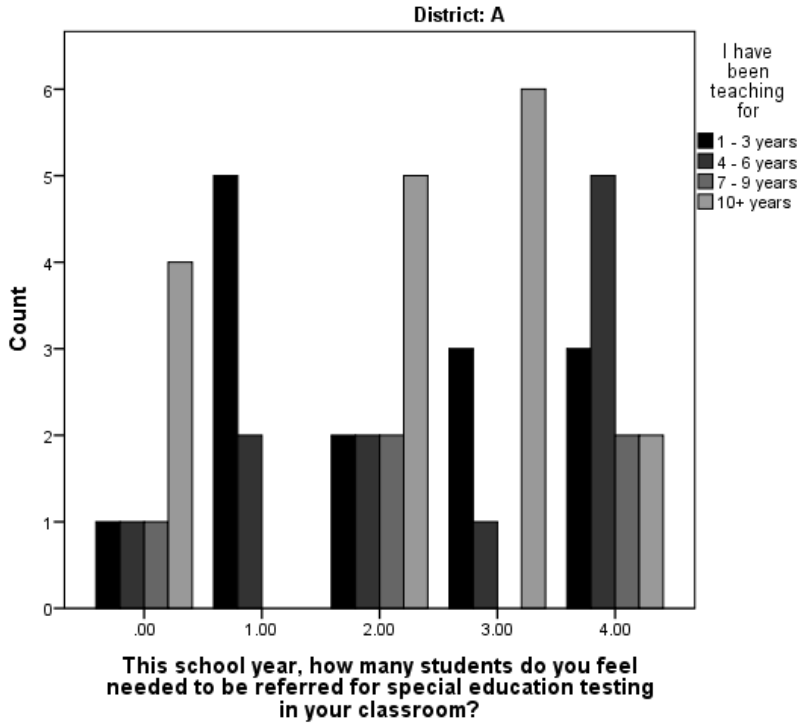

Figure 3. Special education referrals by years of experience in District A.

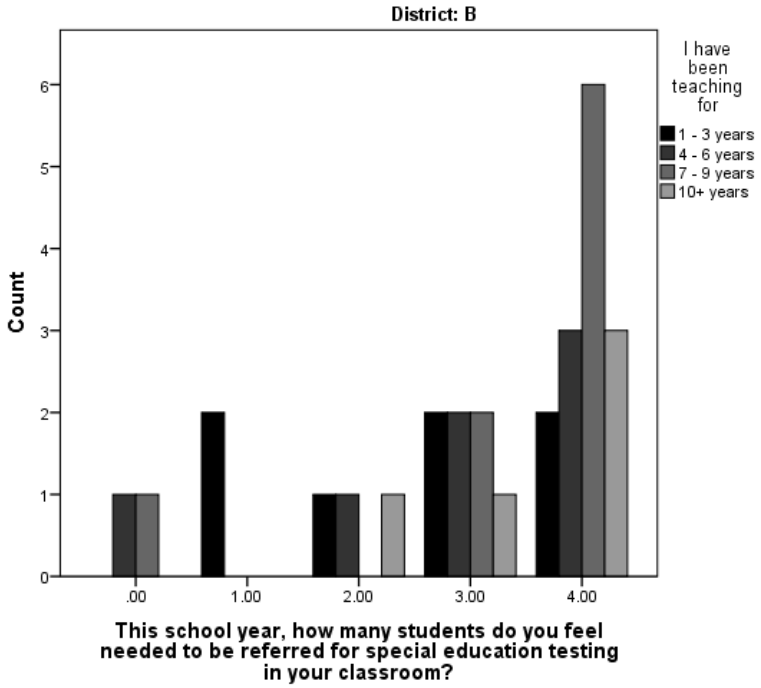

Figure 4. Special education referrals by years of experience in District B.

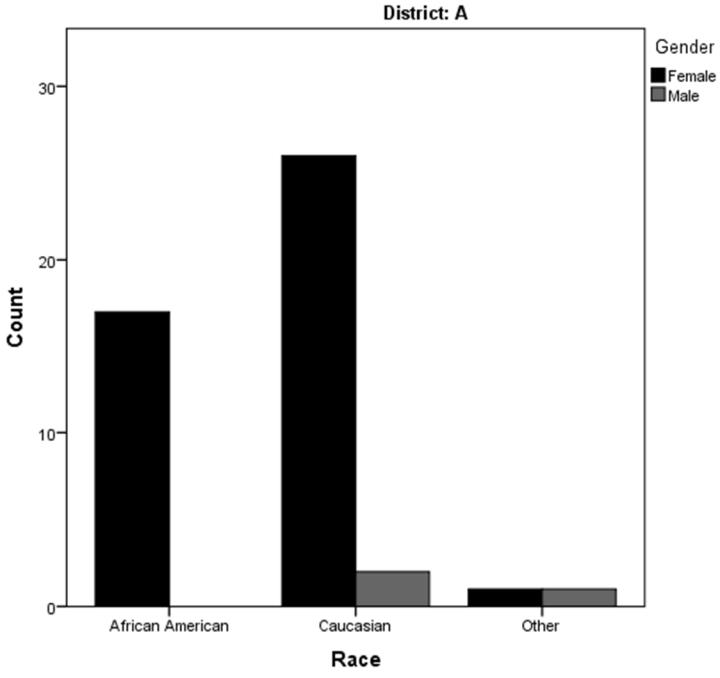

Figure 5. Teachers' race by gender in District A.

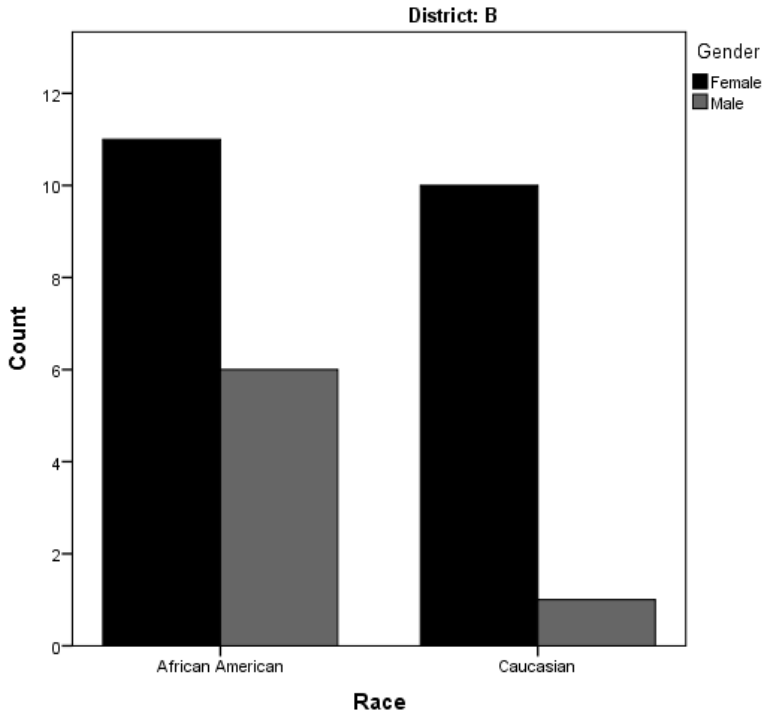

Figure 6. Teachers' race by gender in District B.

Reliability

A composite score of eight items was created for teachers' attitudes toward achievement. Cronbach's alpha values were calculated to test the reliability of the scale. Table 7 presents the Cronbach's alpha values and descriptive statistics for the attitudes toward achievement scale.

Table 7

Cronbach's Alpha and Descriptive Statistics for Teachers' Attitudes Toward Student Achievement

Scale	*N*	No. of items	Cronbach's α	*M*	*SD*
Attitudes toward achievement	75	8	0.73	2.18	0.001

Analysis of the Research Questions

RQ1

Are there differences in teachers' attitudes toward achievement by district?

H_{01}: There are no differences in teachers' attitudes toward achievement by district.

H_{a1}: There are differences in teachers' attitudes toward achievement by district.

To examine RQ1, I conducted an independent sample *t* test to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference between average composite scores by district. Prior to this analysis, the assumptions of normality were assessed with a KS test. The result of the KS test was not significant for the composite score ($p = .20$), suggesting that the composite score was normally distributed. Homogeneity of variance, which assumes that both groups have equal error variances, was assessed using Levene's test. If this test is significant, the assumption is violated. The Levene's test was not significant ($p = .22$), indicating that the variance of attitudes toward achievement was relatively equal in both districts (see Table 8). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume equal variances for the statistical analyses.

Table 8

Results of Levene's Test for Equality of Variance

Variable	*F*	*P*
Composite score	1.55	.22

The *t* test was two tailed, with the alpha level, or the probability of rejecting the null hypothesis when it is true, set at .05. Based upon the results of the independent *t* test,

there was insufficient evidence to reject Null Hypothesis 1 and show a statistically significant difference in average composite scores between districts (p = .30, t = -1.05, df = 77; see Table 9).

Table 9

Results of Independent t *Test for Difference in Average Composite Scores by District*

Variable	Group A		Group B			
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*p*
Composite	2.15	.39	2.25	.44	-1.05	.297

Note. Equal variances were assumed.

RQ2

Does the amount of training on cultural sensitivity relate to teachers' attitudes toward achievement?

H_{02}: The amount of training on cultural sensitivity does not relate to teachers' attitudes toward achievement.

H_{a2}: The amount of training on cultural sensitivity does relate to teachers' attitudes toward achievement.

To examine RQ2, I conducted a Spearman rho correlation to determine whether the amount of training on cultural sensitivity was related to the teachers' attitudes toward achievement. The assumptions of the Spearman rho correlation were assessed. The amount of training on cultural sensitivity was coded as ordinal, and the scores on one variable had to be monotonically related to the other variable.

Prior to analysis, the variable containing the responses for attending PD or an in-service training on cultural sensitivity was recoded with respect to order as it pertained to when the participant last attended. Not at all "0" was recoded 1, "within the last 6

months" was 2, "within the past year" was 3, "within the past 2 years" was 4, and "3 or more years ago" was 5. The results of the Spearman rho correlation showed a nonsignificant, small, and positive correlation (ρ = .17, p =.15). Null Hypothesis 2 was not rejected, suggesting no association between the amount of training on cultural sensitivity and teachers' attitudes toward achievement.

RQ3

Are there differences in the average number of students referred to special education for each teacher by district?

H_{03}: There are no differences in the average number of students referred to special education for each teacher by district.

H_{a3}: There are differences in the average number of students referred to special education for each teacher by district.

To examine RQ3, I conducted a Mann-Whitney U test to determine whether there was a difference in the average number of students referred to special education for each teacher by district. The Mann-Whitney U test is used to compare the number of times a score from one sample is ranked higher than a score from another sample. The scores from both districts were ranked together; Rank 1 represented the lowest score, Rank 2 the next lowest score, and so on. When scores have the same value, a tie is determined. Those scores are ranked and added together, then divided by the number of scores. Each of the tied scores is then assigned the same ranking (Cramer, 1998). Once the data were ranked, I carried out calculations on the ranks. Given the nonparametric nature of this statistical analysis, there were fewer assumptions to assess.

The assumptions included random samples from populations; the two samples had independent observations; and the measure of the two samples had at least an ordinal scale of measurement (Brace, Kemp, & Snelgar, 2006). Prior to analysis, the variable for students referred to special education for each teacher was recoded as follows: "0" was recoded 1, "1" was 2, "2" was 3, "3" was 4, and "4 or more" was 5. In addition, both districts were recoded as A = 1 and B = 2. The results of the Mann-Whitney U test proved to be significant, suggesting sufficient evidence to reject Null Hypothesis 3. There was a significant difference in the average number of students referred by their teachers to special education by district (p = .016), with District B showing a higher number of referrals than District A (see Table 10).

Table 10

Mann Whitney U Test for Average Differences by District for Teachers Who Referred Students for Special Education

Rank of district	*N*	*Mean Rank*	*U*	*Z*	*p*
A = 1	47	33.48	445.50	-2.41	.016
B = 2	25	45.59			

RQ4

Does the amount of training on cultural sensitivity relate to the number of students referred to special education?

H_{04}: The amount of training on cultural sensitivity does not relate to the number of students referred to special education.

H_{a4}: The amount of training on cultural sensitivity does relate to the number of students referred to special education.

To examine RQ4, I conducted a Spearman rho correlation to determine whether the amount of training on cultural sensitivity was related to the number of students referred to special education. For this analysis, Districts A and B were combined to identify any relationship between the two variables. The assumptions required by a Spearman rho correlation, as stated in RQ2, were assessed and met. The rho correlation coefficient showed a nonsignificant, small, and positive correlation ($\rho = .13$, $p = .28$). Therefore, Null Hypothesis 4 was not rejected, suggesting no association between the amount of training on cultural sensitivity and the number of students referred to special education.

Summary

The section began with a discussion of the findings, followed by an analysis of the data collected from the 83 participants. The data were analyzed using SPSS v.21.0, which removed any identifiable information about the participants and compared the responses to the four RQs. A Cronbach's alpha value based upon the eight items for teachers' attitudes toward achievement was calculated to determine the reliability of the scale, which was 0.73 (.70 or higher is considered acceptable).

Results of the analysis of RQ1 found insufficient evidence to reject Null Hypothesis 1. The results for RQ2 were insignificant, so Null Hypothesis 2 was not rejected. Analysis of RQ3 found sufficient evidence to reject Null Hypothesis 3. Analysis of RQ4 showed a nonsignificant but small and positive correlation, so Null Hypothesis 4 was not rejected. Section 5 provides a brief summary of the study, my interpretation of

the findings, a discussion of the implications for social change, and recommendations for action and future study.

Section 5: Research Findings

Summary

I conducted this study to determine whether PD could address the disproportionate number of African Americans students being referred to special education. There has been a gap in the literature regarding the reasons African American students are referred to and overrepresented in special education programs. The problem is that even though African American children comprise the smallest demographic of students currently attending public school in Michigan (Wayne RESA, 2007), they represent the highest number of students in special education programs in the state. Disproportion is evident when an ethnic group in a general school population has a higher representation in a subgroup or category. When that disproportionate group is a minority, disproportion could exist as the result of teachers' attitudes toward African American students who are achieving below grade level (MacMillan & Reschly, 1998).

The purpose of this quantitative study, a static group comparison, was to determine whether the PD applied as the intervention to teachers in District A would yield a significant difference in attitudes. Once the analysis was compiled, Districts A and B were measured and evaluated by the following RQs:

1. Are there differences in teachers' attitudes toward achievement by district?
2. Does the amount of training on cultural sensitivity relate to teachers' attitudes toward achievement?
3. Are there differences in the average number of students referred to special education for each teacher by district?

4. Does the amount of training on cultural sensitivity relate to the number of students referred to special education?

I reviewed the literature to analyze the perspectives of previous studies about disproportion in special education. The review allowed me to trace the history of desegregation in public education to African American students' overrepresentation in special education programs, examine the student-teacher relationship, and determine whether the application of PD could deter the disproportionate rate of referrals (K. Alexander & Alexander, 2005; Dewey, 1990; Hale, 2001; Hosp & Reschly, 2004; Kunjufu, 2005). Figure 7 recapitulates the historical relationship of public education for African Americans to civil rights and disability legislation. The 50-year history was detailed in Section 2 to explain the legislative journey that public education has taken for African American students and students with disabilities to have access to an equitable education.

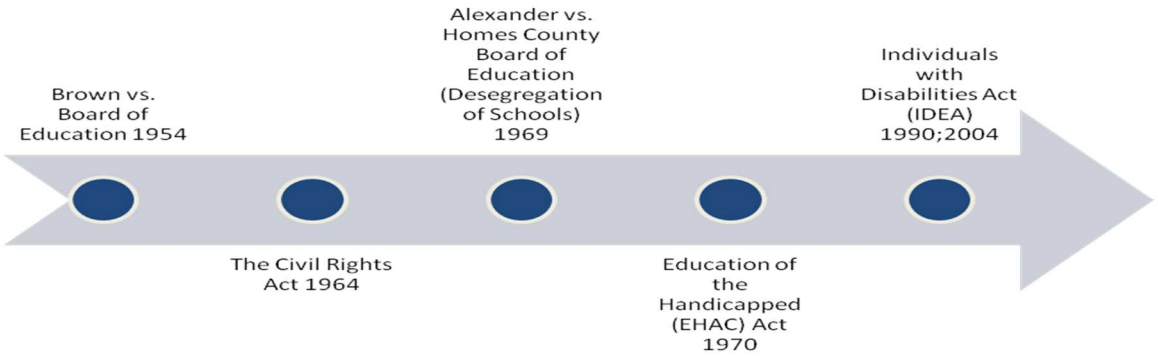

Figure 7. Time line of 50-year civil rights and disability legislation history.

The section included previous research identifying race and poverty as concomitant factors, along with possible teacher bias, in African American students'

placement in special education programs being 4 times higher than that of their European American peers (Harvard CRP, 2002). Addressing the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education should begin by focusing on classroom teachers, who frequently are the first ones to refer and place students (Marable, 2006; Skiba et al., 2008). Salend and Duhaney (2005) stated, "Educators can help minimize the disproportionate representation of students of color in special education by delivering a wide range of effective, culturally sensitive educational services within the general education program that support student learning and family involvement" (p. 215).

A preexperimental study design was used to investigate the reasons for the disproportion number of African American students in special education programs. The design facilitated a comparison of data from two school districts while measuring the impact of the training used as the intervention in District A. Both districts (A & B) have similar characteristics: They are public charter schools in a large urban city, and they have students in Kindergarten to Grade 8 identified as 99.9% African American, of whom 80% qualify for federally free and/or reduced-price lunch programs.

After obtaining permission from the respective school leaders and IRB approval from Walden University, a 21-item survey was distributed through SurveyMonkey's website. Aside from the introduction with an opt-out statement, the survey had three sections that the participants were asked to complete: four forced-item questions; nine Likert scale responses; and eight demographic questions. The survey had two separate collectors to differentiate data from District A and District B; I immediately noticed that the response rate for District A was moving more rapidly than for District B. After

collecting data for 5 weeks in total, permission was granted to close the survey; the overall response rate was 65% (83/134). As mentioned in Section 4, data were analyzed using SPSS v.21.0 to remove any identifiable information of participants and compare responses to the four RQs

I examined RQ1 by using an independent *t* test to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference between average composite score by district, so Null Hypothesis 1 was not rejected. I examined RQ2 by using a Spearman rho correlation to determine whether the amount of training on cultural sensitivity was related to the teachers' attitudes toward achievement. The correlation showed a nonsignificant but small and positive correlation, so Null Hypothesis 2 was not rejected.

I examined RQ3 by using a Mann-Whitney U test to determine whether there was a difference in the average number of students referred to special education for each teacher by district. The results showed a significant difference in the average number of students referred to special education by district, so Null Hypothesis 3 was rejected. To examine RQ4, I conducted a Spearman rho correlation to determine whether the amount of training on cultural sensitivity was related to the number of students referred to special education. Similar to RQ2, the rho correlation coefficient showed a nonsignificant but small and positive correlation, so Null Hypothesis 4 was not rejected.

Interpretation of the Findings

I assumed that more novice teachers (i.e., those with 1-3 years of experience) would have participated because urban public charter schools tend to attract more recent college graduates; larger traditional districts are more stable and have more veteran

teachers (> 7 years of experience). However, novice teachers were in the minority for this study, with the overwhelming majority (64%) of participants having a minimum of 4 years of teaching experience. Teaching experience is an important factor to hold constant when examining disproportion in special education; researchers have found that pedagogy and classroom management often have been some of the reasons for students being misdiagnosed, with veteran teachers appearing to have more skills in handling their classrooms (Hale, 2001; Kunjufu, 2005; Oswald et al., 2003; Salend & Duhaney, 2005).

RQs 1, 2, and 4 did not have significant data to support their null hypotheses, thus indicating that there was not a relationship between cultural sensitivity training and the number of African American students being referred to special education in both districts. RQ3 had significant data to support its null hypothesis that there was a relationship between the average number of students referred to special education for each teacher by district ($p = .16$); District B had fewer teachers in the study but referred more students to special education.

Although I conducted the study to measure the PD applied to District A as an intervention, the data analysis shows no relation of involvement in the cultural sensitivity PD and teachers' gender or race to student referral rates to special education; however, the overall characteristics of teachers in District A appeared to be significantly different from those of the teachers in District B. I noted a much faster response rate in completing the survey from the teachers in District A (63%) than from District B (37%), and the number of students referred to special education was significantly higher in District B, although fewer participants from District B completed the survey.

Bandura's (1977) SLT introduced the importance of observing and modeling the behaviors, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others. The SLT has four guiding principles: attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation. The findings from RQ3 for District B could have been more related to teachers' self-efficacy; the SLT posits that behaviors are learned from the environment that students are in.

As Kunjufu (2005) found, the elementary years are fundamental for African American students' success in school. Once students matriculate to Grade 4, an academic shift occurs from memorization to application. With the new academic challenge, African American students often begin the subconscious process of either embracing or rejecting education. The highest percentage of participants in the study taught Kindergarten to Grade 4 (51%, 42); second was Grade 5 to Grade 8 (47%, 39). The significance of Kunjufu's theory and research was evident in this study. Sixty percent (29) teachers self-identified Caucasian, 35% (17) as African American, and 4% (2) as Other.

Because the findings in this study are complex and intangible, administrators and parents should begin to pay more attention to the daily practices of teachers. Although there was no correlation between cultural sensitivity training and referral rates to special education, the self-efficacy of teachers' practice needs further investigation in relation to the impact on African American students' academic achievement especially in the lower elementary years (51% of responses were from teachers teaching grades Kindergarten to 4^{th}).

In the final analysis, there was a difference in the practices of District A and District B. I did not gain enough data to explicitly isolate the PD as the difference in the

referral rates that the teachers were making to special education (District B: 16 respondents [51%] referred four or more students to special education; District A: 10 respondents [19%]; see Figures 1 and 2). However, there did appear to be some internal practices that had a more positive outcome for students in District A. A qualitative case study or ethnography could be conducted to provide data for future analysis.

The student-teacher relationship is vital to the learning process (Marzano, 2001). Students are not the trustees of their education, so parents and administrators must take a more active role in monitoring referral rates to special education. The following sections provide information about the impact of the data obtained in this study while providing practical knowledge on ways to change the disproportionate rate with which African American students are referred to and placed in special education.

Implications for Social Change

Efforts to amend the EAHC Act of 1975 have not addressed the overrepresentation of African American students in special education programs. I examined literature focusing on several key indicators for the overrepresentation of African American students in special education. Race and poverty might have an impact on students' academic achievement, but research has not supported that these factors, in and of themselves, are the reasons for the disproportion numbers of African American students in special education programs (MacMillan & Reschly, 1998; Monroe, 2005; PISA, 2009; Skiba et al., 2005). Jensen (2009) studied the effects of poverty in general and identified several primary risk factors for distress: emotional and social challenges, acute and chronic stressors, cognitive lags, and health and safety issues. In the school

setting, educators should be prepared and required to understand the external factors that impact learning for all children, particularly the likelihood of those living in urban districts having to deal with poverty.

Ongoing PD can influence teachers' attitudes toward achievement. The results showed that fewer African American students in District A were referred to special education, with the only difference between both groups being the PD offered to the teachers in District A.

> Jensen (2009) described some of the actions that school districts can take:
>
> Deepen staff understanding. It's crucial for educators to keep in mind the many factors, some of them invisible, that play a role in students' classroom actions. Many nonminority or middle-class teachers cannot understand why children from poor backgrounds act the way they do at school. Teachers don't need to come from their students' cultures to be able to teach them, but empathy and cultural knowledge are essential. Therefore, an introduction to how students are affected by poverty is highly useful. (p. 11)

Results of PISA (2009) global research identified no relationship between poverty and student achievement in other countries; therefore, educators in the United States must renew their efforts to address this long-standing concern that has stifled the futures of so many African American children in the public school system. All stakeholders (legislators, parents, departments of education, board members, superintendents, administrators, and teachers) will benefit from the findings of this study. M. Alexander (2012), in an exhaustive exploration of the disproportionate number of currently

incarcerated African American men, stated, “I understood the problems plaguing poor communities of color, including problems associated with crime and rising incarceration rates, to be a function of poverty and lack of access to quality education--the continuing legacy of slavery and Jim Crow” (p. 3).

There is a relationship between race and poverty and the disproportionate number of African American students in special education (Jensen, 2009; Oswald et al., 1999; Skiba et al., 2005). The United States must begin to address this negative relationship to decrease the number of students referred to special education in the public school system. Educating teachers about the effect that their positive or negative self-efficacy can have on the academic futures of African American students will begin the work of creating equity for all students in public education. Teachers and administrators alike should understand the impact of their values on individual student learning; teachers in District B had different PD and appeared to refer students more frequently, whereas teachers in District A, when race, experience, and gender were held constant, did not (refer to Figures 1 & 2).

Educators need to become informed of the statistical data on special education programs and the effect of isolating students from general education peers, including self-esteem issues, low emotional intelligence, and future criminology; rarely do students become more successful after being placed in special education or reentering the general education classroom (Hale, 2001; West, 2001).

Recommendations for Action

Participants were certified teachers of students in Kindergarten to Grade 8 in urban charter schools in two school districts in Michigan. Administrators should begin to implement PD on special education, SES, cultural sensitivity, and differentiation. School leaders often provide PD at the beginning of the school year, but to effect changes in the disproportionate numbers of students referred to special education programs, administrators and/or regional ISDs should mandate follow-up PD throughout the school year. The findings highlighted a possible new concern with teacher efficacy affecting students' referral rates to special education; colleges and universities that offer preteaching programs should review their course offerings to determine whether future educators are being prepared adequately for the realities of teaching in urban districts (i.e., effects of poverty, students not on grade level, and how to differentiate instruction so that all children can master the skills at their ability levels).

Community leaders and local and state policymakers should begin to monitor the internal practices of school districts in urban areas and mandate PD for school leaders and teachers in schools that have high referral rates of minority students to special education programs. This study also is important to the futures of African American students. In its approach to resolve disproportion in the prison system, the federal government should begin to reward schools in urban districts that have reduced rates of minority students in special education programs.

M. Alexander (2012) stated:

> In 1991, the Sentencing Project reported that the number of people behind bars in the United States was unprecedented in world history, and that one fourth of

young African American men were now under the control of the criminal justice system. (p. 56)

Parents, the most important stakeholders, need to be made aware of the results of this study. A workshop for parents will help to empower them and show them the best ways to advocate for their children.

Recommendations for Further Study

Future researchers who want to study African American students' disproportional representation in special education programs could conduct qualitative or mixed methods investigations. This study followed a quantitative design, but qualitative studies could yield themes and similarities in teachers' attitudes or practices that could provide further data on practical strategies that schools can implement to decrease the disproportion in special education. A similar study could be planned using a longitudinal design in either of the two districts used in this study to extrapolate empirical data on effective and ineffective practices of educators after receiving PD.

One limitation of the current study was that it was bounded to teachers of Kindergarten to Grade 8 in urban charter schools in two school districts in Michigan. Future researchers could expand the sample to include schools in larger urban and suburban districts, as well as expand the sample to include high school teachers. An unexpected characteristic, namely, teachers' self-efficacy, emerged in District B that could be studied in relation to attitudes toward African American students' achievement. Researching the self-efficacy of school leaders and/or teachers might open tangible solutions to the problem of the overrepresentation of African American students in

special education programs. For noneducators, a correlational study of African American students achieving below grade level and the number of African American males and females in the criminal justice system might be worthy of attention.

In concluding, the practices in District A made an impact on lowering the referral rates to special education of African American students in Kindergarten to Grade 8; however, the data regarding PD as the catalyst were inconclusive. More research in this area is needed. It is whimsical that for more than 50 years, despite landmark legislation, countless research, and millions of public dollars, in the final analysis, decisions about students' academic futures come down to teachers' attitudes toward their students.

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Appendix: Survey

1. Introduction to the Survey and Informed Consent

You are invited to take part in a research study on teachers' attitude toward low achieving students and special education. Certified teachers teaching in kindergarten through eighth grade in public charter urban schools are qualified to take part in this study. You were invited as a possible participant due to being a teacher in grades K-8 in a Public Urban Charter School. This form is called "informed consent" to allow you an understanding of the study before deciding to take part.

The data retrieved from your participation will be used by the Researcher in a doctoral study as part of the requirements of Walden University Doctorate of Education (Ed.D.) program. The research gathered will also add to the existing body of knowledge in education as well as provide data for social change.

The purpose of the study is to explore if professional development aides in understanding African American students performing below grade level. Your participation is greatly needed and will help inform future research and educators working in Urban Schools understand strategies for students below grade level. If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked a series of questions that will take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. If you initially decide to participate, you may discontinue participation at any time.

Participation in this study is voluntary and no compensation will be offered. At any time you may discontinue the survey with no obligation to the Researcher and discontinuing will not affect your employment with your district. Please complete each question by clicking the box that best represents your response. There is no right or wrong answer, all responses are completely anonymous and all answers will be confidential with no identifiable indicators of you, your school or
district. Your responses will be used only for statistical purposes. The reports used for this study will summarize findings and data will be grouped together and reported in graphs as numbers. Being in the study will not pose risk to your safety or wellbeing.

The researcher conducting this study is Rochelle Ponder and is currently employed as a middle school principal, however the role as Walden doctoral student doesn't conflict with job responsibilities as school leader. I can be contacted with questions now or anytime in the future via email at rochelle.ponder@waldenu.edu. The researcher's Doctoral Chair can be reached at lillian.castaneda@waldenu.edu. The Research Participant Advocate at Walden University is Dr. Leilani Endicott and can be reached at (612) 312-1210 if you have questions about your rights as a participant. Walden
University's approval number for this study is _____and it expires on _____

Please print or save this consent form for your

records. Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information and I feel I understand the study well enough to be involved. By clicking the "next" box below, I understand that I am agreeing to the terms described above.

Sincerely,
Rochelle
Ponder
Doctoral
Candidate
Walden University School of Education

2. Survey

Thank you in advance for your participation, the survey will take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete.

1. What concern do you have most about special education students in general education classrooms?

- Lack of parental support
- Difficulty in maintaining discipline
- Modifying lesson plans to accommodate special needs
- Students cannot learn at the same pace as their general education peers

2. When a student appear to achieve below grade level

- I talk with last year's teacher regarding his/her ability
- I modify assignments
- I meet with the parent(s)
- I contact the special education department/liaison

3. The main disadvantage of inclusion is

- General education students receive less attention when special needs students are in general education classrooms
- Not enough resources in my school
- Students with special needs are more of a burden to teach
- Not enough time in my classroom

4. Students who consistently have low grades

- Have behavioral challenges
- More than likely has a learning disability
- Have minimal parental support at home
- Don't study for tests

3. Teacher Attitude Survey

On the following statements, please state your level of agreement by choosing 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 4 (Strongly Agree). There are no correct responses, feel free to be honest in reflecting your feelings regarding low achieving and special education students.

1. Mixing special education students with their general education peers in one class will allow more understanding and acceptance of differences among them.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
☐	☐	☐	☐

2. Parents of students that are achieving below grade level, are a greater problem for general education classroom teachers.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
☐	☐	☐	☐

3. The extra time required for special education students will take away from their general education peers.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
☐	☐	☐	☐

4. Students who are below grade level should be given assignments that reflect their ability level rather than grade level

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
☐	☐	☐	☐

5. The needs of low achieving students are best served through special separate programs or classrooms

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
☐	☐	☐	☐

6. Students in special education cannot learn the same things (on the same level) as their general education peers

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
☐	☐	☐	☐

7. Students in special education should not be in the same class with general education students

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
☐	☐	☐	☐

8. Students that are low achieving most likely have a learning disability

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
☐	☐	☐	☐

9. Students that are low achieving are more of a burden to teach than their peers

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
			

4. Demographic Information

The research is comprised of two public charter schools with similar data portraits. The following questions are for demographic data and complete anonymity will be taken when analyzing and reporting findings.

1. Please indicate your gender

- Male
- Female

2. I have been teaching for

- 1 year
- 2 years
- 3 years
- 4 years
- 5 years
- 6 years
- 7 years
- 8 years
- 9 years
- 10 years
- 11+ years

3. What grade(s) do you currently teach?

- Kindergarten
- First
- Second
- Third
- Fourth
- Fifth
- Sixth
- Seventh
- Eighth

4. This school year, how many students do you feel needed to be referred for special education testing in your classroom?

- 0
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4 or more

5. I have attended a professional development or in-service on cultural sensitivity.

- 0
- Within the past 6 months
- Within the past year
- Within the past 2 years
- 3 or more years

6. I have attended a professional development or in-service on special education, inclusion or IDEA.

- 0
- Within the past 6 months
- Within the past year
- Within the past 2 years
- 3 or more years

7. The following best describes my race

- Caucasian
- African American
- Other

8. What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?

- Bachelor Degree
- Master Degree
- Ed Specialist Degree
- Doctorate Degree

Other (please specify)