

**WHAT'S SO SPECIAL ABOUT SPECIAL EDUCATION?  
A CRITICAL STUDY OF WHITE GENERAL EDUCATION TEACHERS'  
PERCEPTIONS REGARDING THE REFERRALS OF AFRICAN  
AMERICAN STUDENTS FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES**

A Record of Study

by

DUSTYN RAE ALEXANDER

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

August 2009

Major Subject: Educational Administration

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## ABSTRACT

What's So Special about Special Education?

A Critical Study of White General Education Teachers' Perceptions Regarding the Referrals of African American Students for Special Education Services. (August 2009)

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This study addressed the problem of the disproportionality of African Americans in special education by conducting critical white research. A review of literature revealed that research using this methodology had not been conducted with this problem in mind and that critical white theory might be a wise choice in order to understand this issue more fully. This study sought to fill that gap by providing information on the perspectives of white general education teachers regarding the referral and potential placement of African American students in special education. White teachers were selected in order to explore this phenomenon from a critical white perspective. Since most teachers are white, this population is critical in the development of an understanding of the problem of disproportionality. The purpose of this study was to identify the perceptions of white general education teachers regarding the:

1. ability, behavior, and school readiness of African American students;

2. instruction, referral, and potential placement of African American students in special education;
3. gaps that exist in the preparation of general education teachers regarding the instruction of African American students.

The constant comparative (Glaser & Strauss, 1965) technique resulted in the identification of six themes. These themes supported the current research and confirmed that a lack of cultural responsiveness, a deficit view, and a misunderstanding of the special education referral process and potential services contributes to the gross disproportionality of African Americans in special education. The added perspective of my being a special education administrative practitioner and parent added a depth of understanding to this crisis that has not been previously explored in-depth literature. Also, a useful model called the pipeline to special education was developed to understand what occurs between general education and special education. Finally, a critical white perspective revealed that dominant white values in the classroom may perpetuate marginalization in the form of privilege on the part of the teacher to be permitted to abdicate responsibility for struggling African American students by referring them to special education.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The education system is failing a critical mass of African American students. General education is unable to meet their social and academic needs (Losen & Orfield, 2002). They are, in turn, overrepresented in special education (Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005; Losen & Orfield, 2002). There are limited results to indicate progress there, too. In fact, once placed in special education, African American students' achievement gains and dismissals from special education are at rates considerably lower than their White counterparts (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). The review of literature traces the issue of African American education at the national, state, and district level with regard to academic achievement, behavioral issues, and, ultimately, the disproportionality of African American learners receiving special education services. This study utilized a critical White epistemological framework to study the perception of White teachers regarding the referral to and potential placement of African American students in special education. White general education teachers on three campuses with a high rate of disproportionality and large volumes of referrals of African American students for special education evaluation in a large, urban Texas school district were interviewed.

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The style and format for this dissertation follow that of the *Journal of Educational Research*.

Attempts were made to discover their perceptions regarding the ability, behavior, and school readiness of African American learners as well as their perceptions of the referral and potential placement of African American students in special education. This study delved into the perceptions of three White elementary teachers who work on campus with a large disproportionality of African Americans in special education and that account for several referrals of African American students for special education evaluation. Further, it was discovered that there racism traveled the path of a referral for special education placement in order to relieve them from accountability for teaching these students. Deficit thinking, cultural incompetency, and a lack of culturally responsive pedagogy, were culprits that allowed them to use their privilege to abuse the referral process for potential placement in special education programs.

### **Statement of the Problem**

It is well-established that since the court-ordered desegregation of American public schools in 1954, overt racism and bias in schools have been subtly altered to more covert methods of racism (Blanchett et al., 2005). Widening achievement gaps between White students and African American students, increased referrals of African American students to alternative disciplinary placements, under-representation of African American students in gifted and talented programs and advanced placement programs, and the over-representation of African American students in special education are all examples of this kind of racism in the public school system (Green, McIntosh, Cook-Morales, & Robinson-Zanartu, 2005). In fact, some researchers would say that schools

are more segregated now than they were 50 years ago as a result of marginalizing students who do not assimilate to fit mainstream behavior and learning (Shealey, Lue, Brooks, & McCray, 2005). This continued marginalization of African American students is a form of dysconscious racism that accepts dominant White norms and privileges (Thomas, 2003; King, 1991).

### *Dysconscious Racism*

Cultural institutions can produce a false consciousness in which power and oppression become taken-for-granted 'realities' or ideologies. Joyce E. King originally called this lack of consciousness of White privilege dysconscious racism. "Dysconsciousness is an uncritical habit of mind (including perceptions, attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs) that justifies inequity and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given.... Dysconscious racism is a form of racism that tacitly accepts dominant White norms and privileges" (1991, p.133).

Dysconscious racism takes the form of less blatant stereotyping or efforts to marginalize a particular race. In some cases, these efforts may have other motives on the surface, which seemingly justify the bias (Thomas, 2003). Occasionally, dysconscious racism occurs without the offender even realizing his or her own racism (Thomas, 2003). This type of racism has resulted in further marginalization of African American students in terms of their lack of exposure to rigorous instruction, post-secondary opportunities, and accessibility to general education (The Civil Rights Project, 2001). Unequal access to these vital elements of an education can produce grave results. Among these results is dropping out of school; recent salary calculations indicate the annual salary of a high

school dropout may be between 7 and 10 thousand dollars less per year than those that receive a high school diploma; thus, securing a position below the poverty line (Value of an Education, 2008). Another alarming result of the continued marginalization of African Americans in the public school system is the achievement gap between White students and African American students.

### *The Achievement Gap*

From a national perspective, most recent achievement gap reports indicate that the African American-White gap is about 29-30 percentile points. In a national distribution of achievement of basic skills in reading and math, African American students are at the 31<sup>st</sup> percentile, and White students are at the 61<sup>st</sup> (Rothstein, Jacobsen, & Wilder, 2008). In the state of Texas, the gaps reported via the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) results in the areas of language arts (ELA) and math are smaller with ELA being 11 points and math being 23. In this case, the differences are reported in percent of students passing the TAKS test. With regard to the district in this study, the gaps are similar to the State's with ELA being 15 points and math being 24. Table 1 is a demonstration of the performance of African American and White students on TAKS. The environments presented in the table include the (a) three campuses used in this study, (b) school district, (c) state for this study, and (d) national percentages. Almost, without exception, African Americans performed below their White counterparts. At the campus level, gaps between African American students and White students are not apparent at School

Two and School Three had no scores of White students reported because less than 50 students were tested.

**TABLE 1. Percentage of Students Meeting State Standard: Ethnic Subgroup Performance on TAKS, 2006-2007**

	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>ELA Score</b>	<b>Math Score</b>
School One	African American	91%	73%
	White	95%	89%
School Two	African American	72%	75%
	White	58%	58%
School Three	African American	75%	75%
	White	Not enough to report	Not enough to report
District	African American	77%	58%
	White	93%	82%
State	African American	84%	64%
	White	95%	87%

Source: Texas Education Agency (n.d.)

### *Disproportionality*

One of the more widely researched manifestations of public school, institutional racism is the disproportionality of African Americans in special education (The Civil Rights Project, 2001). *Disproportionality* is defined as a situation in which a particular racial/ethnic group of children is represented at a higher or lower percentage than their representation in the total population. Many factors are at work to contribute to this problem; however, the key issue seems to lie in the classroom.

The lack of culturally responsive classroom management and instruction seem to be closely linked to two areas of disability among African American students (Webb-Johnson, 2002). The largest areas of over-identification of African Americans in special education are mental retardation (MR) and emotional disturbance (ED) (Wang, Reynolds, & Walberg, 1995). The 2002 President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education confirmed that, "Children of minority status are over-represented in some categories of special education. African-American children are twice as likely as White children to be labeled mentally retarded and placed in special education; they are also more likely to be labeled emotionally disturbed and placed in special education" (p. 3). These realities suggest that "race matters," both in educators' initial decisions to refer students for special education and in their subsequent placement decisions for students identified and labeled as having disabilities (Coutinho, Oswald, & Best, 2002).

In order to demonstrate an educational need for special education services at school, the suspected area of disability must manifest itself in the school environment (Individuals with Disabilities Act, 2004). In the cases of referral for testing in the areas of MR and ED identification for services is directly related to behavior and ability in the classroom (Individuals with Disabilities Act, 2004). Mental retardation is measured by IQ and adaptive behavior across environments and emotional disturbance is related to a depressive, psychotic, or anxiety disorder that manifests itself at school to the extent it impedes learning (Singhal, 1999). So, the manifestation of unusual or disturbing behavior and seemingly low ability in the

educational environment often become the impetus for a referral for special education evaluation.

At the national level, African Americans in school are more than twice as likely to be labeled mentally retarded (MR) or emotionally disturbed (ED) (President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education, 2002). In Texas, this trend also exists with the likelihood of an ED or MR label being higher for African American students. The district in this study also demonstrates a startling number of African American students labeled as demonstrating mental retardation. The trend for an ED label does not seem to be as apparent among the elementary African American population in this district. However, in the district used in this study, the likelihood of being placed in a disciplinary alternative setting is much higher for African American students. Table 2 is a demonstration of the disproportionality of African Americans in the category of mental retardation and emotional disturbance. Percentages reported here indicate the percent of students in the total school population that are identified as disabled in the MR and ED categories. This table is a reflection of the fact that African American students are far more likely to be labeled MR and ED. The environments presented in the table include the three campuses used in this study, the school district and state for this study, and the national percentages. At the campus level, ED percentages are not reported because there were no students reported with a primary ED code.

**TABLE 2. Students by Disability Compared to Total Population: Ethnic Comparison**

	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>MR</b>	<b>ED</b>
<b>School 1<sup>a</sup></b>	African American	3.7%	Not enough to report
	Hispanic	1.23%	Not enough to report
	White	Not enough to report	Not enough to report
<b>School 2<sup>a</sup></b>	African American	2.30%	Not enough to report
	Hispanic	0.96%	Not enough to report
	White	Not enough to report	Not enough to report
<b>School 3<sup>a</sup></b>	African American	1.86%	Not enough to report
	Hispanic	0.65%	Not enough to report
	White	Not enough to report	Not enough to report
<b>District<sup>a</sup></b>	African American	2.64%	0.45%
	Hispanic	0.92%	0.28%
	White	0.97%	1.46%
<b>State<sup>b</sup></b>	African American	0.78%	0.98%
	Hispanic	0.56%	0.71%
	White	0.65%	0.82%
<b>Nation<sup>c</sup></b>	African American	2.24%	1.45%
	Hispanic	0.78%	0.44%
	White	0.88%	0.75%

Sources: <sup>a</sup>Special Education Manager (n.d.)

<sup>b</sup>Special Education Texas (n.d.)

<sup>c</sup>U.S. Department of Education (2005)

Not only are African Americans overrepresented in certain special education eligibility categories, but they are also overrepresented in the overall special education population. Table 3 is a demonstration of the disproportionality of African Americans in special education including the (a) three campuses used in this study, (b) school district, (c) state for this study, and (d) national percentages. The district in this study serves 5,292 African American students (34.9% of the student population). Of these 5,292 students, 722 are in special education. This means that 13.65% of

African Americans in this district are in special education. African Americans account for 40.93% of the total special education population in this district. These percentages reflect rates since the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) which specifically address disproportionality through the Response to Intervention method for identifying students with learning disabilities.

**TABLE 3. Total African American Population Compared to African American Population in Special Education, 2007 (School, District, and State)**

Location	% of Total	% in SpEd
School 1 <sup>a</sup>	13.08	26.67
School 2 <sup>a</sup>	42.83	50.00
School 3 <sup>a</sup>	48.30	61.90
District <sup>a</sup>	34.99	40.93
State <sup>b</sup>	14.40	18.25
Nation	12.30	19.19
	(2000 Census) <sup>c</sup>	(27 <sup>th</sup> Annual Report) <sup>d</sup>

Sources: <sup>a</sup>Cognos (n.d.)

<sup>b</sup>Special Education in Texas (n.d.)

<sup>c</sup>U.S. Census Bureau (2000)

<sup>d</sup>U.S. Department of Education (2005)

Disproportionality also exists with respect to placement of African American students in disciplinary alternative education placements (DAEP). This trend is present with both non-disabled and disabled African American populations. At the national level, in 2000, African Americans represented only 17% of public school enrollment nationwide, but accounted for 34% of suspensions (Dismantling the School-to-Prison Pipeline, 2005). In 2003, African American youths made up 16% of

the nation's overall juvenile population but accounted for 45% of juvenile arrests (Dismantling the School-to-Prison Pipeline, 2005). Studies show that African American students are far more likely than their White peers to be suspended, expelled, or arrested for the same kind of conduct at school (Dismantling the School-to-Prison Pipeline, 2005). In the Texas school district in this study, in the 2005-2006 school year, 8.2% of students with disabilities were placed in a DAEP while only 4.8 of the total population was placed in a DAEP (Texas Education Agency, 2007). Students with disabilities were also twice as likely to be expelled and 1.5 times more likely to be placed in in-school suspension (ISS) (Texas Education Agency, 2007). Of these students with disabilities who experienced placement in the DAEP, 68% of them were African American. The percentage of all African American students currently at the DAEP in this district is 50% in the middle school and 62% at the high school level. However, African Americans only comprise 35% of the total district population, (Texas Education Agency, 2007).

### *The Pipeline*

The Children's Defense fund focuses on what they call the cradle to prison pipeline. Poor children and children of color face risks and disadvantages that often pull them into a "Cradle to Prison Pipeline"; this pipeline leads children to marginalized lives and premature deaths (Children's Defense Fund, n.d.). In the case of African Americans in the school environment, there appears to be a sort of pipeline for the placement of African American students in special education and/or a DAEP. This pipeline is recognized to continue to the prison systems where it has

been acknowledged that over a third of inmates have a documented disability (Dismantling the School-to-Prison Pipeline, 2005). Moreover, 68% of inmates are former high school drop-outs (Dismantling the School-to-Prison Pipeline, 2005). According to the July, 2002 President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education, young people with disabilities drop out of high school at twice the rate of their peers. These shocking statistics coupled with the fact that approximately 50% of inmates are African American make the likelihood of an African American child being sucked into this pipeline threefold: lack of high school completion, disability label, and juvenile criminal/behavioral problems (Dismantling the School-to-Prison Pipeline, 2005). By placing African American students in special education and DAEP's at disproportionate rates, we are dramatically increasing the likelihood that they will have limited success later in life and almost guaranteeing future placement in the category of a drop out and/or in the legal system. Since the two areas of African American overrepresentation (ED and MR) are inextricably connected to behavior issues and/or academic performance manifested at school, this study must investigate the classroom origins that precipitate a referral for special education evaluation.

This study focused on one of the three main contributors to the pipeline (disability label). Because this African American school to prison pipeline begins at school, in this study, the focus of concern is the general education classroom. Dewey (1916) believed that classrooms are microcosms of society at large where students are socialized for Western behavior and thought. This Western "way of being" is based

on White, middle class values because they are the dominant group in American society (Scheurich & Young, 1997). Moreover, school employees are predominantly from this social/cultural group, and this is especially true for classroom teachers (Webb-Johnson, Artiles, Trent, Jackson, & Velox, 1998). Relevant and rigorous instruction, a supportive classroom environment, and a meaningful relationship with the teacher are the greatest predictors of a student's social, emotional, and academic success in the public school setting and in society as a whole (Shealey et al., 2005). Students who come from social and cultural groups that do not easily assimilate or fit into a teacher's frame of reference are often discounted by being placed into alternative programs or labeled as disabled or faulty (Rice, 2003).

### **Purpose of the Study**

In order to more fully understand the perceptions of White teachers regarding the referral to and potential placement of African American students in special education, a critical White study was conducted. The disproportionality of African American students in special education is well established; it has also been suggested that this issue is a form of racial discrimination. This travesty among students identified as mentally retarded was first exposed by Dunn (1968). He indicated that overrepresentation may be a form of discrimination. Since then, the topic has been investigated many times over. Little critical White research has been conducted, however, to explore, at the classroom level, the possible reasons that referrals of African American students to special education occur. This study sought to fill that

gap by providing information on the perspectives of White general education teachers regarding the referral and potential placement of African American students in special education. White teachers were selected in order to explore this phenomenon from a critical White perspective. Since most teachers are White, this population is critical in the development of an understanding of the disproportionality challenge. The purpose of this study was to identify the perceptions of White general education teachers regarding the:

1. ability, behavior, and school readiness of African American students;
2. instruction, referral, and potential placement of African American students in special education;
3. gaps that exist in the preparation of general education teachers regarding the instruction of African American students.

### **Research Questions**

The following research question guided this study.

What are the perceptions of principal-nominated, White general education teachers with respect to:

1. their African American students' abilities, social skills, and school readiness?
2. the achievement gap and disproportionality nation wide and in their school district?
3. the factors that influence general education teachers to initiate a referral of an African American student to special education?

4. the potential services and progress of African American learners who are referred for special education testing?

Little research has been conducted to explore the perspectives of White general education teachers regarding African American students with respect to their instruction and potential placement in special education. By doing so, the field of education can have a deeper understanding of the classroom dynamics that precipitate referral and potential placement of African American students in special education.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

#### *Instructional Racism*

Have we created pseudo-disabilities by failing to adequately meet the needs of all of our students? Have we misidentified the system's failure to teach students well by blaming the students for their poor achievement and progress and pathologizing them as disabled? Whether we have created disabilities or marginalized students who do not perform well in the mainstream system is up for debate. Even so, African American students in special education are relegated to fighting discrimination on two fronts: race and disability (Patton, 1998). Although much civil rights and social justice work has been done, the dominant group of privilege remains the same. Scheurich and Young (1997) assert that there is such a thing as epistemological racism and that, in fact, race filters our way of knowing and coming to know. They state that the seminal knowledge creators of the past were mainly comprised of White males and the knowledge they produced is a social history of the White experience

(Scheurich & Young, 1997). Because the abundance of the documented Western knowledge base is founded upon the White experience, civilizational racism is based upon epistemological racism in the knowledge production process. Of course, “civilizational racism filters down to societies, institutions, and individuals to our classrooms” (p. 5). As a result, students of color who are unwilling or unable to successfully be bi-cultural, are pushed to the margins. The hope of this exploration is to enhance the disproportionality literature regarding institutional racism at the district and campus level by exploring the White racism that occurs in the classroom, while also exploring its contribution to the overrepresentation of African Americans in special education. I call this classroom bias *instructional racism*. I first heard this term used by Gwendolyn Webb-Johnson in August of 2005 during a speech she delivered to the school district in this study during their annual convocation. It was a profound concept to me because, for the first time, it seemed to be a description that adequately explained to me what I perceived to be occurring all around me. That is, the gross underachievement of African American students coupled with their overrepresentation in alternative discipline settings and special education. Upon further research, I discovered a formal definition for *instructional racism*:

Instructional racism, then, is the impact of the relationships among biased unconscious, conscious, and dyconscious ideologies about instruction. These biased ideologies promote institutionalized beliefs of a particular cultural group over those of historically marginalized populations ... and poor children. These children and youth often experience limited access to educational opportunities by virtue of the fact that their ethnicity, race, and socioeconomic status are perceived as deficits (Quisenberry & McIntyre, 1999, p. 53; Larke, Webb-Johnson, Rochon & Anderson, 2006).

So, in order to confront epistemological racism and its genealogy, this research had to employ a research theory that would expose, give an in-depth analysis, and de-center the dominant White view. That was a critical white study.

### *Critical Research*

Epistemological research frameworks such as critical theory seek to give voice to marginalized populations in order to empower them and expose biased structures and socialized texts. Terms like *White*, *African American*, *male*, *female*, etc., have a socially constructed meaning that is held and perpetuated by the dominant social group. In America, this group is White, middle-class males. People not in this privileged group are *othered* or stigmatized and pushed to the margins. Foregrounding and critical research exposes these power differentials in order to give voice, empowerment, and liberty to those who are *othered* while simultaneously de-centering the dominant view (Merriam, 2002).

Critical theory research in the field of education by Patton, Artiles, and others has tackled issues such as disproportionality of African Americans in special education. When we seek to understand and address issues such as disproportionality using epistemologies that embrace cultural differences and expose the social discourse regarding race, then we can make progress towards justice. So, what is race anyway? Race itself really has no scientific basis, but society's construction of race has become an obsession (Delgado & Stefanic, 1997, p. 499). Yet, we are a raced society and the dominant group, Whites, is virtually unaware of their own race because of the taken for granted privilege it carries. All non-Whites are *othered* and placed in racial

categories. Whites would prefer to be color-blind in response to racial problems rather than engage in discussion that would lead to the acknowledgement of their own race and the privilege they enjoy that simultaneously marginalizes people of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997, pp. 644-645). In order to employ a critical framework in this research, the critical White theory was applied. Currently, there are little critical White studies on the issue of disproportionality.

### *Critical White Studies*

As an employee of the school district and a parent of African American children, I am an actual part of the culture I am studying; therefore, I am a participant observer. The participant observer is vital to a critical study because its very essence is to reveal the false consciousness by reflexive means (Thomas, 2003). This study employed this particular methodology in order to fully explore the perspectives of White general education teachers as a possible false consciousness that perpetuates the marginalization of African American students. In addition, the reflexivity of the researcher lends a powerful tool for exploring multiple perspectives and challenging false consciousnesses on many levels. Further, an exploration of Whiteness, White privilege, and White racism will occur through the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1965). These are the critical elements of critical White research (Allen, 1999; Delgado & Stefancic, 1997; Haviland, 2008). As of yet, no critical White research has been conducted to explore the issue of disproportionality of African Americans in special education from the White general education teacher perspective.

## Method

In a pilot case study, an interview was conducted with a White, general education fourth grade teacher in a district that accounts for a large volume of African American referrals for psycho-educational evaluations resulting in a gross over-representation of African Americans in special education. Attempts were made to get a sense of her perception of tolerance, culturally responsive instruction, and classroom management as well as expectations for behavior and performance among African American students. After transcription, this interview was analyzed for themes. The transcriptions and coding were peer-reviewed and researcher notes were also analyzed by an independent party. The data were analyzed using McKenzie and Scheurich's (2004) four "equity traps" as themes. Additionally, another theme called *missionary mentality* was added. The missionary mentality is characterized by the teacher feeling that her job is a calling in order to save students from poverty or minority groups. This missionary mentality suggests that the students have gone astray and need to be brought into the mainstream fold. This attitude is echoed in the research (McIntyre, 1997; Warren & Hytten, 2004) as one of the faces of Whiteness. It is characterized by knowing how things should be and carrying a vision of racial salvation to help those "others." I specifically focused on one paralogic belief related to poverty. This teacher appeared to equate poverty with the African American cultural experience. This was of particular interest in this school district because over 80% of the students are on free and reduced lunch (Texas Education Agency, n.d.). As a result of this pilot case study and my strong reaction to this one teacher's

comments, I decided to broaden this study to include a variety of general education elementary teachers in this district and juxtapose their comments to my reflections as a parent and special education administrator.

Because I am White, a district special education administrator, and a parent of bi-racial children, I had an opportunity to learn about these phenomena from multiple and unique perspectives. I am a White, middle class female in my early thirties. This research is important to me for two reasons. First, I am a coordinator of special education in the school district being studied. Because I am responsible for helping to address our clear overrepresentation of African Americans in special education, I have a vested interest. Secondly, I am a parent of two African American/Latino children and one African American/European American child. My husband is an African American administrator at the high school level. I have observed his struggles to be seen as a competent leader; he has felt as though he is constantly trying to prove himself. He could have easily become a permanent victim of the pipeline as he was identified with a disability in grade school and experienced legal problems as an adolescent. He eventually entered the military, completed his bachelor's and master's degree, and is now a gifted school administrator. Additionally, I have experienced (a) my children not being held to high expectations, (b) difficulty in one of my daughters being considered for gifted and talented programs, and (c) my stepson receiving a referral to special education for what I feel was a lack of meaningful instruction in the area of reading. When my stepson did not

qualify for services, they tested him again and again. For these reasons, I am personally very dedicated to understanding this social justice issue.

The focus of my study was to explore the perspectives of White general education elementary school teachers who work in a district with a large over-representation of African American students in special education. My method for discovering this information was to conduct a critical White study. I interviewed White elementary teachers who work on campuses that account for a large volume of special education referrals to special education and who have a documented disproportionate representation of African Americans in special education. This exploration delved into their perspectives and tapped into the motivations that general education teachers have for referring African American students for special education services.

I conducted two individual interviews with three White general education teachers for a total of 6 interviews. However, I remained flexible should only one interview or more than two be necessary. Three separate campuses were selected; teachers were nominated by their principal based on two criteria: a proficient Professional Development Appraisal System (PDAS) evaluation in the last 12 months and benchmark scores of at least 60% passing. The PDAS is the evaluation instrument that most Texas school district utilize to evaluate teachers. Scores on PDAS range from “exceeds expectations” to “needs improvement”. Optimally, interview one was an attempt to establish rapport and focus on African American special education referrals and the teachers’ perceived possible outcomes of those referrals. Interview two focused on disproportionality, and the teachers’ general

perceptions of African American students. I maintained a reflexive journal. The data were peer reviewed, member checks occurred, and the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1965) among the interviews, discussion forum, and reflexive journal took place. Finally, data were coded and analyzed for themes.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Achievement Gap.** The observed disparity on a number of educational measures between the performance of groups of students, especially groups defined by gender, race/ethnicity, ability, and socioeconomic status (Landsman & Lewis, 2006).

**Constant Comparative Method.** systematic qualitative research methodology in the social sciences emphasizing generation of theory from data in the process of conducting research. Rather than beginning by researching & developing a theory, a variety of data collection methods are the first step. From the data collected from this first step, the key points are marked with a series of codes, which are extracted from the text. The codes are grouped into similar concepts, in order to make them more workable. From these concepts categories are formed, which are the basis for the creation of a theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1965).

**Critical White Study.** An examination of the construction and moral implications of Whiteness by using narratives as a tool for exposing systems of racial power and White privilege. Another theme of critical White studies is encouraging awareness and deconstruction of the White, hegemonic discourse. These studies are traditionally performed by White researchers with White participants (Gee, 1996).

**Disproportionality in Special Education.** The overrepresentation of an ethnic group in special education when compared to their overall representation in the total population (Dunn, 1968).

**Dysconscious Racism.** A form of racism that accepts dominant White norms and privileges; cultural institutions can produce a false consciousness in which power and oppression become taken-for-granted *realities* or ideologies (King, 1991).

**Instructional Racism.** A classroom-based racism that infiltrates the instructional and assessment methods as well as the classroom management techniques that are utilized with diverse learners (Larke, P.J., Elbert, C., Webb-Johnson, G., Larke, A. & Brisco, M., 2006).

**White Privilege.** A sociological concept which describes advantages enjoyed by White persons beyond what is commonly experienced by non-White people in those same social, political, and economic, spaces. Often, the person benefiting is unaware of his or her privilege (McIntosh, 1990).

**White Racism.** Not only an individual belief that Whites are superior to other races, but also a social dominance over other races that is acted out collectively (Frankenberg, 1993).

**Whiteness.** A body of knowledge, ideologies, norms, and particular practices that have been constructed over the history of the American colonies and the U.S. with roots in European history as well. The knowledge, ideologies, norms, and practices of Whiteness affect how we think about race, what we see when we look at certain

physical features, how we build our own racial identities, how we operate in the world, and what we *know* about our place in it (Wise, 2003).

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This review of literature traces the history of African American education in the United States with regard to the theories of African American underachievement. The disproportionality of African American in special education is also discussed. In addition, the research on culturally responsive pedagogy, postmodern curriculum, and federal law is reviewed. Finally, the methodology for this study, a critical white study, is reviewed along with the constant comparative method.

#### **African American Underachievement**

African American underachievement, more commonly known as the achievement gap, refers to the phenomenon that African Americans perform more poorly than their White counterparts in various educational achievement scenarios. There have been several initiatives and explanations to address this problem. For example, the fourth grade failure syndrome is a withdrawal of interest by children of this age in school-related activities, which results in academic failure (Kunjufu, 1984). Contributors to this syndrome are single-parent families, teachers who are unfamiliar with African American culture, a predominance of female elementary teachers who are not tolerant of typical male behavior, and teachers who cannot communicate high expectations (Kunjufu, 1984). This attempt to explain African American underachievement, particularly among males is just one theory presented on this topic. In all, there are approximately 10 theories, many of which overlap. Ultimately,

the achievement gap cannot be attributed to one cause nor can it be addressed so easily; it is a complex problem which requires a multi-faceted approach that most certainly necessitates the collaboration between schools and communities (Kunjufu, 1984).

What is obvious to so many people is the expectation that a specific, predictable subset of students will consistently become academic failures, troublemakers, and discipline problems. We refer to this expectation as the normalization of failure, which operates at the level of taken for granted assumptions and beliefs ... we strove to make the familiar appear strange, to “problematize” or denaturalize” the inequalities that are generally taken for granted. By problematizing the familiar, we hoped to demonstrate that patterns of inequity persist to a large extent because of our consent and acquiescence as a community. We further hoped that illuminating this consent would begin to galvanize the collective will to address the issues more forcefully (Noguera & Wing, 2006, pp. 142-143).

### *Deficit Thinking*

Antiracist research has exposed traditional racist explanations for the African American-White achievement gap. Chief among these racist theories is the deficit view. In *The Evolution of Deficit Thinking: Educational Thought and Practice*, Valencia (1997) defined *deficit thinking* as a form of blaming students, their families, and the community for poor students’ and students of color’s school problems and academic failure. It contains eight chapters that discuss deficit thinking as it applies to education. Valencia introduced the theory of deficit thinking by conceptualizing the notion in six ways. This includes the process of blaming the victim, the discourses of genetic pathology, the culture of poverty, inadequate home life, poor parenting, and accumulated environmental deficit models as causes of school failure. Simultaneously, the inequality of the system itself remains blameless. These racist

notions attempt to explain school failure among students of color and students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Grossman (1991) stated that “anecdotal evidence suggests that most educators would claim that they do not believe that African American ... students are genetically inferior. However, research suggests that many teachers act as if they are” (pp. 1-2).

Other articles focus on specific issues that are seemingly caused by deficit thinking. Ford, Harris, Tyson, and Trotman (2002) and Ford and Grantham (2003) connected the deficit thinking model to the under-representation of African American students in gifted and talented programs. They asserted that the deficit model perpetuates segregation in the school environment by preventing African American students from participating in certain programs. Ford, et al. and Ford and Grantham offered several suggestions for moving beyond deficit thinking. These include adopting contemporary ideologies of intelligence and IQ testing, utilizing culturally sensitive instruments for identifying giftedness, providing multicultural preparations for teachers, utilizing a multicultural pedagogy, and developing partnerships between the school and the home. The trend towards developing recommendations to address deficit thinking continued in the work of Garcia and Guerra (2004). Their article offered a framework for attacking the deficit model through professional development. The framework involved a systematic exposure of deficit views, challenging them through research, and reframing them into a view that does not blame students, families, and communities for the school failure of low-income and racially diverse

students. Articles of this type continued to further address teacher and administrator preparation.

The deficit view is a sort of over-arching umbrella that encompasses all the racist theories of African American educational issues. Despite how it is organized in the research literature, there are several distinct explanations for this very real problem. It is these theories put into practice at the classroom level that actually are the cause, not the reason for African American educational issues. The deficit view discusses the viewpoints of teachers regarding their students. Teachers tended to think of and talk about their students in terms of their presumed weaknesses, lack of motivation, and poor family support (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004). Jackson (2005) discussed the theory that African American students underachieve as a result of a lack of motivation. She reframed this notion by offering an alternate explanation. She argued that marginalized students experience extreme stress and anxiety because of the perceptions that their teachers have about them. Therefore, “the stress often manifests itself in self-defeating behaviors that appear as inattentiveness, resistance, and not caring” (p. 205). Further, terms like minority, disadvantaged, and low achiever complicate the issue. Jackson suggested that these terms be replaced with students of color, students put at a disadvantage, and underachiever.

### *Equity Traps*

Other studies have been conducted to explore racism in the classroom. The academic underachievement or achievement gap of African American students when compared to White students has been explained in many different ways throughout

the years. Most of these explanations were based upon racial bias and have served to further perpetuate the problem. McKenzie and Scheurich (2004) offered a construct for principal preparation called “Equity Traps.” These equity traps help to explain how covert racism is played out in the school environment. They named these traps as “the deficit view, racial erasure, employment and avoidance of the gaze, and paralogic beliefs and behaviors” (p. 601). These four traps are defined and systematically addressed in such a way as to prepare principals to intervene at the campus level. In my opinion, these four traps encompass many of the racist theories of underachievement that have existed in the field.

The deficit view discusses the viewpoints of teachers regarding their students. Teachers tended to think of and talk about their students in terms of their presumed weaknesses, lack of motivation, and poor family support (p. 608). Skrla and Scheurich (2001) shared this view in their piece. They argued that school district leaders are profoundly affected by a deficit view; this is most profoundly manifested in their expectation of what is possible for students of color (p. 237).

Racial erasure is defined as “the notion that by refusing to see color, and by prioritizing other factors—such as economics—over race, we can deny our own racism” (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004, p. 613). This is typically seen in comments such as, “I am color blind, I just don’t see race,” or “we are all human beings.” Racial erasure often uses the argument that race is not a problem in society anymore; rather our greatest struggle is successfully dealing with poverty. These comments completely negate race by substituting another issue in its place. Jencks and Phillips

(1998) confirmed that traditional conservative explanations of African American under-achievement have included, “the culture of poverty, and single motherhood” (p. 45). Of course, none of these theories can be substantiated by evidence. These theories negate racism as an issue that must be dealt with by substituting other explanations. Poverty and parenting become scapegoats for explaining underachievement. A strength-based approach would acknowledge that students who are raised in these environments often possess skills that, if built-upon, would enhance school performance. Blaming poverty for all of the issues in African American school achievement would completely negate the fact that academic underachievement is common in the African American population across all socioeconomic levels (Gordon, 2006).

Avoiding and employing the gaze comes from the work of Foucault (1977) where the *gaze* is the “surveillance for the purpose of controlling behavior” (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004, p. 619). In this piece the *gaze* manifests itself as the accountability of a supervisor or parent that teachers wish to avoid or the reinforcing effect of the status quo that teachers wish to employ (2004). For example, teachers may prefer to work in school where expectations are low and accountability is nil so that they do not have to deal with uncomfortable issues such as race. However, No Child Left Behind has legislated an accountability system for districts and campuses that include every sub-population. This system is measured by Annual Yearly Progress (AYP). Campuses who repeatedly do not meet AYP standards may have serious financial sanctions by way of transferring students, losing Title I funding, and ultimately may

face closure. As a result, the climate of low expectations on campuses and in districts must be confronted, the gaze destroyed, so that funding sources are not in jeopardy.

On the contrary, teachers may employ the gaze to reign in a vocal new teacher who wishes to call attention to such problems as racial discrimination (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004). New teachers who do not accept racial stereotypes are often ignored or shunned by existing faculty. Noguera and Akom (2000) stated, “Images rooted in racial stereotypes that permeate American society limit the aspirations of African-American and Latino students” (p. 31). Problems with teacher attrition have been attributed to the informal power structures that exist in schools seeking to perpetuate stereotypes and mediocrity.

Finally, paralogical or illogical beliefs and behavior are based on false beliefs that are founded upon self-deception (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004). An example of this would be blaming the students’ behavior for a teacher’s lack of classroom control when the reality is that the teacher has very poor management skills and little structure for the classroom. Another common example is the assumptions many teachers make about their students from impoverished backgrounds. For example, it is common to hear a teacher talk about students from low socio-economic backgrounds as culturally deprived or lacking in educational experience.

Cultural deprivation is just one example of the paralogical beliefs. Justifying African American underachievement by blaming the students for poor social skills based on their culture is another example. Students are blamed using their lack of social skills, poor behavior, and hyperactive or vervistic demeanor as an excuse

(Webb-Johnson, 2002). In addition, the cultural construct of language for African Americans has also been blamed for their poor school performance. Perry (1993) explained that “the ‘cultural difference’ explanation for school failure was initially located in discussions about whether the language of African American children was a barrier to school success” (p. 5). This can easily be addressed by a culturally responsive pedagogy, thus problematizing the theory. However, “when school is not a legitimate institution for the children and their families ... cultural boundaries are likely to be transformed into cultural borders, and are ... implicated in children’s school performances (p. 8). Rather than taking responsibility for this travesty, teachers and administrators blame the students for their lack of ability to teach them well.

### **Disproportionality in Special Education**

The persistence of African American underachievement has resulted in a sort of pipeline to special education. Kunjufu noted this trend in 1984. It seems as though the lack of achievement among African Americans has been perceived to be a deficit in ability, emotional or behavioral incapacity, or faulty processing inherent in the student. This aligns with the racist theories of the achievement gap including, low intelligence, meager motivation, the deficit view, and poor behavioral adjustment as a result of single parenting or insufficient parenting. These erroneous concepts translate into suspected learning disabilities, mental retardation, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, and emotional disturbance. The disproportionality literature has spanned

over three decades, first recognized by Dunn (1968) a little more than a decade after court-ordered desegregation. So, the placement of African American students in special education has become a type of re-segregation as well as a method of perpetuating racist ideas regarding the capabilities of African Americans (Singhal, 1999).

The disproportionate representation of minority students in special education has long been a concern in discussions of educational equity. Hosp and Reschly (2003) cited three main reasons for this: (a) potentially negative effects of stigmatizing labels; (b) restricted access to general education settings, especially for minority students; and (c) lack of conclusive evidence that special education programs are effective. These concerns relate to potential inequities in both educational opportunities and outcomes resulting from ineffective education. The National Research Council (NRC) report on disproportionate representation of minority students in special education (Donovan & Cross, 2002) identified factors affecting the representation of minority students in special education: (a) sufficient numbers of qualified teachers; (b) class size below 20, especially in the early grade levels; and (c) adequate levels of school funding, especially if used “to hire better-trained teachers who use more effective instructional strategies” (Donovan & Cross, p. 179). These factors are cause for concern as they closely relate to the fourth grade failure syndrome, lack of postmodern curriculum, and culturally responsive pedagogy.

*Theories of Disproportionality*

Confronting epistemological racism with critical perspectives is also necessary with respect to the issue of the disproportionality of African Americans in special education. Previous research on this topic has attempted to explain why overrepresentation of African Americans in special education occurs (Skiba, Knesting, & Bush, 2002; Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Gallini, Simmons, & Feggens-Azziz, 2006; Skiba, Simmons et al., 2006). These theories of disproportionality differ from the theories on African American underachievement in that they attempt to explain how African American students actually qualify for special education services. The three basic theories of disproportionality are: (1) biased assessment, (2) the influence of poverty, and (3) poor pre-referral systems. These explanations extend the discussion regarding racial bias in the public school system (Shealey & Lue, 2006).

Much of the research focuses on disproportionality as a special education assessment problem to be solved rather than a social justice issue that must be systemically addressed (Dekker, Krou, Wright, & Smith, 2002). Specific sources of psychometric bias could depress the scores of minority students relative to their expected “true score,” which in turn would yield the over-identification of minority students for special education service (Skiba et al., 2002). A number of possible sources of test bias have been identified, including construct validity, content or item bias, inappropriate standardization samples, examiner and language bias, and differential predictive validity (Skiba et al., 2002). The debate about minority

disproportionality in special education is often framed in terms of test bias: whether aptitude and achievement tests are constructed in such a way as to be inherently biased against certain groups, yielding inaccurate scores or inaccurate predictions (Skiba et al., 2002). Yet the test itself is only one part of the assessment process; in order to be culturally competent, tests must also be administered and interpreted without bias. Indeed, culturally competent assessment might be defined as a process of assessment that does not contribute to the overrepresentation of minority students in special education (Skiba et al., 2002).

Some look at the issue as one related to poverty rather than race (Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Simmons, Feggins-Azziz, & Chung, 2005). Oswald, Countinho, Best, and Singh (1999) attempted to correlate economic and demographic variables to the identification of students as mentally retarded and emotionally disturbed and found that African Americans who are from lower economic backgrounds are more likely to be identified as mentally retarded and less likely to be labeled emotionally disturbed. Regardless of economics, however, African Americans were still identified in both categories at greater rates.

Throughout the history of concern about minority disproportionality in special education, there has been a strong focus on the possible contribution of the processes of referral, assessment, and decision making that lead to eligibility determination (Skiba, Simmons et al., 2006). Pre-referral intervention teams have been identified in the literature as a positive resource that may reduce the over-referral of minority students through the development of a process specifically designed to meet

individual needs prior to referral (Skiba, Simmons et al., 2006). However, pre-referral teams that function to do just as they are named, eventually do refer students for evaluation. A “pre-referral” team that uses a “culturally responsive” response to intervention model would depend upon research-based interventions and progress-monitoring. These teams are rare, but they do appear to be effective. Research-based initiatives borne out of critical research have emerged to address the achievement gap and its resulting issues.

#### *Disproportionality Recommendations*

As stated previously, the literature related specifically to racial overrepresentation of students with disabilities focuses largely seeking to explain disproportionality and making recommendations to special educators, diagnosticians, and district/campus administrators on how to prevent or correct the problem. Countinho and Oswald (2000) sought to synthesize the discussion on disproportionality and make recommendations to correct the problem. These recommendations focused on pre-intervention strategies as well as a fine-tuning of the assessment process. However, the research does not adequately apply critical theory to support a proactive approach that addresses the root of the problem (Patton, 1998). That is not to say that the research on disproportionality has not helped to identify and publicize this matter. There have been key players in this discussion that helped to clarify the issue, engage in fierce conversations, and make useful recommendations. Yet, the problem continues to worsen.

Artiles (1998) exposed the fact that little theory has been applied to the problem of overrepresentation in his article, "The Dilemma of Difference: Enriching the Disproportionality Discourse with Theory and Context." He reviewed the literature on differences and extended this to the idea that learning differences in students of color have been labeled as disabilities simply because they do not fit into the traditional idea of learning. Placing minority students into special education only makes them more different than they are already perceived to be. Artiles called for a "plurality of perspectives" to make room for all of the differences that students bring to the table (p. 34). Giving voice to a plurality of perspectives is achieved through critical research regarding the education of diverse learners. It has been difficult, if not impossible, to locate any critical White studies on this particular topic.

Additional clarification or categorization of the deficit view has recently been presented in the *Journal of Educational Leadership*. Weiner (2006) specifically focused on reframing the deficit view with respect to hyperactivity and incivility. Further, Harry and Klingner (2007) explored deficit thinking as it relates to the disproportionality of minorities in special education. In doing so, the authors present "two distorting lenses," (p. 19) of the deficit model. One is called the disability deficit and the other is referred to as the social/cultural deficit. The discussion here explores the idea of going a step further from imposing a deficit view on minority students to assuming that they are faulty or disabled. In addition, social and cultural differences are interpreted as deficits. Rather than seeing variation, teachers tend to see pathology.

With regard to referral of the “faulty” students for special education services, referral appears to be the beginning of total marginalization. Hosp and Reschly (2003) confirmed that “referral for assessment or intervention has been cited as one of the most important predictors of future special education eligibility because most students referred for consideration of special education are eventually placed in special education programs. Once placed, African American students seem to overpopulate more restrictive settings. Thus, a call for a better understanding of the disproportionality phenomenon is proposed: “The relationship between eligibility and referral suggests that a better understanding of disproportionate representation in special education categorization requires investigation of factors affecting referral rates and processes” (Hosp & Reschly, 2003, p. 71).

### **Research-Based Initiatives**

#### *Progressive Curriculum*

There has been a multitude of research that applies critical to other multicultural education issues. The outcomes of critical educational research have included troubling the notion of curriculum. If the idea of curriculum is based upon the knowledge and skills that are written, taught, and tested and epistemology is the study of the way one comes to know, then the concept of curriculum becomes exceedingly powerful. A modern definition of curriculum is steeped in a positivistic stew; it is linear, absolute, subject or topic-based, and only effective if kept in tight alignment with state and national standards (Slattery, 2006). On the other hand, a

progressive view of curriculum is more critical, creating spaces for investigating and challenging discourses and power structures that marginalize groups of people (Slattery, 2006). In this curricular perspective, room is created for theories such as critical, feminist, queer, spiritual, and other epistemological frameworks to be explored. These curriculum spaces move beyond simple celebration and appreciation of other cultures and ethnicities to a more meaningful study of different ways of life. Cary's (2006) work explored the administrative process of creating inclusive curriculum spaces that allow for conversations to be held and voices to be heard. The normally privileged educator must learn to be reflexive about their own bias and social text in order to create spaces that include outside, divergent views rather than exclude any but that of the mainstream discourse (Cary, 2006). These created spaces not only make room for multiple perspectives but also allow for many techniques, experiments, strategies, and projects to occur in the pedagogical process. Furthermore, the idea of a curriculum space in the knowledge production process has a profound impact on the arena of research. Qualitative methodology such as critical and ethnographic fits nicely into this space as it is fundamentally inclusive of culture, language, history, and voice.

The impact of a progressive curriculum in the classroom is significant. The development of and mentorship/coaching of reflective judgment during the school years is virtually ignored. This skill extends beyond the critical thinking spectrum and knowledge structure continuum; therefore few students engage in it and fewer teachers are able to guide it during instruction. King and Kitchener (1994)

emphasized this by stating that “rising to this challenge so that students ask more complex questions and make more reflective judgments is no small undertaking. As educators, we have the responsibility to teach students the ‘habits of mind’ associated with making interpretive analyses and thoughtful, reasoned arguments” (p. 222). The authors of this book discuss this issue by presenting a Reflective Judgment Model comprised of 7 stages. These can be organized into the pre-reflective, quasi-reflective, and reflective periods. This model traces the development of thinking about problems for which we seem to find no answer or the answer we think we have becomes challenged or no longer seems viable. The authors called these “ill-structured problems” and explain that “true reflective thinking is initiated only after there is recognition that a real problem exists” (p. 6). Reflexivity, in this case, becomes a process where difficult issues are subjected to an increasingly critical review. At its core, our beliefs are confronted. The ontological assumptions we hold dear are based upon some epistemological stronghold. During stage 6 & 7 reflection, these foundations are exposed to deconstruction by looking at multiple perspectives, worldviews, interpretations, and evidence-based realities. An evaluation of the strength of a position is made and personal adjustments to one’s own thinking and beliefs occur. Becoming a self-reflective practitioner is key to leading the development of this skill in one’s students. Moreover, self-reflection is the basis of critical practice.

### *Culturally Responsive Pedagogy*

Another outcome of research in multicultural education is the notion of culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP). CRP incorporates curricular issues, classroom climate, and the instructional process. Ladson-Billings (1994) provided a clear framework for culturally responsive practices. In this book, Ladson-Billings distinguished between an assimilationist approach to educating African American children and a culturally responsive scheme. Assimilationist programs attempt to re-socialize children into the mainstream culture. “Children’s academic problems are seen to be rooted in the ‘pathology’ of their homes, communities, and cultures. Thus if the children can be removed from their culture of ‘deprivation’ then the school can transform them into people worthy of inclusion in the society” (pp. 10-11). Furthermore, this method causes African American students to achieve at a “psychic cost” in that “doing well in school is seen as ‘acting White’. Thus if they do not want to ‘act White’ the only option, many believe, is to refuse to do well in school” (p. 11). “The axiomatic thinking that if doing well in school equals “acting White” then doing poorly equals ‘acting African American’” (p.11). This idea comes from Fordham and Ogbu’s (1986) work and happens to be recognized as one of the theories of African American underachievement.

One of the most basic tenets of culturally responsive practice is how the teacher views their students. Ladson-Billings (1994) explained that “whether teachers think of their students as needy and deficient or capable and resilient can spell the difference between pedagogy grounded in compensatory perspectives and those

grounded in critical and liberatory ones” (as cited in Landsman & Lewis, 2006, p. 31). Ladson-Billings (1994) asserted that many teachers are “uncomfortable acknowledging any students differences and particularly racial differences ... these attempts at color-blindness mask ‘dysconscious racism’ an ‘uncritical habit of mind that justifies inequity and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given’” (pp. 31-32). It is how teachers choose to see their students, then that most profoundly impacts their learning.

Culturally relevant practice is described by Ladson-Billings (1994) as having the following characteristics (pp. 34, 55, 81):

- Teacher sees herself as an artist, teaching as an art.
- Teacher sees herself as a part of the community and teaching as giving something back to that community.
- Teacher believes all students can succeed.
- Teacher encourages students to make connections to their community, national, and global identities.
- Teacher sees teaching as pulling knowledge out.
- Teacher-students relationship is equitable and extends beyond the classroom.
- Teacher demonstrates connectedness with all students.
- Teacher encourages a community of learners.
- Teacher encourages collaborative learning; students are responsible for each other.

- Knowledge is continuously created.
- Knowledge is viewed critically.
- Teacher is passionate about content.
- Teacher helps students develop necessary skills.
- Teacher sees excellence as a complex standard that takes diversity into account.

The culturally responsive classroom values students as competent, incorporates their culture into the curriculum, exposes the dominant oppressive culture, challenges the status-quo, and allows students to maintain their own cultural identity while simultaneously preparing them for larger societal demands (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Furthermore, Grossman (1991) asserted that:

To work effectively with culturally diverse students, teachers require cultural sensitivity. Cultural sensitivity is an awareness of the general problems culturally diverse students experience in school because of their cultural differences, how cultural differences influence students' preferred learning styles, how they may cause students to behave in ways that are acceptable in their cultures but not in school, and how these differences may lead students to react in unanticipated ways to behavior management techniques. However, being sensitive to cultural difference in general is not sufficient. Educators need to have an in-depth knowledge about the specific cultures that are represented in their classes in order to adapt their instructional, assessment, classroom management, and counseling techniques to specific cultural characteristics of their students. And they need to have the courage and commitment to actually use techniques that are appropriate for students from different ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds in the face of the many community, administrative, and financial forces that pressure them not to do so (p. 4).

Thus, a culturally responsive pedagogy is a critical undertaking to challenge the privileges of Whiteness that are steeped in current teaching and learning frameworks.

This outcome may only be achieved through continued critical research related to the

classroom setting. Moreover, critical White studies that explore White perspectives on White racism are of paramount importance to understanding this issue.

*White Teacher, African American Learner Research*

Books, research articles, and dissertations have explored the dynamics of the White teacher and her students of color. For example, Landsman (2005) authored a book on this topic that began to inspire and model conversations for educators to have on the topic of race. She wrote that “we will achieve a day of freedom from racism when Whites acknowledge the day-to-day privileges they and their children receive simply because of the color of their skin. We will achieve true equity in education in this country when poor, Asian, African American, female, Native-American, and Latino/a students start at the same starting point as middle- and upper-class White children (p. 162). Additionally, McKenzie’s (2001) dissertation tackled this same issue revealing themes that emerged from the perceptions of White teachers regarding their students of color and their own racial identity. Hyland (2005) reviewed an ethnographic research project that worked to identify the practices of White teachers that perpetuated Whiteness and stifled culturally responsive classroom pedagogy. Several metaphors were identified as unintentional racist practices that White teachers employ in an effort to be a “good teacher of African American students” (p. 429). Blanchett (2006) stated that “educators tend to see Whiteness as the norm and consequently the academic skills, behavior, and social skills of African American and other students of color are constantly compared with those of their White peers” (p. 27). Sleeter (1993) gave us a construct for future

research on White educators and African American students with respect to special education:

The existing body of literature on the current state of teachers' preparation for educating a racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse population suggests that much more must be done to ensure that teachers not only are prepared to educate whoever comes into their classrooms but are also prepared to deconstruct institutional as well as their own White privilege and racism. By deconstructing issues of White privilege and racism in the American educational system, teacher education candidates can better understand how their perceptions of "Whiteness," "Blackness," and "color-blindness" affect their interactions with students whose race differs from their own. These negative perceptions of African American students and of their "Blackness" are likely to become evident in the learning environment and to affect the extent to which teachers believe these students can or will learn and their decisions to refer or not refer them to special education (As cited in Blanchett, 2006, p. 27).

Given work like this, we have a much deeper understanding of Whiteness and have tools to more readily identify the dominant hegemonic discourses that exist in education and result in the marginalization of certain student groups.

### **Federal and State Interventions**

Skrla and Scheurich (2001) agreed that the deficit view and lack of culturally responsive practices are problematic. They argued that school district leaders are profoundly affected by a deficit view; and that this is most profoundly manifested in their expectation of what is possible for students of color. Four Texas school districts that had been recognized as achieving significant improvement on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) test for students of color and students from low-income homes were studied to try to determine how they were able to close the achievement gap. Their findings were that the Texas accountability system is

responsible for a significant reduction in deficit thinking. They asserted that accountability exposes inequality, develops anti-deficit orientations, drives high expectations, and shatters stereotypes by setting exemplars.

Landmark legislation like NCLB and the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004 have attempted to raise the expectations for all students and remove excuses for achievement gaps between ethnicities (Scheurich, Skrla, & Johnson, 2000). However, these relatively recent changes in the law have not yet filtered down to the campus and classroom level where bias and low expectations appear to have infiltrated the thinking of teachers and administrators. In addition, the response to intervention (RtI) model proposed by these two pieces of legislation seeks to address the problem of over-identification but does not get to the heart of disproportionality. Where there has been a lot of focus on limiting the numbers of students identified for special education services, little has been done to address the racial make-up of those who are admitted to special education (Salend, Duhaney, & Montgomery, 2002). The 2004 reauthorization of the IDEIA aligned itself with NCLB by requiring an RtI model for identifying learning disabilities. However, RtI does not address the two largest areas of disproportionality, ED and MR. Furthermore, diagnosing mental retardation has become easier to do as a result of the Texas state rules adopted in September of 2007. Furthermore, states were required to implement a monitoring or accountability system for improving the general delivery and construction of special education services. In Texas, this system is called the Performance-Based Monitoring System (PBMS). It ranks districts from a level 1 to 3 on several indicators. Some of

which include disproportionality, least restrictive environment, dropouts, involvement in statewide assessments, and delivery of related services (Texas Education, Agency, 2007). While this is effective in bringing these issues to a district's attention, there is very little impact at the classroom level.

Deficit thinking is the umbrella for the racist theories that exist to explain the issues of African American school achievement. It is these theories put into practice in the classroom that constitutes a kind of instructional racism. This racism creates pseudo-disabilities that ultimately further marginalize African American students by making them eligible for special education. Until the inception on NCLB and Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), there was a great amount of incentive for placing students in special education. Doing so, allowed Individual Education Planning (IEP) teams to exempt eligible students from state assessments and remove them from the general education classroom. However, in the last three to four years, AYP has counted all students in Special Education who participate in state assessments by testing off of their enrolled grade level or on an alternate assessment in too great of a percentage as artificial failures. So, the incentive has been removed. This is huge step forward for students with disabilities. The damage has been done, however. African-American students have been systematically marginalized and stigmatized in this process. Furthermore, the trend of disproportionality has not improved since AYP began. Legislating high expectations alone cannot correct the deficit model. Substantial training for teachers to create and nurture a classroom climate that values all

cultures, implementing a culturally responsive pedagogy, and confrontation and reframing of deficit thinking must all occur as well.

### **Critical White Studies**

Given the problems reviewed in this research (African American underachievement, disproportionality, and marginalization), it is not enough to depend upon legislation and other scholarly research regarding teaching and learning in a multicultural setting. White scholars in the academy must answer the call to action to engage in a White discourse on White racism (Scheurich, 1993). He stated:

We White academics need, first, to begin to understand and make conscious, especially within our intellectual work, the fact that in our society all people are racialized persons, that is, all people are socially influenced in significant ways by their membership in a racial group. We Whites need to study and report how being White affects our thinking, our behaviors, our attitudes, and our decisions from the micro, personal level to the macro, social level. We need to make White racism a central, self-reflective topic of inquiry within the academy. (p. 9)

Thus, critical White studies are necessary to explore Whiteness and privilege with regard to these critical educational issues. Critical White studies are those performed by White scholars espousing a critical framework for understanding White racism, Whiteness, and White privilege.

In order to fully understand the characteristics of critical White studies, a working definition of White racism is necessary. According to Sleeter (1993), "White people tend to retreat from identifying racism with ourselves," and Scheurich (1993) noted that Whites have a tendency to view racism as an individual belief rather than a collective act of domination. So, White racism is not only an individual belief that

Whites are superior to other races, but also a social dominance over other races that is acted out collectively. McIntosh (1990) summarized it beautifully: “I was taught to see racism only in individual acts of meanness, not in invisible systems conferring dominance on my group” (p. ¶ 7). Ultimately, White racism, in a collective sense, is the phenomena that “Whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal,” so that when we work to benefit others, this is seen as work that will allow “them” to be more like “us” (McIntosh, 1990, ¶ 7).

Another key feature to understanding critical White studies is the notion of White privilege and power differential it perpetuates between Whites and other races. Landsman (Landsman & Lewis, 2006) asserted that:

At this moment, the key to understanding basic inequity and injustice in the United States is to acknowledge that the problem resides not with Oprah, Ruth Simmons, or the well-dressed Black man shown to the worst seat in a restaurant full of empty choice tables. The problem resides in the men and women at the doors, or those in the boardrooms, management offices, school districts, and other decision-making locations, blocking the way, or following customers in their stores, or denying places and classes, entrance and access, to men and women based solely on their Blackness or Brownness. As a result, privilege resides in the fact that White people can move about, can experience, life, can apply to college, for loans, for jobs without being denied entrance or freedom based on their skin color—and never for a moment have to think about it. (p. 15)

The seminal work on White privilege by McIntosh (1990) provided a list of 50 examples of how White privilege is played out in society. She explained that privilege is like an “invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was “meant” to remain oblivious (page #). This White privilege is not a favored status but an invisible system of dominance of Whites over other races. Wise (2003) pointed out:

Few Whites have ever thought of our position as resulting from racial preferences. Indeed, we pride ourselves on our hard work and ambition, as if somehow we invented the concepts. As if we worked harder than the folks who were forced to pick cotton.... We strike the pose of self-sufficiency while ignoring the advantages we have been afforded in every realm of activity: housing, education, employment, criminal justice, politics, banking, and business. We ignore the fact that at almost every turn, put hard work has been met with access to an opportunity structure denied to millions of others. Privilege, to us, is like water to fish: invisible precisely because we cannot imagine life without it.

Wise named the undercurrents of White privilege as those that “allows one to not have: to think about race on a daily basis; one’s intelligence questioned by best-selling books, to worry about being viewed as “out of place” when driving, shopping, buying a home, or for that matter, attending the University of Michigan.” This invisibility of White privilege exposes its key feature: colorblindness. Colorblindness is a racial strategy of ignoring the existence or influence of racism, privilege, or one’s responsibility or participation in it (Allen, 1999). Predominantly colorblind approaches to race issues in academia have dominated the research, ignoring the power differential and oppressive features of White privilege and its discriminatory effects (Applebaum, 2003). So, critical White theory’s purpose is to expose privilege and its oppressive outcomes.

A third key element to critical White study is the social construction of Whiteness. According to Frankenberg (1993), “Whiteness signals the production and reproduction of dominance rather than subordination, normativity rather than marginality, and privilege rather than disadvantage” (pp. 236-237). So, Whiteness is what makes the structure of White privilege possible and White racism prolific. Three characteristics of Whiteness replete in the literature are that Whiteness is

powerful yet power-evasive (color-blind), Whiteness uses privilege to maintain its power, and Whiteness is not monolithic (it cannot be oversimplified) (Haviland, 2008).

The primary goal, then, of a critical White study, is for Whites to “interrupt the dominant discourse on race and racism by any means necessary: the spoken word, art, literature, political essays, media, protest, whatever” (Wise, 1998). The methods used by critical White theorists are largely qualitative and include discourse analysis of racial identity or Whiteness, White privilege, and stories of White racism along with a reflexive examination of the researcher’s own racism and racial identity. A discourse analysis involves a critical study of ways of behaving, valuing, thinking, speaking, interacting, and writing (Gee, 1996). There are helpful constructs for conducting such analyses. Looking for themes such as colorblindness, sameness, normativity, and baiting are common (Allen, 1999; Haviland, 2008). Further, with regard to racial identity, Helms (1990) and Carter (1977) presented a useful model for evaluating the phases of a healthy White racial identity. These include contact, disintegration, reintegration, pseudo-independence, immersion-emersion, and autonomy. These phases demonstrate an evolution from dysconscious racism, privilege awareness, and individual action towards actual intervention in institutional White racism by seeing the problem as one for Whites to engage in with other Whites.

Tools utilized by scholars conducting a critical White study include dialogic interviewing, reflexivity, perspective seeking, and discussion forums. Dialogic

techniques, perspective seeking, and discussion forums are inseparable methods that are utilized to elicit the participants' story or narrative concerning a certain phenomena. These perspectives are not meant to be truth, but are intended to obtain a deeper understanding of multiple realities. In a critical study, those are the realities of the dominant group. They are then deciphered into themes in order to de-center the dominant view and emancipate marginalized populations. Discussion forums seek to facilitate conversation concerning these taken for granted realities in an effort to promote social justice and change. Dialogic interviewing techniques are characterized by a natural conversational flow so that the researcher is not seen as dominant over or critical of the participant. This method is key to the reflexive process in that it engages the researcher in the conversation so that, they too, can be critical of their own bias and participation in the dominant discourse.

Reflexivity is an act of self-reflection whereby examination or action refers to and affects the entity instigating the action or examination. In brief, reflexivity refers to circular relationships between cause and effect. A reflexive relationship is bi-directional. Reflexivity requires an awareness of the researcher's contribution to the construction of meanings throughout the research process, and an acknowledgment of the impossibility of remaining 'outside of' one's subject matter while conducting research. Reflexivity then, urges us "to explore the ways in which a researcher's involvement with a particular study influences, acts upon, and informs such research" (Nightingale & Cromby, 1999, p. 228).

There are two types of reflexivity: personal reflexivity and epistemological reflexivity. 'Personal reflexivity' involves reflecting upon the ways in which

our own values, experiences, interests, beliefs, political commitments, wider aims in life and social identities have shaped the research. It also involves thinking about how the research may have affected and possibly changed us, as people and as researchers. ‘Epistemological reflexivity’ requires us to engage with questions such as: How has the research question defined and limited what can be ‘found?’ How has the design of the study and the method of analysis ‘constructed’ the data and the findings? How could the research question have been investigated differently? To what extent would this have given rise to a different understanding of the phenomenon under investigation? Thus, epistemological reflexivity encourages us to reflect upon the assumptions (about the world, about knowledge) that we have made in the course of the research, and it helps us to think about the implications of such assumptions for the research and its findings, (Willig, 2001, p. 10)

Table 4 is an organizer for understanding the basic characteristics of a critical White study. Critical White studies are based on the central tenets of critical theory and involve White researchers and White participants. Also, critical White studies have an underlying purpose to reveal White racism, White privilege, and overall Whiteness at work in society. Critical White researchers use tools such as dialogic interviews, interpretivism to seek perspectives of their participants, reflexivity about their own privilege, and discussion forums when appropriate to challenge the findings that perpetuate White dominance and the marginalization of others.

**TABLE 4. Critical White Studies**

<b>FEATURES</b>	<b>THEMES</b>	<b>TOOLS</b>
Based on Critical Theory	White Racism	Dialogic Interviews
White Researcher(s)	Whiteness	Reflexivity
White Participant(s)	White Privilege	Perspective Seeking

**Implications: Why My Study Is Needed**

This study seeks to accomplish the goals of a critical White study with respect to studying the perspectives of White general education classroom teachers. A qualitative inquiry of perspective is vital to understanding, with depth, the thinking of general education teachers. Moreover, employing critical White theory through an inquiry-based methodology is necessary for revealing the perspective on a topic such as the instruction and placement in special education of African American students. The added nuance of the researcher as a participant observer who is both a special education administrator and a parent of bi-racial children make this study not only necessary but unique. Hopefully, it will open the door to further investigations that will promote collaboration with parents and improved preparation of general education teachers for the sake of African American learners.

## CHAPTER III

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### **Design**

The epistemological frame is critical White theory employing an inquiry-based qualitative methodology. This research is a critical White study because I explored the White general education teacher motivations that result in referrals of African American students for special education services, their perspectives on the marginalization of those students placed in special education, and the presence of the White privilege discourse as a perpetuator of the power differential between White teachers and African American students. The ultimate purpose of this study was to understand the perspectives of White teachers who refer African American students for special education evaluation and services and possibly develop a construct to disrupt the disproportionality that exists in special education where African Americans are concerned. I am truly invested in this because I am a district level special education administrator and a parent of students of color; I explored my own perceptions and possible dysconscious racism through cathartic reflection. I juxtaposed teacher perceptions with my reflections. The study followed a qualitative, inquiry-based and reflexive design, utilizing journal and research reflections and a critical White theoretical framework.

Other critical White studies on dysconscious racism in the classroom have revealed two categories of impaired consciousness with respect to diverse learners (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997). In both categories Whites defend their privilege. *White*

*privilege* is defined by McIntosh as “an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, codebooks, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear, and blank checks” (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997, p. 291). Furthermore, one basic purpose of critical White research is to make systems of privilege visible:

Thus the very vocabulary we use to talk about discrimination hides these power systems and the privilege that is their natural companion. To remedy discrimination effectively we must make the power systems and the privileges they create visible and part of the discourse. To move toward a unified theory of the dynamics of subordination, we have to find a way to talk about privilege. When we discuss race, it needs to be described as a power system that creates privileges in some people as well as disadvantages in others. Most of the literature has focused on disadvantage or discrimination, ignoring the element of privilege. To really talk about these issues, privilege must be made visible. (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997, p. 315)

This critical White research aligns itself to these premises and purposes in the context of White teachers, African American learners, and potential placement in special education.

Campuses were selected based on their number of referrals of African American students for special education evaluation as well as their rate of current disproportionality of African Americans in special education. The three highest referring and most disproportionate elementary campuses will be selected for possible interview candidates. White general education teachers were nominated by their principal based on a proficient Professional Development Appraisal System (PDAS) evaluation in the last 12 months and district benchmark scores of at least 60% passing in reading (Personal Communication, September, 2008). The district benchmarks are local exams given every three weeks in order to determine and inform future instruction,

intervention, and remediation. A 60% passing rate in this district would be considered high on these exams as they cover the scope and sequence of the curriculum as well as expose students to the rigor of the TAKS test (Personal Communication, September, 2008). PDAS is the evaluation instrument used in the state of Texas for teachers. Teachers are identified as either unsatisfactory, needs improvement, proficient, or exceeds expectations. Proficient indicates that the teacher is considered to be a master in eight different domains at least 80% of the time (Personal Communication, August, 2002). Three teachers overall will be chosen for interview. Because these teachers must have solid benchmark scores and a proficient evaluation, they are defined as good teachers on these diverse campuses. I chose to interview White teachers that are considered to be good teachers on their diverse campuses. Simultaneously, I chose to interview White teachers as a White researcher in hopes that I will receive candid answers as a result of our sameness. However, I carefully balanced this “seduction of sameness” so that I would not experience a blurred vision with respect to White narrative (Hurd & McIntyre, 1996, p. 88).

### **Population**

The large 4A school district chosen for this study was selected based on current Performance-Based Monitoring (PBM) data published by the Texas Education Agency (TEA). PBM is the accountability system utilized by TEA to audit programs in local school districts. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the

Superintendent of Schools. The selected school district had a level three performance indicator on African American representation in special education. Level three indicates a high percentage of African American students in special education and requires intervention and corrective action on the part of the district. Of the 5,311 African American students reported to TEA, 716 of these students were identified as qualifying for and receiving special education services. This percentage exceeds the representation of African American students in the district. More specifically, thirty-five percent of all district students are African-Americans, while forty-one percent are represented in special education.

Campus 1 is an elementary campus located in the south sector of the school district. Its population is 419, consisting of 13% African American, 76% Hispanic, and 11% White. It accounted for six referrals in the previous school year. Four of the referrals were African American students. They have a disproportionate representation of African American students in special education because they have 27% African Americans in special education and only 13% in their general population. African Americans at this school site comprise 34% of their mentally retarded population, 23% of their learning disabled population, and 20% of their speech impaired population.

Campus 2 is an elementary campus located in the south sector of the school district. Its population is 613, consisting of 43% African American, 48% Hispanic, and 8% White. It accounted for 12 referrals in the previous school year. Nine of the referrals were African American students. They have a disproportionate representa-

tion of African American students in special education because they have 50% African Americans in special education and only 43% in their general population. Their African Americans comprise 67% of their mentally retarded population, 64% of their learning disabled population, and 41% of their speech impaired population.

Campus 3 is an elementary campus located in the north sector of the school district. Its population is 324, consisting of 48% African American, 50% Hispanic, and 1% White. It accounted for five referrals in the previous school year. Three of the referrals were African American students. They have a disproportionate representation of African American students in special education because they have 62% African Americans in special education and only 48% in their general population. Their African Americans comprise 75% of their mentally retarded population, 33% of their learning disabled population, and 67% of their speech impaired population.

### **Participants**

Three general education teachers who were nominated by their principal agreed to participate in the study. Teachers were nominated based upon proficient PDAS evaluations and district benchmark scores of at least 60 percent in reading. I was fortunate to have three participants who were experienced teachers (having at least five years in education and on their campus). Blanca is a first grade teacher at campus 2, and she has taught at that campus for over 15 years. She is in her forties and is a lifelong educator. Alba is a third grade teacher at campus 3, and she has taught at that campus for over 5 years. She is in her fifties and is a former social

worker who received her teaching credentials via alternative certification. Guinevere is a fourth grade teacher at campus 1, and she has taught at that campus for over 20 years. She is in her fifties and is a lifelong educator who plans to receive a counseling certification in the near future. It was simply coincidence that all three nominees that agreed to participate were female. I contacted them through district e-mail and attached the information sheet. They responded to me that they would be willing to participate. I called them, and we set up our first interview time and date. Following the first interview, we set up a time and date for the follow-up interview.

### **Data Collection**

I began by interviewing one general education teacher from each campus twice each. The first interview will serve to fully explain the purpose of the study, obtain background information, and establish rapport. The second interview was more in-depth relating to instruction and management of African-American students. Individual interviews took place in two, 45-minute blocks. I asked five questions per interview. However, I maintained flexibility as a researcher should more or less interview sessions become necessary. Trust between the researcher and the interviewee was established based on familiarity with me as an administrator, established rapport, and ice-breaking interview questions such as, "Tell me briefly about why you decided to become a teacher?" In addition to the interviews, a discussion forum to resolve discrepancies between responses in the two interviews was held with all of the general education teachers together lasting 45 minutes. As a

researcher, I maintained a journal recording my reactions, feelings, and perceptions during the research process. Data collection spanned a two-month period. Methods used by Frankenberg (1993) in the interview process were employed. A dialogical approach to counter the power differential between the researcher and the interviewee and to solicit candidness in the participants' perceptions and experiences were utilized. The questions were as follows:

Brief introductions and review of the purpose of the study:

1. Tell me briefly why you decided to become a teacher.
2. As you know, I am studying the process of special education referrals of African American students. Can you remember one that you referred and just walk me through the story?

Depending on what the interviewee covered, I asked questions such as "what happened with the student that led you to refer her or him," "can you give me a fairly detailed description of the behaviors that led to the referral," "how did the referral process work," "how quickly did the district move on the referral," and "what did you have to do after you made the referral?"

1. Can you do the same with a different African American student, walk me through what happened? (Probed as above after story was told.)
2. Have any of your fellow teachers talked to you about their experiences with the referral of African American students to special education? (If said, yes, followed same procedure as above.)

3. What are your thoughts about the achievement gap between White students and African American students? Why do you think this has occurred? Is this a problem here?
4. Tell me about your feelings on the social skills/behavior, ability, and school readiness of your African American students.
5. What do you do for African American students in your classroom that aren't learning? Is this any different than what you might do for other struggling students?
6. What is your process for determining whether or not a special education evaluation should be requested for an African American learner?
7. What are your perceptions of special education? What happens in special education that cannot or does not happen in a general education classroom?
8. Do you think that African American students get referred to Special Education more than White students? Why or why not?

### **Data Analysis**

School district documents were reviewed in order to choose the three campuses. Documents included Cognos demographic reports, Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) reports, and Special Education Manager reports. Cognos is the software used to generate demographic district reports from the state database. The three campuses chosen were the most grievously disproportionate elementary campuses and also had made a significant number of referrals of African American students for special education evaluation. Interview and reflection data analysis

occurred through the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1965) of the general education interview transcriptions and reflexive journal entries. The constant comparative method discovers the latent pattern in the multiple participants' words. If the researcher is potentially biased, the constant comparative analysis is a vital analysis tool. Bias can easily occur in passionate issue oriented research, such as political, gender, or race related research. So, the constant comparison of all data sources allows for themes to only be identified if they are present across all data records. I began with a cross-case analysis of the three interviews and reflexive entries using the constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1965) "to group answers . . . to common questions [and] analyze different perspectives on central issues." Glaser and Strauss (cited in Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 339) described the constant comparison method as following four distinct stages:

1. comparing incidents applicable to each category,
2. integrating categories and their properties,
3. delimiting the theory, and
4. writing the theory

Categories that are created when a researcher groups or clusters the data become the basis for the organization and conceptualization of that data (Dey, 1993). "Categorizing is therefore a crucial element in the process of analysis" (Dey, p.112). Content analysis, or analyzing the content of interviews, is the process of identifying, coding, and categorizing the primary patterns in the data (Patton, 1990). "The qualitative analyst's

effort at uncovering patterns, themes, and categories is a creative process that requires making carefully considered judgments about what is really significant and meaningful in the data (Patton, p. 406). Inductive analysis (Patton, 1990) means that the patterns, themes, and categories of analysis "emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis" (p. 390). According to Dey (1993), a natural creation of categories occurs with "the process of finding a focus for the analysis, and reading and annotating the data" (p. 99).

Several resources are particularly useful to the process of category generation: "inferences from the data, initial or emergent research questions, substantive, policy and theoretical issues, and imagination, intuition and previous knowledge" (Dey, 1993, p. 100). To utilize those resources optimally, I became thoroughly familiar with the data, remembering to be sensitive to the context of the data; to be prepared to extend, change and discard categories; to consider connections and avoid needless overlaps; to record the criteria on which category decisions are to be taken; and to consider alternative ways of categorizing and interpreting data (Dey, p. 100). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), the essential task of categorizing is to bring together into temporary categories those data bits that apparently relate to the same content. It is then important to "devise rules that describe category properties and that can, ultimately, be used to justify the inclusion of each data bit that remains assigned to the category as well as to provide a basis for later tests of replicability" (p. 347). These categories, for my purposes, are referred to as themes. The themes identified remained internally consistent so that they were meaningful both internally, in relation to the data understood in context, and

externally, in relation to the data understood through comparison (Dey, 1993). When a particular theme is adopted, a comparison is already implied. To compare observations (Dey, 1993), one must be able to identify bits of data which can be related for the purposes of comparison.

In principle, data is organized by grouping like with like. After the similarities are separated into groups, each data piece is compared within each group. Data requiring further differentiation, will be divided up into separate sub-groups. I could then compare observations within each group or sub-group, looking for similarities or differences within the data. I could also look for patterns or variations in the data by making comparisons between the different groups or sub-groups. The meaning of the theme evolves during the analysis, as more and more decisions are made about which bits of data can or cannot be assigned to the theme (Dey, 1993). The fit between data and themes--the process of developing themes--is one of continuous refinement. "Flexibility is required to accommodate fresh observations and new directions in the analysis" (Dey, p. 111). During the course of the analysis (Dey, 1993), the criteria for including and excluding observations, rather vague in the beginning, become more precise. The researcher must continually attempt to define and redefine themes by specifying and changing the criteria used for assigning them to the data. In so doing, one must recognize that any definitions developed in the beginning will probably be quite general and contingent in character. "In defining categories, therefore, we have to be both attentive and tentative - attentive to the data, and tentative in our conceptualizations of them" (p. 102). Ultimately, the data were coded according to themes that emerged from the

comparisons. These themes were analyzed for significance and situated in the body of reviewed research. An emergent theory of the data was generated based on the themes and their perceived meaning in relation to the original research questions.

### **Trustworthiness**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined trustworthiness as having the four following criteria: credibility (third party review), transferability (detailed notes and descriptions), dependability (multiple data layers), and confirmability (member checks). The aim of trustworthiness in a qualitative inquiry is to support the argument that the inquiry's findings are "worth paying attention to" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p.290). This is quite different from the conventional experimental precedent of attempting to show validity, soundness, and significance. In any interpretive research project, four issues of trustworthiness demand attention: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility is an evaluation of whether or not the research findings represent a "credible" conceptual interpretation of the data drawn from the participants' original data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p.296). Transferability is the degree to which the findings of this inquiry can apply or transfer beyond the bounds of the project. Dependability is an assessment of the quality of the integrated processes of data collection, data analysis, and theory generation. Confirmability is a measure of how well the inquiry's findings are supported by the data collected. (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this inquiry, trustworthiness was enhanced through the strategies detailed below.

To address credibility, I enlisted the help of a competent peer reviewer (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dr. Gwendolyn Webb-Johnson was my peer reviewer for this project. Dr. Webb-Johnson holds her Ed.D. in Special Education from Illinois State University and is an active faculty member at Texas A&M University and conducts regular research in the fields of African American education and special education. Dr. Webb-Johnson was responsible for meeting with me as I refined my procedure, after I collected the data, and periodically during the process of data analysis. During our meetings, Dr. Webb-Johnson received regular progress reports of the project, and posed questions regarding the research questions, methodology, ethics, trustworthiness, and other research issues. She made pointed observations, and suggestions, and posed questions throughout the process. Her role was generally consistent with that defined in the literature (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

To address transferability, the complete set of data analysis documents are on file and available upon request. This includes transcriptions, coding, reflexive responses, and theme generation. Access to the inquiry's paper trail gives other researchers the ability to transfer the conclusions of this inquiry to other cases, or to repeat, as closely as possible the procedures of this project.

To address the issue of dependability, I deliberately included three data sources rather than just one or two. My intention here was to generate three layers of data: two interview transcriptions per participant and a reflexive journal maintained by the researcher. This technique, while not meeting the technical definition of "triangulation" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), provided a richer, more multilayered data set than one or two

data sources would have generated. In addition, future studies could supplement the theory developed in this research by analyzing this inquiry's data by participant or by theme.

To address confirmability, I completed member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) with all of the participants. In the process of member checking, each of the research participants reviewed a summary of the final results of the inquiry. Participants rated the findings of the data analysis as a credible interpretation of what they experienced during the interviews. In addition, all three participants made comments that directly connected the findings to one or more personal experiences they have had in the classroom. The exact documents used in the member checking process are on file and available upon request.

### **My Position as the Researcher**

I am a White female in my mid-thirties. I am the secondary special education coordinator in this district. It is my responsibility to coordinate services, programs, and professional development and provide technical assistance to campus administrators when needed. Our district is grievously disproportionate in special education and alternative disciplinary placements among the African American population. So, it is of vital importance to me to address this issue for the sake of our African American students. Further, I am the parent of three bi-racial children who have African American heritage. I am married to an African American high school administrator in the district. In my experience, I have observed first-hand what I perceived as White racism in

practice with my own children, my spouse, and the students who I serve. My personal commitment to social justice, my family make-up, and the fact that I am a special education administrator in this district create difficult in my maintained objectivity during the research process. Although, I have tried hard not to be biased, some subjectivity is inevitable. Thus, as a researcher, I am uniquely situated in this study; I maintained a reflexive journal to gauge my reaction to the data and filter the information through my three lenses: researcher, administrator, and parent. It is my hope to generate a theory or construct that will aid in the disruption of the grievous disproportionality of African Americans in special education. Furthermore, I hope to adapt this construct to a professional development model for teachers, administrators, and special education assessment staff. Chapter 4 gives an in-depth explanation of the findings and emerged themes from the interview transcriptions as they related to the original research questions. The findings are presented by theme and sub-theme.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESEARCH FINDINGS

#### Participants and Process

The respective principals of Schools One, Two and Three, nominated a first grade, third grade, and fourth grade teacher to participate in the study. The characteristics of these participants are indicated in Table 5.

**Table 5. Characteristics of Participants Nominated by the Principal**

Grade	School	Experience	Name	Age/Gender	Education
3 <sup>rd</sup> grade teacher	3	5+ years	Alba	50's/F	Licensed Social Worker turned teacher through alternative certification
1 <sup>st</sup> grade teacher	2	15+ years	Blanca	40's/F	Career teacher with Bachelor's Degree
4 <sup>th</sup> grade teacher	1	20+ years	Guinevere	50's/F	Career teacher with Bachelor's Degree working on Master's in counseling

At the onset of the interview process, I noted some observations in my journal. The first teacher I visited was Alba at school Three. This campus is located on the north side of town in what is considered a predominantly African American low-income neighborhood. There is a group of housing projects in close proximity to the campus, and it is not unusual for the school to be in "lockdown" status due to criminal activity in the vicinity. The campus itself is a relatively new structure (built in the last 12 years) and

extremely child-friendly in decor. Alba was waiting in her classroom waiting for me when I arrived. She was older, with salt and pepper hair, plainly dressed, wearing no make-up, and rather stern looking. She appeared tired and, I was worried that this first interview would not go well. Coupled with the fact that I was nervous, I decided to break the ice with some small talk. Alba's demeanor immediately changed into one a receptive, open attitude that appeared to be genuinely interested in the process and we both felt much more comfortable. I felt compelled to tell her a little about the study (basically reiterating what was contained in the information sheet). She told me about her social work background and expressed that she chose to work in an inner-city-like environment and felt confident in her abilities to work with children from low-income families. It seemed to me that she equated low-income with culturally diverse. I then began the more formal section of the interview. Her responses to my questions regarding the referral of African American students for special education evaluation were puzzling. She appeared to not be able to discern the level of retardation. It seemed like she did not really understand disabilities or the referral process. She also had trouble describing the referral process and did not know the name of the intervention team.

The more she talked, the more I noticed her increased comfort level with the terms "poor," "low income," and "at-risk," as opposed to African American or Black. She was, however, freely, talking about children of "Hispanic" descent. I wondered if she was nervous to talk about African American children by "name" because of the nature of my study, a study of the perceptions of white teacher regarding the African American students and their decisions to refer them for special education evaluation, or if she just

naturally substituted the above terms. When she did talk about African American children by “name,” she referred to them as “little black” boys or girls. Again, I dismissed this at first, but it did catch my attention. Alba was very careful not to blame parents directly during the first interview, but she intimated that the parents of “poor children” had limited skills and resources. I suspected that she really meant the parents of African American children because she repeatedly referred to the wonderful closeness and involvement of “Hispanic’ families. Overall, I was discouraged that the special education department’s (of which I am an integral part) efforts to make the referral process well understood had not, in this case, filtered down to the teacher level. Also, I was apprehensive regarding her willingness to talk specifically about her African American students in future interviews because she seemed to be more willing to talk about Whites and Latinos but appeared to avoid African American jargon by replacing it with “at-risk,” “poor”, or “low income.”

The second teacher I visited with was Blanca at School Two. This campus is located at the southern edge of town surrounded by a large government housing project predominantly inhabited by Latinos. This area is an isolated part of town with no traditional neighborhoods or business. School Two is a large campus, which at first glance, presents more like a middle or intermediate school. I found the same feeling once inside. It did not seem like an elementary-aged, child-friendly set-up. Blanca was also in her classroom waiting for me to arrive. She was an energetic, cheery person. I felt a little more comfortable having one interview under my belt, so we started right away. Blanca was eager to talk and did so almost without taking a breath. She was not at all

shy about admitting that she really did not understand response to intervention, differentiate between disabilities, or fully comprehend the referral process. Again, this was disappointing to me as a special education administrator.

Unlike Alba, Blanca freely talked about her “poor little Black” students. She was quick to stereotype their home experience, parents, and behavior. Internally, I was shocked and angered by much of what she said. I felt like a traitor to social justice by not stopping her. I had to maintain my researcher mindset and preserve as much objectivity as possible. I kept telling myself, “this is just a perspective, what is she telling you Dustyn?” I also felt deceitful that I did not reveal that I was married to an African American and had three bi-racial children. I felt that if I exposed this she would stop talking and quickly guard her comments. She definitely seemed to “feel” safe being White with me. I knew that I was collecting a lot of meaningful data during our interview, but it was all that I could do to sit there and listen to what I would characterize as racist folklore like generalized stereotypes regarding absent parent, criminal activity, and violence in the home.

The third teacher I interviewed was Guinevere at School One. This campus is in the south part of town, right in the heart of a primarily Latino neighborhood. The houses are older, but well-maintained and quite charming. This building is one of the oldest in the district with terrazzo flooring and wood paneling. It is a beautifully maintained structure with fairytale murals, gardens, parent library, and new playground used by the community. Guinevere was in her classroom when I arrived. She was grading papers and was embarrassed that she had forgotten that I was coming. She was a charming lady,

hard-working, dedicated, and really funny. Her room was well organized, she worked late almost every day, and she appeared to have a wonderful sense of humor and good attitude. I was really confident by this time, but Guinevere was nervous that she had not prepared notes to refer to during our interview. I tried to use humor to calm her down, and I felt like we were on the same page right away. We laughed about her forgetting that I was coming and feeling like she was not prepared. However, her responses to my questions regarding the referral process for special education revealed a different side of her. Guinevere was clearly frustrated and almost seemed bitter regarding the new TAKS accountability system and the special education referral process. She commented that she had become anxious and depressed regarding some of her students who were not successful on the statewide assessment. Additionally, her efforts to refer these students for special education have, in her opinion, have been too labor-intensive and so she vowed that she will no longer refer students.

Four research questions drove the interview process. What are the perceptions of principal-nominated, White general education teachers with respect to:

1. the factors that influence general education teachers to initiate a referral of an African American student to special education?
2. the potential services and progress of African American learners who are referred for special education testing?
3. their African American students' abilities, social skills, and school readiness?
4. the achievement gap and disproportionality in special education and in their school district?

The responses and my reflective notes revealed six distinct themes which I will next explicate. First, many of the teachers' responses revealed characteristics of deficit thinking like: cultural deprivation/lack of assimilation, poor parenting, and bad genes. Second, there was an apparent cultural unawareness with respect to African American students. Third, teachers seemed to lack a sense of efficacy regarding the effective instruction of African American learners. Fourth, teachers appeared to be unable to discriminate between disabilities. Fifth, teachers appeared confused about the referral process. Sixth, teachers appeared to possess a limited knowledge regarding special education services. Themes 4 and 5 related to research question 1. Theme 6 correlated to research question 2. Themes 2 and 3 paralleled with research question 3. Finally, theme 1 and its sub-themes corresponded to research question 4. The data was replete with responses sufficient to address the research questions that guided this study.

### **Theme One: Deficit Thinking**

The deficit view is well established in the research (Valencia, 1997) as a form of blaming students, their families, and the community for poor students' and students of color's school problems and academic failure. This includes the discourses of genetic pathology, the culture of poverty, inadequate home life, poor parenting, and accumulated environmental deficit models as causes of school failure. Simultaneously, the inequality of the system itself remains blameless. Three sub-

themes of deficit thinking are presented here: cultural deprivation, genetic inferiority, and blaming parents.

### *Cultural Deprivation*

Many of the teachers' responses, as defined by citations, revealed the characteristics of deficit thinking. There were three main deficit categories present in the data: cultural deprivation/lack of assimilation, genetic inferiority, and poor parenting. Cultural deprivation is a viewpoint that believes that there is an absence of certain expected and acceptable cultural phenomena in the environment which results in the failure of the individual to communicate and respond in the most appropriate manner within the context of society, thus, failing to assimilate to mainstream norms. Genetic inferiority assumes an inherent lack of ability due to biological inadequacy. Poor parenting is a common deficit view that blames the parents for the students' poor performance or lack of school readiness; it can be connected to the use of coded phrases like "broken home," "single parent," and "absent fathers," with "coded" meaning that these phrases are short hand codes for deficit thinking.

Alba takes a cultural deprivation or lack of assimilation point of view.

**A:**... they might have a mom ... two step moms and two step dads you know aunties, uncles, whatever you know. I think that has a lot to do with it ... with what is acceptable within these different socioeconomic groups and so forth and so on. I think that has a lot to do with the kid's outlook ... and the nurturing patterns at home. And you know then it kinda snowballs down cause that's the way the parents were raised so therefore they raise the kids that way. And so it just filters down that way. ... I think it has a lot to do with the way they're raised sometimes. I guess basically nurturing and just basically what's accepted you know and what's not accepted. What they value and what they've come to value... the Hispanics put a lot of emphasis on education. That's how they seem to move up. The majority of Whites are the same way ... they put ... it seems like some of the black population ... I know it's

changed but I can see difference here with the kids ... some parents “you’re not going to wind up like me, you’re going to get a good job and not go to Whataburger.” You gotta study and you gotta work. And there are other ones I can’t get the parents in here and when they do come it’s like they gotta hurry up and get out of here, “I’ve got things to do.” So just a feeling that at home they’re not getting that extra reinforcement. Some of it too I think maybe they’re ... what they’re exposed to. You don’t get exposed to a lot of different things ... then your vocabulary is limited, your whole world is limited because you can’t connect to things. Like right now we’re working on vocabulary and some basic words. They don’t understand. That’s why I got them working on simple words up there right now. But, just what they’re working with. Like I said, their whole life experience. Seems limited somewhat...

Her initial explanation seemed to center on “what is acceptable within these different socioeconomic groups,” but she quickly expanded from a coded focus on class to a coded focus on culture. She said that “the Hispanics” and “majority of Whites” put a lot of emphasis on education while the “black population” does not. She gave an example that a lot of her African American parents are too busy to come to school and get involved in their child’s education. She concluded that some of her African American students do not get any reinforcement at home with regard to their school performance.

Alba also seems to conclude that African American families do not value education or prepare their students for school. Further, she comments that the African American vocabulary is a limitation to school readiness. Additionally, Alba said that African American students seem to have a limited life experience by saying, “their whole life experience. Seems limited...” Finally, she alludes to assimilation difficulties with respect to school readiness because their vocabulary is not developed

and when, “your vocabulary is limited, your whole world is limited...” All of these then are evidence of her cultural deprivation deficit view.

Blanca built on these ideas by seeming to make broad assumptions regarding the black population as being culturally deprived.

It could be that maybe those early years that are so important that maybe the parents of the ... could be that ... I don't know if it's true ... but maybe the parents of the black population don't put as much emphasis on reading to the children. Spending time with the children ... it's during that early learning stuff that you kind of like think everybody does when you're a parent but you realize they don't later. Maybe they don't have as much emphasis on that so when the kids start school they're not as ready for school as maybe some of the other Hispanic kids or White kids. And then maybe that tends to kind of put them behind in the beginning.... But maybe that's what happens. Maybe at that early, early age when we expect a whole lot, maybe they're kind of behind down here because maybe you know there's not as much emphasis on that... The attitude is “I don't wanna do what they want me to do, so I'm not going to do it.” Maybe they just don't have the drive to succeed. And maybe they don't even think they can. They really don't have a lot of confidence in themselves. Cause nobody in many cases have ever told them that they can do anything...But I think they get bogged down in this and the different neighborhood also ... when they see that the older guys ... the men out there ... and they're making money selling drugs ... and they're doing this ... they talk about so in so's in jail and so in so's in jail and so in so's gonna have a baby ... but that's not acting normal ... that's the norm you know to say that my daddy's in jail, my mama's in jail ... duh duh duh da da ... to them a lot of them they don't understand that that's not a norm ... you know you don't say well that's not a norm ... and I haven't heard a lot of it this year.

First, Blanca contrasted “Hispanic and White kids” with African Americans. She said that the former groups put more emphasis on education by reading to their children and having high expectations. Second, Blanca seemed to assume a lack of early parental interventions and expectations for school readiness in the African American community. This, she said, “put[s] them behind at the beginning...” Third, she hypothesized that African American males are setting the bad example by making a

lot of money selling drugs, females are having babies, and adults are in and out of jail. So, the young African American students assume that is the norm for expectations and behavior. Finally, she suggests that African American children are unwilling to assimilate to the accepted school “norm” for behavior and expectations. Blanca said, “The attitude is I don’t wanna do what they want me to do, so I’m not going to do it.”

Guinevere concurs by explaining her expectations for assimilation for school purposes.

Yeah and I never thought about it and actually we’re trying to teach them middle class values. It’s not what they know. If they’re going to get along in the world and be successful ... they have to learn that. It doesn’t mean that they have to be that way when they go home. And I think they’re able to learn. I act this way when I’m at home and I say these sort of things when I’m at home, but when I’m at school I don’t do that.

Guinevere was the first participant to refer to middle class values as the norm; she made African American underachievement an issue of class or socioeconomic status. It would seem that Guinevere substituted poverty for the African American culture and experience and expects students to assimilate for school and general social purposes. However, her expectation inherently assumed that the African American student would have to behave one way at home and another at school.

### *Genetic Inferiority*

Another deficit view indicator is the idea that African Americans possess an inherent lack of ability. Alba alludes to this idea.

I’ve always thought they just ... maybe they’re Intelligence Quota wasn’t ... maybe you never know. Sometimes when children are developing ... nutrition is very important in development of the brain. And that sort of thing going on

and a lot of families are poor and struggling and don't eat properly. And children don't get nourishment. So it could be prenatal ... not getting prenatal care so therefore the kids have different problems like ADHD and mental retardation and things like that. But that's the only thing I can really see... Well you know I don't think they're being ok "this kid's black so we're going to put him in there." I really think it's either they're able to teach them so they can learn it you know and in a way that they can understand it or again we go back to pre-natal and things like that.

Alba talks about pre-natal and genetic factors that may explain why African Americans are disproportionately represented in special education. She says, "I really think it's either they're able to teach them so they can learn it you know and in a way that they can understand it or again we go back to pre-natal and things like that." So, it seemed that if the schools could not teach them, then their failure to learn had to be a result of genetic or pre-natal factors.

Blanca also refers to genetic inferiority and seems to assume that African American mothers are prone to risky behavior during pregnancy.

Well no, not unless you got back to you know the mother when she's expecting the child ... what's acceptable to her. Does she drink too much? Does she do drugs? Cause that's been a big thing in the black culture for a good long while. Yeah, it has. And I think a large population of, I don't know about everywhere, but I think a large population ... and I may be wrong, but I think it's been pretty prevalent here in the ... area ... and the use of like crack cocaine and these kind of things. I don't know if this is recent that this has happened, but if these mother's are involved in that ... even drinking alcohol or snorting hairspray. That could damage their babies. From the get go. And that may be a physical thing. And therefore you've got these acceptable drug things going on. Exactly. And there was a good long while there people would say well "this child was a crack baby" and you could uh ... I hadn't heard that in a while, but I remember. And so ... and that gets back to making a living. Mom, you know that's how some of them make their living as a cheap little thing and some of them just go out there and do it anyway. And that goes back to what's acceptable to them...If you cannot as a person in society or you don't have the mental ability to think things through. I mean you've got "X" amount of mental ability and you think going out and shooting somebody ... just like this lady we have here ... This is their mental

ability... shooting the guy who is running... They may not have the educations and they may not have the mental resources to really deal with it in intelligent terms you know so you get the people going out and robbing ...

Blanca seemed to believe that African Americans are over-represented in special education because of inherent ability gaps, perhaps caused by poor pre-natal care. She hypothesized that the mothers use drugs, snort hairspray, or drink too much alcohol while they are pregnant. She talked about the common comments about African American children being “crack babies.” Also, she believed that drug-use and selling has been, “a big thing in the black culture for a good long while,” in order to make a living.

Blanca also ties African American behavior to their inherent intelligence, “And that goes back to what’s acceptable to them...you don’t have the mental ability to think things through. I mean you’ve got “X” amount of mental ability, and you think going out and shooting somebody [is acceptable]...” Additionally, she took it further with the statement that “They may not have the educations and they may not have the mental resources to really deal with it [life] in intelligent terms.” These appeared to be direct comments about African Americans’ inherent ability.

Guinevere also makes a statement that seems to say that genes alone are responsible for a student’s behavior and ability: “Like whether or not you’re born black or whether you born White. It has to be because of your genes. Who your parents are and what they give you.” She concluded that since color is a matter of genetic determination, so then everything else must be a matter of biology.

*Blaming Parents*

A third deficit view characteristic was the blaming of parents for a child's lack of school achievement. Blanca points to parenting as a predictor of school success.

No one was at home. Yeah. His dad was in prison. His dad is African American and his mom married a Mexican guy... What's going on with him? Did his mom give him his medicine or not. Which half the time they don't. You know we have them up here where the parents take their medicine and sell it. It happens...my thought was ok I know African Americans always score lower. But I see where they come from ... I see the parents or the lack of parental. I just think parents are huge, like the biggest piece.... they deal with women all the time. They have mothers and grandmothers who mostly raise them. And a lot of them don't have men in their ... or at least they don't have men that are good role models. I had a little boy whose mother is actually in jail right now for smacking him in the head with a frying pan. And she's got like five kids. ... He didn't have any role models... And they see these people out there maybe moms ... you know and dad are broken up ... and you know mom's trying to make ends meet and mom's out here ... she's taking the credit card that's not hers trying to make ends meet ... and then she get's in trouble and maybe mom and dad are both in jail. And you know then they have to move around a lot and they don't have money for this or money for that and you see a lot of that in this area... But there's a lot of temptation out there. There's a lot of temptation. And they don't have the granny scrubbing the floor and the mamma over here just pushing them and saying' hey you gotta do this you know. This is what your doing and I'm working two jobs or make them feel like they're really great and stuff...Who you happen to be born to, which isn't always true, but you know if you think about it ... it happens a lot.

Blanca commented that most of her African American students are being raised by mothers or grandmothers because the males are in prison. She also says that the African American families are matriarchal because "they deal with women all the time... And they don't have the granny scrubbing the floor and the mamma over here just pushing them and saying' hey you gotta do this you know." Further, she said there were not enough African American mothers that were willing to work two jobs and set the example for their children to work hard in school.

Blanca tells stories about African American students whose parents sell their medicine, hit them in the head with frying pans, stealing credit cards to make ends meet, moving all of the time, and are in and out of jail. Blanca alludes to violent parental behavior, parental abandonment, and criminal activity as if they are commonplace among the parents of African American students. She attempted to correlate it to behavior motivated by temptation and trying to make ends meet.

Guinevere also blamed parents for their children's struggles in school:

So many of the parents of my children have no goals at all for their children nor for themselves. Goal setting assumes change. Do you know how many of the parents of my students are in prison or jail? I did have a sister now that I'm thinking about it ... I did have the sister of one of my little boys who was referred last year. And she comes ... I know her family very well. And she comes from a tough home where the mom, well their mom died last year. We don't really know for sure why her mom died. It was probably related to drugs. Yeah and so their grandmother has them. Their wonderful grandmother which of course is very typical in the homes of a lot of these kids. The parents are in prison and the grandmother's are raising them...But the families are either clueless or don't care in many cases. ...

Guinevere appeared to assume that African Americans resist change by not setting goals or high expectations for themselves and that the parents abdicate responsibility for their children to engage in drug-use and criminal activity. She commented, "well, their mom died last year. We don't [you do not use contractions in formal research writing, though your participants can use contractions in their quotes] really know for sure why her mom died. It was probably related to drugs. Yeah, and so their grandmother has them. Their wonderful grandmother, which of course is very typical in the homes of a lot of these kids." She praised the grandparents who raise her students as though it was the norm.

Indeed, Guinevere's deficit thinking ran so deeply that she actually predicted yearly which of her fourth grade students are going to end up in prison, "And you know what I do at the end of every year is I write notes about all the kids and what I think's going to happen to them. And I'll put 'this kid is never gonna make it ... blah blah blah'... just for me. Because we say that one's gonna be in prison by the time he's thirteen ..." She said this at the conclusion of our interview session as a part of a story she told about a student she saw recently who was actually in college. This revelation was significant because he was one of her former African American students who she believed was mentally retarded and would eventually wind up in jail.

The first theme identified in the data was that teachers exhibited the three main traits of deficit thinking. These were cultural deprivation, genetic inferiority, and blaming parents. Cultural deprivation is the belief that characteristics of a culture are to blame for a student's lack of school readiness or ability to assimilate to mainstream culture. This belief assumes that they should assimilate. Genetic inferiority is the idea that students have an inherent lack of ability that is presumed to be biological. Finally, a key principle in deficit thinking is blaming the victim. In this case, teachers overwhelmingly blamed parents for their students' lack of performance and social skills. Next, teachers revealed their knowledge regarding African American culture and their use of curricular strategies to respond to it in the classroom.

## **Theme Two: Negative and Superficial Characterizations of Racial Culture**

This theme focuses on the White teachers' concepts of African American culture as well as their methods of responding to it in the classroom. It seems that their characterizations of African American culture are stereotypical, negative, and exemplify folklore and urban legend. Furthermore, their instructional strategies and materials lack depth with respect to being culturally responsive. They do not appear to see the need for cultural responsiveness beyond holiday celebrations and brief foci on important historical figures of color.

Blanca described her perceptions of African American culture:

... but just the way that maybe they've been raised. You know, it ... I'm sure they've been taught to behave. When you're out in public, you know. If you're allowed to just you know run around and no one tell you well this is what you need to do and that's what you need to do ...and you go out to eat and no one's telling you well this is what's acceptable and that's what acceptable. Then what is acceptable to them is a whole different ball game. You know then they come to school and that's a whole new set of this is acceptable and that's acceptable...you know the black culture has been so different from the White culture and the Hispanic culture ... that in the White culture there's so many ... so many uh people that have been pushing their kids for years and always it's been important for years and years and years ... not that it's not been important to the black community ... but I think for a good many years, the black community ... a lot of ... even today ... a lot of them ... even the parents are just ... you know they don't have as much education ... a good number of them for different reasons. Maybe they dropped out of school ... maybe they uh ... you know just for different reasons. Maybe they started going with the wrong crowd to the point where um ... just basic survival you know raising their kids ... and providing for them and living day to day, sometimes when you gotta just survive then its hard to get ahead with the other things. I think that their culture has had a lot that going on. I think they're doing better. I think a lot of them have reached out to you know what's out there for them..... They have a lot of drama. And so I think the kids have a lot in their lives to deal with. I think survival is the big thing. ... I think it does. I think the culture and the just huge amounts of people that are just out there trying to make ends meet. And not because anybody didn't want to do better it's maybe they're parents didn't know

better because their parents didn't know better you know they lived this way ... and so pretty soon it just kind of snowballs down to this is the least important thing ... survival is the most important thing. Getting by and a lot of ... you know ... especially if they've had babies...Just an acceptable thing ... it's acceptable to see them out at night out selling drugs on the street or whatever...

Blanca made sweeping generalizations about the African American culture being characterized as uneducated and in survival mode. She noted that what is acceptable in "Black" culture is a "whole different ball game." Because of basic survival, selling drugs and "drama" were, to her, commonplace. Blanca characterized African American culture as being accepting of selling drugs, teenage pregnancy, and dropping out of school. She seemed most comfortable talking about African American culture as juxtaposition to European American and Latin American culture.

She goes on to describe how she infuses multicultural subject matter into her instruction:

...these boys a lot of times, and I know it's not all boys ... these boys a lot of times are so angry. It's just ... I personally have a hard time dealing with it. I just don't know how to be ... real affected. I've had students like that and I have to really ask my friend next door to help me. Because I don't know if they don't. I don't know. We just don't relate that well together. I really am trying to understand where they come from better... I think so cuz like you know if it's um ... like if it's about Martin Luther King, we talk about Martin Luther King or if it's Abraham Lincoln and about the slaves. Or about things that they don't even know about it. We were talking about the little black lady on the bus and how they boycotted the bus...And then they see Obama running for president. So hopefully they see the whole world as that...I think they just see it all as one big ... well like this is the world. This is our Earth. This is our home. It doesn't matter if you're in India, Africa, Australia. This is it. (*Laughing*) We can't go anywhere else unless we find another planet to go to. That's kinda how I approach it. It doesn't matter because we're all on this planet.

Blanca characterizes her African American boys as angry. To address, their culture in the classroom she, “we talk about Martin Luther King or if it’s Abraham Lincoln and about the slaves...We were talking about the little black lady on the bus and how they boycotted the bus...And then they see Obama running for president.” Her meager attempts to appeal to the diversity in her classroom revealed the lack of knowledge she has regarding various cultures. Additionally, she really did not seem to think it was necessary to differentiate based on culture because we are all from the same planet. This seemed like an allusion to racial erasure (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004).

Alba demonstrated the same with her response.

We were talking about different types of people like in Social Studies we were talking about heroes and I was sure to include Martin Luther King Jr. and I brought in Cesar Chavez and (I’m trying to remember who the White person was ... my mind’s gone blank). But anyway just try to bring them all in so that they all know they do have somebody. I should probably look more into the cultural thing but I really haven’t...Well some with African American boys. I went to that training...Well some of them do. You know you don’t do confrontation. That doesn’t work with any of our kids. They hear that all day long. You don’t yell at them. You kind of give them some space so they calm down. So they can have some room to make decisions. Cause they’re being told what to do all the time... But you know that’s a strategy that supposed to be helpful with African American boys. You know, just being aware that a lot of them don’t have that male role model.... Well I have them back there so they can move around. You know. I had one little boy last year who could not sit down. So I put him at the back there by himself and let him stand in his ... so if that’s what they need then that’s fine. Just so it’s not bothering somebody else.

She also feels that the inclusion of major heroes (“so that they all know they do have somebody”) like Martin Luther King Jr. and Cesar Chavez in social studies is culturally responsive. She admits, “I should probably look more into the cultural thing but I really haven’t.” Alba felt that she had been trained to be culturally

responsive to African American males. The training model she cited, however, appears to come from a deficit view. She cited that she had learned that African American males do not like confrontation because “they hear that all day long,” need a place to calm down, and room to move around so she has, “them back there [back of the classroom] so they can move around.”

Alba talked in more detail about her cultural training background.

I took one several years ago. It was one of the first trainings. We did a book study. Now I can't even remember the name of the book, now that's terrible. But it was more, again a lot of the cultural poverty. Not so much race or ethnicity but more poverty. And then this training I went to in talking to the parents is more socioeconomic and how when you talk to people who have a lower education um you know don't have a lot of money ... then you talk to them more of a round way ... you don't come directly at them cause they find it threatening, but if you're talking to middle / upper middle class people you better get to the point and let them get out of there. I try to do that with my parents. No most of mine, they are ... if they're barely they'd be lower middle class and poverty. So I try to talk to them, try to you know not ... I don't want to get down to their level ... meaning anything negative. I mean just not using all these acronyms ... because I don't even understand half of them. We try to really get down and say this is what your child is doing. We're going to be adding and subtracting and stuff like that. Try to be more specific.

This description reveals that she is more versed on socioeconomic differences as opposed to racial ones. However, her description of the culture of poverty seemed to come from a deficit view. I suspected that she equates poverty with certain racial groups (a paralogical belief) or at least pathologizes poverty. She explained, “when you talk to people who have a lower education... then you talk to them more of a round way ... you don't come directly at them cause they find it threatening, but if you're talking to middle / upper middle class people you better get to the point and

let them get out of there. I try to do that with my parents.” It seemed as though she assumed poor people are also lacking in intelligence.

Guinevere also lacked a clear understanding of African American cultural as well as a multicultural instructional framework:

Cultural heritage and things like that so that kind of comes in and then you can kind of move that into the reading and things like that too. We’re all different but we’re all the same. We all have to work together. But not as a real strategy. I guess I just don’t have time to think about that. We really try to bring in all the holidays. And the funny thing is when we do Black History month or week or however long we do it. My Mexican kids ... well what we started doing instead of that ... we do just multicultural. And we do everybody.

Guinevere’s response to a culturally responsive pedagogy was that she celebrates holidays, “But not as a real strategy. I guess just don’t have time to think about that.” She added that she really does not have time to be culturally responsive; this is the responsibility of the parents. However, she also alluded to focusing on sameness as a response to multiculturalism.

Guinevere goes on to say that she does not have the skills to communicate with her African American students as well as another African American teacher.

A: My friend next door Jahari, she grew up in poverty. Believe me, my parents didn’t have money, but she grew up in real poverty. She’s African American. She can totally relate to ... in the book there’s the thing about if you’re in poverty you do this and this and if you’re middle class or if you’re upper class. It just breaks it down. And she can totally identify with everything on the poverty pages. Everything.

Q: So you see that she has a different set of abilities to relate

A: Oh yeah. She does. Yeah and I never thought about it and actually we’re trying to teach them middle class values. It’s not what they know. If they’re going to get along in the world and be successful ... they have to learn that. It doesn’t mean that they have to be that way when they go home. And I think they’re able to learn. I act this way when I’m at home and I say these sort of things when I’m at home, but when I’m at school I don’t do that. And if I speak

to them ... of course I sound like an idiot if I try to say anything that's hip or cool. See she can do that cause she can speak their language.

Q: Authentic?

A: It's authentic. It sounds stupid for me to say cause it's not who I am and they know that. They know that it's ok for her to say and not for me. She can talk to them in their language that I don't understand a lot of times.

Guinevere, too, seemed to connect the poverty experience with the African American experience. She told a story about how her African American colleague next door is better able to communicate with her African American students because she, too, came from an impoverished background. She explained, "She can talk to them in their language that I don't understand a lot of times." I was not sure if she meant that the African American students had their own language or if the students from poverty had their own language. To her, it seemed one in the same. She did acknowledge that schools expect and teach middle class values, but I am not sure she was ready to admit or understand that those middle class values are also raced, to be more like White, middle class values.

Theme two reveals the lack of understanding of and responding to African American culture. These educators appear to accept stereotypical characterizations of African American culture such as drug use, criminal activity, lack of interest in education, and poverty. The teachers in this study seem to believe that they infuse multicultural aspects into their classroom by celebrating African American Heritage Month and presenting African American exemplars like Martin Luther King Jr. that they believe are the opposite of the status quo. The fact that they are not willing to be culturally responsive throughout the school year and adopt a more in-depth, realistic

understanding of African American culture leads to theme three. Teachers lacked efficacy with respect to the instruction and management of African American learners.

### **Theme Three: Lacking a Sense of Self-Efficacy with Students of Color**

Self-efficacy is the belief that one is capable of performing in such a way as to attain certain goals (Bandura, 1994). In this case, it is a belief that one has the capabilities to execute actions required to instruct and manage their classrooms successfully. Unlike efficacy, which is the power to produce an effect (in essence, competence), self-efficacy is the belief (whether or not accurate) that one has the power to produce that effect. There is an important distinction between self-esteem and self-efficacy. Self-efficacy relates to a person's perception of their ability to reach a goal, whereas self-esteem relates to a person's sense of self-worth. These teachers appeared to lack self-efficacy with regard to their African American learners' success.

Blanca, gives an explanation of her take the instruction of students from different cultures. In doing so, she reveals that she is really unsure of how to work with African American students who struggle and does not appear to believe that different, culturally responsive strategies exist or are necessary.

I think we just see kids ... just kids ... And I think we just see them all working and struggling and also accomplishing on their own different levels. I don't think we have the time to say well ... this is ... you know. I think that's pretty much down the road. I think school is school. We view it that way. We have expectations and put them out there and hopefully ... the best ... and we don't always get it back ... I think there's a big gap in academics and the black

kids and the White kids ... it snowballs on them to the prisons ... there's a large amount of black men in the prisons. Because they grow and and society is what society is. And you know they kinda get lost in the shuffle... I think school's trying the best it can. Against a lot of odds out there in society. And I didn't know... I don't know what you would do differently you know ... school is school and procedures are procedures, strategies are strategies. And that's what we're here for, is to give them strategies to build and go on up and get out there in the world and be able to live.

Blanca asserted that she felt school do they best they can to instruct African American students by saying, "I think school is school. We view it that way. We have expectations and put them out there and hopefully ... and we don't always get it back ... I think there's a big gap in academics and the black kids and the White kids ... it snowballs on them to the prisons ..." She was the first to connect African American underachievement to over-population in the prison system, but she did not seem to connect any personal responsibility as an educator for this trend. Blanca's response was riddled in the deficit view, and confirmed that she really did not feel like she has the ability to instruct these students any differently. She closed by saying, "I don't know what you would do differently you know ... school is school and procedures are procedures, strategies are strategies. And that's what we're here for, is to give them strategies to build and go on up and get out there in the world and be able to live." If the expectation is only for African American students to "live" then I wonder if we do not get exactly what we expect.

Further, Blanca seemed to suggest that Special Education is the answer for difficult to teach students.

I think sometime children have problems that you don't know what to do. I think one of the biggest beefs of teachers is ... there is a gap and we do have Special Ed ... and that can help ... I've seen it help .... But then you've got the kids that can't

get in Special Ed ... and they can't get any help ... you know and there are different levels of limitations. So which ... that's why I don't understand state testing ... because we're not all the same. We have different limitations and different ... so I don't understand you know why ... they don't see that as human beings that ... there are different people out there. If you're not just dead into a social skills program and you've got all these disabilities and you just can't do that test ... why even try to make them do the test.

Blanca struggled to understand how to reach students who do not qualify for special education services. Furthermore, she appeared to feel like the accountability system was not appropriate for certain student because they had "limitations" that would prevent them from being successful on TAKS. It seemed as though she felt some students really need a social skills program as opposed to an academic preparation, "If you're not just dead into a social skills program ... you just can't do that test ... why even try to make them do the test?"

Alba responded to this series of questions in a like manner.

Social skills are very limited...Yes ma'am. No ma'am. Raising your hand. Taking turns. The social register. The language. Having to bring them up from that very casual language. They have to speak a more formal language in school. Right now I'm struggling with L. I don't know what to do with him. I had him last year and he didn't get in Special Ed. You know when he can't read or he reads so low. If I could do one on one with him, but I can't but then again he's so not reading. Today we did a thing in reading vocabulary thing. When I read it to him he knew the answers. He knew what the vocabulary words meant but he couldn't read them. But he couldn't read them. How can he get past that? How can I help this child? He's in third grade and he still can't read.

Alba did not seem to have a grasp on how to instruct students with different cultural experiences and school readiness. She claimed social skills and language are factors, "Taking turns. The social register. The language. Having to bring them up from that very casual language. They have to speak a more formal language in school."

Furthermore, she admitted that she didn't, "know what to do with him...How can I help this child? He's in third grade and he still can't read." Alba did not appear to really know how to respond to cultural differences as strengths.

Alba went on to express her frustration with students who are not successful on the TAKS test.

Gosh doggit, how many hoops you got to jump to say ok she did bad on this test therefore we're going to put her in resource. So unless there is an underlined bias there or somehow again we're just not teaching, bringing them up to understand ... you know the culture is different ... we're middle class mainly White culture, school is. So a lot of stuff that the kids come in lacking, we need to understand that. So they may not ... the intelligence may be there. We can't tap into it because we haven't figured out how to relate what we know to them. That's a possibility. It's just hard for me to really say.

Alba seemed to think that students who do not perform well on the TAKS test belong in special education. However, she then appeared to have an epiphany that school is centered upon White, middle-class values and perhaps, "we" (the school system) have not, "figured out how to relate what we know to them. That's a possibility." This was the first teacher to make a connection like this one during the interview process. Others touched on it, but they did not connect the system's responsibility for African American students' performance gaps.

Guinevere revealed that she suffered from depression as a result of her inability to successfully instruct her struggling African American students.

... I don't think that I totally should be accountable for them, but in the eyes of my administrators ... I am. I don't think I should be. I think they should be partly responsible and of course the families... Oh you know what ... I'll tell you that ... it's personal, very personal ... not this year but the year before I had to start going on antidepressants because of it. I did, I went to my doctor and yes ... I went to my doctor and she's like 'how are you doing?' and I just

burst out into tears... And I was just a nervous wreck all the time ... a nervous wreck all the time.... It's so overwhelming when ... I had a friend who once said ... my name's not Jesus ... and I can't save them all. I mean you want to but you also try not to lose your mind. You try not to lose your life. As a teacher, you have family. You have your own life. But you have these kids who it's such an overwhelming job to try to be everything to them... He thought he was going to be a football player. Even though he could barely read. He failed. He was one of my failures. I didn't know what to do with him. It's overwhelming. It's totally overwhelming. Because you feel like you're trying to do it all by yourself...They're too many people having kids who don't have a clue how to be a parent. So it's up to educators to do it. And you know what if I was just now 22 years old, I don't know if I would get into this. I'm serious. I know too many young teachers who are just not going to do it. They say they can't do it. They can't do this for 20 years.

Guinevere was the first candidate to seem to really take it personally when her students did not perform well. However, her response was one that appeared bitter, "... I don't think that I totally should be accountable for them, but in the eyes of my administrators ... I am. I don't think I should be. I think they should be partly responsible and of course the families... my name's not Jesus ... and I can't save them all."

Guinevere would prefer that some students, who do not learn in the general education class as it is, be under a different accountability system (like special education). She went on to share that she believes that teachers are expected to play too many roles, and, if she had it to do again, she might not have gone into the profession. She explained, "I didn't know what to do with him. It's overwhelming. It's totally overwhelming. Because you feel like you're trying to do it all by yourself...They're too many people having kids who don't have a clue how to be a parent. So it's up to educators to do it." Her statement seemed to place a sense of blame on parents.

In short, these teachers experience a great deal of anxiety regarding their struggling African American students. It would seem that they do not believe that they have what is necessary to instruct these students. Rather than looking at exemplars who are successful with these students or attaining the skills necessary to be culturally responsive, it is assumed that these students belong somewhere else, like special education.

The first three themes in this study relate directly to White teachers' views of their students of color culture, abilities, social skills, and school readiness. When I asked these teachers to talk about how they come to decide that an African American student may have a disability and require a special education evaluation, their responses were based on stories of African American students who are being or who have been referred for special education services. However, their replies were generic in nature in that it was revealed that they lacked a basic understanding of disabilities, response to intervention as a precursor to the referral process, and the prospective services that a student may need in special education. Although these answers could apply to White students and African American students, these themes proved especially troublesome given their already revealed deficit views, lack of understanding of cultural differences, and need of self-efficacy with students of color.

#### **Theme Four: Unable to Discriminate Between Disabilities**

When I asked teachers to tell stories about students that they or their colleagues have referred for special education evaluation, they were consistently unclear as to

what they suspected was wrong. It was difficult for them to clearly articulate whether they felt the student had a learning, emotional, or cognitive disability.

For example, when asked if she goes into a referral with a specific disability in mind, Blanca responded:

No. Cause a lot of times you don't know. Because it's like I had this little boy ... this little boy was not in Special Ed. He was a little black boy. He'd already failed first grade and was still struggling. At first he tried, he really tried, but he liked to sleep a lot. And then he'd wet his pants. And it got to the point where he just wouldn't try. I guess the first year he was in first grade he didn't do anything. It was a struggle struggle struggle. And I think we referred him that year, I can't remember. The years start to blend in together. I don't know if he got into Special Ed the second year or not. I really don't know. His father died that year he was in my room. If I, you know I think I went to the committee for him and they wanted you know to try this and try that so anyway they left after the father passed away. They moved, but he came back the next year. But the thing about him if I had gone before the committee, I wouldn't have known any sort of disability to pinpoint other than the fact that he struggled, and he just after repeated repeated and repeated ... I really tried with him.

Blanca tells a story about a young man referred twice for a special education evaluation even during a traumatic time for him following the illness and subsequent loss of his father. However, each time, the teacher(s) really did not have an idea of what his disability might be, if any. The apparent lack of knowledge of the diagnostic categories by the general education teacher leaves them to shoot in the dark with regard to appropriate interventions as well as classroom level support.

Blanca goes on to describe her rationale for referrals to special education.

I think if you've got a question or sense that there's something not quite right and especially if they've already been retained a year and I don't think ... to me ... I don't think it would hurt anybody to just go ahead and test them. Just to see and get it out of the way. They may not see anything ... more often than not they don't qualify. A lot of times they don't. Now sometimes when they leave first and go to second and they're older I think there's a different test in

the ages like from first and they go to second there's a different test so I've been told. Sometimes they will qualify the next year. But the thing about it is ... and that may be another reason they do it because if they test them in first and they don't qualify then you've gotta wait I think two years before you can test them again. So they couldn't be tested the next year and the next year it might show up. So that might be you know ... at this age the test is easier than it is as they progress to an older age or so I was told. So it'll show up later so they might stand a better chance of it in second grade than in first grade.

Blanca appeared to feel like special education evaluation should be used as a screener just to check and see if there may be a disability. This opposes the whole notion of response to intervention and the diagnostic process that is the burden of the general education teacher to ensure that research-based instruction has been implemented in reading and math. Moreover, she claimed that if a child did not qualify the first time, then waiting another year to test may help them to qualify because the gaps in achievement get larger. This notion of the wait to fail model is exactly why the federal government mandated an RtI model for intervention. Furthermore, disabilities, if they are true disabilities in the school environment, do not just “show up.”

Another example of this is the apparent misunderstanding of the nature of mental retardation. When asked about her understanding of this disability Alba replied:

I'm suspicious about this one I have now and this Hispanic girl I have. But you know, they don't look severe. But this one little black boy I have, L, there may be some kind of retardation going on. But maybe, I don't know I suspect maybe something happened at birth or maybe mother had intake of something she might not have needed or something. Something doesn't seem quite ... or maybe something traumatic happened. But I'm suspicious of something. But maybe he doesn't know or that he you know that he's at a level where he's really immature and is functioning on a level where he can't really socially interact.... In fact I think his I.Q. is just right there on the line. And I think C's is a little lower. It's not profound. It could be quite severe. Like I said I

think she will probably qualify. Unless I just miss that one. Cause I know the scuttlebutt from what I've heard ... especially with African Americans students ... they're trying not to get them in. I don't know if it's true or not... Yeah, yeah ... J needs so much help. She's probably on the edge of being profound.

Alba comments about students she has that she suspects have some level of retardation; she attributes it to something the mother may have taken or done while she was pregnant and says, "Something doesn't seem quite right..." Her confusion about the levels of retardation is particularly disturbing. It would be unmistakable if she actually had a student in her classroom with severe or profound retardation. That would put their IQ's below 30 often resulting in a vegetative-like state. Her idea, however, that three different African American children her classroom have retardation has lead her to initiate special education referrals. The likelihood that they would qualify under that label is low, but without proper intervention and instruction a pseudo-disability is an issue that ought to be raised in this case. She admits that she thinks that the district is trying to keep African American students out of special education. This is probably a misunderstanding resulting from the special education department's campaign to raise the awareness of our disproportionality problem in the district.

Alba shared a story about a particular student who had qualified for special education services as a student with a learning disability. However, she suspected he also had a behavioral disability.

**Q:** Do you think it [his behavior] rises to the level of a disability?

**A:** I think his is probably a disability. From what I know about his family and the way C is, there's definitely something there. It's not just ... he was one that would scream in your face. Once he would... he would reach a point

and there was no way nobody that could bring him back down. Anger, just screaming and yelling ... and nobody, nobody could bring him back down. He just had to work it all out and then settle back down. You just had to be sure he didn't hurt anybody or himself or anything like that.

**Q:** So is he in Special Ed for being emotionally disturbed or is he coded something else.

**A:** I'm not quite sure right now ... another teacher has him this year. They're working on behavior modification with him to see if that's going to work.

Although we learned later that he was coded LD, she was sure he had an emotional or behavioral disability because she said, "From what I know about his family and the way C is, there's definitely something there." Alba seemed to attribute perceived family difficulties to her suspicion of an emotional disturbance. She described his behavioral outbursts as violent and difficult to redirect. Additionally, she said that he was receiving some kind of behavioral intervention to see if that would help. However, he had not qualified as a student with ED or OHI and Alba appeared to have difficulty discerning between a disturbed child and disturbing behavior.

Finally, a third teacher admitted her complete lack of diagnostic knowledge or process. Guinevere states:

**Q:** Were you thinking LD or MR?

**A:** I wasn't thinking either one of those. Cause I'm not trained to know enough about ... to really ... assess this kid's needs but...

**Q:** Something. There's something going on.

**A:** Yeah.

This exchange is evidence that she seems not only to be untrained regarding specific disabilities, but also operating on hunches rather than a clear diagnostic protocol with proper intervention. Again, the teacher admits the hunch that, "There's something going on," and that she really is not trained to identify possible disabilities.

Guinevere went on to tell a story about a young lady who she believed had mental retardation.

She's just a low IQ and that's what I think is the most difficult part ... is that happens so many times and whenever you want to refer them and you know when you refer them because they have a low IQ they don't qualify for Special Ed with just a low IQ. They can be borderline MR. They can be MR and they still don't qualify for Special Ed ... because it's got to be a learning disability. You know they're capable but because of some kind of learning problems they're not able to achieve in class the way their peers do. If they're just low IQ it's so hard. It's really hard. ..She couldn't pass the TAKS test. ..and I know all children can learn ... don't get me wrong but pass that test when they have ... their parents were addicted to drugs when they were born. So you know they just don't come with all the brain cells. She's not all there you know? I mean T is borderline MR. She's very low, but she's as sweet as can be. Up through 4<sup>th</sup> grade she was in Regular Ed.

**Q:** Did she get retained in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade through SSI?

**A:** She passed. I don't ...

**Q:** She passed 3<sup>rd</sup> grade TAKS?

**A:** She passed the reading. And that's all they have to pass. She passed the reading. It's ... I don't know how she ... I guess she has good coping. I don't know. I often wondered how she passed it. She passed the reading test. She had to take it twice but she did pass the reading test. She went to summer school for math. And then passed the test. I don't know how she passed the reading test in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. But she did. It's kind of amazing.

Guinevere believed that this student had mild mental retardation, but because her IQ was on the border, she did not qualify. She went on to explain that this student was “not all there” and seemed to attribute her situation and other students similar to her as a result of parents who were addicted drugs when they born and that she (and others) do not “come with all the brain cells” to pass a TAKS test. However, when I asked her if she was retained in third grade due to Texas' student success initiative, she admitted that this particular student, who she thought had retardation, passed both the reading and math TAKS.

Without a clear suspicion of a disability, there is really no way to meaningfully participate in a targeted, scientifically-researched intervention process prior to a special education referral. This lack of diagnostics seemed to leave teachers with only generic interventions to implement. Without a suspected disability in mind, there is no way to identify progress in a targeted area or, if there was no progress noted, predict future services that may be necessary. Moreover, this method undermines the whole idea of a response to intervention methodology in order to rule out cultural and socioeconomic factors as well as a lack of effective, research-based instruction. This leads directly to theme five where the teachers described their understanding and use of the response to intervention and referral process.

#### **Theme Five: Confused About the Referral Process**

Another theme that emerged was that teachers appeared confused about the referral process. An understanding that it is a general education responsibility to implement a targeted research-based intervention and progress monitor to identify a response or lack thereof was completely missing. These teachers seemed to feel this process was a burden, too time-consuming, and a ploy by special education to delay an evaluation. The whole process was characterized as a means to an end with copious paperwork and barriers.

I asked Alba to describe the process she goes through during a referral.

Well when you refer them you're supposed to fill out the first form but now you've got to show that you've done all that you can to advance the child to help the child. So usually you meet with the committee ... the CDMC committee and you tell them that you want to refer this kid. And then they'll say well what have

you done. And they'll say, "well lets watch the child for about nine weeks" ... they want to know that you've done everything you can to help the child improve. And usually you'll wait nine weeks, and if things don't become better you'll go back and fill out form "A" and tell them things aren't getting better you know and meet with the mother. Sometimes the parents ... if the parent wants the child tested ... then the child's tested no questions asked. But usually they want to know that the teacher has tutored, put them in small groups, talked to the parents just anything that you can do. Most of the time when we get a referral, we've already done quite a bit of that, but they want the documentation for one grading period before you come back. Grading periods are like nine weeks, and sometimes that can put you into testing for the next year. And then when they go into the testing process ... a lot of times most children don't make it into Special Ed because they'll say they're working on their level. They may have an I.Q. that's low but they're working on their level.

Alba told her rendition of the special education referral process. She explained that the referral goes to a committee who design an intervention plan to be implemented for approximately nine-weeks. Then, if things do not improve, a Form A is completed to begin an actual referral for special education evaluation. Other than not knowing the name of the committee (SAT not CDMC) and the fact that parent requests are not honored without demonstration of RTI or the presence of an obvious disability, Alba actually had the most detailed and accurate description of the process.

Nevertheless, she demonstrated a lack of understanding about its purpose.

**Q:** What is your understanding of response to intervention as it applies to the referral process?

**A:** I'm sorry?

**Q:** Response to intervention? RTI

**A:** My response to intervention? What exactly do you mean?

**Q:** So you have an intervention plan that you're tracking. So what interventions are you using?

**A:** Well, I've got here sitting in the front. So she's right up here. Um, oral ... a lot of testing ... oral testing, and she does pretty good on that. Try to give her one on one in the classroom for math and things like that. Sometimes I'll have one of the other students, and you know you've got some teachers in here and let them help her.

**Q:** Yeah. Peer tutoring.

This established that Alba does not appear to understand the purpose of RtI or what research-based interventions that are geared toward the area of suspicion are. In fact, her description of the intervention she is using (proximity, oral testing, and peer tutoring) seem, from her description, to be working. This would nullify the need for a special education evaluation because she is responding to the interventions.

Alba goes on to tell a story about one of her male students who has “given up.”

**A:** L doesn't try. He's given up. In first grade and we tried again last year and

...

**Q:** How did that process go?

**A:** Well we couldn't even do it last year. We had a new Special Ed teacher here, and she's was going to try to do it, because she was in my class too and saw L. But they said well we can't do him because he's in first grade, and he's got this gap between his ability and his I.Q. or something that they look at?

**Q:** For a learning disability it would be between I.Q. and Achievement.

**A:** Yeah and the gap was too big or whatever it was. So anyway, he couldn't qualify. But between Miss M and me we try to modify for him and do things like that for him.

**Q:** So he's been referred, tested and did not qualify. And so, you tried to refer last year and they said “no, he just got tested ... he's not going to qualify.” Do you plan on referring him again?

**A:** I have to look at the paperwork again and see what it says.

Alba did not seem to understand the eligibility criteria for a learning disability (more than one standard deviation difference between IQ and achievement) and almost appeared to blame the student for not trying. She also did not seem to understand that the process of evaluation is good for three years or why he did not qualify in the first place. So, this particular student was tested again.

Blanca's understanding of the referral process is more remedial.

It's like maybe this a barrier to slow it down or to say well you haven't tried all this stuff first. And sometimes you feel like this child isn't getting what

they need now because of all the stuff you're making me do. And on the other hand I can kinda see that you gotta have all your ducks in a row. You gotta have all the documentation as to why. It's all tied to federal dollars and all this other stuff. So you gotta do it all. But sometimes I do think that it's too slow. You know it takes too long to do it. Um ....Yeah, yeah. It's almost like they try to put obstacles in your way. Some people may say well I ain't gonna do that, it's too much work I'll just deal with it in the classroom. It's Special Ed anyway ... what are they gonna get out of it. You know so, but um I haven't gone the whole spectrum yet, but I know there's a lot more stuff that I'm gonna have to do.

**Q:** So what is your understanding collective understanding about response to intervention?

**A:** What do you mean?

**Q:** Do you know what that term means as far as the referral process?

**A:** No I don't.

**Q:** So you were just made aware at the end of the year ... we've got a new process for referring students? It takes longer and you have to intervene for nine weeks at a time...

**A:** Until you really get into it, so much comes at you ... so I'm not gonna worry about that now cause I don't have to deal with it. When you start going into it ... now I'm still taking information daily ... that's what I'm doing. So when I get that done ... whatever the next step is ... then I'll know what to do then. Like I said, I'm not really sure how it goes from here. I don't understand this system. I don't understand what they're looking for. It's like they're trying to screen people out.

Blanca, too, suspects that the district is trying to slow down referrals and feel like the lengthy process keeps the students from getting the special help they need. I wondered why she did not feel like she was capable of giving the students the help they needed, especially following her comment, "It's special ed anyway...what are they gonna get out of it." Her interpretation of the referral process was that it is a series of barriers to keep students out of special education as opposed to a series of careful diagnostic interventions in order to rule out other explanations for poor performance. Also, Blanca appeared to have a sort of tunnel vision with respect to process; she did not seem to have the larger picture of the intervention and progress

monitoring procedures prior to a special education evaluation. Instead she said, “whatever the next step is ... then I’ll know what to do then.”

Guinevere concurred and goes as far as to say she will not refer students anymore because it is too time and work intensive:

There’s so much paper work involved in it now. Thank goodness I have not referred anyone this year. They were talking about it at the last meeting we had. You have to keep a running record every day. Like a checklist of the things they can do and the things they can’t do every single day. One of the teachers here typed up some kind of a list where ... of all the skills they need to have so she can just go back and check. Because it’s extremely time consuming. Unbelievable is more and more and more paperwork. Because you know they cut down so much on who qualifies on getting Special Ed. They don’t want you to refer anybody. They really don’t want you to. It’s very much discouraged. Don’t refer anyone. And I mean unless it ... even if they’re failing it’s not an assurance at all that they’re going to qualify.... Yeah there’s a committee. It’s called an SAT committee. You know what I sure need to of boned up on this stuff. I think I’m on that committee. I think. So yeah there’s a committee. So you have to do this checklist if you refer anybody. You have to fill out all this Form A, Form B ... you have to send in ... you know get their eyes checked and make sure all that is working fine. You do this. I do a checklist. And ... cause I’ve done it before. Never before where we had to keep this daily record. That’s a new thing, a brand new thing.

**Q:** Are you familiar with Response to Intervention as it applies to the referral process. It’s called RtI (Response to Intervention)?

**A:** Yeah I’ve heard the RtI ... *laughing* ... Yeah I’ve heard those words.

**Q:** It’s part of the referral process. It’s before you do the A and B, the actual referral paperwork. You have to daily log an intervention. Right?

**A:** Yeah that’s what they’re doing now.

**Q:** What are some interventions?

**A:** I am not ... I’m not referring anybody. I would not, I will not refer anybody. I won’t. I’m thinking by the time they get to the 4<sup>th</sup> grade anyway someone should have caught. But no, there’s so much involved in it, I can’t even imagine doing it all, you know.

**Q:** If you were going to use interventions or if you hear about other teachers, what interventions are they using to log a response or a non-response? Do you know?

**A:** No I don’t. I really don’t.

Guinevere also feels like the referral process has intentionally become so time consuming so that fewer students will be referred. She comments that she has heard of RtI but that she has no intention of referring because the process was too time-consuming and complains that, “You have to keep a running record every day. Like a checklist of the things they can do and the things they can’t do every single day.” Guinevere adds that she will not refer anymore because of this; it was in this response that I began to detect her bitterness and frustration. It seemed that the implementation of a committee to review and design interventions prior to special education evaluation was perceived as a threat and “gotcha” as opposed to a team of professionals working to improve the life of a child. Also, she said that just because a student has failed it doesn’t mean that they can be referred anymore. So, it appeared that failure in grades or on TAKS has been an impetus for special education referrals in the past and that this new intervention process was seen as a way to thwart those kinds of referrals by using data to indicate that research-based instruction and intervention have taken place.

Absent diagnostic procedures, the response to intervention and referral process seemed to be relegated to shooting in the dark, maintaining generic data, and completing the necessary paperwork to lead to an actual evaluation. Assuming that an African American student did have a suspected learning disability in math, had received a targeted intervention without response, and moved forward to a special education evaluation these teachers did not have any idea of what special education services would be necessary. Thus, I identified theme six.

**Theme Six: Limited Knowledge Regarding Special Education Services**

So not only do these teachers not have a specific idea of what a child's disability might be or intervention to implement to ensure that a disability is present, but also they really do not have a recommendation of what special education services may be necessary to address the child's needs. Furthermore, there was little or nothing that they could articulate that could only occur in special education. In fact, all that they described were interventions that could take place in general education.

Blanca described two behaviorally impaired African American students and the services they are going to receive.

Well we did have another one next door but she was so aggressive. She was a little black girl and she was stomping on feet and biting teachers. Yeah she was totally disruptive. Just all sorts of things and so they put her in I guess self contained and they're gonna take my little boy and pull him out. They're gonna pull him out for an hour in the morning and two and half or hour and a half in the afternoon. And we think that might help him. We'll see if that'll help him... I see him with a ... a smaller group that maybe he'll function and do something for them and won't be so distracted. Because there's just so much going on...it's too big for him. There's just so many distractions...Maybe he'll see that this is what I can do something in this class. And then he'll come back in here and do what he needs to do with us and it'll give him some time away from us. I haven't met his mom or dad, but they need to come up here and speak with us. I've sent messages through cousins ... older cousins so we'll see what happens. Other than them telling me ... she did write a note about S's homework. They do his homework for him. I can tell from the handwriting. But I ... I'm hoping that he'll that it will help him focus more and come back to class and not be so frustrated.

Blanca said, "We'll see if that'll [pull-out small group resource special education services] help him..." It appeared that data-driven decisions are relegated to hunches. Also, small group instruction is not a special education service. Additionally, she indicated that the services were for the student to get "some time away from us," so

that “he’ll come back in here and do what he needs to do.” It is almost as if the services are a punishment not specially designed instruction geared towards a disability. Further, she added that she is convinced that his parents do his homework for him.

Along with Blanca, Alba seemed to think small group and one-on-one are also special education services:

**Q:** So if and when she’s able to come in for let’s say C, you feel like she can get the help she needs by staying in here. What would you recommend to an ARD committee that she do with C?

**A:** Well, that she get more one on one. That things are broken down more for her. I learned this from Miss M last year ... like with the tests for L, my resource kids plus L ... N before he got accepted ... for their tests I would make it larger print ... give it more room. Things I had to learn Miss M things I didn’t know about. So, I got those things and she helped me with stuff like that. Just learning ... the seating, and the oral. You know if I had someone to work with C it would free me up to help the kids that are right there on the edge that need help.

**Q:** So what kind of Special Education services a child like Cody needs or would through Special Ed that he’s not able to get in the general Ed arena?

**A:** I think more guidance. Maybe since he is marked or whatever word you want to use ... as Special Ed that gives that makes a Special Ed teacher come in that doesn’t have to work with him doesn’t have to work with the regular classroom teacher.

Alba seemed to abdicate responsibility to the special education teacher so that she can have time to work with other students. She says, “You know if I had someone to work with C it would free me up to help the kids that are right there on the edge that need help.” Does this mean that “C” does not need help that is worthy of her time? Moreover, she really only appeared to need consultation from special education regarding accommodations, not specially designed instruction. Alba admits, “Maybe since he is marked or whatever word you want to use ... as Special Ed that gives that

makes a Special Ed teacher come in that doesn't have to work with him doesn't have to work with the regular classroom teacher." I took this to mean that she felt a special education "mark" afforded a student help that he would not otherwise receive in a general education class. I wasn't sure at this point if that indicated that students needed something she did not know how to give, did not have time to give, or if she did not feel she should have to help a child who needed extensive intervention.

Guinevere spoke candidly about the motivation for a special education placement:

**Q:** When you see students qualify and get admitted to Special Education, do you feel like they continue to make progress once they're in Special Ed? Do they get what they need? Is there a ...

**A:** Sometimes up until lately, cause now they are being held more accountable ... because they have TAKS test ... until that I think that they looked at it as just a freebie. I don't really have to do anything that matters.

**Q:** The students ...

**A:** Oh absolutely. They knew they were going to pass no matter what. They knew. They might have a learning disability, but they're street smart. And they knew if they got in resource, it didn't really matter. They didn't have anything to worry about. But it's more so now because, I mean it's more they're held more accountable because they have to get tests. And after this year I think they're testing is going to count on our school accountability. Unless the state legislature changes that, which I hope they do.

**Q:** They counted this year.

**A:** Yeah, for AYP ... but as far as your acceptable ... but aren't all of them being counted after this year. Our principal told us that this is our last year to have a shot at exemplary.

**Q:** Oh, wow. Because of Special Ed.

**A:** Yeah, because of Special Ed.

**Q:** So when you or a colleague is referring what is it that you're hoping that Special Education can provide that the general education environment is unable to provide.

**A:** Maybe so that they can first of all just have smaller groups. So you don't have to deal with the whole class. So they get more specialized attention hopefully. And things that are adapted more for what they're able to be successful with.

**Q:** Alternate assignments?

**A:** Yeah, alternate assignments. Honestly, just to be honest ... I mean it used to always be you want to get them qualified so they don't take TAKS ... you

know because you don't want them to be on your number. I mean that's the bottom line.

**Q:** ... different strategies ... are there?

**A:** No

**Q:** So that's not a carrot so to speak ...

**A:** It's not on my list ... but I told you I'm not going to refer anymore ... I'm not ... it's too much paperwork. I think TAKS is stupid anyway. So whatever. I hate it, I hate it. I just hate it. It just so much drives everything we do.

Guinevere appeared to think that the some students wanted to be in special education, “They knew they were going to pass no matter what. They knew. They might have a learning disability, but they're street smart. And they knew if they got in resource, it didn't really matter. They didn't have anything to worry about...” Furthermore, she adds, “And after this year I think they're testing is going to count on our school accountability. Unless the state legislature changes that, which I hope they do.” She appeared to not want these students (who she formally accused of intentionally wanting to be in special education) to have high expectations. Not only that, but she told how her principal openly said, “that this is our last year to have a shot at exemplary... because of Special Ed.

Also, in this line of responses, the special education students were continuously referred to as “they” which I thought could be a scriptural form of “othering” them from the norm. Guinevere's version of special education services for her students was, “Maybe so that they can first of all just have smaller groups. So you don't have to deal with the whole class.” This seemed to reveal the beginnings of the abdication of responsibility and accountability for disabled students. Moreover, the fact that special education placement has been a disguise for TAKS exemptions and alternate expectations was revealed here. However, NCLB has removed that incentive. So,

teachers are left to instruct these struggling learners without any real idea of how to do so; this keeps special education as a viable option simply because it is somewhere else and someone else who becomes accountable for these students.

So, six main themes, including three sub-themes, were identified following a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1965). First, many of the teachers' responses revealed the characteristics of deficit thinking specifically, cultural deprivation/lack of assimilation, poor parenting, and bad genes. The teacher's responses seemed to be characterized by a "blame the victim" mentality, the chief attribute of a deficit view. It appeared, in the teacher's view, that poor student performance was often the result of a lack of assimilation to school expectations, absent or uninvolved parents, or simply just a lack of inherent ability. They often expressed sentiment that the African American student experience is overwhelmed with personal survival which made school a low priority.

Second, the teachers possessed an apparent cultural unawareness with respect to African American students. It was easier for the teachers to talk freely about Latino and White culture, but they were unable to give specific information about African American culture without slipping into a deficit framework or utilizing poverty jargon. When each teacher was queried about culturally responsive pedagogy or multicultural materials and techniques, without fail they responded that their version of cultural responsiveness was limited to celebrating significant holidays and historical figures. So, it appeared that there was a general cultural incompetence that existed with respect to the African American lifestyle.

Third, teachers seemed to lack a sense of efficacy regarding the instruction of African American learners. The teachers in this study repeatedly made comment that they were at a loss as to how to reach their struggling African American students. This was especially true if they had been referred for special education evaluation and had not qualified. Moreover, there were instances when teachers expressed anxiety, bitterness, or depression about the accountability ramifications should those struggling African American students not demonstrate proficiency on the state assessment. It seemed as though they would have preferred that another teacher or program were responsible for their learning. They did not feel like they had the tools or training to help them be successful.

Fourth, teachers appeared to be unable to discriminate between disabilities. Prior to the process of a referral for special education a suspected disability is to be noted. These teachers were unable to discern what disability they suspected an African American student had. This undermined the spirit of the RtI procedure because proper, research-based interventions geared to the area of difficulty could not be identified and implemented. All of the teachers expressed a notion that they had an instinct that something was wrong but they were not sure what it was. The interventions they implemented were generic in nature; such as, peer tutoring, preferential seating, and extra time to complete assignments.

Fifth, teachers appeared confused about the referral process. Following the RtI procedure, if a response is not noted, then a referral for special education, 504, or dyslexia evaluation may ensue. However, the teachers appeared very unclear about

this. They seemed to confuse the RtI process with the referral process. Also, they seemed to feel that RtI was a barrier that special education put into place to keep African American students out of special education. When, in fact, RtI is a federal general education requirement.

Finally, teachers appeared to possess a limited knowledge regarding special education services. These teachers not only did not know what disability they suspected or appropriately intervene in the areas of difficulty, but also they really did not seem to have a real recommendation or idea as to what special education services the African American student might need. Again, they mentioned generic services that are not unique to special education; such as small group, extra help, and targeted remediation. This series of missteps or misunderstandings (no suspected disability, lack of intervention, and uncertainty of needed special services) appeared to be related to these teachers' initial impressions of their African American students' abilities, school readiness, and behavior. Such that, African American students who struggle in the general education classroom can become pathologized as disabled.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **CONCLUSIONS**

#### **Discussion of Results**

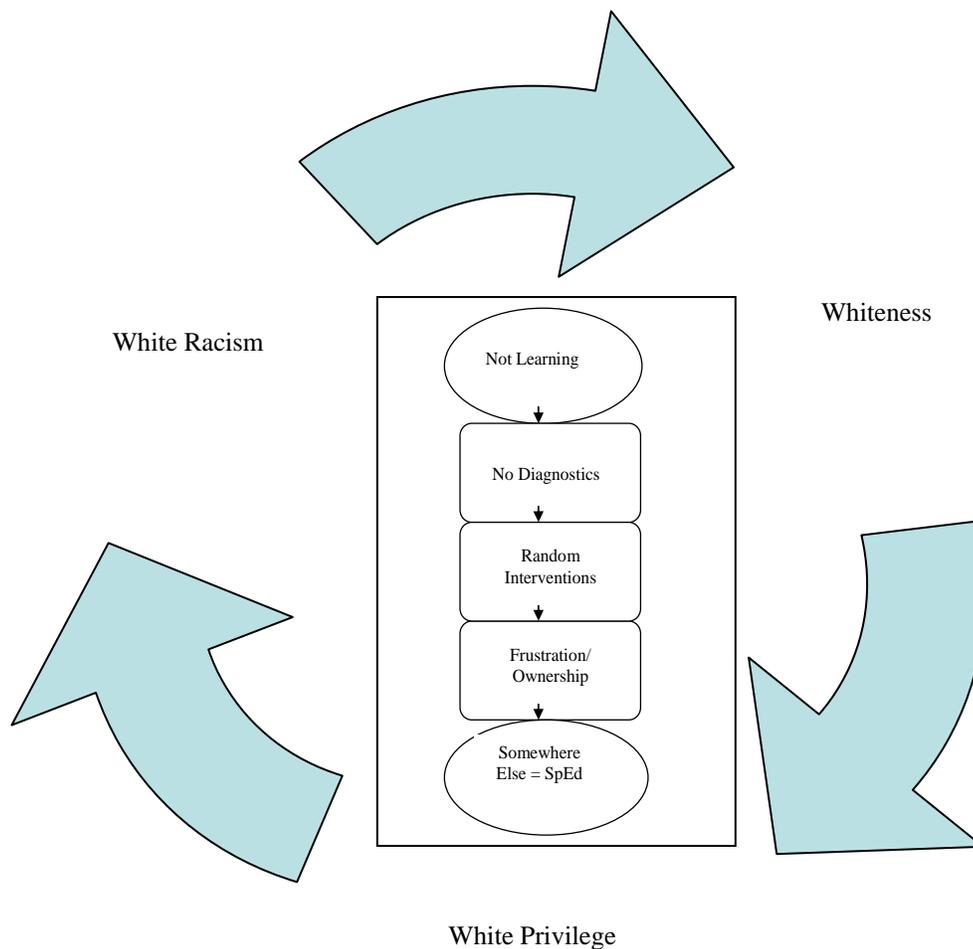
The six themes identified in this critical study were analyzed with respect to the research questions, so that a working theory could be generated. First, many of the teachers' responses revealed characteristics of deficit thinking like: cultural deprivation/lack of assimilation, poor parenting, and bad genes. Second, there was an apparent cultural unawareness with respect to African American students. Third, teachers seemed to lack a sense of efficacy regarding the effective instruction of African American learners. Fourth, teachers appeared to be unable to discriminate between disabilities. Fifth, teachers appeared confused about the referral process. Sixth, teachers appeared to possess a limited knowledge regarding special education services. Overall, the six themes seemed to exist on two sides of a common coin. On one side, there were clear racial and cultural issues and on the other side there was clear confusion regarding procedural issues. First, it seemed like students, parents, families, and the African American culture as a whole were scapegoats to relieve a burdened education system from their lack of efficacy and prevented them from taking responsibility for the performance of all students. Secondly, there appeared to be a clear misunderstanding of disabilities, response to intervention, the overall purpose of special education. The Response to Intervention process as a replacement for the former referral process is perceived as a barrier put into place by special

education. Special education is seen as a fabled somewhere (and someone) else to work with African American students who are not successful in the existing general education environment. By placing students in special education, other teachers are responsible for the students' performance, the students are eligible for accommodated and modified state assessments, and they fall under different accountability categories.

This is where the two sides of the coin merge. The allure of special education alters the RtI process into a referral pipeline that provided these White teachers a vehicle for their privilege and racism to travel. Their perceived unwillingness to change their instructional and management techniques to a more culturally responsive pedagogy coupled with the apparent lack of awareness that there is a systemic Whiteness norm in this district, breeds an acceptable solution that students who do not conform to the system as it exists, belong somewhere else like a special education classroom. So, White general education teachers utilize their privilege to maintain the status quo and simultaneously marginalize African American students who do not assimilate. They resist an RtI and diagnostic approach to intervene with struggling students and identify potential disabilities. In order to disrupt this process, it appears that education, cultural competency, fierce conversations, and strong leadership are needed.

I have discovered that there appears to be is a sort of public school pipeline for African Americans to enter special education in this district. This feeds right into the NAACP's School to Prison Pipeline (2005) because being African American and

having an identified disability are two of the three main indicators that a student may get sucked into the pipeline. This special education pipeline in this district begins with an African American student who is struggling to make progress in the general education environment (see Figure 1). Following a lack of diagnostic processing to determine what the issue might be (academic, social, or behavioral), random, generic interventions are employed. These include peer tutoring, extra time, proximity to the teacher, or shortened assignments. When not successful, interviews revealed that the teacher becomes frustrated and begins to feel like another place or person may be able to better instruct the student. With the pressure of accountability bearing down, the general education teacher begins the referral process in an effort to relinquish ownership or responsibility over the student. The goal of future leaders in education is to disrupt this pipeline by employing the recommendations listed later in this dissertation. This disruption must occur at every level of leadership: grassroots in the classroom, building level leaders, district administration, and through an agenda in higher education academia.



**Figure 1.** The African American Pipeline to Special Education

### **Implications**

This critical White study seemed to confirm that the public school classroom is exactly what Dewey (1916) described a microcosm of society. White teachers lead their classrooms in such a way as to perpetuate the norm, White, middle-class culture and values. When African American students struggle or resist assimilation, they are marginalized to other programs or placements, the chief of which is special

education. This is a tempting resolution to a White teacher's challenge: one, it shifts account-ability elsewhere; two it pathologizes the student rather than placing responsibility on the teacher; and three, it is likely a permanent somewhere else for the student to go. Thus, granting overburdened teachers relief from their lack of efficacy.

The special education pipeline serves a vehicle for their dysconscious racism to travel relieving them from confronting their White privilege and Whiteness as a norm (see Figure 1). Dyconscious racism takes the form of less blatant stereotyping or efforts to marginalize a particular race, especially in the education environment to programs like special education (King, 1991). Teachers, regardless of race, exercise a great deal of power over a student's educational experience. A White teacher complicates this power differential with privilege: White teachers dominate the profession, possess societal privilege, and are permitted to utilize teaching and management styles that confirm the Whiteness norm (see Figure 1). According to Frankenberg (1993), "Whiteness signals the production and reproduction of dominance rather than subordination, normativity rather than marginality, and privilege rather than disadvantage" (pp. 236-237). The seminal work on White privilege by McIntosh (1990) explained that privilege is like an "invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day" (pg. 1). So, when an African American student cannot or does not assimilate to the classroom environment, the White teacher's privilege allows them to assume that there is something faulty with the student. This fault, or deficit, is often mistaken for a disability. Harry and

Klingner (2007) explored deficit thinking as it relates to the disproportionality of children of color in special education, exploring the idea of going a step further from imposing a deficit view on students of color to assuming that they are faulty or disabled.

A special education referral proceeds and, because the African American student has not been taught, they often reveal eligibility as a student with a cognitive, learning, or behavioral problem. Thus, White racism travels down the pipeline in a dysconscious, socially acceptable manner. In some cases, efforts made towards securing special education services can appear well-intended and justify the bias (Thomas, 2003). This idea fits nicely with the research regarding African American underachievement and disproportionality as being a result of deficit, racist views and White norms and expectations (Artiles, 1998; Blanchett, 2006; Landsman & Lewis, 2006; McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004; Patton, 1998; Skrla & Scheurich, 2001).

With respect to these findings, my research both supported and extended the existing literature. It has been identified that White teachers are deficit thinkers (Ford, Harris, Tyson, & Trotman, 2002; Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Harry & Klingner, 2007; Skrla & Scheurich, 2001; Valencia, 1997), misunderstand African American culture (Landsman & Lewis, 2006; McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004), and lack self-efficacy with respect to African American learners (Landsman, 2005). It has also been established that a poorly configured or misunderstood pre-referral process contributes to disproportionality (Coutinho & Oswald, 2000; Dekker, Krou, Wright, & Smith, 2002; Hosp & Reschly, 2003; Skiba, et al., 2006).

However, connecting the deficit views of White teachers toward African American learners to the special education referral process as a vehicle for their racism to travel has not been established by a critical White interpretivist study like this one. These teachers did not meaningfully participate in the response to intervention process with proper diagnostics and progress monitoring. Placement in special education allows them relief from their lack of self-efficacy, as well as the burden of changing teaching and management styles to those that are more culturally responsive. Finally, it shifts responsibility and accountability to the special education teacher to provide sometimes unnecessary or at best duplicate services to a marginalized African American student.

### **Three Perspectives**

This study allowed me to analyze White teachers' perspectives from three vantage points. First, I am a parent of children of color, second, I am an administrative practitioner in special education, and finally I am a researcher.

#### *Parent*

With regard to theme one, my reflexive notes revealed a great deal of parental animosity. My responses to these comments were filled with emotional jargon. I wondered if I had encouraged their deficit views by not confronting them during the interviews. I also asked myself if there were areas where I had been drawn into this belief system after spending ten years in this district. I was angry that teachers felt this way about their African American students; what must some of my children's

teachers think of them? I found myself in the throws of King and Kitchener's (1994) reflective judgment model. This model traces the development of thinking about problems for which we seem to find no answer or the answer we think we have becomes challenged or no longer seems viable. The authors called these "ill-structured problems" and explain that "true reflective thinking is initiated only after there is recognition that a real problem exists" (p. 6). Reflexivity, in this case, becomes a process where difficult issues are subjected to an increasingly critical review. At its core, our beliefs are confronted. The ontological assumptions we hold dear are based upon some epistemological stronghold (King and Kitchener, 1994).

It was extremely difficult for me to respond to the interviews and then to be reflexive about my feelings and comments. Initially, my responses were emotional, sarcastic, and condescending. I had my parent hat on. I was thinking, "These are the teachers that could be working with my children," "Would they assume my kids come from poor families," and "Is this the kind of mentality that caused Stephon to get evaluated for special education two times or the reason why it took Anna five years to finally get into the gifted and talented classes?" Also, as the partner of an African American male, I thought, "Is this what White people think of my husband; that he is an absent father who sells drugs, steals, and is in and out of jail?" Frankly, I was pretty angry about some of the comments I heard. I asked myself, "Did Joe have to assimilate to become as successful as he is; does he think he has to act White?" I wanted to say, "Hey, my children are African American, you do not now anything about them, they have educated parents who have struggled to become so, and they

come from African American families that are nothing like what you are describing.”

I wanted to challenge their statements as urban legends and folk-lore. It was all I could do not to say, “Are you kidding me with bad gene theory?” How many parents out there feel helpless as their children are swept into a system that ultimately may further marginalize them and shatter any dreams that they may have? Teachers have an inherent power over the life of a child and exercise that privilege in positive and negative ways. How much more, then, does a White teacher have privilege to exercise? If White practitioners have privilege that is intrinsic because of their Whiteness, then that privilege is compounded by their position as an educator.

This power differential allows teachers to refer students for special education evaluation and recommend services in an ARD committee that may very well serve to marginalize that child as opposed to intervene. Moreover, the parents of children referred for evaluation and services often have little or no knowledge about the process. I fear that many times teachers, perhaps unintentionally, utilize their power and privilege to convince parents that special education is the only answer for their children.

### *Practitioner*

As an administrator, I was shocked at the apparent lack of knowledge regarding disabilities. It is the general education teacher who makes many of the referrals for special education evaluation in this district. It is alarming to think that many of them may make these referrals without a clear suspicion of a specific disability. Do they

really understand the purpose of special education? I am wondering if this is a gap in teacher preparation or if professional development is necessary for teachers to update their knowledge base on disabilities. From the special education practitioner's perspective, I was equally concerned. It was clear that there is a significant communication and training barrier in our district. As an administrator, I have observed the clear trend of continued referrals for special education even though a TAKS exemption is not possible. The special education department in this district continues to have multiple referrals just before TAKS testing each year. I feel the only way to disrupt this is to educate campuses more fully regarding the new accountability system. Clearly, what the special education department feels is well known, is not understood at all. Teachers do not understand the trademarks of different disabilities, the referral process, or what makes special education services necessary. Whether this is due to a lack of training in teacher preparation programs, poor communication from the campus administrators, or simply ineptness on the special education department's part, it must be addressed.

Furthermore, there is a glaring lack of cultural responsiveness in the classroom. Deficit thinking permeates the system. Ford, Harris, Tyson, and Trotman (2002) and Ford and Grantham (2003) asserted that the deficit model perpetuates segregation in the school environment by preventing African American students from participating in certain programs coupled with an overrepresentation in others. Multicultural curriculum is absent, parents and the community are blamed for student underachievement, and teachers do not feel prepared to deal with many classroom

management and learning problems involving African American students. I struggle with processing this chasm of practice without taking on a deficit view where teachers are concerned. Valencia's (1997) definition of the deficit view included blaming students, their families, and the community for poor students' and students of color's school problems and academic failure. However, I find myself wanting to take that same view towards teachers for not being culturally responsive. It would not make sense to engage in blame-placing, as well. So, it is my first inclination to look at the system. I do not see these teachers as malicious, but rather unaware participants in a system designed specifically to disguise Whiteness as the norm and perpetuate White privilege and racism while simultaneously blaming its very victims for their failure. This invisibility of White privilege exposes its key feature: colorblindness. Colorblindness is a racial strategy of ignoring the existence or influence of racism, privilege, or one's responsibility or participation in it (Allen, 1999).

I was also surprised that there was such a gap in the apparent understanding of African American culture. I perceived many of these responses as being full of stereotypes, folklore, and urban legends. An ongoing cultural competency model may be necessary for this district to utilize in order to address these issues. Furthermore, a screening instrument for potential employees could be helpful to assess a candidate's cultural competence. In an administrator's role, I wondered how I could begin to combat such sweeping generalities, urban legends, and folklore without seeming like I have an axe to grind. As a result of expected assimilation, a lack of cultural responsiveness, and cultural competence, many African American students face a

grave academic future. My experience of ten and a half years in this particular district has left me with the impression that our schools may be indirectly responsible for populating our prisons. The marginalization of African American students by placing them in special education, the resulting high drop-out rates coupled with low reading levels, and likelihood of involvement in criminal activity are all predictors for future placement in the prison system. In fact, every Friday I administer ARD (IEP) meetings at the juvenile detention center for student with disabilities, who are newly incarcerated. There have only been three Friday's this school year when my presence was not needed. Every other week, at least one student with disabilities was incarcerated. As an additional note of interest, I was asked to present on the topic of culturally responsive pedagogy to all new teachers in this district for the 2008-2009 school year. After the first of a two-day session, I was called in by the Coordinator for Professional Development and asked to "tone down" my presentation because some of the White teachers had complained that it was offensive because of my discussion of hegemony, white normativity, and privilege. So, my suspicion is that many new White teachers are not any more culturally aware than veteran teachers with respect to their privilege, White supremacy, and general cultural competence.

### *Researcher*

As a researcher, I was motivated to understand how these teachers think and to provide a leadership model to provide intervention for school districts with a deficit view problem. These principal-nominated teachers really did not seem to have specific factors that they look for prior to the referral of an African American student

other than that he or she is struggling and not responding to the generalized practices in the classroom. No diagnostic or specific intervention process was named, limited or no understanding of the response to intervention requirement was provided, and significant confusion about the procedures to follow for a referral for evaluation were present across all three participants. It would seem that the district's special education department has not clearly communicated the referral process to the right people. The district trains administrators in the process yearly, but I am wondering if their needs to be a required annual update that includes teacher, too.

Further, it concerns me that teachers may believe that the district's special education department is "screening out" African American referrals; clearly communication regarding the rule-out factors for eligibility is needed (no lack of research-based instruction in reading math and no socio-economic, cultural, or language factors interfering). Federal law requires that these factors be ruled-out prior to a disability being identified. Finally, it is clear that RtI is not understood to be a federal general education requirement; instead, it is viewed as a special education obstacle.

From a researcher's perspective, recurrent verbiage and conspicuous deletions were ever present in the interview data. Several times the teachers would refer to the African American students as "little" whether they were six-years-old or ten. In fact, there were over 70 references of this type in the transcriptions. It seemed as though it was an indirect way of positioning them in a seat of sympathy or inferiority. I suspect this sympathy is related to a missionary mentality where the teacher feels like she/he

are sent to save students from their current situations. This attitude is echoed in the research (McIntyre, 1997; Warren & Hytten, 2004) as one of the faces of Whiteness. Moreover, whenever I would ask questions specifically regarding culture, teachers would openly talk about White and Latino culture, but would omit African Americans from the conversation and replace it with socioeconomic jargon. I am unsure as to whether this is because the teachers in this case did not know what to say, had nothing positive to say, or used terms like “poor” and “at-risk” as code for African American. I feel the latter is true because of their nonverbal, “wink, wink” language. I attribute this to the phenomenon of the “seduction of sameness” often experienced in White on White research (Hurd & McIntyre, 1996, p. 88). The teachers appeared to feel that they could speak in code regarding their African American students, and that I, as a fellow White person, would understand them. Further, I see this as a paralogic belief like McKenzie and Scheurich (2004) described. For example, blaming one’s lack of classroom management skills on the students.

When, the teachers did talk about African American issues, it was filled with deficit views and folklore. For example, parents of poorly performing or misbehaving students were overwhelmingly blamed and assumed to be ineffective, unsupportive, on drugs, or in prison. Extreme examples were seemingly generalized as the norm for African Americans in our community. Stories about selling their children’s medicine, hitting their children with frying pans, and abandonment were taken for granted as an everyday occurrence. With respect to cultural competence, these teachers were

unable to mention any multicultural infusion into their classroom other than Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Black History Month, Cinco de Mayo, Cesar Chavez, and “the black lady on the bus (Blanca).” This directly relates to Ladson-Billings’ (1994) comments on the lack of a culturally responsive pedagogy in the classroom.

Moreover, I detected a hint of martyrdom on the teachers’ part. Their responses echoed like they were too burdened with the difficulties of working in an urban, diverse district to go above and beyond the norm for students who did not respond to their teaching and management style. This seemed illogical given they had chosen to work in such a place, and it would seem obvious that tactics that are successful with suburban White, middle-class students would not necessarily be successful for African American students.

Another concern was the connection between White privilege and racism and the actual the issue of disproportionality of African American in special education in this district. The three basic theories of disproportionality are: (1) biased assessment, (2) the influence of poverty, and (3) poor pre-referral systems. These explanations extend the discussion regarding racial bias in the public school system (Shealey & Lue, 2006) and fold into the special education referral, identification, and services process. There appeared to be a total lack of diagnostic knowledge and application where suspected disabilities were concerned. These teachers did not have specific disabilities in mind when they initiated a referral, nor did they try interventions specific to areas of weakness. All three teachers reported to go on hunches or gut feeling when referring a child for special education evaluation. Very generic

interventions such as peer tutoring, small group instruction, and preferential seating were employed. In fact, two of the teachers did not know what response to intervention was, let alone a culturally responsive response to intervention. Culturally competent assessment and intervention might be defined as a process of assessment that does not contribute to the overrepresentation of students of color in special education (Skiba et al., 2002). With respect to the referral process, it was seen as a barrier riddled with paperwork and lengthy wait time before an actual evaluation took place. They seemed horrified that the process now included daily data recording. So much so, that one teacher said she would not refer students anymore. Pre-referral intervention teams have been identified in the literature as a positive resource that may reduce the over-referral of students of color through the development of a process specifically designed to meet individual needs prior to referral (Skiba, Simmons et al., 2006). However the teams in this district were viewed as an obstruction to evaluation.

Ultimately, none of the teachers really knew what it was that special education would do for their students other than give them more help in the classroom. This speaks to the efficacy regarding the instruction of African American learners. These teachers did not know what to do to help their struggling students and hoped that someone else would. The interview responses indicated that these teachers were desperate to relieve themselves from accountability for difficult to teach students even if it meant pushing them into special education to do it. The lack of ownership for African American learners who did not easily assimilate to the school culture or

learn under the generic conditions presented, was evident throughout the interviews. At no time, did the teachers assume responsibility for their academic progress or acknowledge the system as a culprit for the achievement gap or disproportionality of African Americans in special education. The lack of culturally responsive classroom management and instruction seemed to closely link to the two greatest areas of disability among African American students, MR and ED (Webb-Johnson, 2002). I believe that this lack of culturally responsive pedagogy is directly related to a teacher's comfort level with different cultures, efficacy level with respect to African American learners, and the willingness to adjust their teaching and management styles accordingly. Culturally responsive pedagogy and leadership are needed in this district. Moreover, parental involvement would be helpful to address the idea that teachers feel they are isolated and helpless without home support from parents, family, and/or guardians

## **Summary and Recommendations**

### *Summary*

This study sought to address the problem of the disproportionality of African Americans in special education by conducting critical research. A review of literature revealed that research of this nature had not been conducted with this problem in mind and that critical theory might be a wise choice in order to understand this issue more fully. Moreover, research related to the underachievement of African American learners revealed that many of the racist theories that exist to explain this

phenomenon could also explain why White teachers refer African American student for special education evaluation (Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Hyland, 2005; Jackson, 2005; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Kunjufu, 1984; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Landsman & Lewis, 2006; Perry, 1993). Finally, with new federal guidelines for accountability and instruction, this study hoped to understand the dilemma from a current view-point. So, adding my unique perspectives of researcher, practitioner, and parent enhanced the ability to get a variety of perspectives on the topic. I was able to interpret the comments made by white teachers as a racial peer, parent, administrator, and researcher.

The research focused on four guiding questions. What are the perceptions of principal-nominated, White general education teachers with respect to:

1. Their African American students' abilities, social skills, and school readiness?
2. The achievement gap and disproportionality in special education and in their school district?
3. The factors that influence general education teachers to initiate a referral of an African American student to special education?
4. The potential services and progress of African American learners who are referred for special education testing?

Participants included three elementary White teachers in a district which has a significant disproportionate representation of African American students in special education and who work on campuses that are the most grievously disproportionate. Two interviews per candidate occurred. I kept a reflexive journal. Following

transcription, the data was analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1965) to identify six themes. They were (a) a limited knowledge of disabilities, (b) the referral process, special education services, deficit thinking, cultural incompetence, and lack of efficacy regarding the instruction of African American learners. These themes supported the current research and confirmed that a lack of cultural responsiveness coupled with the deficit view contributes to the gross disproportionality of African Americans in special education (Ford, Harris, Tyson, & Trotman, 2002; Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Harry & Klingner, 2007; Skrla & Scheurich, 2001; Valencia, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1994). The added perspective of practitioner and parent added a depth of understanding to this crisis that has not been explored previously. Also, a useful model to understand what occurs between general education and special education was developed. This model traced the teacher experience from feeling like they have an African American student who is not learning, to trying generic interventions, to initiating a referral for special education evaluation. Finally, the critical perspective revealed that dominant White values in the classroom perpetuate marginalization in the form of referral to special education. Concurrently, privilege on the part of the teacher permits them to abdicate responsibility for struggling African American students.

### *Recommendations*

My recommendations for future action include:

1. *Culturally responsive leadership at the district, campus, and classroom level.*

With respect to the identified theme that teachers appeared to possess a

cultural unawareness with respect to African American students, I make the following suggestion. It should go without saying, but it is still evident that these teachers needed expectations from above meaning that they would be accountable and responsible for the learning of all children. Further, they did not appear to feel obligated to respond to the cultural differences in their classrooms. Ladson-Billings (1994) provided a clear framework for culturally responsive practices. Ladson-Billings distinguished between an assimilationist approach to educating African American children and a culturally responsive scheme. One of the most basic tenets of culturally responsive practice is how the teacher views his/her students. Ladson-Billings (1994) explained that “whether teachers think of their students as needy and deficient or capable and resilient can spell the difference between pedagogy grounded in compensatory perspectives and those grounded in critical and liberatory ones” (as cited in Landsman & Lewis, 2006, p. 31). It is how teachers choose to see their students, then that most profoundly impacts their learning. I also think the equity traps piece (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004) remains a useful construct for the preparation of culturally responsive campus leaders. It is from the leadership level that the tone is set that all children can and will learn. Further, it is the instructional leaders on a campus who must provide accountability to all teachers for ensuring that students learn, and if they do not learn the way that we teach, then we will teach them in the way that they learn. Instructional racism “is the impact of the relationships among

biased unconscious, conscious, and dyconscious ideologies about instruction, (King, 1991). These biased ideologies promote institutionalized beliefs of a particular cultural group over those of historically marginalized populations” (Quisenberry & McIntyre, 1999, p. 53). Leadership towards this end will aid in the disruption of instructional racism.

2. *Teacher preparation in cultural competence and intervention.* Teachers seemed to lack efficacy regarding the instruction of African American learners. It did not appear that teachers received any specific education in the area of cultural competence. Blanchett (2006) stated that “educators tend to see Whiteness as the norm and consequently the academic skills, behavior, and social skills of African American and other students of color are constantly compared with those of their White peers” (p. 27). The culturally responsive classroom values students as competent, incorporates their culture into the curriculum, exposes the dominant oppressive culture, challenges the status-quo, and allows students to maintain their own cultural identity while simultaneously preparing them for larger societal demands (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Grossman (1991) asserted that:

To work effectively with culturally diverse students, teachers require cultural sensitivity. Educators need to have an in-depth knowledge about the specific cultures that are represented in their classes in order to adapt their instructional, assessment, classroom management, and counseling techniques to specific cultural characteristics of their students. And they need to have the courage and commitment to actually use techniques that are appropriate for students from different ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds in the face of the many community, administrative, and financial forces that pressure them not to do so (p. 4).

A model for becoming bicultural or culturally competent is necessary for prospective teachers to internalize during their preparation process and current teachers to develop. Not clear Moreover, the teachers in this study did not appear to have the ability to design, implement, and monitor specific intervention for struggling learners. This must be a developed area for prospective and current teachers. Special education cannot be viewed as an intervention when it is clearly a federal program for providing special designed instruction for students who are not able to make progress in general education without the protection afforded by IDEIA.

3. *Professional development to address the deficit view and screening instruments for prospective employees.* Many of the teachers' responses revealed the characteristics of deficit thinking. In order to address existing employees who have the characteristics of deficit thinking, I suggest a professional development model. Garcia and Guerra (2004) offered a framework for attacking the deficit model through professional development. The framework involved a systematic exposure of deficit views, challenging them through research, and reframing them into a view that does not blame students, families, and communities for the school failure of low-income and racially diverse students. I suggest use of this model or something similar to it as well as prospective school employees participating in completing a deficit view screening instrument. Public education will not benefit by continuing to employ professionals who are deficit thinkers. This instrument

would be administered during the application process in an effort to identify prospective employees who are deficit thinkers and may lack cultural competence. I envision that it will be scenario-based and include a variety of topics such as discipline, multicultural education, parental involvement, and instructional differentiation.

4. *Required updates on special education for general educators.* Currently, Texas requires an annual 6-hour annual professional development updates for classroom teachers in the area of gifted and talented. I think that the same should occur on the topic of special education. These updates should include disability knowledge, special education services knowledge, referral process review, legal updates, ARD process reminders, and useful strategies for collaboration. By doing this, the identified themes that teachers appeared to be unable to discriminate between disabilities, confused about the referral process, and to possess a limited knowledge regarding special education services, would be addressed. “Race matters,” both in educators’ initial decisions to refer students for special education and in their subsequent placement decisions for students identified and labeled as having disabilities (Coutinho, Oswald, & Best, 2002). While there has been a lot of focus on limiting the numbers of students identified for special education services, little has been done to address the racial make-up of those who are admitted to special education (Salend, Duhaney, & Montgomery, 2002). So, required updates in the purpose and processes of special education along with the

intervention and referral process would be helpful in re-framing a teacher's understanding and, hopefully, their practice. The professional development should focus specifically on the identification of disabilities with the rule-out factors in mind so that cultural differences are not mistaken for disabilities.

5. *Discussion/fierce conversation forums in affected districts.* It would be useful to hold discussion groups in districts where disproportionality is problematic. Jackson (2005) argued that marginalized students experience extreme stress and anxiety because of the perceptions that their teachers have about them. Therefore, "the stress often manifests itself in self-defeating behaviors that appear as inattentiveness, resistance, and not caring" (p. 205). Further, terms like minority, disadvantaged, and low achiever complicate the issue. Jackson suggested that these terms be replaced with students of color, students put at a disadvantage, and underachiever. These groups could help to expose and work through some of the sensitive issues revealed in this study like deficit thinking and begin the reframing process of deficit views. Confronting deficit thinking and White racism and privilege are the only ways to excavate deficit views from inside the system. Scheurich (1993) agrees, he stated, "We Whites need to study and report how being White affects our thinking, our behaviors, our attitudes, and our decisions from the micro, personal level to the macro, social level. We need to make White racism a central, self-reflective topic of inquiry within the academy. (p. 9).

6. *Future research in the areas of gender, principals, and parents.* Finally, I think that future research on disproportionality from a principal and parent perspective would be helpful in understanding the leadership and parental perceptions more deeply. It would also be helpful to hone in on gender issues in the African American struggling learner population since teachers in this study more often expressed difficulty with African American males. For example, getting the perspectives of African American parents with respect to their children's education and services in special education would be exceedingly powerful. Further, focusing on the educational experience of African American males who have been identified with a disability would be enlightening. Finally, exploring the perspectives of principals with respect to culturally responsive pedagogy and disproportionality would give an additional depth of understanding of the educational leadership preparation and process.

These recommendations are aligned to the six themes identified from the research findings. The goals of these recommendations are to disrupt the pipeline to special education by raising awareness among existing educators, screening future educators in this district, and to provide professional development in the areas of deficit thinking, special education services and referral, and African American education. Furthermore, fostering cultural responsiveness at all levels of leadership (classroom, building, district, and community) must be a priority initiative in this district. Ultimately, academia must continue to engage in research and conversation to further

the social justice agenda, particularly in the public school system. This study and its recommendations should further the agenda for social and academic justice for African American learners. It is important to continue this research endeavor in order to expand the understanding of white teachers and African American learners with respect to disproportionality in special education. Ultimately, the fate of our nation depends upon well educated learners of every color.

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The typist for this record of study was Mr. Bill A. Ashworth, Jr.