

2017

## Teachers' and Parents' Perceptions of Special Education Referral for African American Students

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# Walden University

College of Education

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Darlene Smith-McClelland

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
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Walden University

2017

Abstract

Teachers' and Parents' Perceptions of Special Education

Referral for African American Students

by

Darlene Smith-McClelland

MA, Northern Arizona University, 1999

BS, Grand Canyon University, 1989

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Leadership and Policy Change in Education

Walden University

March 2017

## Abstract

Patterns of representation of African Americans in K-12 special education programs vary across the United States. A school district in Arizona has a 13% African American population, yet the African American special education representation is 17%. The purpose of this grounded theory study was to generate an understanding of the processes related to special education referral and assignment of African American elementary students as perceived by 7 teachers and 6 parents in the school district. Inductive analysis including open, axial, and selective coding led to the categorization of three themes: complexity in the referral process, inadequate teacher-parent communication and lack of shared knowledge, and inadequate teacher training. A key finding was parents' dependency on teachers for placing children in special education without the requisite knowledge to ask questions or make critical choices for their children. Parents' powerlessness and lack of knowledge may contribute to the overrepresentation of African American children in special education programs in the district. Findings may be used to educate parents and train teachers in the processes of referral and assignment of students to special education programs.

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## Dedication

I would first like to thank God and give all the honor and glory to him my heavenly father. With affectionate memories of my grandmother especially of her loving words and a life led by kindhearted examples, she instilled in me a love of lifelong learning through finding joy in my journey. My journey through life would not have been worthwhile without my entire family and friends. Although too many names to mention, please know your love and support means the world to me. I thank God every day for blessing me with “my village.” I also dedicate this dissertation in loving memory of my Grandmamma, Granddaddy, my Daddy, Aunt Doris, Dad Boulware and Aunt Murline.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Overrepresentation of African Americans in special education has been a documented problem for at least five decades and the focus of attention from educational policymakers and stakeholders (Skiba, Artiles, Kozleski, Losen, & Harry, 2016). Decades of quantitative studies have shown that African American students have been between 1.5 to 3 times more likely to be diagnosed with specific categories of disabilities, including intellectually disabled (ID), emotionally disturbed (ED) and learning disabled (LD), compared to their White counterparts (Skiba et al., 2008; Sullivan et al., 2011). However, overrepresentation is not evident in all categories of special education: African American students have been less likely to be identified as having health impairments (HI) and deaf-blindness (Skiba et al., 2008). Nor does overrepresentation apply broadly at the national level: 16% of all public-school students are African American, and only 15% of the national special education population is African American (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2013). Furthermore, a recent study contradicted earlier research findings that racial minority students are less likely to receive the special education services they need, compared to White students (Morgan, Frisco, Farkas, & Hibel, 2010). Adding variables such as family poverty, single parent household, and prior achievement to a statistical model predicting special education program participation made the effects of racial/ethnic identity undeterminable. This body of research shows that disproportionality of special education classification for students is a complex and multidimensional issue and that its causes are prone to local conditions, which suggests

the need to examine local patterns of African American student representation in special education programs (Morgan et al.,2010).

Quantitative studies of this phenomenon, though providing consistent proof of patterns of disproportionality, have provided a limited understanding of the hows and whys of these patterns (Harry & Fenton, 2016; Sullivan & Artiles, 2011). Qualitative studies of underrepresentation of African Americans or other racial/ethnic minority representation in special education have brought to light “authentic voices of school personnel and families, as well as...detailed portraits of social beliefs and interactions that result in questionable placement decisions” (Harry & Fenton, 2016, p. 27), but have been limited.

Included in Chapter 1 is the background of the problem, a brief history of the policy regarding overrepresentation of African Americans in special education, the research problem, the purpose of the study, and the research questions. Grounded theory is discussed as a framework to address the research questions, and a summary of the research design is presented. Following these sections is a list of terms and definitions relevant to this study as well as a presentation of the research assumptions, scope, limitations, and delimitations. Finally, I explained the importance of this study and the contributions it will make to scholarship, practice, and social change.

### **Background**

Special education programs and policies have their roots in the early years of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which was passed in 1965. Since its inception, many amendments have been made, one of which was the 1975 passage of the

Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHC). This act required that states provide instruction for special needs students (U.S. Department of Education [U.S. DOE], 2004). EAHC was revised in 1990 and renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA). IDEA requires states to provide children with special education services as a condition for receiving federal funds (U.S. DOE, 2004).

The overrepresentation of ethnic minorities and low-income students in special education programs became a concern even before the advent of EAHC and IDEA, receiving attention from both researchers and policymakers since the early 1960s (Artiles & Bal, 2008). In 1997, amendments to IDEA added the stipulation that states must collect data with the intention of monitoring and reducing overrepresentation (Section 674). In 2004, as part of the reauthorization of the act, concerns regarding the overrepresentation of African American students in special education classes prompted Congress to address the situation (U.S. Government Accountability Office [U.S. GAO], 2013). The revised law required school districts to identify significant overrepresentation based on race and ethnicity (U.S. GAO, 2013).

In 2012, President Obama issued an executive order called the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans. This order was intended to address the overrepresentation of African American students in special education programs by finding the root causes for the numerous referrals to special education and to create a level playing ground for African American children. The secretary of education appointed an executive director to oversee the initiative and build an interagency group for support (Munro, 2012).



Causes of disproportionality of representation of racial/ethnic groups in special education programs include poverty, teacher bias, testing bias, cultural bias, inadequate access to research-validated instruction, and institutionalized racism (Artiles & Trent, 1994). Inadequate instructor preparation, low school rigor, and uninformed parents are also associated with disproportionality (Anderson, Howard, & Graham, 2007; Green, 2009). Poverty may exacerbate students' need for supportive interventions, which are found primarily in special education classes (Bollmer, Bethel, Garrison-Morgan, & Brauen, 2007). Racial inequality in its various forms likely affects disproportionality in complex ways. Disproportionality may be a symptom of "larger cultural and historical processes that shape the educational experiences and opportunities of students from historically underserved groups" (Waitoller, Artiles, & Cheney, 2010, p. 296). Racial inequality can also be manifested in the classroom. Dewey (1916) noted as far back as 1916 that classrooms are microcosms representing society in which Western values and thoughts are standards for students.

More recently, Alexander (2010) described the traditional setting of a public-school classroom as reflecting the predominant group's cultural principles. In the United States, the predominant group has been European American middle class. When educators are unfamiliar or indifferent to a student's culture, the indifference can appear in the teaching and learning; this phenomenon may account for referrals and placements that are inappropriate and incorrect (Irvine, 2012; Rice, 2003). Interviews with teachers have revealed difficulties they experienced connecting with and understanding the cultural behaviors of disadvantaged minority children (Skiba, Simmons, 2006). These

difficulties may be manifested in teacher bias, which may cause teachers to misdiagnose disruptive or nonnormal behaviors in certain populations of students as learning disabilities. Similarly, students who are struggling academically but have no documented disability may be placed incorrectly in special education, which is used as a substitute for remedial education programs (Antczak, 2011).

In addition to poverty and racial inequality leading to disproportionality, some special needs diagnoses may be overused or misused. Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and unspecified learning disability (LD) are two of the most frequently diagnosed learning and behavior issues, and these diagnoses often represent false positives that emerge from indiscriminate and unstandardized classification practices (Harrison & Rosenblum, 2010). An unknown number of these false positives may arise because students, particularly older students, desire the special accommodations that accompany these diagnoses. Some students may even fake LD and ADHD symptoms to take advantage of the allowances given to those with these diagnoses (Green, 2009).

### **Process of Special Education Referral and Assignment**

The Arizona Department of Education (2016) has an outline for referral and assignment processes across the state. The process indicates teachers and parents are two of the key participants in the special education referral and assignment process. The process usually begins when a parent or teacher (though it can be any professional in the school, including doctors or judicial officers) makes a referral, which is a written statement asking that a student be evaluated to determine whether he or she needs special education services. This written declaration is sent to the school's committee to address

the concern for the student. Every school or district has a committee who decides a student's special education needs and services. This committee includes parents and other stakeholders who have a broad range of experience planning for and working with students with disabilities. Together this group works to make sure that special education programs and services are provided to meet the student's needs. After review by this committee, the written referral may result in a request to have the student tested to see if he or she needs special education services ( Arizona State Department of Education, 2016)

According to North Syracuse Central School District (2016) Special education in New York State: A parent's guide, the subsequent evaluation process includes a written consent from the parents, as well as the use of various assessment tools and strategies. The evaluation is free to the parent. Students are tested to determine any learning difficulties and the challenges these potential difficulties would present regarding the student's participation and progress in the general education program. The committee then must consider information from parents when making decisions. The evaluation must be comprehensive and provide information about the student's abilities and needs. Assessments include information from parents and a group of evaluators, including at least one special education teacher or another person with knowledge of the student's potential disability. Tests and assessments, given as part of evaluation, must be provided in the student's spoken language by a trained, knowledgeable, certified person. A requirement is that the tests be unbiased and not discriminate racially or culturally (Arizona State Department of Education, 2016).

According to the Arizona Department of Education (2016), an initial evaluation to determine a student's needs must include a physical examination, a psychological assessment (if deemed appropriate for school-age students, but mandatory for preschool children), a social history, an observation of the student in his or her current educational setting, other tests or assessments that are appropriate (such as a speech and language assessment or a functional behavioral assessment), and other assessments as needed. The results of the evaluation along with the reports must be provided to parents. The committee member who administered the tests or assessments should explain the results to the parents. If parents are not in agreement with the results of the test presented, they have the right to obtain an independent educational evaluation and request that the school district pay for it ("Arizona State Department of Education, 2016).

After the evaluation is completed, parents are invited to a meeting, as members of the committee, to talk about the results. If parents cannot attend, they have the right to ask the district to accommodate their schedule and location of the meeting. At the meeting, the committee reviews the evaluation results. Based on that information and information that parents provide, the committee decides whether the student is eligible to receive special education services (Arizona State Department of Education, 2016).

The 2007 reauthorization of IDEA included numerous provisions designed to guarantee parental participation in special education referrals and assignments. The mandates directed schools to ensure that parents are part of all stages of the special education process. Provisions include involvement in the identification of special needs, assessment of student progress, individualized education plan (IEP) development, and

ensuring that procedural safeguards are intact. IDEA stipulates that schools and agencies are to provide evidence that they notified parents of meeting schedules that were convenient for their involvement. The order requires that procedural safeguards are presented to and understood by the parents and that parents understand their right to grieve differences (U.S. DOE, 2010).

### **Problem Statement**

Overrepresentation of African American students in special education programs is a particular problem in Arizona and the Park Place Elementary School District (pseudonym), which is 13% African American; however, the proportion of African American students who are learning disabled is 17% (Arizona Department of Education, 2016). This problem of overrepresentation in the Park Place Elementary School District may be “shaped by a variety of interpersonal, social, environmental, cultural, and institutional forces” (Sullivan & Bal, 2013, p. 476), which suggests the need to evaluate the complexity of the problem at multiple levels of analysis as well as to examine local patterns of representation that shape the educational experiences of African American students. An in-depth inquiry into the processes related to special education referral and assignment in the Park Place Elementary School District was needed.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this grounded theory study was to generate an understanding and explanation of the processes related to the special education referral and assignment of African American students in the Park Place School District in Arizona as perceived by teachers and parents. The points of view of parents and teachers enabled me to develop a

theory regarding the overrepresentation of African American students in special education in the Park Place Elementary School District in Arizona. This research contributes to the existing knowledge of the process of referral as experienced by teachers and parents.

### **Research Questions**

The study was conducted to answer the following research questions:

1. What are parents' perceptions of the practices used when African American students are referred and assigned to special education in the Park Place Elementary School District?
2. What are teachers' perceptions of the practices used when African American students are referred and assigned to special education in the Park Place Elementary School District?

### **Conceptual Framework**

For this study, I used grounded theory to investigate social processes regarding the referrals of African American students to special education services at a school district in Arizona. Grounded theory studies do not involve deducing an explanation for events based on a general theory. Rather, these studies begin with open-ended questions and involve the collection of data from participants without the presumptions that much was known about why participants act the way they do and the context of the social processes involved. Theoretical conclusions are developed based on the data. I used inductive data analysis in which the data were reviewed and organized until a comprehensive set of themes emerged.

Although this study was not deductive in nature, it was informed by the concept of a perceptual lens, which refers to educators' inclination to rely on their personal experiences and general stereotypes to view their students (Brendtro & Ness, 1995). This conceptual framework is explained further in Chapter 2. The grounded theory approach was most appropriate for this study because of the need to focus on participants' understanding and explanation of the referral processes by which African Americans students are assigned to special education programs.

### **Nature of the Study**

The grounded theory approach, as described by Corbin and Strauss (2008), was used for analysis of data and identification of the emergence of the relevant theory of the processes explored within this study. Data gathering consisted of face-to-face, semistructured, in-depth, audio-recorded interviews conducted with seven teachers and a focus group with eight parents, all of whom are essential stakeholders. The gathered data were transcribed and analyzed.

This qualitative research method includes a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived grounded theory about a phenomenon (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). These procedures included data collection, exploration of the content and context of interviews, and the evolution of succeeding analysis. The study followed Corbin and Strauss's three stages of grounded theory analysis: open, axial, and selective coding. For the first stage, Corbin and Strauss (2008) recommended researchers conduct open coding by going through the texts line by line or sentence by sentence looking for ideas and text to code or group based on similar meaning.

According to Corbin and Strauss (2008), the researcher must be alert to theoretical issues underlying the data text. Further, the researcher must develop sensitivity to the deeper theoretical levels and questions of the text that will constantly be asked. Processing the data line by line and sentence by sentence provided additional opportunities to gather ideas from the transcribed interviews. Following multiple reviews, some of the phenomena that contributed to the problem of disproportionality of minority students in special education was exposed.

The second stage, axial coding, involves the exploration of the relationships or connections between the various codes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Axial coding demonstrates the presence or absence of relationships between the identified concepts, which enables the researcher to process the meaning of the commonly coded content. Finally, stage three is selective coding, which is used to identify and describe a central phenomenon. At this stage, Corbin and Strauss (2008) indicated that once the primary phenomenon was identified, selective coding consists of systematically relating it to other categories. This approach requires manipulation of categories and themes. I organized the content by moving categories, creating new categories, and dividing existing categories. From the use of this process, primary categories emerged. These thematic categories enabled me to answer the study's guiding research questions.

### **Definition of Terms**

The following definitions were used in this study:



*Cultural diversity*: Cultural variations in speech, communications, dress, art, and customs, as well as differences in societal organization, values, and interactions with the environment (Clements & Jones, 2006).

*Disproportionate representation*: In the context of special education, disproportionate representation occurs when students from different racial or ethnic groups make up higher proportions of the program group than they compose the general population (Artiles & Trent, 1994).

*Individual education program (IEP)*: Often called an individual education plan, IEP is a legal educational document that describes and sets an educational goal for a student with a disability assigned to special education (MDLC, Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities, 2004).

*Referral process*: Gathering information and using appropriate tests, instruments, and techniques to identify students and make decisions about their academic assignments (Ysseldyke, 2001).

*Perception*: An individual's impression of a certain situation or thing (Seidman, 2006).

*Special education services*: Extra support offered students with disabilities in schools (Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities, 2004).

*Specific learning disorder (SLD)*: A disorder involving basic psychological and cognitive challenges for students (Arizona Department of Education [ADE], 2008).

### **Assumptions**

The principal assumption for this grounded theory study was that participants understood questions and responded honestly during interviews. Park Place Elementary School District in Central Arizona, the study site, is not representative of all public elementary school districts in the United States. However, this district is racially diverse, which provided a reasonable scope of data for understanding the processes related to referral and assignment of African American students to special education programs. The context was selected because it is where I was located for a time and had ready access to finding participants.

### **Scope**

The focus of this study was the process of referral to special education programs in an urban elementary school district in the *Southwestern* United States. The scope of this study included teachers and parents who participated in the referral process with their students or children. All parents in the study had children who had been referred to special education programs. The transferability of the findings is limited due to the local nature of the research, though themes are intended to provide insight that may be applicable in other contexts.

### **Limitations**

Because the participants were limited to an urban elementary school district in the state of Arizona, the findings may not be generalized to other people or districts outside of the studied district. In addition, the small sample identified through purposive selection is not representative of either the full local and larger regional or national groups

involved with the special education referral process. The use of a local contact to facilitate the solicitation of participants and the scheduling of the individual interview sessions may have benefited or inhibited these processes, impacting access to the targeted population. The study was not conducted in my state of residence, which decreased ease of access to the volunteers and reduced convenience of conducting in-person interviews. Another limitation was that no single mode of communication would guarantee inclusion to all parents. Certain parents were not reachable by e-mail or notes sent home with their children, meaning that the participant selection was biased towards parents who were relatively easy to contact.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study provides information to stakeholders in Park Place Elementary School District and other districts to help them understand the perceptions of teachers and parents about the processes related to the special education referral and assignments for African American students. Developing a theory and providing this information will help stakeholders develop practices that address disproportionalities in the assignment and referral processes for African American students . If unnecessary referrals are avoided through greater parental involvement, teacher training, and cultural awareness, schools could significantly reduce the number of inappropriate placements of minority students (DeNoble, DeNoble, Flores, & McCabe, 2007).

### **Implications for Social Change**

Misapplied special education labels may stigmatize students and limit their chances of becoming lifelong contributing members of society (Rebora, 2011).

Unnecessary referrals are a burden for the educational system and may have a negative impact on students' futures (Shealey & Scott, 2006). These students' experiences may lead to poor academic achievement, poor attitudes and peer relationships, low self-esteem, segregation from the general education population, and being denied access to core curriculum (Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, & Ortiz, 2010; Hosp & Reschly, 2004; Shealey & Scott, 2006). These barriers to academic achievement impede long-term opportunities for employment (Anderson et al., 2007). Inappropriate referrals to special education are not only costly and stigmatizing, they also redirect special education funds for students in need of those resources (Olson, 1991). This study contributed to social change by providing supporting evidence for the need to educate parents and train teachers in communicating to parents regarding the district processes of referral and assignment of elementary African American students.

### **Summary**

The disproportionate representation of African American students in special education programs has been problematic. The purpose of this grounded theory study was to generate understanding and explanation of the processes related to special education referral and assignment of African American students as perceived by teachers and parents in a public elementary school district located in the Southwestern United States. Data collection for this study included semistructured interviews with parents of elementary students placed in special education as well as their teachers. The recorded data from face-to-face interviews were transcribed and analyzed for themes and the emerging theory.

Chapter 2 contains a review of the literature related to African American students, referral processes, parental involvement, cultural influences, and teacher training related to special education placement and practices.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this grounded theory study was to generate understanding and explanation of the processes related to the special education referral and assignment of African American students as perceived by teachers and parents in a public elementary school district located in Southwestern Arizona. Artiles et al. (2010) reported that the overrepresentation of African American students in special education programs is a problem receiving much attention from educational stakeholders. The causes of overrepresentation are complex, shaped by a variety of interpersonal, social, environmental, cultural, and institutional biases (American Psychological Association, 2012; Shealey & Scott, 2006; Waitoller et al., 2010). The special education label may stigmatize these students and limit their chances of becoming lifelong contributing members of society (Rebora, 2011). Their experiences may lead to poor academic achievement, poor attitudes, low self-esteem, segregation from the general education population, and denied access to core curriculum (Artiles et al., 2010; Hosp & Reschly, 2004; Shealey & Scott, 2006).

This chapter begins with a discussion of the theoretical framework that guided this study. Next is a brief history of special education legislation and regulations in the United States and Arizona. Following this regulatory overview is a review of literature on overrepresentation of ethnic/minority groups in special education programs. Finally, literature on best practices in the referral and assignment process is presented.

Information for this chapter was collected using the library and journal databases of ProQuest Central, NEA Education Policy and Practice Department, Educational

Researcher, ERIC, and SAGE Full-Text. I also used the Google Scholar search engine. Key words and terms used to search these databases included *African American education, minorities education, academic achievement, African American culture, special education, referrals to special education, referral process to special education, referral of African American students, overrepresentation in special education, parental involvement, minority parental involvement, perceptions, teachers, No Child Left Behind, NCLB, and history of African American education.*

Original peer-reviewed journals and professional articles were downloaded from the Internet. The searches included more than 200 articles and research studies dealing with the identified subtopics. In selecting the most appropriate peer-reviewed publications, I chose articles that were published after 2008. However, to establish a historical base for this research, I chose publications that were written before 2008.

### **Theoretical Framework**

I used Corbin and Strauss's (2008) grounded theory approach, which consists of a comparative analysis of data. In this approach, conceptual ideas are developed based on the data, rather than prior theory, which entails an inductive data analysis process in which the data are worked until a comprehensive set of themes emerges. Though the data analysis process was inductive, the Gestalt concept of a perceptual lens, which refers to the way that educators rely on their personal experiences and stereotypes to view their students, was helpful (Brendtro & Ness, 1995).

An example that embodies the Gestalt perspective is the work of Farrell (as cited in Kode, 2002). Farrell was the first special educator credited for linking the needs and

instruction of her students to social work, medicine mental testing, psychology, and assessments. She was profoundly aware that students could not function or learn properly without their primary needs being met, specifically hunger and comfort. Farrell was mindful that a student was more than his or her behavioral expression or grade from an exam. She was cognizant that the student was connected to his or her home environment. Whether the guardians accept the child unconditionally, encourage the student to take risks, value education, and care for the child's emotional health and physical condition matters. Farrell also knew the value of educators who are skilled in their content area and skilled at encouraging students to perform at higher levels. Farrell alleged that human perceptions were frequently flawed; however, they often shared meaning or formed consensus. These shared understandings or perspectives enable individuals to make sense of the world they exist in, despite numerous misperceptions (Kode, 2002).

### **History of Special Education Law**

In the 1950s, public pressure forced the federal government to establish programs and measures for students with disabilities, students from lower socioeconomic conditions, and students having other disadvantages. Preceding the federal legislation requiring public education for children with various disabilities, the options for parents were to homeschool or find and pay for private education (Martin, Martin, & Terman, 1996). Parents formed advocacy groups in the early 20th century to bring public attention to what they regarded as the government's obligation to children with special disabilities. By 1961, President John F. Kennedy took note of the growing awareness by creating the President's Panel on Mental Retardation. Soon after President Dwight Eisenhower took



office, he signed Public Law 85–926, which provided monetary support to colleges and universities to train teachers and leadership personnel to teach students with mental retardation (Martin et al., 1996).

Congress expanded Public Law 85–926 in 1963 to incorporate grants for research addressing disabilities. Also needed was more funding to train teachers more extensively to educate students with special needs. Federal aid was provided to encourage local and state programs to provide special education during the administration of former Presidents Johnson and Nixon (Martin et al., 1996).

In 1965, to address inequities in education, President Lyndon Johnson acknowledged these issues and signed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA; Baily & Mosher, 1968). The objective of ESEA was to support schools' accountability and increase equality in education nationally. President Johnson said “by passing this bill, we bridge the gap between helplessness and hope for more than five million educationally deprived children. I believe deeply no law I have signed or will ever sign means more to the future of America” (Johnson, 1965).

In 1975, President Gerald Ford signed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act into law (PL 94-142). This law encouraged states to establish a procedure to satisfy the needs of every child by introducing six requirements to receive federal funds. Public Law 94-142 introduced several key concepts to special education for the first time, including “zero refuse,” which means that a free and appropriate public education is authorized for every child with special needs; nondiscriminatory identification and evaluation; the individualized education plan (IEP), the idea of the least restrictive

environment, which is a school environment free of restrictions and beneficial to the students; due process; and finally, parental participation, which is the principle that schools should support the active involvement of parents or guardians in their child's education (Slavin, 2006).

Additionally, two federal laws were enacted to ensure the educational rights of disabled children. Specifically, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (Amendments of 1973) were mandated (Martin, Reed, & Terman, 1996). To ensure that all children are accounted for within the broad spectrum of special education, Congress renamed and modified The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHA) to IDEA in 1975.

The IDEA statute required states to establish policies to impede the inappropriate identification or disproportionate representation by ethnicity and race of children with disabilities, including specific impairments described in Section 602(3) [612(a) (24)] (U.S. DOE, 2010). A provision of the updated legislation modified the conception of the least restrictive environment, requiring that children with disabilities, to the greatest extent possible, should be educated in the same classrooms with children without disabilities.

When data provided confirmation that disproportionate representation of minorities in special education was an ongoing problem, Congress prioritized the issue (U.S. GAO, 2013). Prior to the reauthorization of the act in 2004, Congress had required action to be taken by states and school districts to correct the issues of overrepresentation for at-risk students; however, Congress gave power to the states for self-governing to

identify and implement ways to resolve this problem within special education, and this leeway was problematic. The practice of self-governing resulted in a broad range of definitions and formulas for disproportionality that varied from state to state. The problem encountered was a lack of consistency identifying and addressing disproportionality (Posney, 2007; U.S. GAO, 2013).

Within the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004, states were required to address and monitor overidentified minority students' educational needs (U.S. GAO, 2013). Each state education agency (SEA) was required to monitor the local school districts to determine where there was inappropriate identification of students based on race and ethnicity. Additionally, the SEA was responsible for notifying the local school districts and offering support and guidance to aid the district if disproportionality was found. States are mandated to respond to all disproportionality that was the direct result of inappropriate identification acknowledged in the State Performance Plan (SPP) Indicators 9 and 10 (Appendix A; U.S. GAO, 2013).

### **Provisions in Federal Law Concerning Parents**

At about the same time that IDEA was reauthorized in 1974, Title VI of the ESEA was expanded to allow parents of disabled children the right to dispute the educational practices without burdensome legal costs. Later, the reauthorization of the ESEA in 2001 promoted four principles that stipulate a framework through which educators, families, and communities can work together to improve the education of children. These principles are (a) implementation of scientifically based research programs that effectively educate the students, (b) engagement of increased parental choice, and (c)

assurance of local flexibility and control to improve the ability to address and serve the specific academic needs of the children in each community.

In 2015 ESEA was again reauthorized, and provisions of parental involvement within Title I Part A of the ESEA 2015 were amended to emphasize the shared accountability for high student achievement between schools and parents. Provisions included increased public school choice and allowing eligible children from low-performing schools to receive supplemental educational services. The reporting provisions give parents the right to examine and participate in their child's education, which includes access to the qualifications of the teachers along with the ratings of the quality of the schools. With this information, parents can make informed choices for their children. This policy supports sharing responsibility for and helping to develop successful and effective academic programs within the schools their children attend.

### **Current Federal Regulations Concerning Special Education**

Federal funds are given annually to states to serve special needs students and prevent disproportionate placements. The federal government has empowered states to develop their description and course of actions for special education as long as they stay within the guidelines of PL 94-142 (U.S. DOE, 2010). Approximately 87.7% of funding at the elementary and secondary level is from nonfederal sources. The federal contribution to elementary and secondary education was approximately 10.8% in 2010 (U.S. DOE, 2010). The funds are from the U.S. DOE and other federal agencies, including the Department of Agriculture's School Lunch program and the Department of Health and the Human Services' Head Start program (U.S. DOE, 2004).

### **State of Arizona Referral Process**

The federal government mandates that states have a process, but each state determines its own referral procedures using the IDEA requirements, stating that before a student can receive special education instruction and related services, they must receive a full and comprehensive evaluation. The following steps are required: parental consent for the initial evaluation of the student, nondiscriminatory evaluation, evaluation by a team, evaluation of the student in all areas of suspected disability, use of more than one procedure to determine the student's educational program, and an assessment in the native language or mode of communication of the student (Burke, 1992).

In Arizona, where this study occurred, the state defines special education as explicit instruction that meets the extraordinary needs of a student with a disability (Arizona State Department of Education, 2016). According to guidance provided by the Arizona State Department of Education (2016), districts must adhere to the following four rules: Instruction to students is provided at no cost to the guardians; the referral evaluation process and identification is initiated by parents, teachers, and sometimes the student's physician; school-initiated referrals must follow strict procedural requirements that necessitate parental notification, participation, and consent; and students cannot be referred or evaluated for special education without written parental consent (Arizona State Department of Education, 2016).

Determination for assignment to special education programs is ultimately decided by the multidisciplinary evaluation team (MET) team. Districts have the option of choosing their own name for their team. Some districts in Arizona call their team the

student assist team. The evaluation requires the team to review all information and material about the student, which includes parental information, relevant documentation, and educational history. The decision to recommend special education placement is decided by three key questions: Does the student have one or more of the disabilities outlined in the criteria for special education? What is the student's present level of performance and educational needs? Does the student need special education to enable him or her to meet educational goals? Once the MET has decided the student's eligibility for special education, the team prepares an evaluation report explaining what action is proposed ( Arizona State Department of Education, 2016).

The disability categories for special education referrals are found in Title 15, Chapter 7, Article 4 of the Arizona Revised Statutes. The criteria noted in Title 15 can be found in Appendix B.

### **State of Arizona-Monitoring Overrepresentation**

The 1997 and 2004 reauthorizations of IDEA placed a larger priority on diagnosing African American students with individual needs. The revision authorized the state education offices to reduce racial disproportionality by considering ethnic, cultural and racial differences (Overton, 2009). ADE uses two types of monitoring tools to evaluate disproportionality, a Statistical Analysis Software (SAS) and a data analysis procedure developed by WestEd Research Corporation. Each school district reports their African American disability data for rates of disproportionality.

### **Park Place Elementary School District Referral Process**

This study took place in the Park Place Elementary School District (psudeonym). According to Park Place school district’s Special Education Department roster, approximately 99% of its students receive free and reduced lunch. The district serves approximately 10,493 students and has 21 schools. The composition of the demographics in the selected district consists of 80.6% (8,467) Hispanics, 14.0% (1,469) African Americans, 2.1% (272) Caucasians, and 2.4% (293) Others (“Special Education — The Official Website of the Arizona State Department of Education,” 2016).

Students enrolled in the special education program represent 10.6% of the total student population (“Special Education — The Official Website of the Arizona State Department of Education,” 2016). The ethnic breakdown of pupils enrolled in the urban school district at the time of the study is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1

*Ethnic Breakdown of Pupils Enrolled in Park Place District*

Ethnic Group	N Enrolled
African American	194
Hispanic	775
Caucasian	29
Native American	2
Asian	3
Total	1183

To determine the existence of overrepresentation of minority students in the selected urban district, the percentage of various ethnic groups in a program or category must be proportionate to the percentage of the equal group in the school population. Within the school district, the proportion of African American students in special education was overrepresented by 31%. At any time, a disproportionate number of pupils are identified from specific populations of students as having disabilities; this group was overrepresented.

The referral process for Park Place School District is as follows (“Special Education — The Official Website of the Arizona State Department of Education,” 2016): Students are generally referred by the classroom teacher, but any member of the school staff and/or parent may refer a student to the Student Assist Team (SAT). A student is referred to the team when learning, behavior, or emotional needs are not being met under existing educational circumstances. The classroom teacher(s) notifies the parent regarding these issues. Prior to the SAT meeting, teachers are advised to implement modifications to enhance learning opportunities. Modification may be as simple as changing seating location, a daily assignment sheet, additional wait time, or an increase in the use of visual teaching aids. Any modification that has been tried or is in place would be discussed with a parent at the SAT meeting (“Special Education — The Official Website of the Arizona State Department of Education,” 2016).

At an SAT meeting the student (when appropriate) and the parents meet with a group of teachers, school nurse, and/or administrators. The facilitator leads the group through a process, which results in a written plan of action. Next, the team discusses the



student's strengths, concerns, gathers pertinent history and information and discusses present interventions and outcomes. The team then brainstorms interventions and chooses actions to complete a plan of action for student success. At the end of the meeting, a follow-up date is scheduled to review progress. Parents are invited to meet again with members of the SAT to evaluate changes and growth in their student ("Special Education — The Official Website of the Arizona State Department of Education," 2016).

### **Factors Contributing to Referrals**

Some of the most common causes for special education referrals include: (a) peer relationships low, (b) demonstrates irritation, (c) academic expectations below average, (d) antisocial and introverted manners, (e) disruptive actions, (f) aggressive behavior, (g) refusal to work or little effort, and (h) little attention span (Shippen, Curtis, & Miller, 2009). Of these rationales, five can be explained by connecting socialization patterns employed and reinforced by the student's social group or the environment. For instance, a teacher may see a student as withdrawn or antisocial, relating these behaviors to a disability.

Most referrals to special education programs are valid, but some of them are not attributed to an identified disability and are therefore suspicious (Heward, 2006). These factors are known as illegitimate. Illegitimate reasons for referral are poor peer relationships, displaying frustration, shy and withdrawn behavior, fighting, and student refusal to work, poor attendance, low socioeconomic standing, and the student's home circumstances (Blanchett, 2009; Heward, 2010; Hutton, 1985). Also included are rates of transiency, tardiness, familial socioeconomic rate, lack of effort, having a sibling

previously identified as special needs, physical look of a student, parents' education level, and the enrollment in a school with a large minority population. In contrast, legitimate reasons for referring a student include performing below an average expectation, participating in disruptive behavior, and Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (Hutton, 1985).

An example of an invalid referral reason is a teacher evaluating a student's inability to maintain positive peer relationships as a disability (Heward, 2003). Heward (2003) explains, if a student was in the presence of adult figures excessively or was an only child, he or she may not possess the social nuances necessary to interrelate with his or her peers. This lack of interrelating with peers does not equate to the student's inability to relate to peers; it simply means the student has not learned yet how to do so. The school could access this information and provide structured opportunities to help the student develop this social skill. Schools provide pupils who display social deficiencies with small mixed-gender therapy or counseling programs; students demonstrate growth (Heward, 2003). They showed growth in their interpersonal skills and are better prepared to interrelate with peers (Gottlieb & Gottlieb, 1991).

A unfortunate predictor of referrals is the lack of teachers' cultural awareness within the school's community. Dunn, Cole, and Estrada (2009, p. 48) stated, "teacher interactions, perspectives, classroom practices, curriculum expectations, along with students' characteristics work together to minimize or maximize a student's possible referral for special education." According to Artiles and Trent (2000), stereotyping cultural differences and misunderstanding cultural nuances has been an influential factor

in children's placements in special education. Some teachers perceive cultural differences as deficiencies. Such interpretations have resulted in referrals based on idiosyncratic principles formed by biases, personal background, and cultural beliefs (Hilliard, 1999; Lee, 2010; Obiakor, 2007).

### **Problem of Disproportionality**

Disproportionate representation of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students in special education programs has been a concern for nearly five decades (Bal, A., Sullivan, A. L., & Harper, J., 2014). Disproportionality is related to multiple social, environmental, interpersonal, institutional, and cultural factors (Artiles, et al., 2010; Skiba, et al., 2008) and it exists in various forms and at different levels. According to a policy brief from the National Education Association. (2008, p. 1), overrepresentation can be present in any of the following ways:

- National, state, and district level over-identification of CLD students as disabled;
- Higher incidence rates for certain CLD populations in specific special education categories, such as mental retardation or emotional disturbance;
- CLD students who are receiving special education services in more restrictive or segregated programs;
- Excessive incidence, duration, and types of disciplinary actions, including suspensions and expulsions, experienced by CLD students.

There are two ways disproportionate representation can arise: children can either be misidentified or misclassified (Togut, 2011). Misidentification refers to

inappropriately recognizing students as having disabilities. Misclassification refers to inaccurately labeling students who have been identified for special education services as needing one class of services when in fact they need another class. In the educational system, minority students eligible for special education can be both misidentified and misclassified.

In particular, identification of African Americans for special education programs is sometimes based on factors beyond medical, cognitive, or developmental functions (Artiles, et al. 2010). Diagnosis is frequently based on the subjective disability categories, meaning that no clinical or professional finding was at the center of the diagnosis process (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Waitoller, Artiles, & Cheney, 2010).

### **Overrepresentation Research and Explanations**

In a review of studies from previous researchers between 1968 and 2006 Waitoller, A. Artiles, and D. Cheney (2010), examined practices, policy and implications of overrepresentation for research. They inquired into what characteristics of overrepresentation had been studied and what ways the studies framed the issue. Four international databases were searched using systematic procedures to identify relevant studies. Overrepresentation research was found to have increased over time since 2000. Most of the studies used quantitative design and focused on African Americans and learning disabilities categories. Waitoller et. al. (2010) characterized overrepresentation studies as falling into one of three categories: socio-demographic, socio-historic, and diagnostic.

## **Sociodemographic**

The sociodemographic category involved examination of individual circumstances and characteristics. In particular, poverty and race are two sociodemographic explanations for disproportionality in special education. poverty is associated with disability and influences the probability of being assigned a disability diagnosis (Fine, 2002; Skiba, et al., 2005; Skiba, et al., 2006). Some of the causes are direct effects of an impoverished environment leading to developmental deficits. The risk is greater for children in poverty of having low birth weight and being exposed to environmental poisons, which are factors that could impede mental development (Fine, 2002). Additionally, children coming from atypical family arrangements and poor communities may not be as well prepared to enter school (Fine, 2002).

Race, of course, is closely associated with poverty in the U.S. and teasing apart the effects of race and class can be difficult. Skiba, et al. (2005), acknowledged the assumptions connecting poverty and drace: African American students are more likely to live in poverty be lower achieving. Lower achieving students are at greater risk for special education referral and subsequent placement (p.131).

Delgado & Scott (2006), used logistic regression analysis to examine the relationship between risk factors associated with poverty and the referral rate for special education. They used information from the birth certificates of preschoolers in Florida and reported that issues connected with poverty including the child's low birth weight, prematurity-related biological factors, and low maternal education, were all factors associated with high rates of referral for special education services.

**Sociohistoric**

The second category of overrepresentation research was the socio-historical perspective, which accounted for 5% of the researchers' studies. The studies concentrated on the differential power issues associated with race relations and were usually grounded in the assumption that operational factors such as race and power shape the decisions made by school districts, teachers, parents, and administrators. Studies of this type have used school or district level data to explore structural variables related to group level risks, such as enrollment, racial and linguistic composition of the student body, expenditures per-pupil, ratios between student and teacher, credentials of teachers, teacher demographics, mean academic performance, proportions of students in free and reduced lunch programs, discipline patterns and dropout rates among students (Coutinho et al., 2002; Eitle, 2002; Hosp & Reschly, 2004; Skiba, Poloni- Staudinger, Simmons, Feggins-Azziz, & Chung, 2005; Sullivan, 2011).

An example of the sociohistoric perspective was a study by Eitle (2002), which focused on the relationship between school districts' structural factors, school policies for segregation, economic/political structures, and placement of African American students in specific categories of mild mental retardation (MMR) in special education. Data from OCR and NCES were used to secure 981 samples from school districts across the nation. The districts were described based on their enrollment, physical location, type of area (e.g., rural, suburban, urban), and available special education services (i.e., within and outside of the district). Political-economic configurations were operationalized as the students' race (i.e., African American and Caucasian), parental level of education,

household income, and school desegregation guidelines. The proportion of African American students enrolled in the district was adversely correlated to the representation of these students in these programs.

### **Professional Practices**

Finally, 62% of the studies focused on the various professional practices used to determine students' disability diagnosis. These studies addressed decision-making processes, potential team members' biases regarding referrals, students' perceptions, other beliefs, and assessment issues. One example was Skiba et. al. (2006), who interviewed 66 educators to survey their assumptions about overrepresentation. The educators stated that poverty and the risk factors related to it contributed to the unequal representation of African American children in special education. Also, they identified the lack of training and resources to handle the challenging behaviors. Finally, the practitioners indicated that overrepresentation was caused by a mismatch of cultures between the students and the school.

Alexander's dissertation research (2009) addressed the problem of the disproportionality of African Americans in special education by conducting critical white research and concluded that some teachers have abandoned their responsibilities to teach ethnically diverse students. He found that the typical public school classroom teacher referred culturally different children to special education based on Caucasian cultural values. He articulated the imbalance between teachers and students in inner-city public schools, where the population was primarily students of minority decent and the teachers were Caucasian, middle-class, females.

Kearns, Ford, and Linney (2005) lead a mixed-design study with school psychologists to understand their perspectives of the overrepresentation of African American children in special education. The psychologists described overrepresentation from a perspective of cultural disadvantage. They suggested overrepresentation was associated with a failure to value educational experiences, lack of parental involvement, teen pregnancy, and pressure from parents and teachers as reasons for disproportionality. Further, the psychologists asserted that if poverty persists the problem among African American students will persist.

Three case studies conducted by Harry, Klingner, & Hart (2005) described the general environment as pessimistic in schools concerning African American families living in poverty. This multiple case study was conducted to challenge the notion that poverty ridden African American parents are the cause of their children's learning deficiencies (Harry, et al., 2005, p. 101). The results illustrated the negative attitudes school professionals held towards African Americans living in poverty, even though they did not establish relationships with the families they served. The researchers contended that in the absence of knowledge about the families, the teachers assumed these families were characterized by large family size, single motherhood, and incarceration or drug abuse (Harry, et al., 2005, p.110).

Knotek (2012), conducted an ethnographic study in rural Carolina to examine two multidisciplinary teams. He found that the process was more subjective when students presented behavioral problems or were from lower socioeconomic positions, meaning that instead of focusing on the original reason for the referral, the multidisciplinary team



focused on the profile of the student (i.e., behavior problems and socioeconomic status). Knotek stated this propensity might contribute to overrepresentation from referrals to special education of African American students as compared to their Caucasian peers.

**Teacher training.** Inadequate teacher training has been highlighted in research as a particular issue associated with disproportionality. Since teachers are the primary communicators of knowledge in the American school structures, they must be prepared and trained how to instruct minority students within a continually changing racial climate (Alexander, 2009; Frankenberg and Hawley, 2008). Some teachers in mainstream classrooms are not adequately trained to comprehend past the fact that students who present problems such as behavioral or learning issues may need to have an intervention plan in place (Drane, 2002).

Often, teachers could opt to implement preventative measures rather than removing students from their peer group. Donovan and Cross (2002), found that poorly prepared or unsupported teachers might refer students to special education as a way of dealing with discipline problems and insufficient resources.

### **Parent engagement**

A second major aspect of school organization that fits into the category of professional practices and can impact referral and assignment to students in special education is parent engagement. Researchers have documented extensively the importance of parental engagement in the children's educational accomplishment (Baker & Snowden, 1998; Becher, 1984; Chavkin & Williams, 1993; Cotton & Wikelund, 1989; Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Hickman, Greenwood, & Miller,

1995; Wang, Haertel, and Walberg, 1998; Lall, Campbell, & Gillborn, 2004; Staples & Dilberto, 2010). Research suggests that parents engaged in their child's educational experience have highly developed social skills, fewer behavioral problems, and demonstrate well-rounded social-emotional adjustment (Baquedano-Lopez, Alexander, & Hernandez, 2013). Students achieve academically and have more positive attitudes and behaviors when parents are encouraging, knowledgeable, and actively involved (Kyriakides, 2005).

However, studies of minority parental involvement in public schools have shown that their needs are not being addressed by school districts (Brandon & Brown, 2009; Zions et al., 2003). School organization may intimidate parents if, as students, these parents had experienced negative interactions with teachers and schools (Thompson, 2003). The absence of a connection between parents and the school may result from lack of interaction, creating less-than-favorable cooperation by minority parents in the educational process of their children (Thompson, 2003).

Additionally, parental involvement in schools might be difficult for African American parents simply because they are unsure or unfamiliar with their roles and how they are expected to be involved. Educators can exhibit an absence of respect resulting in parents' perceived alienation from their child's education process (Brandon, Higgins, Pierce, Tandy, & Sileo, 2010). Some school staff have a pessimistic view of minority students and their families, which contributes to these parents not feeling comfortable about involvement (Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2008). Educators can then misunderstand the reasons for parents' lack of involvement and may think it indicates a lack of concern,

when in fact some parents do not feel comfortable asking for help (Williams, 2007). It is important for teachers to understand the barriers that parents sense within the school that lead to negative perceptions and low involvement (Brandon & Brown, 2009; Smalley & Reyes-Blanes, 2001; Thompson, 2003).

Research also shows that African American parents have uncertainties regarding special education because of not understanding the referral process or insufficient or miscommunication from the school when their child was identified with a disability (Williams, 2007). These parents feared that their child will be placed in a self-contained classroom away from their friends or traditional children (Williams, 2007).

Researchers explained that minority parent involvement was low in their child's institution, both in general education programs and regarding special education programs (Coots, 1998). Some of the negative factors influencing participation levels are (a) little awareness of parental rights, (b) parents' inadequacy of knowledge or indifference about their children's educational achievement, and (c) little communication between school professionals (Brandon & Brown, 2009). Parental involvement may also be influenced by personal factors, such as (a) time/job constrictions, (b) inadequate of childcare, (c) need of transportation, (d) financial limitations, and (e) requiring of knowledge of educational jargon (Coots, 1998).

The work schedules of parents, the fast pace that society forces upon them and their disintegrating role has lead to the decline in parental involvement (Ferrara, 2009; Gibson & Jefferson, 2006; Mapp, Johnson, Strickland, & Meza, 2008; Jeynes, 2010, 2010; Mapp, et al., 2008). Researchers are aware that children in urban areas are more

often the victims of this reality (Jasis & Ordonez, 2012; Lightfoot, 2007; Mapp et al., 2008).

Reports have been made from some parents that they do not know where to begin in terms of being involved in their child's education (Chavkin, 1989). Parents have complained that the referral process was overwhelming and intimidating (Williams, 2007). Some parents have expressed feelings of fear, depression, and even school phobia which causes them to feel a sense of isolation (Epstein, 2005). These are cycles of noninvolvement in which parents withdraw from communicating with teachers and administrators (Brandon et al., 2010).

African American parents' relationships with schools are further contingent on how parents view the school's qualifications. Researchers describe this type of parental involvement as confrontational (Lareau & Horvat, 1999). Yet, Diamond and Gomez (2004), described parent involvement conduct among low-income African American parents as reform-based. Low-income parents aim to push for accountability because they identify the quality of their children's school as not meeting standards (Munn-Joseph & Gavin, 2008)

### **Promising Practices**

Given the longevity and magnitude of issues with disproportional representation of CLD children in special education programs, educators have developed promising practices to decrease the incidence of misidentification and misclassification and to ensure minority students are neither over- nor underrepresented in special education programs. These practices address some of the identified antecedents of

disproportionality such as parental behavior and knowledge, and communication between schools and parents.

### **Home-School Partnerships**

Practices and proceedings for special education referrals and how the school communicates and receive information from parents are essential (Thompson, 2003). The reauthorization of IDEA called NCLB in 2001, was created to address the issues of the parental involvement in schools by providing a Title 1 financial grant (Brandon & Brown, 2009). This federally funded grant supports the purpose of aiding schools to ensure high quality, equal and fair educational opportunities to all disadvantaged students. Title I also has ordered provisions for parent programs to help in student achievement. The funding promotes participation of parents in meaningful communication with the school as well as becoming academically involved in their child's learning activities includes the following: (a) That parents are an integral part of their child's learning (b) parents are encouraged to become actively involved in their child's education at school (c) parents are considered partners in the education process, in decision-making and participate on advisory committees; and (d) other activities carried out, such as those described in section 1118 of the ESEA. (US-DOE, 2004, p. 3).

### **Prereferral Teams**

Pre-referral intervention teams (PITs) are teams at school sites that involve teachers, school psychologists, administrators, and other specialists; depending on the concerns for the child that are popular in some districts (Machen, Wilson, & Notar, 2005). These teams are formed to deal with the identification of academic challenges

before a student is referred for special education services (Burns & Symington, 2002; Truscott, Cohen, Sams, Sanborn, & Frank, 2005). PITs are proactive and collaborate to spotlight the challenges of struggling children in the general education situation prior to being referred to a “more restricted environment” (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006).

### **Holistic Approach to School/Family**

Research has shown the relationship between culture and motivation; therefore, teaching a diverse student population requires a holistic approach with an emphasis on built-in motivation (Hood, Hopson, & Frierson, 2005). Bruffee (2002) identified three principles that might help to achieve a more culturally harmonious existence between families and schools. The three principles are: (a) cultural communities are identical in many simple elements of social structure, needs, and desires; (b) culturally diverse communities brought together in heterogeneous societies contribute to a solid common ground; and, (c) taking the common ground involves learning the tact of re-negotiating across the boundaries that divide.

Using these principles, Bruffee (2002), developed an all-inclusive picture uniting the home and the school to promote student achievement. When parents embrace these principles, Bruffee suggests the focus at home could be channeled towards advancing their child’s achievement. This includes, specifically, upholding high expectations for their children, developing a shared language, maintaining a healthy//positive home environment that includes provision of guidance, academic support, and encouragement. This culminates with the home becoming an environment filled with opportunities to

explore new ideas and become engaged in new experiences. These principles may also reestablish familiar, positive work habits within the family.

Researchers concur (e.g., Cochran & Henderson, 1986; Epstein, 2005; Henderson & Berla, 1994) when learning institutions work with families to encourage learning, children are more likely to succeed in school and life after school. Schools that can build partnerships with parents are eager to respond to their apprehensions and respect their contributions. These schools are successful in supporting connections that are intended to improve student's academic success (Henderson & Mapp, 2002b). The emphasis that the parents are partners in the school; their involvement should be recognized as necessary and valued (Cotton & Wikelund, 1999).

The most successful parent partnership programs are those that offer parents a variety of roles in the framework of a well-coordinated and meaningful program. It was important to give parents an opportunity to select from a variety of activities that will accommodate their schedules (Cotton & Wikelund, 1999). Schools may offer an educational component for the parents. When planning programming and services, school personnel need to evaluate their willingness to involve parents and determine how they want them to participate. Machen, Wilson, and Notar (2005), indicated, that to develop effective parent involvement programs, educators should explore ways in which to help school leaders identify best practices to promote parent trust and participation in the process of their child's education. Personnel from the school identified in this study understand the research and the importance of parent involvement as it relates to student achievement.

## Summary

Researchers theorize that many factors contributed to the overrepresentation of minority students being referred and placed in special education programs. Many concerns such as teacher perceptions, communication discrepancies between teachers and their students are a lack of cultural awareness and insufficient training. Moreover, an unqualified and untrained teacher intensifies educational problems.

The literature review confirms the connection between parental involvement and a child's educational environment are vital factors when it comes to facilitating student learning. Better communication between school personnel and parents could help African American students to enhanced learning and may contribute to preventing misdiagnoses and unnecessary referrals to special education. Actively involving parents, predominantly in low-income areas remains a significant challenge for educators. However, instructional support teams such as Pre-Referral Intervention Teams (PIT) have made great strides in working with all educational stakeholders (parents, school personnel, students) to alleviate inappropriate placement and overrepresentation of minority students in special education (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006).

Chapter 3 provides an overview of the research methodology proposed for use within this study. Addressed herein are the role of the researcher, selection of participants, instrumentation, ethical procedures, data collection, and analysis. Chapter 4 will incorporate a presentation of the study's findings. Chapter 5 will include a summary and interpretation of the results. As the final chapter of this work, Chapter 5 will



conclude with a discussion of the answers to the guiding research questions and the implications of the study's findings.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this grounded theory study was to generate understanding and explanation of the processes related to the special education referral and assignment of African American students as perceived by teachers and parents in a public elementary school district located in Southwestern United States. This qualitative study was designed to gather detailed insights, examples, and feedback from parent and teacher interviews that could facilitate the identification of factors contributing to the disproportionality and overrepresentation of African American students placed in special education programs in this district.

This chapter includes a description of the grounded theory method, which was the qualitative research approach used to guide this study. This chapter also includes the problem statement, a discussion of data collection, and the purpose statement. Also included are the research questions, conceptual framework, nature of the study, scope of the research, assumptions, and limitations. Finally, this chapter includes the ethical procedures and the summary.

#### **Research Design and Rationale**

The following two research questions guided this study:

1. What are parents' perceptions of the referral practices used when African American students are referred and assigned to special education in Park Place School District?

2. What are teachers' perceptions of the referral practices used when African American students are referred and assigned to special education in Park Place School District?

The grounded theory approach as described by Corbin and Straus (2008) was most appropriate for this study because it focused on the participants' perceptions and understanding of the referral processes of African American students to special education. Grounded theory research is not tied to any preexisting theory; the theories developed are new and offer the possibility of creative revelations (Charmaz, 2014). This study included qualitative data from parents' and teachers' perceptions and understanding of the referral process obtained from semi-structured in-depth individual interviews (see Elliott, 2006) and focus group interviews (see Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Creswell (2003) described constant comparative methodology as a means of taking information from results collected and correlating it to emerging categories. This study resulted in the development of a theory regarding the way the referral process was perceived by these stakeholders in this district and how it was connected to the overrepresentation of African American students in special education. I explored participants' individual experiences through the course of their child's referral to special education.

### **Other Methods Considered**

Several other research approaches were considered. A case study approach was inappropriate for this study because case study researchers utilize a process in which a situation, person, or group is studied through detailed descriptions over a specified period

(Creswell, 2003; Stake, 2006). Ethnographic research was inappropriate because it requires examination of cultural beliefs, customs, and behaviors from the information collected through fieldwork. Although this study was culturally specific to African Americans, its focus was not to observe and study this group. The goal was to explain the factors involved in the referral process that contribute to an overrepresentation into special education.

I rejected narrative research inquiry because of the necessity to explore the life of an individual or small group of individuals. Narrative research involves the collection of extensive information to tell stories of the lives of individuals (Creswell, 2003). This approach would not have been suitable to answer my research questions. Last, the phenomenological design was not suitable for this study because the intention was not to describe the lived experiences of participants (Creswell, 2003).

### **Role of the Researcher**

In 2004, prior to the start of my enrollment with Walden University, I was employed as an assistant principal at an elementary school in the Park Place School District. It was here that I became aware of and concerned with the number of minority students being referred to specific learning disability programs. I decided to make the referral process the focus of my research. At the time of the study, I was no longer employed at this district and had moved out of state to teach at the community college level, where I worked with previously referred special education students to prepare them for college level work. Subsequently, I returned to Arizona where I currently work in a different district with special needs students before they are assigned to special education.

I conducted a face-to-face semi-structured audio-recorded interviews with teachers and a focus group with parents. I served as the sole interviewer during the focus group and individual interviews with key informants. With Glaser's statement, "all was data," (2001 p.145). Following Glaser's (2001) recommendation, I minimized biases by (a) wording interview questions in neutral language to avoid influencing the respondents' answers, (b) identifying biases by corroborating with other observers or stakeholders who provided insight and information, and (c) asking for clarification if participants answers were contradictory or vague.

As suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998), I was alerted to theoretical issues lying behind the text and developed sensitivity to particular concerns. Analyzing data line by line and sentence by sentence provided me additional opportunities to gather ideas to code from the transcribed interviews. Following multiple stages of data analysis, the details of the phenomenon of interest were exposed.

### **Methodology**

This section includes a description of the population and sampling strategy. It also includes a discussion of the data collection procedures used, including the instrumentation for the focus group and interview sessions. Finally, this section outlines the data analysis plan.

### **Participant Selection**

The population for this study was parents of special education students and teachers who interacted with these students and participated in the referral process in some way. The research setting was an urban school district with 21 K-8 schools,

approximately 1,400 employees, and 12,000 students in Arizona. The sampling strategy was purposive. For parents, I sought approximately 15 parents of African American students in first through eighth grades who had been referred to special education services and accepted and enrolled in a special education program. To be eligible for participation in the study, parents must have participated in the referral process for their child in the selected urban school district. For teachers, I attempted to secure approximately 10 representatives of both special education and general education. It was understood that, although representing the two major roles in the referral process, this sample would not be representative of any team, locale, or time beyond the selected district during the current school year.

Fifteen was a sufficient number of parents to sample because this number represented different points of view (i.e., grade levels and disabilities) to reach saturation based on the aims of the study. Many researchers believe that focus groups are more productive if limited to between eight and 10 participants (Strauss & Corbin, 1997 p. 136). Ten teachers were identified as a representative sample for this population given the similarity of the procedures teachers follow and the environments in which they work.

### **Participant Recruitment Procedures**

To recruit participants for the study, I tried to meet with the district superintendent. My initial telephone call required speaking with the administrative assistant providing specifics for the call. A return call by the administrative assistant provided me with information needed to move forward with my data collection. An email

received from the district office provided me the procedures to be followed and the name of the district's contact person responsible for granting permission to conduct the study.

District permission was sent to the principals stating that their schools could participate in the study. Following the receipt of the principal's contact information, I sent an email of introduction and followed up with a telephone call. The principals informed their teachers of my study and asked that they contact me directly if they wanted to volunteer. After being contacted by interested volunteer teachers, I provided each with a letter of invitation (Appendix B).

Next, I asked principals to send a message to all parents seeking volunteers to participate in a focus group. Because district policy prohibits the targeting of specific parent subgroups, all parents were invited to volunteer for the study. I deferred to each principal's judgment regarding the most appropriate way to communicate with parents and teachers. Principals were made aware that regular U.S. Postal Service mail was not an option to communicate with parents due to the lack of budget for postage.

The recruiting message to parents explained the purpose of the study and asked the parents to contact me via e-mail or phone (Appendix C). Once contact was established, I informed parents who fit the criteria of the location and time of the focus group and answered any questions they had about the purpose or procedures of the study as well as their rights as human subjects. Each parent participant was asked to sign a letter of informed consent at the start of the focus group session.

For teachers, I communicated with each participant by phone or e-mail to schedule a time and location for their face-to-face semi-structured interview. I offered to

hold interviews in a comfortable place of their choice (i.e. their office, public library, or other convenient and comfortable public location). In this study, all interviews were held in teachers' classrooms after school hours. At the beginning of each interview, I secured a signed letter of informed consent from each teacher.

### **Instrumentation and Procedures for Data Collection**

I developed a focus group interview guide (Appendix F) for the interview with the parent focus group. This guide was structured around the study's research questions and included a series of questions designed to obtain data regarding parents' perspectives and experiences of the special education referral process. The focus group interview was held in a private room located in a public meeting facility. With permission of the participants, the interview was recorded using a digital audio recorder. I also took notes during the interview. Prior to the start of the focus group interview session, each participant was required to read and sign an informed consent form.

Teacher interviews were conducted with the use of a semi structured interview question guide (Appendix G). With permission of the participants, interviews were recorded using a digital audio recorder. I also took notes during interviews. Prior to the start of each interview, each participant was required to read and sign an informed consent form.

### **Data Analysis**

In grounded theory, theoretical explanations are scaffold by identifying the phenomena regarding the origin of the conditions and circumstances, how they are communicated through action/interaction, the consequences that may arise from the



effects from them, and the variations of the qualifiers (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). This requires all participants to have firsthand experience of the phenomenon being studied.

I was alerted to theoretical issues within the text and developed a sensitivity to the deeper theoretical levels. To achieve this, I constantly asked questions (e.g., who, when, where, what, how, how much, why). I also conducted a spiral analysis to implement inductive reasoning. Going line by line and sentence by sentence provided multiple opportunities to gather ideas and text to code the transcribed data. Following multiple reviews, the phenomenon that contributed to the problem of overrepresentation of minority students in special education in this district was exposed. A coding process was adopted to identify, group, and name the emergent themes.

I continued the study with axial coding involving the exploration of relationships or connections between the various codes. Axial coding was used to determine the presence or absence of connections between concepts. Selective coding was used to identify a central phenomenon. Once the central phenomenon is chosen, selective coding is used to systematically relate it to other categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I continued comparing, assessing, and manipulating the categories. By moving categories, creating new categories, and dividing existing categories, I identified the emerging primary categories.

The process of analysis included transcribing, coding, and categorizing data gathered from the interviews. The data processing was initiated with digital technology to conduct the transcription of the recorded interviews and the word count analyses. I used NVivo11 software to expose the related categories throughout the recorded data (Strauss

& Corbin, 1998). This data analysis led to the development of a theory concerning factors that can lead to overrepresentation of African American students in special education. The same processes were used for each of the interview sets (parent focus group and teacher key informants).

NVivo 11 was data management software that facilitates coding of non-numeric data such as documents, open-ended survey response text, audio, video, and images. NVivo allows researchers to organize and classify data relatively quickly. With the assistance of NVivo, I analyzed these data to generate understanding and explanation of the processes related to the special education referral and assignment of African American students within this district. I followed Corbin and Strauss' (2008) three stages of grounded theory analysis, open, axial, and selective coding. The processes involved open coding to categorize the findings, axial coding to find relationships between the categories, and selective coding to find the main category and consistently correlated it to all other categories.

Corbin and Strauss (2008) recommend that the researcher use open coding by analyzing the text line-by-line or sentence-by-sentence looking for ideas and text to code. Following multiple reviews, the phenomena that contributed to the problem of overrepresentation of minority students in special education was revealed. Axial coding involved the exploration of relationships or connections between the various codes. Using axial coding demonstrated the presence or absence of connections between concepts, seeking causal relationships and categories until saturation was reached. Selective coding was used to identify a central phenomenon. Corbin and Strauss (2008) indicate that once

the central phenomenon was chosen, selective coding consists of systematically relating it to other categories.

I used the research questions as a guide to coding relevant themes from all sections of the text. As ideas were developed, I assigned working definitions to each code. As the transcripts were analyzed, the definitions will be continually challenged, and new codes may be developed because the text may not be supported by the properties. At this point, codes that are rarely used will be dismissed. Constant comparison means continually comparing the categories and codes of new text with current categories and codes fully developing the properties of the overall categories for the individual codes. This was an ongoing process until saturation was reached, meaning no new codes or categories emerged and coding more transcripts would continue to produce a repetition of themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Finally, if needed, responded verification and member checking processes was used to confirm the meaning intended by the participants during the interviews. This checking did not warrant follow up questions or a request for feedback about the identified themes. The thematic findings will be made available for any interested participants.

### **Trustworthiness**

The validity of this study was based on four criteria: credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Polit & Beck, 2012). Credibility referred to the believability of the findings and involves conducting the research in a demonstrably believable manner. Transferability referred to the potential

that results can be generalized or transferred to new surroundings or groups.

Confirmability referred to the data's accurateness, relevance, or objectivity. And dependability was the consistency of data collected during different circumstances over a period.

In this study, credibility was provided by a transparent and documented data collection process as described in this dissertation and was further enhanced by triangulation. Triangulation refers to using several methods to study a single phenomenon. Patton (2002) identified four types of triangulation: methods, sources, analyst, and theory, not all of which are appropriate to any given study. In this case, I employed source and methods triangulation to enhance credibility. I utilized two sources: parents and teachers, and compared their interviews to each other. I also approached these two sources with different data collection methods: parents were interviewed in a focus group setting and teachers were interviewed one-to-one.

Confirmability and dependability were enhanced through the use of audit trail notes and a reflexive journal. Because readers of qualitative research may not share a researcher's interpretation of the data, they should nonetheless be able to discern how I reached my conclusions. To provide a way for the reader to assess the trustworthiness of a study, it was necessary for me to present detailed and faithful descriptions of not only data collection procedures and data, but also the decisions made throughout the research process. Dependability and confirmability was assured by documenting the process via notes that include the rationales for the methodological and interpretative judgements of the researcher. These notes are referred to sometimes as an audit trail.

The qualitative analysis software used in this study, Nvivo, provided a “trail” of decisions made during data analysis. I utilized NVivo this way. I ran queries in NVivo to locate all the passages from interview transcripts that matched the criteria, codes or categories I set. Locating multiple instances of themes, for instance, ensured that any concept described in the findings was not the perception of just one person, but rather confirmed that a number of participants held the same opinion. These queries were logged during data analysis and retrieved for confirmability purposes.

Potential researcher bias was a critical component of the study because I was the primary instrument: interviews, observations and analysis were all filtered through my perspective. Therefore, the participants’ interpretations of the phenomenon that was under study needed to be compared with my interpretations of this phenomenon in a systematic way (Merriam, 2009). Reflexivity is the term used to describe a researcher’s awareness of any of biases that could affect the outcome of the study. To facilitate reflexivity, I kept a journal of my thinking process as I utilized constant comparison of data to confirm, modify, or discard observations. In this way, reflexivity, combined with an audit trail, helped ensure dependability and confirmability of my results.

### **Ethical Procedures**

Before each interview was conducted, a consent form was distributed and a signed form was collected from each participant. Along with the signed consent form, the purpose, nature, procedures, benefits and risks of this was study explained during the introduction to participants. Institutional Review Board (IRB) ([02-24-16-0042904](#)) confidentiality policies and guidelines were followed by the researcher regarding the

treatment of human subjects. Also, all related materials gathered from each participant was coded and housed in a secured, locked file cabinet in my home. Participants were advised that their involvement was completely voluntary and confidential and they may elect not to participate at any time throughout the interview process. They were allowed to ask questions to satisfy their personal comfort level. Each participant was assured that their names would remain confidential and be replaced them with pseudonyms for the purpose of reporting results. Finally, all information gathered was stored on a password protected USB flash drive and maintained in a secured file cabinet.

Some parents may have been hesitant to answer questions regarding the way their school communicates information to them about their child's progress. They may have been reluctant to share their personal involvement on their child's progress. Punch (2005), recommended that researchers build a rapport and cultivate a trust relationship with participants. Since I have no relationship with the district, participants have been hesitant about the study. In an effort to build a rapport I provided a non-threatening, relaxed environment conducive to sharing relevant information.

### **Summary**

Chapter three explained the research methodology, provided an overview of the research design, target population, data collection instrument and procedures, coding, and data analysis. Chapter 3 concludes with a discussion of the steps taken to address the validity and trustworthiness of the study and the ethical process that was followed to protect the identities and establish the trust of the participants. The grounded study theory provided a foundation to understand the referral process of African American students to

special education programs in an urban elementary school district in a Southwestern state. Chapter 4 presents an analysis of the data collected from this study.

## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this grounded theory study was to generate an understanding and explanation of the processes related to the special education referral and assignment of African American students in a district in Arizona. This study was designed to obtain information directly from parents and teachers based on their experience and knowledge to explore African American students' referral and assignment to special education programs within this district. Two research questions guided the data collection process for this study:

1. What are parents' perceptions of the referral practices used when African American students are referred and assigned to special education in Park Place School District?
2. What are teachers' perceptions of the referral practices used when African American students are referred and assigned to special education in Park Place School District?

This chapter includes the setting of the study followed by a description of the study participants. Next, I describe the data collection and analyses procedures along with evidence of the trustworthiness of the study. Last, I present the results.

### **Setting**

This grounded theory study was conducted in an urban school district in Arizona. Established in 1912, the same year Arizona achieved its statehood, the Park Place School District had long been known for excellence in its K-8 instructional programs, bilingual curriculum, parental participation, and community partnerships. What began as a 15-



pupil district more than eight decades ago now has 10,493 students across a total of 21 schools. A significant majority of students enrolled in this district are Hispanics, followed by African-Americans and a relatively small percentage of Caucasians, Native Americans, and Asians (Park Place District home page, 2016).

### **Description of District**

The study took place in a kindergarten through eighth grade school district located in the large metropolitan area of Arizona. The district draws students from the Southwestern and the Native American Communities. The configuration comprises five different cultures: Hispanic, African American, Native American, Caucasian, and Pacific Islanders. The district is located in a socioeconomically depressed area consisting of a large number of low-income housing, vacant lots, and commercial and light manufacturing businesses.

### **Student Demographics**

This district services a low to middle income population. A high percentage of the students walk to school, take school transportation, or are transported by family. This district is a Title I district. Approximately 90% of the students qualify for the free/reduced lunch programs. Breakfast is a daily provision for the students. The district has a high transient population resulting from large numbers of students from Mexico and from low-income families that move for financial reasons.

### **Participant Demographics**

Two categories of informants participated in this study: parents and teachers. A total of 15 participants agreed to take part: Eight were parents of students referred to

special education, and seven were general and special education teachers. In the scheduled focus group interview, two male parents did not attend. Initially, this was a concern; however, six was a sufficient number to reach saturation based on the aims of the study.

Six parents of African American students participated in this study. Two were male, and four were female. I assigned each parent a pseudonym: Ina, Maci, David, Selena, Randi, and Kay.

Ina is a retired African American female elementary school secretary. She is raising her grandson, of whom she has custody. She stated that he has learning disabilities. She also stated that she had gone through the special education system with another one of her children over 20 years ago. Maci is a female stay-at-home parent. Maci stated “I have been through this special education thing with some of my other kids too.” David, another parent, works in the finance department at a car company.

Selena and Randi are a married African American couple. They have one child who was labeled specific learning disability. Selena stated “in my case we had to go through more testing and more testing and they set up meetings at the school counselor the first thing they wanted to do before they wanted to go to special education route was to put him in smaller classroom sizes after that the issue still continued then close to the year they decided special education would be what we would have to do.” Kay is a single African American mother. She is a medical office receptionist. Her son was referred to the special education system from his doctor. She said “from his testing they said he was a little slow from his tests and his development.”

### Teacher Demographics

Most of the teachers (6) were African American women, one was a Hispanic woman, and one was an African American male. All teachers had worked in the district for more than 7 years, all were considered highly qualified, and all had experience referring students to special education.

I assigned each teacher a pseudonym: Ms. Lee, Ms. Bell, Ms. King, Ms. Dunn, Ms. Curry, Mr. Draper, Ms. Simms, and Ms. Cruz. Table 2 shows information about teacher qualification and experience.

Table 2

#### *Teacher Qualifications and Experience*

Participant Name	Experience (Years)	Specialized Degree /Education
Ms. Lee	27	BA, Masters in Elementary Education
Ms. Bell	17	BA, Masters in Elementary Education
Ms. King	36	BA, Masters in Special Education, Ph.D. in Special Education
Ms. Dunn	35	BA, Masters in Elementary Education
Ms. Curry	20	BA, Masters in Elementary Education
Mr. Draper	17	BA in Elementary Education, Masters in School Counselling
Ms. Simms	30	BA, Masters in Special Education
Ms. Cruz	17	BA in Elementary Education

### **Data Collection**

I recruited participants by contacting the district superintendent's office to obtain permission and to secure her support and assistance. Permission was granted, and I was instructed to work with the supervisor of human resources. I was directed by the supervisor to communicate directly by e-mail to each principal in the district, requesting his or her support and cooperation for my study. Of the 19 principals in the district, four were willing to assist in the recruitment of teachers and parents. I provided the principals the criteria to be used in recruiting participants. Instructions were provided asking that interested parties contact me directly. Following the initial contact, I sent each teacher and parent a letter of invitation and information regarding the study (Appendix B).

### **Parent Focus Group**

The focus group was held in a conference room on a school campus and began at 6:00 p.m. With permission of the participants, data were recorded using a digital audio recorder and researcher note taking. Following introductions, an overview of the study, and the signing of the informed consent, I began the group interview at approximately 6:15 p.m. At the conclusion of the focus group interview, I informed participants that they could contact me if they had additional questions. The focus group interview concluded at approximately 7:45 p.m.

### **Teacher Interviews**

I was contacted by individual school representatives, via telephone, stating their willingness to assist in the recruitment of teachers and parents. Shortly thereafter, I was given a list of individuals and their contact information. I placed telephone calls to each

teacher to schedule a convenient time and location for the face-to-face semistructured interview. The interviews were held following the teacher's work day in her or his classroom. At the beginning of each interview, I reviewed the informed consent document and asked the participant to sign the document.

With permission of the participants, I recorded data using a digital audio recorder and researcher note taking. Face-to-face interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes. After each interview, participants were informed that they could contact me if they had additional questions.

### **Data Analysis**

I used grounded theory methods (Charmaz, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), to provide a theory or explanation for parents' and teachers' experience of the special education referral and assignment process in a way that can offer insights into social/cultural, environmental, and institutional factors that may contribute to the overrepresentation of African American students in special education programs.

Grounded theory methods entail a process of analysis that includes transcribing, coding, and categorizing the data gathered from interviews. The data processing for this study was initiated with digital technology to conduct the transcription of the recorded interviews and the word count analyses. I then used Nvivo11 software to expose patterns in the data. I began by open coding interview transcripts line by line applying the constant comparative method. I then developed axial codes and ultimately developed a single concept, or selective code, that encapsulated the referral and assignment process

for parents and teachers. This three-stage coding and analysis process was conducted as follows.

### **Open Coding**

I used open coding first to analyze the text line by line or sentence by sentence looking for repeated ideas and text to code, as recommended by Strauss and Corbin (1990). This coding was conducted several times as I transcribed the interviews and reread for accuracy. Strauss and Corbin also suggested that a researcher be alert to theoretical issues lying behind the text and develop a sensitivity to the deeper theoretical levels by constantly asking questions of the text (i.e., who, when, where, what, how, how much, and why). Going line by line and sentence by sentence provided additional opportunities to gather ideas and text to code from the transcribed interviews. Continuous refinement and analysis led to the development of axial codes.

### **Axial Coding**

Following open coding, I conducted axial coding to explore relationships or connections between the various open codes. Axial coding was used to demonstrate the presence or absence of connections between concepts. I sought comparative relationships and categories until saturation was reached.

### **Selective Coding**

As ideas were developed, I assigned working categories to each code (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This process is known as selective coding, which consists of systematically relating a central concept or synthesis to the open and axial codes. Charmaz (2006) stated that selective coding is used to refine the initial coding and make

sense of the various categories—or axial codes—by relating them to each other. In this study, I used selective coding to identify the central phenomenon.

### **NVivo 11 Software**

I used NVivo 11 software to help with data analysis. After importing the transcribed data in NVivo 11, I grouped words or sentences into categories using common topics, terms, and phrases. I then organized the categories by patterns and presented the data as themes. I used the program to compare data manually for comparative purposes, first coding three words and then sentences. I grouped the sentences into categories to identify patterns of subthemes and ultimately to develop key themes.

For example, I used the open code *training* to generate reports that showed instances in which participants referred to or used the term training. When viewed together, the various statements most often referred to training in some aspect of special education, and they could be grouped under the higher-level code or category of *teacher's training in special education*. The following statements are examples for this category:

- “The training provided all seemed more on the surface rather than in depth.” (Ms. Bell)
- “On the job training.” (Ms. King)
- “As a classroom teacher, I did not receive formal training in the discipline of special education” (Ms. Dunn).

Gradually, this process of coding, recoding and abstraction led to the development of one overall concept, as depicted in Table 3. The open codes in the first column, the ease/unease felt by parents, challenges faced by parents, the involvement of parents in the process and so on—were collapsed into the larger categories of parental knowledge, understanding and involvement in the referral process, teachers’ understanding of the referral process, parent-teacher interaction prior to referral process and teacher sensitivity about the student ethnicity and disability. These three categories were, in turn, collapsed into the overall concept of parent and teacher understanding of and interaction around the referral process of African American students in this district.

Table 3

*Open, Axial, and Selective Codes*

Open coding	Axial coding	Selective coding
The ease felt by parents during referral process	Parental knowledge, understanding and involvement in the referral process.	Parent and teacher understanding of and interaction around the referral process of African American students.
Challenges faced by parents in referral process		
The amount the school involved in parents in referral process		

*(table continues)*



Open coding	Axial coding	Selective coding
<p>The parents' acknowledgement regarding their input in their child's education</p>		
<p>The understanding of parents concerning information explained in meeting</p>		
<p>Responsibility of school authorities about initiation of referral program</p>		
<p>Initiative taken by school representative on notification of referral</p>		
<p>The teacher's role in communicating to parents before referral program</p>	<p>Teacher's understanding of the referral process</p>	
<p>The teacher's understanding of the ethnicity and disability of the student</p>	<p>Parent-teacher interaction prior to referral process and teacher's sensitivity about the students' ethnicity and disability</p>	
<p>The teacher's understanding as to the notification process to the parents for referral program</p>		

*(table continues)*

Open coding	Axial coding	Selective coding
<p>The teacher's understanding of the various students' disability and capacity to admitted to referral program</p>		
<p>The teacher's acknowledgement as to ethnicity of the student</p>		
<p>The teacher's understanding of the guideline which allots a child to special education</p>		
<p>The intensity of the role of teacher in referral practice</p>		
<p>The teacher's understanding of the process of referring students to special education</p>		
<p>The training received by teacher in special education</p>		
<p>The length of occupation and capacity of special education teacher along with student-teacher interaction</p>		

In the final step, I returned to the data and applied the selective code. From this analysis, three themes emerged. The themes are depicted in Table 4. They are complexity of the referral process, inadequate teacher training, and inadequate teacher-parent communication/knowledge base.

Table 4

*Emergent Themes*

Themes	No. of participants endorsing the category
Complexity of the referral process	11
Inadequate teacher-parent communication/knowledge base	6
Inadequate teacher training	10

Next, the evidence of trustworthiness is discussed, followed by a presentation of the results, organized by these three themes.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

The validity of this study was based on four criteria: credibility, transferability, conformability, and dependability. For this research study each of these criteria used are described below.

#### **Credibility**

Credibility was ensured through the use of source and methods triangulation. Triangulation supports credibility by utilizing different methods such as individual interviews, a variety of informants, focus groups, and observation to record accurately the phenomena (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Polit & Beck, 2012). The source and methods

triangulation to ensure qualitative validity for this study were a focus group with parents and semi-structured interviews with teachers.

### **Transferability**

In order to help facilitate transferability, the detailed experiences of the participants including both the parents as well as the teachers were described in their own words. For instance, with regard to questions regarding qualification or special education training received by the teachers, the participant responses were quoted in their own words. Ms. Lee stated “As a classroom teacher, I did not receive formal training in the discipline of special education.” Ms. Bell echoed similar sentiment as is apparent from her response, “the training provided all seemed more on the surface rather than in depth.” These responses indicate a common theme that a significant majority of the teachers received any special training to deal with the children with special education needs. Such descriptions helps in exact interpretation and comparability of the findings.

### **Dependability**

A key goal of the grounded theory method was to ensure that the findings were consistent over time and that the observations made were adequate to support the hypothesis, as opposed to merely setting and achieving pre-defined objectives (Merriam, 2002). This study was strengthened by documenting relationships between various concepts and themes as well as through audit trails (Merriam, 2002; Warrington & Younger, 2006). To increase dependability for this study, I maintained a written account of the observations made and the findings revealed throughout the duration of the study in the form of memos. Every detail regarding the findings including those observed

during the data collection process were duly recorded, analyzed and interpreted. The use of such audit trail not only helped in enhancing the dependability of the study but also helped me in tracing the original sources, thus enabling improved deductions and observations based on credible data sources.

### **Confirmability**

The term confirmability refers to various strategies through which the researcher aims to ascertain and substantiate the accuracy of the results /findings. To ensure confirmability, I guarded against allowing personal biases and pre conceived notions from interfering with the outcome of the study. Immediately transcribing the data following each interview provided for accuracy in the recording of the data and enhanced the credibility of the findings.

## **Results**

As described above, three themes emerged from the data analysis that unite the parent and teacher perceptions—as well as the two research questions—and provide a triangulated, or grounded, conceptualization of the central phenomenon: parents' and teachers' understanding of and interaction around the referral process of African American students.

### **Complexity of the Referral Process**

In interviews with parents, the referral process emerged as a complex and interrelated set of seven *referral process dimensions*. These were dimensions or aspects of the process for referral of students to special education used by the teachers as they were perceived by parents. The dimensions are shown in Table 5.

Table 5

*Dimensions of the Referral Process*

Dimensions	Referral Process Elements	Responses	
1.	Method Notified	Teacher conference	5
		Doctor	1
2.	Level of comfort	Comfortable	1
		Uncomfortable	1
		Extreme unease	1
		Neutral	3
3.	Level of understanding	Negligible	3
		Excellent	1
		Vague	2
4.	Level of input	Good	6
5.	Level of participation	Good	3
		None	1
		Neutral	2
6.	Opinion about referral process	Frustrating	1
		Complex and time-consuming	3
		Difficult to understand	2
7.	Level of ease	None	4
		Moderate	1
		Good	1

The first referral process element was notification. Most parents reported that they were notified of their child's potential assignment while attending a teacher conference and this method of notification did not provoke a negative or positive reaction. During the conference, their level of comfort was mainly neutral, though two were uncomfortable and only one person felt comfortable. Parents stated that they felt anxious and hesitant to share at the first meeting held to initiate the referral process. It was felt that this anxiety stemmed from their lack of knowledge regarding the process and its

implications on their child. Also, half of the parents were able to understand what was being communicated during the meeting and the others felt the “information was above their heads.” Kay said she “felt frustration”, Ina, said she felt “they were talking over her head”, Maci stated that in the beginning everything was a challenge, she went on to say that after having several children go through the process it became routine. Selena, Randi and David stated that their challenge came from not seeing the behaviors the school saw in their children. Most of the parents indicated their knowledge of the process was limited in nature and that they wanted to have more of a voice in regard to placement of their child. Some parents felt because they lacked the knowledge of the referral process they were not able to adequately assist in the appropriate placement of their child. They also indicated that the process was complicated, frustrating and time consuming.

Regarding parent’s actual involvement in the referral process, the challenges faced were few and the level of input and involvement allowed by school personnel was good. Parents had feared that they would have limited input in their child’s placement but instead faced the challenges of understanding the terminology and processing the vast amount of information given. Only one parent had an adequate understanding of the process and information: “I didn’t understand. Not at first. It took me a while. I sat there for a while just questioning trying to get an understanding and then after a while I finally started understanding a lot more of what they were saying”. Others reported the information as being negligible or vague: “I didn’t understand logistics and everything, you know saying all the stuff about my child.”

The level of participation was good and neutral with three parents acknowledging their experience as good and two parents describing their experience as neutral. When it came to overall assessment, parents reported that the process was complex, difficult to understand or frustrating and, finally, when it came to level of ease, some parents reported “none.”

During the individual interviews, teachers were asked to explain their understanding of the referral process. Their responses are as follows:

- Ms. Lee stated, “any student who appears to have behavioral concerns, or are at least two years behind academically”.
- Ms. Bell and Ms. King said “we did a SAT (Student Assist Team) process, where an overview of where the child is academically and what has been tried. We make a recommendation first and decide if it needs to go to the case study evaluation”.

Although all of the teachers offered their understanding of the referral process, these understandings varied and were not necessarily fully aligned with district guidelines.

Communication between teachers and parents was a component of the referral process. All teachers initially notified parents regarding their concerns about their child’s academic struggles. However, teachers notified parents through various methods: some sent letters home or made contact by telephone to inform them of a potential referral to a special education program. Mr. Draper stated “usually they get a letter or a call from the



psychologist requesting to set up a meeting.” Avenues for communication were not standardized and varied from teacher to teacher and sometimes from student to student.

I asked teachers about their understanding of the students’ disabilities and capacity when being referred. Their responses were as follows:

- Although parents are required to contribute to the team decision, too often, they take the recommendation of the professional team, much like accepting a pharmaceutical Rx from a doctor.
- Their involvement is minimal and, as a result, students are advanced into the special education system for life.
- I think all the teachers or I don’t think a lot of the teachers have the knowledge to make the assessments on the students they were referring.
- A lot of times I think it was classroom management. The teacher would refer the kids because the teacher didn’t know them and they would act out and the teacher would write them up.

In summary, these comments about the dimensions of the referral process point to a general dissatisfaction among parents about the referral process, describing the level of comfort as highly uncomfortable and describing their experience with the entire process as that of “extreme unease.” Furthermore, most of the parents expressed their inability to understand the referral process due to lack of knowledge and understanding of issue and professional jargon. The parental response concerning understanding the referral process was unanimously negative, which was indicated using such words as “negligible” and “vague” to express parents’ level of understanding on the topic. Consequently, parents

described their overall experience of the referral process as “uneasy.” Similarly, as described by a teacher Ms. Simmons, “teachers have to be more accountable for their findings, administrators have to be more adequately trained so they can provide more direction to teachers, role playing helps, if the referral process was followed as intended it would be ok, but problems occur when teachers have prejudices.”

Teachers felt frustrated with the intensity of their role in the referral practice, Ms. Bell recounts “too much red tape.”, Ms. Lee, stated “none, I have had no special education training. I had one class during my Master’s program, which mainly covered terms and acronyms to familiarize ourselves with special education terminology.” The level of teacher’s understanding on the racial representation of the students was also good, they understood how teacher’s decisions in the referral process might influence the composition of students enrolled in Special Education. Combined comments from parents and teachers describe the complexity in traversing the referral process for all involved. The intricate interactions between the parents and teachers for each of the dimensions of the referral process all have to be attended to, which makes the process complex.

### **Inadequate Teacher-Parent Communication/Knowledge Base**

Most parents felt the communication from the school was not always clear regarding their children. The second theme that emerged concerned the quality of teacher-parent communication. Communication refers to the notification channels used by the teachers to communicate with the parents regarding the referral process and the

level of participation expected of parents. The findings revealed that the methods used to notify parents of the initial referral varied significantly by the teachers.

Ms. Lee stated that she notified her parents in writing and they were contacted by the Special education lead teacher, while Ms. King, expressed that her parents were contacted by the district. Ms. Dunn stated, “I communicated with parents either in person or by telephone prior to a letter that they would later receive.” Ms. Curry said “classroom teachers inform the parents of the child’s inability to manifest the needed skills to perform the work at the prescribed grade-level; most commonly this is at a parent-teacher conference setting.” The teacher’s means of notifying their parents varied significantly among themselves. In comparison to the teachers’ means of processing an initial notification five parents revealed they received a written notice during a scheduled teacher’s parent conference while one parent child’s doctor made a direct referral to the district and was later notified of a scheduled meeting.

This theme is also related to parents’ knowledge and understanding of a complex process. The data indicates the crux of the issue is parents were presented with unfamiliar information and terminology. This lack of knowledge interfered with their ability to communicate their thoughts and opinions with the referral team. Consequently, parents felt they had no real choice other than deferring to teachers’ judgments. During the focus group interviews, some of the parents stated they were able to understand most of what was being communicated during the meeting and the others felt the “information was above their heads.” Kay said she “felt frustration.” Ina said, “they were talking over my head”.

Parents, Kay, Maci, and David expressed that they did not initially understand the referral process. After being involved in the process, they better understood their roles. One parent Ina, said she understood everything that was being discussed in the meeting. Some parents aptly stated that they obviously lack specialized knowledge in regard to special education which limited both their understanding of their rights and that of their child. The capacity to address aspects of the referral process, which were in effect vague, requires the understanding and use of specialized jargon.

Kay stated, “At first I was aggravated, it took a while, I sat there for a while just questioning trying to get an understanding and then after a while I finally started understanding a little bit more.” Maci chimed in, “Yeah, I felt that way too after while I didn’t understand logistics and everything. After numerous times, you know saying all the stuff about my children.”

Parents stated that they felt anxious and hesitant to share at the first meeting held to initiate the referral process. It was felt that this anxiety stemmed from their lack of knowledge regarding the process and its implications on their child. Also, half of the parents could understand what was being communicated during the meeting and the others felt the information was above their heads. Kay said she felt frustration. Ina said she felt they were talking over her head. Maci stated, “In the beginning everything was a challenge.” She went on to say, “After having several children go through the process, it became routine.” Selena, Randi and David said their challenge came from not seeing the behaviors the school observed in their children. Most of the parents indicated that their knowledge of the process was limited in nature. Some parents felt because they lacked

the knowledge of the referral process they were not able to adequately assist in the appropriate placement of their child. They also indicated that the process was complicated, frustrating and time consuming.

Collectively, the parents were given the opportunity to have input, but they were not sure of how their input was received or if their input was considered. This doubt about the effectualness of their voices was a cause of uneasiness for the parents. Selena, David and Kay, all stated they were not at ease during the referral process. Selena explained “it was just the fear of the unknown. We didn’t know what we have to do next or what is going happen next.” Maci stated, “I did not feel at ease in the beginning, but since she had to go through the referral process several times it became routine.”

Researchers contend that many school staff members had a pessimistic view of minority students and their families, which contributes to teachers and administrators not feeling comfortable about parent involvement in the process (Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2008).

Some of the parents also seemed to be unsure regarding the effectiveness of the program and its influence on their children. Parents stated that their children still “seemed to struggle daily (academically).” These parents seemed to be skeptical regarding the motive of the teachers in placing their children in special education programs. Maci, stated, “After going through all of those special education classes and after being referred they didn’t really get the educational part of it they needed, I don’t know if it really helped them [her children] learn anything, because they still struggle daily.” A few of the parents stayed behind after the interviews were over. They stated, even though they did not agree with everything the school said about their children, when they participated in

the referral process “we did not know we could say no” so most of the parents conformed to the viewpoints of the school staff instead of feeling confident in their own beliefs regarding the final decision of placement of their child.

David stated, “At the end of everything was said and done I think the factoring of the test scores, I mean, I wondered if it was because they wanted the kids out of regular classes because of the state testing.”

Finally, due to limited knowledge in regard to the special education program most of the parents did not challenge placement or programming.

Table 6 and Table 7 contain conceptual memos that were developed based on the interview responses of the parents and teachers. These memos provide additional support for the theme of inadequate teacher-parent communication/knowledge base.

Table 6

*Parental Perspective*

Memo written based on interviews with the parents
<p>The parents seemed to have adequate knowledge regarding the referral process but also were unanimous in their opinion with regard to the high level of complexity associated with it. Parents were also observed to be uncomfortable during the meeting held to initiate the referral process. This anxiety seems to stem from their lack of knowledge regarding the process and its implications on their child. Also, some parents struggled to understand what was being communicated during the meeting, they felt hesitant to share their inputs due to the presumed expertise required to do so. The parents acknowledged that they were invited to share their inputs but felt ‘frustrated’ due to their ‘limited knowledge’ and expertise on the subject resulting in their inability to share their inputs. This lack of knowledge seems to cause increased unease during the process although they also admitted to the need for communication especially in processes related to special education. The parents also seemed to be unsure regarding the effectiveness of the program and its influence on their children, since they still ‘seemed to struggle daily’ and seemed to be skeptical regarding the motive of the teachers in placing them in special education programs.</p>

The answers from the communication questions in this study further revealed the uncertainties and concerns in the minds of the parents about the well-being of their children in special education.

Table 7

*Teachers' Perspectives*

Memo written based on interviews with the teachers
<p>The teachers were aware of the key requirements regarding the referral process but did not have clarity regarding the knowledge and processes involved. Consistent procedures concerning special education referrals are not practiced district wide. The process used by the teachers to notify the parents was through phone calls home, written communication or through parent-teacher meetings. The teachers also shared that although the parents are technically expected to share their inputs and get involved in the decision making process, most of them are passive spectators and rely heavily on teachers' recommendation and assessment.</p>

**Inadequate Teacher Training**

The third theme that emerged to explain the phenomenon of parent and teacher understanding and interaction around the special education referral and assignment process was the inadequacy of teacher training. Based on the data collected, teachers can be broadly classified into three key categories; some training, no training and degrees in special education. Most teachers did not receive any special training or have any special qualification that would help them refer students with special educational needs to programs designed to help them enhance their learning experience. Nearly 62% of the teachers were not qualified to refer students to special education since they did not receive any special education training required to identify students with special needs, nor help them differentiate between disobedience, misbehavior, and learning disabilities.



Only 13% of the teachers were identified as having received special education extensive (higher qualifications) education, and 25% of the teachers received some training. Some of the teachers spoke of their personal experiences regarding their training.

Specifically, Ms. Dunn, Ms. Lee, Ms. Cruz, Ms. Curry and Mr. Draper were categorized under No Training, (meaning no formal training received), Ms. Simms and Ms. King were categorized under “Special Education” based on their Special Education Degree, while Ms. Bell, was classified under some formal training.

Ms. Dunn answered “I felt that I was short changed during my student teaching because I was never given the opportunity to take over the class independently. I can’t recall any techniques from that experience that have stayed with me over the years. I didn’t feel prepared to have my own class after I graduated” (§ 2).

Most of the teachers conveyed similar experiences reflected by Ms. Dunn. Ms. Curry stated, “I did not receive formal training in the discipline of special education” Mr. Draper, answered “very limited.” Ms. Simms, stated that she received “Post graduate classes in special ed.” And, Ms. Cruz, stated “The training I have received in special education was during my undergraduate courses, along with professional development courses through district requirements.” According to Frankenberg and Hawley (2008), until their training meets the swelling demands of our shifting society, our students will experience the consequences. Teachers must be prepared and trained how to instruct minority students within a continually changing racial climate. Reasons for referrals consist of incongruity between ability and achievement conduct disorders.

### **How the Findings Relate to the Research Questions**

The research questions that guided data collection were designed to elicit separately the perceptions of parents and teachers. The first research question asked about parents' perceptions and the second research question asked about teacher perceptions in order to triangulate sources and provide an understanding of the practices of referral and assignment from two different viewpoints. However, rather than highlighting the differences between the two groups, the results of the data analysis revealed that perceptions of parents and teachers were aligned. Both parents and teachers viewed the processes of referral and assignment as complex. Both parents and teacher described inadequate teacher-parent communication and a lack of parent knowledge regarding special education as a problem. Last, comments from both parents and teachers revealed that teacher training was a potentially weak link in the chain.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this grounded theory study was to generate understanding and explanation of the processes related to the special education referral and assignment of African American students and how these processes may contribute to an overrepresentation of African American students in special education programs in the Park Place School District. To achieve this objective, a grounded theory study was carried out that sought the experiences and perspectives of two groups of stakeholders that are central to the process: parents and teachers.

From the data analysis three key themes were identified, complexity in the referral process, inadequate teacher-parent communication/knowledge base and

inadequate teacher training. The findings revealed that the parents perceived the referral process as highly complex resulting in their inability to partake in the conversations or share their inputs despite opportunities to do so and encouragement from the teachers. Combined comments from parents and teachers describe the complexity in traversing the referral process for all involved. The intricate interactions of the dimensions within the referral process, of parents and teachers, all must be attended to, which makes the process complex.

The Inadequate Teacher-Parent Communication/Knowledge Base theme is closely related to parents' knowledge and understanding of a complex process. The issue for parents was their unfamiliarity with level of knowledge and terminology used. This lack of knowledge interfered with their ability to effectively communicate their thoughts and opinions. Consequently, parents felt they had no recourse than deferring to teachers' judgments. Finally, the theme Inadequate Teacher Training, revealed that teachers lacked adequate training in policies and procedures to appropriately refer students to special education programs. The next chapter on interpretation of findings will analyze and critically evaluate the findings and lend meaning to the statistical data discussed in Chapter 4.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this grounded theory study was to generate understanding and explanation of the processes related to the special education referral and assignment of African American students and how these processes may contribute to an overrepresentation of African American students in special education programs in the Park Place School District. This study was designed to obtain parents' and teachers' perceptions of the referral and assignment experience. Three themes emerged from data analysis in this study: the complexity in the referral process, inadequate teacher-parent communication/knowledge base, and inadequate teacher training.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

I combined comments from parents and teachers to explain the process of referral and assignment of African American students to special education in terms of the complexity in the referral process, inadequate teacher-parent communication/knowledge base, and inadequate teacher training.

The first theme was complexity in the referral process. Key factors identified by parents as complicating the referral process included the following:

- lack of parents' understanding and awareness of the concept of special education and its need and relevance for their children,
- level of comfort experienced during the parent-teacher meeting,
- level of understanding of the message conveyed and the knowledge transferred during the meeting,

- level of participation in the referral process (parents' opinion about the referral process including the way it was carried out and the level of difficulties or challenges encountered during the process), and
- level of ease regarding the process.

The finding that parents and teachers perceived the referral process to be complex and difficult corroborated findings from previous research. Skiba et. al. (2008) noted that the referral process for special education was complex. Williams (2007) also made reference to the complexity in the referral process, stating that parents have complained that the referral process was overwhelming and intimidating. Additionally, research on African American parent involvement indicated that many of these parents have been reluctant to engage in their children's schools because they are unsure about or unfamiliar with their roles and how they are expected to be involved (Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2008).

The second theme was twofold: inadequate parent-teacher communication and inadequate shared knowledge between teachers and parents. The lack of shared knowledge among subjects indicated a breakdown in communication between parents and teachers, which has been observed in previous studies (Thompson, 2003). Parent participants reported that the referral process was frustrating and difficult to understand. They stated that the information provided was insufficient or vague. They did not feel at ease because they were unable to communicate their opinions, and this inability to communicate was exacerbated by their lack of understanding of the information and terminology used in the meetings. The inadequacy of teacher-parent communication and

shared knowledge base is related to parents' knowledge and understanding of a complex process. The issue for parents was their unfamiliarity with the knowledge and terminology used. This lack of knowledge interfered with their ability to effectively communicate their thoughts and opinions. Other researchers found that parents claimed to be intimidated by the referral and special educational process (Brandon & Brown, 2009).

Some parent participants expressed feelings of fear about communicating with their child's teacher. They had little to no awareness of their parental rights or what they should do for their child; they felt they had inadequate knowledge of their child's educational placement, and they had little communication with school professionals. This fear and anxiety is consistent with the literature that indicated that African American parents have uncertainties regarding the referral of their children because they lack understanding of the process or educational jargon in meetings (Brandon et al., 2010; Brandon & Brown, 2009; Williams, 2007).

Finally, the third theme was inadequate teacher training. Woodland (2008) and Bryan and Gallant (2012) stressed that when teachers are inadequately prepared for assigning children to special education programs, many of these students are mistakenly referred. Bryan and Gallant noted that this mistake is due to a teacher's lack of knowledge regarding his or her students. Skiba et al. (2011) emphasized that teachers have sometimes been found to have mistaken a student's reluctance or other behavior as an indicator of special needs, which can lead to classifying students as unteachable or threatening, which in turn can motivate a teacher to ultimately refer the student to special education programs (Hale-Benson, 1982; Harry & Anderson, 1995). Drane (2002) found

that some teachers in mainstream classrooms are not adequately trained to understand that students who have behavioral or learning issues may need to have an intervention plan instead of a referral to special education programs.

Teacher participants reported that the training they received concerning special needs referral was minimal and probably inadequate. Five of the teachers interviewed received no training in special education yet were expected to refer children to the special education program. Teachers also stated that they lacked adequate training in policies and procedures to appropriately refer students to special education programs.

Taken together, these three themes provide a theoretical understanding of the special education referral and assignment process. The process begins with a classroom assessment and proceeds through a regulated series of evaluations, consultations, and referrals. However, the lived experience of parents and teachers was quite different. Parents perceived the referral process as highly complex because of inadequate teacher-parent communication and lack of shared knowledge between the two groups. This lack of shared knowledge was compounded by inadequate teacher expertise. The result was parents' dependency on teachers' opinions and analysis for placing children in special education. This feeling of being ill-equipped to understand the process resulted in parents being reluctant to share input or make critical choices concerning their children, despite opportunities to do so and encouragement from the teachers. Parents reported that they had no recourse other than to defer to teachers' judgments, which gave them a feeling of powerlessness. This powerlessness to advocate for their children may be a contributing

factor in the overrepresentation of African American children in special education programs.

Understanding the process of special education referral and assignment crosses boundaries of race. I investigated African American students' participation in special education in the Park Place district results, but interviews did not produce any findings related specifically to race. With the exception of one teacher who was Hispanic, all parents and teachers—as well as their special education students—were African American. The findings did not indicate that overrepresentation in the Park Place School District was due to the social, environmental, or cultural forces as referenced in the literature. However, key interpersonal and institutional forces did play a role. Inadequate teacher-parent communication and the lack of shared knowledge between parents and teachers was an interpersonal dynamic at the school site, and the institutional force behind it was inadequate teacher training. These forces combined to influence a process that parents experienced as complex and off-putting. The process resulted in parents deferring to teachers and not advocating for their children. Although parents are required to contribute to the team decision for their children, they often accept the recommendation of the professional team. Their involvement is minimal, and as a result students are advanced into the special education system without a check on whether misidentification or misclassification has occurred.

This study contributes to the discussion of referral complexity, parent confusion, and teacher knowledge of special education by providing a theoretical understanding of the social processes surrounding special education referral and assignment. This



understanding highlights aspects of the process that have not been previously identified in the literature, including parents' intentional reliance on teachers' opinions and analysis in the final decision of placing their child in special education programs.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study was focused on generating an understanding and explanation of the processes related to the special education referral and assignment of African American students from the perspective of the parents and teachers. I did not take into consideration the factors that led teachers to refer students to special education programs.

The inclusion of questions about race could have provided additional insight into the referral process and contributed to the existing knowledge on the subject. Also, questions related to the teachers' relationship or bond with their students and their knowledge of their students could have expanded the study's scope and revealed additional information about the relevance and implications of teacher-student relationships in the referral process.

### **Recommendations**

The first recommendation relates to the complexity of the referral process, inadequate parent-teacher communication, and lack of shared knowledge. Due to parents being uninformed regarding school procedures and parental rights, further study could be conducted on effective methods to inform parents. One possibility would be to develop a resource manual for parents and to conduct an experiment in which the manual would be provided to a treatment group of parents and a control group would be given no additional information. This manual could be used as a resource and an orientation tool at

the start of the referral process. It would provide the most accurate, parent-friendly information on the school's policies and procedures, as well as a glossary of common terms, meanings, and acronyms. After referral and assignment, both groups of parents would be interviewed to determine potential differences in experiences between the groups.

Justification for this recommendation can be found in Title I, Part A of the ESEA that emphasizes the shared accountability for high student achievement between schools and parents. Reporting provisions of NCLB ensure parents the right to examine and participate in their child's education. With this information, parents can make informed choices for their children (U.S. DOE, 2004).

Another recommendation for further study to address inadequate communication and lack of shared knowledge would be to conduct a similar study, but this time to provide parents an advocate at the beginning of the referral process. At the completion of the referral process, parents who accepted the assistance of an advocate could provide invaluable information to researchers. Title I schools are provided funds for parent aids through a Title I grant. Parent aids function as limited advocates for parents and offer a wealth of resources for schools and parents, such as resources for food and bill assistance. Title I also has provisions for parent programs to help in student achievement. This funding promotes participation of parents in meaningful communication with the school as well as becoming involved in their child's learning activities. Through this program parents are encouraged to become actively involved in their child's education. Parents are considered supported partners in the education process, in decision-making, and offered

participation on advisory committees as described in section 1118 of the ESEA. (U.S. DOE, 2004).

A third recommendation relates to adequate teacher training. One recommendation would be to study the effectiveness of a professional development day of in-service training for teachers on the referral process. Researchers could evaluate the success of such training by surveying teachers and conducting a quantitative analysis of the students being referred to special education programs following the in-service training. Drame (2002) argued that some teachers in mainstream classrooms are not adequately trained to understand that students who present behavioral or learning problems may need an intervention plan rather than a referral to special education. The intervention plan includes communicating with parents.

### **Implications**

The significance of this study is to highlight the challenges parents face and the training teachers need regarding special education referral. The findings from this study provided information to stakeholders in this district that may result in curtailing the number of African American students, or any student, being inappropriately referred to special education services. Unnecessary referrals are a burden on the educational system and may have a negative impact on students' futures (Shealey & Scott, 2006). According to Levin and Rouse (2012), society would benefit from a more educated workforce who would be less likely to depend on public assistance and who would be less likely to experience the school-to-prison pipeline.

## Conclusion

In generating an understanding and explanation of the processes related to the special education referral and assignment of African American students in Arizona, this study helps broaden the discussion about the underlying challenges parents and teachers experience in this process. Findings were that both teachers and parents experience the referral process as complex and involving inadequate teacher-parent communication and lack of shared knowledge. These may be symptoms of what teachers report as inadequate training in special needs and special education referral and assignment processes. Most the teachers in this study reported a lack of specialized training in referring students to special education. This lack of training is a potential risk factor for incorrect evaluations of students' learning abilities, which may result in overrepresentation of certain groups of students in special education programs. Prior studies indicated this lack of teacher training related to special education (Shealey & Scott, 2006).

This study also highlighted an underlying process that was not reported in the literature; namely, parents can react to their feeling of inadequacy in understanding the complex process by placing their trust—sometimes blindly and uneasily—in the judgment of the teachers, even though this judgment does not necessarily rest on expertise. Ultimately, however, the parents and children bear the ramifications of special education classification and therefore giving teachers that last word can be problematic.

Due to parents being uninformed regarding school procedures and parental rights, and placing blind trust in teachers, further study on effective methods to inform and educate parents is warranted. In addition, since inadequate teacher training surfaced as in

issue in this study, another recommendation for further research would be to study the effectiveness of a professional development day of in-service training for teachers on the referral process. Such training could include specific strategies for effectively communicating with parents and then be evaluated in terms of parents' perceptions and impact on referrals.

In sum, we know that inappropriate referrals to special education are costly and stigmatizing, and they redirect special education funds away from students in need of those resources (Olson, 1991). This study contributed to social change by providing supporting evidence for two complementary strategies that could reduce these inappropriate referrals: first, educating parents and second, training teachers to communicate with parents regarding the processes of referral and assignment of African American students to special education.

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## Appendix A: Special Education Referral in the State of Arizona

The special education referral must include specific documentation of the appropriate efforts that have been made to educate the student in the regular education program.

- o The parent must receive a Prior Written Notice explaining in detail what action is proposed, how the decision to make the referral was made, what documentation was relied on in reaching the decision, what other options were considered, and why other options were rejected. 20 U.S.C. § 1415(b)(3), (c).
- o Parents must receive a Procedural Safeguards Notice fully explaining parental rights and those of the child along with the procedures that will be used to ensure that those rights are protected throughout the special education process. 20 U.S.C. § 1415(d)(1)(A).
- o Schools must obtain written consent by the parent for the evaluation of a child for special education services. This consent must be voluntary and may be revoked by the parent at any time. 20 U.S.C. § 1414(a)(1)(C)(i).
- If parents refuse to consent to a special education eligibility evaluation, the school may nevertheless continue to seek an evaluation either through mediation or by initiating a due process hearing, discussed below. 20 U.S.C. § 1414(a)(1)(C)(ii).

Once the referral has been initiated, a Multidisciplinary Evaluation Team (MET) is assembled.

This team consists of: The parent(s)

- o At least one of the child's regular education teachers
- o A special education teacher
- o The chief administrative official of the school district or county or the person officially designated responsible for public education
- o A representative of the public agency that is qualified to provide or supervise the provision of special education who is knowledgeable about the general curriculum and the availability of resources
- o A person who can interpret the instructional implications of evaluation results
- o The child, if appropriate
- o Any other person with knowledge or special expertise about the child

Appendix B: Disability Categories for Special Education Referrals, Title 15, Chapter 7,  
and Article 4 of the Arizona Revised Statutes.

1. Autism
2. Developmental Delay (ages 3-10)
3. Emotional Disability
4. Speech/Language Impairment
5. Hearing Impairment
6. Specific Learning Disability (SLD)
7. Mild, Moderate or Severe Intellectual Disability
8. Multiple Disabilities
9. Multiple Disabilities and Severe Sensory Impairment
10. Orthopedic Impairment
11. Preschool Severe Delay
12. Traumatic Brain Injury
13. Visual Impairment
14. Other Health Impairments

### Appendix C: United State Requirements to Determine Disproportionate Representation

Under these indicators, which are based on statutory language at 20. S.C. 1416(a) (3) (C), States are required to review the LEAs in the State to determine the extent to which the disproportionate representation of racial and ethnic groups in special education was the result of inappropriate identification. Failure to conduct this analysis will be cited as noncompliance with the requirements of 34 CFR §300.600(d)(3), which requires that States monitor LEAs with regard to disproportionate representation of racial and ethnic groups in special education and related services, to the extent the representation was the result of inappropriate identification. We believe that the inclusion of disproportionality that was the result of inappropriate identification in the State monitoring and enforcement component of the law clearly reflects the seriousness with which Congress viewed this issue. The focus of monitoring priority indicators 9 and 10 of the SPP was on disproportionate representation that was the result of inappropriate identification. This language signals that more than just an examination of numerical information was required to respond to and appropriately address the monitoring indicators. After reviewing the numerical information, States need to probe instances in which they identify disproportionality to determine whether it was the result of inappropriate identification. States must report annually to the Secretary on the performance of the State on these indicators. States also must report to the public on the performance of each LEA in the State on an annual basis. This annual report must include the State's findings regarding disproportionality in the LEAs in the State resulting from inappropriate identification related to representation of racial and ethnic groups in special education

and the representation of racial and ethnic groups in specific disability categories U.S.

Department of Education 2007.

## Appendix D: Key Informants

(Special Education Teachers and General Education Teachers)

## Letter of Invitation

Dear Key Informant (Special Ed. Teacher and General Ed. Teacher):

My name is Darlene Smith McClelland. I am a student attending Walden University, pursuing my PhD in Leadership and Policy Change in Education. I am conducting a study on the referral process of African American students in first through eighth grades to special education. If you have referred or recommended African American students in first through eighth grades to special education services, I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you and learn more about your experience.

From your participation, I hope to gain insight into your understanding and experiences, as teachers of African American students, with the referral process.

The interview will last 30 to 45 minutes. I will use a digital audio recorder and will transcribe the content of the interview. All interviews are confidential. Your participation was completely voluntary and you may elect not to participate at any time before, during or after the individual interview. Partaking in this research study will not result in foreseeable risks, and no financial benefit will be awarded.

If you are interested in participating in this research, please reply to this e-mail. I will contact you by phone or email and notify you of our agreed meeting date and time.

In addition, if you have any questions, please contact me at

[REDACTED]

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Darlene Smith McClelland

## Appendix E: Parent Letter of Invitation

## Letter Inviting Parent Participants

Dear Parent:

If you have a child placed or referred to special education and would be willing to share your experience with the referral process, you are invited to participate in a parent focus group with approximately 15 other parents. Darlene Smith McClelland, a student attending Walden University, was pursuing her PhD. in Leadership and Policy Change in Education and was conducting a study on the referral process of African American students to special education.

From your participation, she hopes to gain insight into your understanding and experiences, as parents of African American students, with the special education referral process.

The focus group will last 60 to 90 minutes. The researcher will be using a digital audio recorder and will transcribe the content of the discussion, but all discussion will be held in the utmost confidence. Your participation was completely voluntary and you may elect not to participate at any time before, during or after the focus group. Partaking in this research study will not result in foreseeable risks, and no financial benefit will be awarded.

If you would like to participate in this focus group discussion, please contact [REDACTED]

Thank you for your time and consideration,

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Principal's name

## Appendix F: Parent Focus Group Guide

Hello, my name was Darlene Smith McClelland. I am a student attending Walden University, pursuing my PhD. in Leadership and Policy Change in Education. From your participation, I hope to gain insight of your understanding and experiences, as parents of African American students, with the referral process. Your perspectives are significant to this study. The Parent focus group interview will last 60 to 90 minutes. I will be using a digital audio recorder to keep track of the authentic wording you use when I transcribe the content of the interview. Your participation was completely voluntary and you may elect not to participate at any time during the interview. Do I have your permission to audio record the interview? Do you have any questions before we begin?

### **Research questions: What are parents' perceptions of referral practices of African American students referred to special education?**

1. What was your understanding of special education?
2. How were you notified of your child needing special education services?
  - a. Probing question: At what point in the school year were you contacted?  
How were you contacted (phone/e-mail/letter, etc.)?
3. What steps were taken by the school representatives following your initial notification of the referral?
4. Explain the initial meeting to initiate the referral process.
  - a. Probing question: How were you informed about the meeting?
  - b. Probing question: Describe your feelings about your meeting with the Student Assist Team.



- c. Probing question: Did you understand everything said in the meeting?
  - d. Probing question: Do you feel your input was considered in the final decision of your child's placement?
5. Describe your role in the referral process?
- a. Probing question: Did the school fully engage you in the process preceding your child's placement?
6. What challenges did you face during the referral process?
- a. Probing question: Did you feel at ease throughout the referral process.
7. Is there anything else you would like to mention regarding your child's referral to special education?

## Appendix G: Key Informants (General Education Teachers, Special Education Teachers)

## Interview Guide

Hello, my name was Darlene Smith McClelland. I am a student attending Walden University, pursuing my PhD. in Leadership and Policy Change in Education. I will also provide a copy of the consent form to you for your records. From your participation, I hope to gain knowledge of your experiences and expertise of the referral process. Your perspective was important to this study. The interview will last 30 to 45 minutes. I will be using a digital audio recorder to keep track of the authentic wording you use when I transcribe the content of the interview. Your participation was completely confidential and voluntary; you may elect not to participate at any time during the interview. Do I have your permission to audio record the interview? Do you have any questions before we begin?

## Questions for Teachers

1. How long have you been working in the field of education and in what capacity?
  - a. Probing question: How would you describe your teacher-student interaction?
2. What training have you received in special education?
  - a. Probing question: How would you describe the training, its depth, and its intensity?
3. Please explain your understanding of the process of referring students to special education?
  - a. Probing question: Please explain your role in the referral process.

4. Please share your understanding of the guidelines provided to identify which students are to be referred to special education?
  - a. Please share the ethnicity of those students.
  - b. Please share the various disabilities for which those students were referred?
5. Please share your understanding of how parents are initially notified that a referral has been initiated for their child to special education.
  - a. Probing question: Do you have a role in communicating with the parent prior to the child's referral?
  - b. Probing question: Please explain the means in which you communicate with parents?
6. In what ways do you think the current referral process might influence the composition of students enrolled in Special Education?
  - a. Probing question: What would you say about the special education students at your school? Are all ethnic/racial/socioeconomic groups and boys and girls all equally represented, or do most special education students belong to the same group? What ideas do you have about why this is?
7. Is there anything I did not ask that you believe would be important to my study?