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# A Case Study of Disproportionality in Special Education: Inquiry in an Urban School District

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A CASE STUDY OF DISPROPORTIONALITY IN SPECIAL EDUCATION:  
INQUIRY IN AN URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT

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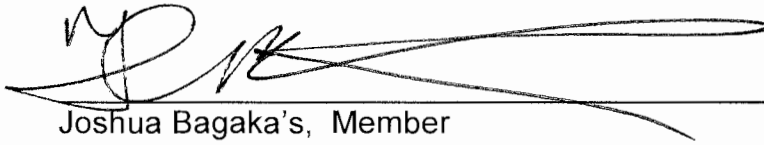
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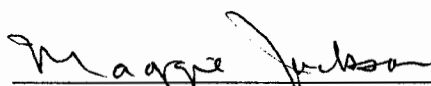
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## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to African American learners in all urban school districts in America. My hope is that your potential will be realized through educators who truly believe in you.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

First I must acknowledge my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, for it is he who gives me strength, purpose and direction. Next I must thank Dr. Judy Stahlman and Dr. James Carl for their tireless efforts in helping me realize my goal. I remain forever grateful. Thank you also to my other committee members who were always available and provided excellent feedback. Finally I must acknowledge my family and close friends. Thank you Bill, Mom and Zari for putting up with me when I could no longer put up with myself. Thank you Auntie Glo, Jennifer, Adrienne, Kelli, Marilyn, both Yvonne(s) and all my co-workers and colleagues (past and present). Your unending support and encouragement helped me reach this goal. I love you all.

A CASE STUDY OF DISPROPORTIONALITY  
IN SPECIAL EDUCATION :  
INQUIRY IN AN URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT  
CHARLOTTE D. IVEY

ABSTRACT

This case study examines the problem of disproportionality in special education in an urban district in Northeast Ohio. Disproportionality occurs when the risk for being identified in a particular disability category is not proportional to the population being considered. The problem of disproportionate representation of racial groups in certain categories of special education is significant because it is only seen in the “judgemental” categories. That is, categories such as ED and SLD, where the determination for eligibility is subjective and based on professional judgment and inference, as opposed to non-judgemental categories such as OHI, blindness, deaf, orthopaedic and TBI, which have known organic causes.

Data collection for this research was achieved through interviews and follow up questionnaires with general education teachers, intervention specialists and school psychologists who work in this district. In addition, the risk ratio for African American and White students were computed to establish the extent of disproportionality. Risk ratio is recommended by OSEP as the preferred method of calculating disproportionality. Risk

ratio answers the question, “What is a specific racial/ethnic group’s risk of receiving special education and related services for a particular disability as compared to the risk for all other students?” The data revealed that African American students are disproportionately represented in the disability categories of Emotional Disturbance (ED) and Cognitive Disability (CD).

The interviews and questionnaires yielded information about the influence of teacher beliefs and biases on the identification and referral of students to special education. The impact of racism was central to understanding the disparities identified. Recommendations were offered to assist in changing staff belief systems and implementing procedures that could potentially decrease disproportionality in this school district. These recommendations included training for staff in African American pedagogy, and special education laws and procedures. Additionally, the district could benefit from structured programs and procedures at the building level to address instructional shortcomings that may impact referrals to special education.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Special Education, the education of students with disabilities, has a history that dates back to the early 1800s when schools were established in the United States for those who were blind, deaf and mentally retarded (Winzer, 1993). The predominant view of schooling for students with special needs was that they required “institutional isolation” (Winzer, 1993). Children with special needs continued to be educated in institutions throughout the nineteenth century. The early twentieth century brought free, compulsory education for children who were deaf and blind. The philosophical outlook had changed. The institutions were now schools with educational goals.

The enactment of compulsory education laws brought children from all walks of life to the public schools. Up until this time, the disabilities that were addressed were the more obvious disabilities (blindness, deafness, physical disabilities). These low-incidence, less subjective, non-judgemental disabilities are the ones usually identified by a medical professional prior to the child coming to school. Students showing up at the schools after the passage of compulsory education laws brought issues that provided a basis for school personnel to become subjective and judgemental. Students were unruly,

low-functioning and often from households that had immigrated to the United States. These students would currently be classified in the high-incidence or “soft” categories of emotionally disturbed (ED); specific learning disability (SLD); and mild mental retardation (MMR) (Harry, et al, 2002). The determination of special education eligibility under these often “subtle” disability categories is judgemental because there is often no known organic cause and determination “rests on the “art” of professional judgement” (O’Conner & Fernandez, 2006, p. 6).

Special classes for these students were developed in the school districts to respond to this newly created need. “Segregated” classes did not allow for interaction with and learning from peers who did not have disabilities. With this expansion of programs for children with special needs came inequalities in how educators identified and served students. Initially there were certain groups identified (or over-identified) as being disabled merely because of their race (e.g. Dunn, 1968; Mercer, 1973). Biases in testing procedures revealed that test instruments did not account for cultural differences and thereby increased the likelihood that non-whites would appear disabled. So, as all children began to access the educational system, unfair practices manifested, especially in relation to disabilities.

To ensure that students with disabilities received free and appropriate public education (FAPE), special interest groups lobbied for change. The change efforts were concomitant with the Civil Rights and Disability Rights movements. These endeavors culminated in Congress setting forth federal requirements for the education of children with disabilities in P.L. 93-112, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and in the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974. Disabilities included deaf/blind,

deafness, hard of hearing, mental retardation, multihandicapped, orthopedic impairment, other health impairment, seriously emotionally disturbed, specific learning disability, speech impairment, and visual handicap.

Special Education as we know it today began with the passage of the federal special education law in 1975 (P.L. 94-142), the Education of all Handicapped Children Act, which in 1990 became the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) . This law made public schools responsible for the education of all individuals with disabilities. “School systems could no longer exclude students suffering physical or intellectual handicaps, nor could they doom students to inappropriate placements and inadequate curricula” (Winzer,1983, p. 382). This law gave parents the authority to make decisions regarding their child’s education, the right to due process and confidentiality, and required that an individual education plan (IEP) be implemented for any child identified with a disability. The law further mandated that education occur in the least restrictive environment and that testing be culturally fair, unbiased and impartial. Since 1990, Congress has amended and reauthorized the law several times, most recently in 2004, in an attempt to improve results for students with disabilities.

Despite these laws and supposed assurances against cultural bias, problems exist. Much of the research in the area of special education indicates that not all students with disabilities benefit equally even in the presence of the laws (Parrish, 2002; Fieros & Conroy, 2002; Harry, et al., 2002). Specifically, minority students have been found to be overrepresented in certain disability categories, misclassified in some cases, and placed in more restrictive environments (Dunn ,1968; Chinn & Hughes,1987; Artiles & Trent,1994; MacMillan & Reschly,1998; Oswald, et al.,1999; Coutinho & Oswald, 2000;

Fieros & Conroy, 2002; Harry, et al., 2002; Parrish, 2002). Often, such disparities correlate with specific racial groups.

African-American students in particular have been found to be significantly over-represented in special education programs for students with emotional disturbance (ED) and those with educable mental retardation (EMR) (Serwatka et al.,1995; Eitle, 2002). An explanation for this dilemma can be found when considering a functionalist versus a critical worldview. The functionalist view holds that social reality is objective, rational and orderly. Any deviations from this are pathological (Foucault, 1976; Skrtic, 1991). From this perspective, overrepresentation is not a problem. It is merely the result of the needs of the particular group. In other words, they are overrepresented in special education because they are more likely to have true disabilities. “This line of thought absolves institutionalized, systemic structures, policies, and practices that create and perpetuate the context for a failing urban school system” (Blanchett, Mumford & Beachum, 2005, p. 74).

The critical theorist would argue that this functionalist worldview fails to recognize the socioeconomic and political nature of schooling, specifically “the role played by schools and the special education system in maintaining the existing social and economic stratification order which exerts ideological, social and political control over African-American learners” (Patton, 1998). Critical race scholars advance the notion of racism being normal and the system of power in all aspects of social life. The power of racism is both material and cultural (Lipman, 2004). Special education, being grounded in structured power relationships, and the needs of the dominant class, has devalued African-Americans and maintained a system that is unjust to African-Americans (Patton,

1998). This system of unfairness has implications for the problem of disproportionality. Disproportionality occurs when the risk for being identified in a particular disability category is not proportional to the population being considered.

According to Harry, Klingner, Sturges and Moore (2002), “to discover what lies behind disproportionality then, research must use methods that can document the school processes that lead to it” (p.72). In this vein, the current research will examine the issue of disproportionality and the identification process of students under the Cognitive Disability (CD), Specific Learning Disability (SLD), and the Emotional Disturbance (ED) categories in a case study of Euclid City Schools. The data gathered will explore the implications of educator’s decisions, address disparities in representation of racial groups in various disability categories and provide best services to meet educational needs. Theoretically, the intent of special education services is to ensure that students with disabilities receive the same quality education as their non-disabled peers. However, if students are not receiving the same quality education, or are identified more often due to their race or ethnicity, there is a problem with the system.

The federal government has instituted practices and created organizations to help ensure compliance with the laws. Two such offices are the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) and the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). Since 1968, the OCR has conducted a biannual compliance report to help enforce students’ civil rights in public schools. Participating districts are selected through a stratified random sampling process. The results provide national and state projections based on a probability sample (Fieros & Conroy, 2002). The data OCR collects varies from year to year. They may collect data on discipline rates one year and change to identification rates the next. New laws (e.g. Title



IX) change the nature of OCR's enforcement function and subsequently the data that needs to be collected. The OSEP collects data also. This data reflects actual child counts from districts across the United States and does not rely primarily on projections as in the OCR data (Fieros & Conroy, 2002).

Donovan and Cross (2002) emphasize the limitations of both the OSEP and OCR datasets. Specifically, there is an absence of data on incidence with which to compare placement rates. This refers to incidence and placement in the various disability categories. Additionally, the authors found inconsistency in placement numbers by race and that disability status and ethnicity had discrepancies. In particular, certain ethnic groups are combined into one group (Asian and Pacific Islander). This can cause a specific sub-group of students, for example, Hawaiian, who are grouped under Pacific Islander, to become obscure and to make it difficult to tease out any disparity related to them.

#### *Statement of the Problem*

Despite laws that aim to prevent it, and knowledge of the problem, disproportionality continues to exist. The OCR reporting system has documented that African-American students have been disproportionately represented in the categories of mental retardation (MR) and emotional disturbance (ED) for close to 40 years (Hosp & Reschly, 2004). African-Americans have been found to be 2.41 times more likely than White students to be identified as having mental retardation, 1.13 times more likely to be labeled as learning disabled and 1.68 times more likely to be found to have an emotional or behavioral disorder (Klingner et al, 2005).

Disproportionality is a problem that manifests itself in the judgemental categories of special education such as emotional disturbance (ED) and specific learning disabled (SLD) (Macmillan & Reschly, 1998; O’Conner & Fernandez, 2006). This means that there is overrepresentation of African American students who are determined eligible under certain categories. Disproportionality is not seen in the non-judgemental categories. “Non-judgemental categories define disabilities whose diagnoses require limited inference on the part of professionals” (O’Conner & Fernandez, p. 6, 2006). Medical professionals have usually diagnosed these disabilities prior to the child coming to school. Children “who are referred to the judgemental categories ... rarely come to school with a disability determination. They are referred to special education only after they have failed to achieve in the general education classroom” (Donovan & Cross, p. 209, 2002).

To date, there is a paucity of studies that examine the disparities in identification and placement of students in special education at the school district level. This study will examine whether disparities exist for any racial group in special education in a single school district - Euclid City Schools, in the area of SLD, CD and ED. These categories represent over 80% of the special education population for this district. Euclid was selected for several reasons. The city population is approximately two-thirds White, and one-third African American. As opposed to the school population which is approximately two-thirds African American, and one-third White. As an employee of the Euclid public schools, this researcher has relatively easy access to interviews and student data. Within the study, the impact of such contributing factors as institutionalized racism, poverty,

community demographics and other institutional practices associated with the identification process will be examined.

### *Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this research is to explore the processes and factors that lead to disparity issues in special education for an urban school district. The perspectives of racial identity, social construction and critical race theory will serve as frameworks to explore the concerns under investigation in this study. In particular, the processes that lead to racial disparities will be explored.

For the purposes of this study, special education will be examined within the structures of white supremacy and racism. This study will examine closely the bureaucratic mechanisms of identification and placement of students with disabilities. It is the researcher's belief that the data collected will reveal nuances that indicate the notion of privilege or control as the usual state of affairs. In revealing this, the researcher hopes to make a difference, at least in this local district.

It is a contention of this researcher that disparity problems are a manifestation of institutionalized racism and that the study's findings will uncover biases and/or procedures that affect identification and placement of children with disabilities. In other words, an objective of this research is to study the relationship among race, racism and power as it relates to contemporary special education. The goal is not only to understand the processes associated with special education identification and services but to also provide insight so that changes can be made for the betterment of all students.

### *Research Questions*

In order to examine the processes involved in special education in Euclid City Schools and explore disparity issues, the following research questions will guide the study:

1. Is there disparity in the representation of any specific racial group of students in the categories of CD, ED and SLD in special education in Euclid City Schools? If so, what is the nature of this disparity?
2. How does the context and activities of the identification process currently in place for special education influence disproportionate representation of certain racial groups in the categories of CD, ED and SLD?
3. How do racial differences among staff, and between staff and students influence special education decision making and service delivery in Euclid City Schools?

### *Setting for the Study*

The setting for my research is the city of Euclid, Ohio. This setting was chosen because it is readily accessible to me, as I am an employee in the school district. The community is a working class community. Euclid is one of Cleveland's oldest suburbs (Keating, 1994). It is considered an urban area and school district due to the large percentage of students eligible for free and reduced meals. In the state of Ohio there are 21 districts that meet the definition for urban. The district must have approximately 5,000 or more students and at least 5% of the families must be receiving assistance from the state. In Euclid, approximately 20% of the families receive assistance from the state.

According to United States Census figures from 2000, the total population for the city of Euclid is 52,717. The racial mix of the community is 34,985 – white (66.4%); 16,116 – black (30.6%). There were 962 (7.1%) families living below the poverty level. About half (52%) were black families and the other half (47%) were white. The median household income in 1999 was \$35,151. For blacks the median household income in 1999 was \$31,117 and for whites \$37,271 (U.S. Census Data, 2000).

In comparison to other school districts in the Greater Cleveland area, Euclid's income levels, which can be considered low to middle – SES, are similar to Elyria, Ohio, for example. Elyria also has a similar total population of 55,953, but the racial make-up is 81% White and 14% Black (U.S. Census Data, 2000). Euclid's racial population is similar to Shaker Heights, Ohio for example, 60% White and 34% Black (U.S. Census Data, 2000). However, Shaker Heights' income and education levels are drastically higher. The income and education levels in Cleveland Heights are also higher than those in Euclid and Cleveland Heights' population of Blacks and Whites is nearly equal (53% White and 42% Black) (U.S. Census Data, 2000).

Euclid can be considered a city that has undergone considerable racial transition in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. “In 1950, Euclid's population was 41,396, with a black population of only 79. In 1960, the population was 62,998 with an even smaller black population of only 44” (Keating, 1994, p. 153). By the 1980s, Euclid's population was 59,999 with a black population of 4,548. While the city remains majority White, the Black population has increased 23% in 20 years.

The political environment of the 1970s and 1980s was such that public silence about the issues of racial transition was the norm (Keating, 1994). In other words, the

dominant perspective in Euclid was don't talk about the racial changes and maybe they'll stop or go away. Because of fair housing violations, the city lost thousands of dollars of grant monies in the 1970s (Ott & Atassi, 2006). It was determined that the city was violating these laws and grant monies were rescinded. The 1980s brought the issue of racial imbalance in the schools to the foreground. "In 1987 the state required the Euclid School Board to submit a comprehensive plan to improve racial balance in its elementary schools" (Keating, 1994, p. 159). As it were, based on proximity, elementary school buildings that were near apartment complexes were predominantly black and the elementary school buildings near single family homes were predominantly white.

Racial bias in Euclid continues as the federal government recently filed it's second-ever Voting Rights Act lawsuit against Euclid on behalf of Black voters. This occurred after a 3-year Justice Department investigation that concluded that the current ward divisions in Euclid (four wards) dilutes black voting power and would be less discriminatory if Euclid were divided into eight wards (Atassi, 2006). In 2007, the federal court ruled that Euclid was indeed in violation and the city was remanded to re-structure it's current wards (Guevara & Atassi, 2007). The November, 2007 City Council elections were postponed until Spring, 2008 to allow for re-structuring. Due to underrepresentation of Blacks in the political process in Euclid, it is unknown how this might also influence racial division and power dynamics in the school system. Blanchett, et al (2005), state that urban schools are indeed impacted by the city politics and dynamics.

A look at demographics for the school population helps to further illustrate contemporary effects. The total enrollment for school year 2005-2006 was 6,537 students. Black students represent 69.8% (4,571) of the student body and white students

represent 24.6% (1,608) of the student body. Moreover, 4.4% (286) students are identified as multi-racial (ODE – EMIS district report, 2005). These numbers are in stark contrast to the city statistics which reveal that 66.4% of the city population is White and 30.6% is Black. Preliminary counts indicated that 15.37% (1005) students in Euclid schools receive Special Education services. Of these students, 21.19% are in the Emotionally Disturbed (ED) category and 41.29% are in the Specific Learning Disabled (SLD) category.

The total number of teachers for school year 2005-2006 is 402. Of the 402 staff persons, 109 are male and 293 are female. The majority of the teaching staff are white, 349 (87%). African Americans represent 51 or 12% of the teaching body. There are 2 Hispanic teachers.

Another significant fact in relation to city dynamics in Euclid is the number of Catholic Schools and their racial composition. There are 4 Catholic elementary schools (K-8) currently operating in Euclid. The total enrollment for these schools is 1,235 students. The racial breakdown is 1,047(85%) are White and 127(10%) are Black.

### *Significance*

The importance of the issue of disproportionate representation of African American and other minority students in special education is evidenced in the fact that the problem has been studied twice by the National Research Council (Donovan & Cross, 2002). Findings of these reports and others (Eitle, 2002; Hosp & Reschly, 2004) have indicated that research must examine the problem on a smaller scale and from different perspectives to better clarify variables involved and find solutions. The current research will extend prior research in this area by examining understandings of service provision

in special education and more specifically, the beliefs, constraints, and resources that define the district's program. The current research will not only examine whether disparities exist in this particular district, whether there are systemic causes or biases and explore the effects of the current climate in education and how this impacts our students, but will examine these issues from the researchers own cultural assumptions and background.

The federal mandate under IDEA provisions are that the Special Education Administrator for a district must examine data specifically relative to disparities according to race and ethnicity in identification of students, types of disability placements and disciplinary actions, including suspensions and expulsions. The results of this research will provide critical information to the district personnel whose charge it is to monitor special education services so that compliance with laws is adhered to. In addition, knowledge of stakeholders' views of the process can direct where systemic changes may be warranted. The data generated from this study can also be instrumental in affecting personal and professional growth of staff and ultimately, outcomes for students.

Although results from this study of a local school district may not be generalizable to other local school districts because of differences in population statistics, the findings may influence how the processes involved in special education are fulfilled. New thinking may be generated to stimulate additional research to further the knowledge base in special education and cultural considerations. Finally, the findings may emphasize the importance of exploring special education's goals and functions in an increasingly diverse society.



### *Definitions*

The following definitions are provided to assist the reader in comprehension of the text. These definitions are primarily from the Ohio Department of Education regulations since this study occurs in an Ohio school.

*Cognitive Disability (CD)* – formerly mental retardation, means significantly subaverage general intellectual functioning existing concurrently with deficits in adaptive behavior and manifested during the developmental period that adversely affects a child’s educational performance (Ohio Department of Education, 2005).

*Disability* – a disadvantage or deficiency, especially a physical or mental impairment that impedes normal achievement (Bogdan & Knoll, 1988). A condition which adversely affects a child’s educational performance (Ohio Department of Education, 2005).

*Disparity* - being unequal; incongruence (Dictionary, 1997)

*Disproportionate representation* –variations in ethnic representation in special education that indicate that a particular group is over- or underrepresented (Coutinho & Oswald, 2000).

*Emotional Disturbance (ED)* – means a condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a child’s educational performance:

- an inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors;
- an inability to build or maintain satisfactory intrapersonal relationships with peers and teachers;

- inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances;
- a general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression; or
- a tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems. The term includes schizophrenia. The term does not apply to children who are socially maladjusted, unless it is determined that they have a serious emotional disturbance (Ohio Department of Education, 2005).

*Evaluation* – the process and procedures used to determine whether a child has a disability and the nature and extent of special education and related services needed (Ohio Department of Education, 2005)

*Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)* – special education and related services provided at public expense, under public supervision, and at no cost to parents (Ohio Department of Education, 2005).

*Individualized Education Program (IEP)* –a written plan of measurable, annual goals including short-term objectives developed to meet your child’s needs according to federal and state regulations (Ohio Department of Education, 2005).

*Institutionalized Racism* – a covert system of privilege and control (Ward, 2000)

*Intervention Assistance Team (IAT)* – a team of educators from your child’s school that meet to design interventions for children who are experiencing difficulty (Ohio Department of Education, 2005).

*Intervention Specialist* – term used for Special Education Teachers in Ohio.

*Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)* – to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities (including children in public or nonpublic institutions or other care facilities) are educated with children who are nondisabled. Removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily (Ohio Department of Education, 2005).

*Other Health Impairment (OHI)* – means having limited strength, vitality, or alertness, due to chronic or acute health problems such as asthma, attention deficit disorder or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, diabetes, epilepsy, a heart condition, hemophilia, lead poisoning, leukemia, nephritis, rheumatic fever, or sickle cell anemia that adversely affects a child's educational performance (Ohio Department of Education, 2005).

*Poverty* – an economic idea related to power and the uses of it; it is ingrained in our total culture and involves all our institutions (Chamberlin, 2001).

*Race* – the self, as well as societally, imposed definition of a person or group (Ivey, 2006).

*Racial Identity* – determining for oneself, the personal significance and social meaning of belonging to a particular racial group (Tatum, 1997).

*Racism* – a system of privilege based upon race and upon the maintenance of white supremacy (Murrell, 1999).

*Risk* – chance; exposure to chance of injury or loss (Dictionary, 1997).

*Special Education* – specially designed instruction to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability (Ohio Department of Education, 2005).

*Specific Learning Disability (SLD)* – means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations. The term includes such conditions as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia and developmental aphasia. The term does not include children who have learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing or motor abilities, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance or of environmental, cultural or economic disadvantage (Ohio Department of Education, 2005).

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The placement of students of color in special education classes has long been a complex issue facing educators (Artiles, 1998). As a framework for examining the issues in the current study, this chapter will review theory and research related to disproportionate representation, critical race, race and racial identity, social construction, and poverty, as they relate to special education.

#### *Disproportionate Representation and Special Education*

The disproportionate representation of African-American students in Special Education, has been discussed extensively in the literature (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Chinn & Hughes, 1987; Coutinho & Oswald, 2000; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Dunn, 1968; Fieros & Conray, 2002; Harry, 1992; Harry, et al., 2002; Oswald, et al, 1999; Parrish, 2002; Reschly & Ward, 1991) and the debates continue. The major issues in the debates center around, disabilities as a mis-labeling of low-socioeconomic status, a result of cultural bias in testing, and problems in the referral and identification processes.

An early lawsuit helped sensitize people to inequalities in education. In June, 1967, a school segregation suit was brought against Superintendent of Schools of the

District of Columbia and the Board of Education of the District of Columbia. The judge determined that the system unconstitutionally deprived Negro children and poor children to the same equal educational opportunity with white and more affluent children. The district was ordered to end tracking, integrate the teaching staff, and provide busing in attempts to equalize educational opportunities (*Hobson v. Hansen*, 269 F. Supp.401 (1967)). Acknowledgement of the issues of segregation in schools helped underscore the problem of disproportionality.

The following year brought a pioneer to the forefront. Lloyd Dunn (1968) was one of the first to bring the problem of disproportionate representation of minority students in Special Education to the literature. He advanced the notion that special education may not be the answer for students who had been labeled educable mentally retarded. The author was feeling a moral dilemma with the processes and procedures that occurred in the education of students whom he felt were merely socioculturally deprived. He realized that the students who were being labeled were students who lived in poverty, broken homes and were members of low-status ethnic groups. The author suggested re-vamping how students were diagnosed, placed and taught. He additionally recommended changes be made in the curriculum to better address the needs of students.

The best known case involving disproportionate representation in special education is the case of *Larry P. v. Riles* (1972/1979/1984/1986). The important issues from this lengthy, complex trial were validation of the existence of over-representation and an over reliance on ability tests. As a result of this lawsuit, California was ordered to develop plans to eliminate disproportionate enrollment of black children in educable mentally retarded (EMR) classes. The IQ tests used to place children in these classes had

not been validated for that type of use. The use of the tests violated the Education for All Handicapped Children Act and the Rehabilitation Act, Title VI, and had discriminatory effects on black children (*Larry P. by Lucille P. v. Riles*, 793 F.2d 969 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir., 1984).

Chinn and Hughes (1987) defined disproportion as percentages exceeding, plus or minus 10%, of the percentage expected on the basis of the overall school-age population in that minority category. For example, “for blacks in 1978 the percentage of total school enrollment was 15.72%. According to the 10% criterion a range from 14.15% to 17.29% would be considered proportionate representation for blacks for that year” (p.43). The authors utilized data from 1978, 1980, 1982 and 1984 from the Office of Civil Rights Surveys of elementary and secondary schools in the United States. The data as mentioned earlier, records student enrollment and placement in special education categories. The overrepresentation of blacks in mental retardation categories (EMR and TMR) and severe emotional disorder (SED) remained at twice the level which would have been expected from the percentage of blacks in the school population over the data from the four years examined.

Reschly (1987) suggested that differentiation should be clear “between: 1) the percentage of minority students in the total school population, 2) the percentage of special education students that are minority, and 3) the percentage of minority students in special education programs” (p.29). Artiles and Trent (1994) additionally argued that the proportion of minority students in the general student population is an important consideration that is often overlooked. Harry (1992) cites a positive correlation between the proportion of minority students in a school and the overrepresentation issue. For example, the larger the minority student population in the school district, the greater the

representation of minority students in special education classes. Serwatka, et al (1995) had findings that were the opposite. As the proportion of African American students in the school increased, the representation of African American students in the EH category decreased. The authors attribute this to saturation, or limits on the number of students allowed to be determined eligible for that category. Another plausible explanation offered was that staff developed a better understanding and ability to teach culturally different students as the numbers and their exposure to them increased.

Artiles and Trent (1994) argued that over-representation of minority students in Special Education is indeed a problem and posit that, with this as fact, we must question the “efficacy of our professional practices and challenge the basic notion of honoring the diversity that we as a field presumably embrace” (p. 411). The authors examined the history of the problem and make reference to the work of Lloyd Dunn and Evelyn Deno, from 1968 and 1970, respectively. Artiles and Trent added to the debate perspectives on how the educational system perpetuates inequities. They suggested that when problems are identified that hint at a need to address larger political and societal ills, the responses tend to be down-played or non-existent. The relevance of the political and economic environments’ impact on social structures, particularly, the educational system is introduced. Additional variables to be considered in the debate are the impact of litigation, and systemic issues within districts. The authors discuss controversies over basic definitions such as, mental retardation and intelligence. Biased procedures (particularly faulty referral and assessment practices) are often identified in school districts and lead to overrepresentation of minority students. The authors state that the construction of school failure was advanced by three theories: minority students as



innately inferior, mismatch between home and school cultures; and values rooted in the dominant American culture, specifically the stratification, resource allocation and “normative” paradigm; and finally the notion that cultural diversity and disability are analogous. The authors conclude with suggestions for a reform agenda including: concept refinement, culturally sensitive research agendas, systemic reform, personnel preparation reform and advocacy and policy recommendations.

Serwatka, Deering and Grant (1995) examined the relationship between the disproportionate representation of African American students in educable mental handicap (EH) programs with each of 15 variables. The authors found that when African American teachers are more prevalent in the environment, there is a decrease in overrepresentation. This may be related to the ability of African American teachers to better interpret and address behaviors of African American students, thereby decreasing misinterpretations of behaviors and the need for referrals. Another explanation that the authors presented was that African American teachers can serve as positive role models for students. The authors concluded that there exists a need for more African American teachers in general education settings where African American students are taught in an effort to decrease overrepresentation of these students in certain disability categories

Coutinho and Oswald (2000) provided a comprehensive review of disproportionate representation in special education as well as provide recommendations for research and advocacy around the issue. The authors reviewed the strengths and weaknesses associated with the many different definitions of disproportionate representation and methods for calculating extent and thresholds. They stressed the need for “coherent and well-articulated conceptual frameworks, responsible use and

representation of data, research dialog that is informed by appreciation of the complex sociopolitical history and current context, and the need for effective advocacy to improve the educational success of minority students” (p.135).

Donovan and Cross (2002) provided the results of a second study conducted over several years by the Committee on Minority Representation in Special and Gifted Education. The studies’ focus was on school-level capacity, supports for achievement available to students from different racial and ethnic groups and at “environmental influences on the developmental trajectory of children in the years before they reach the schoolhouse door that make them more vulnerable to school failure” (p.3). The study examined the pre-school period, the process for identification and referral, and provides suggestions for improving student outcomes. The conceptual framework of this research was that of the child, the teacher, and the classroom environment and the interactions of the three. The goal was to understand why disproportion occurs.

The author’s found that schools should be doing more and doing it earlier, while students are in regular or general education classrooms, to prevent the need for additional services later. Among the recommendations were: data collection that is comparative in nature to norms in the grade level should be implemented; proof of research-based interventions should be mandated prior to identification for services; collaboration with university and/or research centers to develop behavior management interventions, screens and techniques for working with children at risk for behavior problems; and improvement in general education teacher preparation. Recommendations for continued research and advocacy are also provided.

Hosp and Reschly (2004) also examined variables that could contribute to the disproportionate representation of minority students in special education. They found that academic achievement had a strong relationship to disproportionate representation . This supported the work of Oswald, et al (1999) who found correlations between environmental or economic variables and racial or demographic variables in the over representation of African Americans in the disability categories of MR and ED. Hosp and Reschly (2004) extended these variables to apply to the category of LD as well, and added the variable of academic achievement.

The OSEP (2001) recommends use of risk index and risk ratio in calculating disproportionality for a school district. Risk in this research study is defined as chance. The risk ratio, when applied to a disability category, answers the question, “What is a specific racial/ethnic group’s risk of receiving special education and related services for a particular disability as compared to the risk for all other students?” (OSEP, p.11, 2001).

The risk ratio compares the relative size of two risks by dividing the risk for a specific racial/ethnic group by the risk for a comparison group. For example, one could calculate a ratio that compares the risk of a black student being labeled as having a certain disability to the risk of a white student . When the ratio is greater than 1 for black students in a category of disability, the risk that a black student will be labeled as having the identified disability is greater than the risk of a white student being so labeled. Parrish (2002) also made use of the risk ratio, when calculating disproportionality.

The risk ratio for a particular racial/ethnic group does not depend on that racial/ethnic group’s percentage of the school district’s enrollment. The size of a racial/ethnic group’s risk ratio also does not depend on differences in overall special

education identification rates because the risks for the racial/ethnic group and for the comparison group both come from the same district (OSEP, 2001).

Caution must be used in applying risk ratios to district-level data. Risk ratios cannot be compared across districts because the size of the risk ratio is affected by the district-level racial/ethnic demographics of the comparison group. Also, risk ratios are difficult to interpret when based on small numbers of students in either the racial/ethnic group or the comparison group. Additionally, risk ratios cannot be calculated when there are no students in the comparison group receiving special education and related services. (OSEP, 2001).

### *Critical Race Theory*

Critical race theory asserts that racism is “normal, not aberrant in American society” and because it is so enmeshed in our society it appears both normal and natural (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Critical race theory places the phenomena of race at the heart of critical analysis (Roithmayr, 1999). “Critical race theory contains an activist dimension” (Delgado & Stefancic, p.3). Research carried out in this vein should seek to transform unfair practices and improve conditions.

Although no set of doctrines or methodologies define critical race theory, there are three basic beliefs associated with it. The first is that racism is difficult to eradicate, because it is so commonplace in our society. Consider this example. Blacks expect to be treated a certain way when they enter an establishment that is predominantly White or in a White area. They immediately have their defenses raised for an impending personal attack or slight. When the attack does not occur they are relieved, but nonetheless on guard the next time. There are still countless stories of racial incidents and “Black-firsts”

(first Black attorney in a prestigious law firm, first Black coaches in division 1A college football, etc.) in 2006.

The second is that many in our society do not want to see an end to racism. The status quo is good for many. Haberman (2003) points out that many constituencies benefit from failing school systems and structures. Some examples of those who benefit include: central office employees whose goal is to protect the present distribution of financial rewards, power, status and unearned privileges; students in other districts who are unfairly compared to their less fortunate peers (because the playing fields are unequal); and consultants and researchers who gain financial advantages but often do not solve problems. A group cannot maintain their domination if it treats the subordinate group as equals or acknowledge them as worthy. Power and privilege cannot be attained without subjugating others to powerlessness and lack of privileges. If African American researchers do not attempt to provide another lens through which behavior and life experiences are interpreted in the educational arena, we are guilty of helping to maintain the power structures.

The third belief is that of social construction, that race and races are a result of social thought and relations (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). We create our beliefs about concepts through our thinking and interactions. We determine what race means by our thoughts, actions and experiences.

### *Race and Special Education*

When the issue of race is brought into discussions of special education and disproportionate representation, the clearest part of the discussion is that there exists a larger number of racial minorities represented for specific categories. After this point, the

discussions become ambiguous. This author contends that race, is the self, as well as societally, imposed definition of a person. It encompasses skin color, language, facial and bodily features, group affiliation and connotes culturally specific phenomena.

According to Marable(1994), “Race is first and foremost an unequal relationship between social aggregates, characterized by dominant and subordinate forms of social interaction, and reinforced by the intricate patterns of public discourse, power, ownership, and privilege within the economic, social, and political institutions of society” (p. 30).

Historically, it has been implied that minority students are different. Heath (1995) states that white culture represents the norm against which comparisons are made in our society and that minority people have been traditionally defined for what they lack (White-ness) rather than for what they are. This deficit view of minority people can often determine white people’s cognitive, emotional and behavioral reactions to minority individuals’ phenotypes, interactive styles, language proficiency and worldviews (Artiles, 1998). Discussions of race in this country evoke strong feelings. This is because of our strong history of race related issues (Goldberg,1996).

Murrell (1999) defines racism as “a system of privilege based upon race and upon the maintenance of white supremacy”; “a sociopolitical phenomenon that inscribes itself in social practices” (p.7). This is consistent with Wellman (1977) who defines racism as a “system of advantage based on race”. This “system involves cultural messages and institutional policies and practices as well as the beliefs and actions of individuals” (Tatum, p.7, 1997). Tatum (1997) feels that this “idea of systemic advantage and disadvantage is critical to an understanding of how racism operates in American society” (p.8).

Ward (2002) describes a “new racism. She defines this as “the covert, subtle, institutionalized racism that has replaced much of the overt racism – separate schools and entrances, discrimination in housing and employment – that was made illegal after the civil rights movement” (p.xi). The racism that was once directed on an individual basis “is now institutionalized as a system of privilege and control” (p. xi). The author likens this new racism to a chameleon – “hard to recognize and just as hard to counter” (p.xi). “The perpetrator is not a person, but a company, school, police department or a financial institution (p. xi). These things occur behind closed doors, “in places like school offices where tracking, [special education identification], suspension and grading policies are decided” (p. xiv). “Our children are disproportionately labeled and tracked; they are subject to policies created by criminal justice systems to monitor and control black teens, particularly black males; and they are routinely denied access to valued resources” (p.xv).

Blanchett (2006) asserts that special education has become a “new legalized form of structural segregation and racism” (p.25). The author provides examples of how white privilege and racism are at work in school funding, curriculum and teacher preparation. She argues that additional research examining how white privilege and racism maintain disproportionality is warranted and necessary in order to bring an end to this issue.

Parrish (2002) examined the extent to which minority students are over-represented among students receiving special education, while some also may be underserved. He also examines the extent to which these patterns of over and under-representation relate to the allocation of special education resources. Parrish found that financial incentives for high minority districts appeared to be related to higher rates of overrepresentation. “Interestingly, the six states with funding formulas that specifically

place higher premiums on higher-cost disabilities, such as MR (mental retardation) (Service and Category linked) are much more likely to have minority students overrepresented for mental retardation” (p.30). “This suggests that state formulas that place revenue premiums on more severe categories of disability, such as MR, may somehow affect the overidentification of minority students” (p. 31). “Two of the three states with the greatest disparity in special education funding for high- and low-minority districts, Ohio and New Jersey, have funding systems that may vary by category of disability” (p.31). “In Ohio, although black students are overdesignated for mental retardation, all four categories of minority students are underrepresented in what is by far the largest special education category, SLD (specific learning disability)” (p. 31).

In the face of these findings, the assumption of equity associated with differentiating special education funding by category of disability, does not hold true. The idea behind this type of funding system is that, by having higher dollar allocations associated with more severe categories of disability, special education funding will flow to where they are most needed. This is questionable, unless it can be argued that, even though minority students are more likely to be designated mentally retarded, their overall special education needs are less than those of their white counterparts.

It has long been a concern that formulas that place funding premiums on certain categories would create fiscal incentives to overidentify students into these disability groups. Parrish (2002) suggested that these incentives are more likely to pertain to minorities because they may have fewer advocates to protect them. He also suggests that until we get greater equity in base funds across districts, “high minority districts are



likely to continue to look to categorical programs such as special education for remedial education support” (p. 34).

Parrish (2002) cautions that, “dramatic variations between individual districts and regions within a state might exist that are not revealed in the state-level aggregates” that are used in his research. “Therefore the under or over representation for a state does not necessarily depict what is occurring in individual districts” (p. 21). This is additional support for the current studies’ examination of district-level data in order to tease-out the issues.

It is often difficult to separate evidence from emotion when focusing on disproportionate representation of minority children in special education (Donovan & Cross, 2002). When you consider African-American students specifically, the legacy of white supremacy in this country lingers, despite denials of its reality (West, 2001). This legacy yields less visible but seemingly related examples today, such as special education placements (West, 2001).

Fierros and Conroy (2002) examined restrictiveness, in terms of educational setting in special education as it intersects with race. Their research revealed that special education students from racial minority groups are more likely than whites to be placed in restrictive educational settings. This finding was most pronounced for African Americans and Hispanics. Trends from their data indicated two things: 1) “once identified, minority students from every major racial group are more likely than white students with disabilities to be removed from the general education classroom for all or part of their school day”; 2) “black students are most often overidentified in the disability categories

that have the highest correlation with isolation from the general education setting, mental retardation and emotional disturbance” (p.41).

Fierros and Conroy (2002) discussed the process for identifying students for special education services. They pointed out that identification must be entirely separate from deciding the proper level of inclusion/restrictiveness. The heart of IDEA speaks to each student receiving individualized services. “Decisions to place any student in a given educational setting must be individually tailored to best meet the needs of the student and *not dictated by the administrative convenience of a school, district, or existing program of special education* (p.40). The authors advance the idea that part of the confusion around this issue stems from the popular notion that “special education is a place, rather than a system of supports and services” (p.40). Donovan and Cross (2002) suggest that poorly prepared or supported teachers may refer students for special education evaluation as a way to deal with discipline problems and insufficient resources (p.170).

Race is associated with identity. When one’s identity impacts how one is perceived and whether one is identified as having a special need, then there exists a problem in the system. Tatum (1997) illustrates the notion that identity formation has a great deal to do with how we are considered by others and what they “reflect back to us”. Tatum (1997) offers countless suggestions on how to reframe our thinking and actions so as not to damage identity formation for the young in our schools.

### *Social Construction and Special Education*

Harry, Klingner, Sturges and Moore (2002) advanced the notion that disabilities are socially constructed. The authors reported that it is the official and unofficial beliefs and practices that occur in schools that contribute to the problem of disproportion in

special education. Social decision-making, where staff decide subjectively, according to their beliefs and experiences that a child is or is not disabled, is argued as common practice. For their research, the authors focused on the key aspect of the decision-making process related to special education identification: “the issue of the reliance on psychometric testing for eligibility” (p. 73). The authors described the testing instruments used to evaluate students the “rocks” of the assessment process. They describe the “soft places” as the “unofficial, undocumented processes” that occur during the identification of students for special education services. “The definitions of high-incidence disabilities (ED, SLD, and mental retardation) and the criteria by which we try to operationalize them, represent social decisions not factual phenomena” (p.77). The authors cite numerous examples from their research that demonstrate that the decision to place a child was based on factors related to personal concerns or social relationships, not on a rigorous gatekeeping process. The authors note that the area of greatest concern regarding overrepresentation of African Americans is the ED category. The findings of their research suggest that “failure to acknowledge the “soft places” of the assessment process has compounded the problem of overrepresentation” (p.88).

In a similar vein, Bogdan and Knoll (1988) discussed disabilities as social constructs. The authors utilized the theoretical constructs of symbolic interaction and the ecological perspective to focus on the individual’s point of view in relation to the larger social context. “Standardized diagnostic measures and procedures make conventional judgments appear to be truths .... As such concepts as “mentally retarded” and “learning disabled” become reified, the criteria and conceptual base developed for placement take on a reality that belies their existence as social creations” (p. 462). The authors cautioned

that “we should understand official definitions and counts as the products of people, processes, organizations and societies that compile them” (p. 463). As Harry, Klingner, Sturges and Moore (2002) research revealed, Bogdan and Knoll (1988) also find that, “people who develop and apply definitions of disability in schools are subject to social pressures and structural forces similar to those touching other work groups” (p. 465). The authors additionally pointed out that disability is situational. This can be evidenced many times in the school setting where children are labeled as emotionally disturbed at school but are not thought of in this way at home or in their neighborhood. Utilizing the term “disability” can also change the meaning of behavior. We become sensitized to certain behaviors and actions. “Behavioral and physical characteristics that were once noted and interpreted in one way get reinterpreted when defined as a disability” (p. 465).

Mehan, Hertweck, and Meihls (1986) conducted research to examine how schools impact where and what positions in society a person attains. The authors delineated processes and mechanisms in the school environment that operate to stratify students. They specifically examine how teachers interpret behaviors, their referrals for special education evaluations, ability grouping, tracking and advising of students in career paths. The authors conclude that institutional practices, which serve to construct student identities, are a form of social or cultural practice that is developed in the school setting. They maintain that disabilities or other labels (“average student”; “excellent student”) are not exclusively characteristics of student’s conduct or social class or teacher’s beliefs or expectations, but instead, are a consequence of institutional practice.

Patton (1998) believes that the discourse in special education has not included African American voices. This is seen as a disservice to the professional literature and

impacts African American learners who are overrepresented in special education. Patton argues that if the knowledge producers lack “knowledge, experience, or ‘insider’ insight into the culture of the ‘other’, their theories and constructs face serious construct and predictive validity” (p. 27). Patton calls for new script writers to change patterns and the focus so that solutions can be sought.

### *Poverty and It's Relationship to Special Education*

Studies that have examined the impact of poverty on special education have obtained results that both support a direct relationship and deny its reality. What is consistent in these investigations is that the relationship between poverty and special education placements is complex and generally other variables are involved. An explanation of disproportionality based on poverty alone cannot account for the findings that disproportionality is greater in the judgemental disability categories (ED, MR, SLD) than in the more biologically based disability categories (Losen & Orfield, 2002).

Poverty, as well as other environmental factors outside of school, have been found to contribute to a heightened incidence of disability in significant ways (Losen & Orfield, 2002). Poverty and its associated problems definitely impact schools and students. A closer examination of poverty and its impact on American life may shed light on how it impacts the educational system. The set-up of our social structures and institutions is seen as the cause of poverty (Chamberlin, 2001). Many times poverty is thought to be due to the inadequacies of poor people. This is a popular belief in America, but it is not the reality. “Poverty is ingrained in our total culture and involves all of our institutions. The structures and practices in our institutions perpetuate poverty” (Chamberlin, p. 69). Poverty is related to power and the uses of power. Power and the limitations of power

determines the relations between the haves and the have-nots (Chamberlin, 2001 ).

“While poverty refers to economic realities, it like all other economic ideas, expresses cultural values and relationships. It is produced and perpetuated by the choices and beliefs of those who take our inherited institutional structures and practices for granted as acceptable cultural norms” (Chamberlin, p. 36).

In a study by Oswald, Coutinho, Best and Singh (1999), that examined the relationship between poverty and race in the case of SED students, they found that “in high-poverty communities, there was very little difference between SED rate for non-African American students and the rate for African American students, however in communities with virtually no poverty, a non-African American student had a less than 0.9% chance of being identified as SED, whereas the African American student’s chances were more than 1.7%” (p.199). “These data may indicate that wealthier communities are more intolerant of behavioral diversity in African Americans than of differences in cognitive or learning characteristics” (p. 207). The authors suggest that additional research examine “whether community tolerance, understanding and capacity to serve students demonstrating behaviors and attitudes of non-dominant cultures, influence disproportionate identification” (p. 207).

Coutinho, Oswald, and Best (2002) examined the degree of disproportionality among students identified as specific learning disability (SLD) and explored the relationship between disproportionality and sociodemographic variables. The authors found that increased poverty, as a characteristic of the school district, is associated with increased SLD identification rates among Black, Hispanic, and male Asian students. These findings indicate that environmental factors have different effects across racial

groups. The differential effects on racial groups is important to consider in exploring ways to address poverties' impact on special education.

In a study by Skiba, et al. (2005), the authors examined the impact of various sociodemographic and poverty-related variables on levels of ethnic disproportionality in special education. The authors found that while poverty showed “a moderately strong correlation with measures of academic achievement and special education placement rates, the correlation between percentage of African American enrollment and academic achievement is much lower, and the correlation between race and special education rates is virtually zero”(p.141). Poverty proved to be a weak and unreliable predictor of disproportionality. The authors argue that maintaining a focus on poverty clouds the ability to consider other variables that impact ethnic disproportionality.

O'Connor and Fernandez (2006) offer a counter-explanation to the report published by the National Research Council (Donovan & Cross, 2002). They suggest that schools, and the conceptualizations that use white, middle class ideals, behaviors and values as the basis to which other groups are compared, are to blame (not poverty) for placing minority students at a “heightened risk for special education placements” (p.10).

The literature seems to reveal that identification and placement of students in special education is a major undertaking that presents particular concerns for racial minorities. The impact of poverty, though associated, is not sufficient to explain or solve the disparities that exist. The system of power and privilege in this country, related to race, may have a significant impact on the issues. Understanding the social construction of ideas related to disability and special education is also an important consideration. The

literature consistently advocates for the problem to be examined in an intimate setting from a racial minorities' perspective in an effort to pinpoint solutions.



## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

This chapter will address how the research questions were answered. Again, the research questions are:

1. Is there disparity in the representation of any specific racial group of students in the categories of CD, ED and SLD in special education in Euclid City Schools? If so, what is the nature of this disparity?
2. How does the context and activities of the identification process currently in place for special education influence disproportionate representation of certain racial groups in the categories of CD, ED and SLD?
3. How do racial differences among staff, and between staff and students influence special education decision making and service delivery in Euclid City Schools?

I performed a case study of Euclid City Schools. According to Stake(2000), “Case study is less of a methodological choice than a choice of what is to be studied”(p.436). Yin (1984) has described the case study research method as an empirical

investigation of a “contemporary phenomenon within it’s real-life context” (p.23). In this research the case was the special education identification process in Euclid City Schools. Special education and the issue of disproportionality are complex issues that are not easily explained or understood. Examining these issues through case study research helped with the understanding and added strength to what is already known. “Qualitative case studies share with other forms of qualitative research the search for meaning and understanding, the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, an inductive investigative strategy and the end product being richly descriptive” (Merriam, p. 179).

#### *Researcher’s Perspective*

Because the researcher brings so much of themselves into their work, I will share some of who I am to benefit the reader. I did not personally experience the public school system until my 11<sup>th</sup> grade in high school (unless you consider the ½ day experience in my Kindergarten year). My experience was relatively short-lived, as I graduated after my 11<sup>th</sup> grade year. Because I had entered from a Catholic school, I had sufficient credits to graduate. The high school was predominantly African American and I had several African American teachers. This was in stark contrast to my earlier schooling experiences. The Catholic schools that I had attended had all white teachers, majority female (I recall having 2 male teachers in 9<sup>th</sup> grade) with a few nuns dispersed throughout. I remember being in awe about the black history facts that I learned from my white American Government/History teacher. I also recall being in awe with my Algebra II/Trigonometry teacher who was an African American woman. I had always received Bs and Cs in math. This woman was such a dynamite teacher that I aced her

class. When I would tell her how great she was, she would put it right back on me and tell me I always had it in me.

I never really thought about it much, but I guess my early experiences gave me many perceptions about race and power relationships. A major realization being that I did not really experience many African American professionals in my younger years. My mother was a nurse and my step-father, a factory worker. My aunts, uncles, and older cousins were secretaries, nurses, health care and factory workers. I grew up in an African American working class suburb in the 1970s. My siblings and I did not experience much outside of home, the surrounding community and school. My parents “extra money” was spent sending us to Catholic schools where we were getting a good education, but not much cultural exchange. My parents were from the South, like many African Americans living in the Northeastern sections of the United States. They did not talk much to myself and my siblings about their history or experiences. I know today that it was related to their painful experiences, racial and otherwise.

I can recall some painful racial incidents that occurred to me as I grew up. An early experience happened when I was 4 years old, I attended a pre-school program at the local library for a few hours in the mornings and was told by a white boy that his sister could not hold my “black hand”. When I was about 8 or 9, I identified with the sit-com, *Brady Bunch* on TV. The disturbing part about this was there were no programs with working class African Americans on TV with which to identify. Another vivid memory occurred when I was 10 and the “black” catholic school merged with the “white” catholic school and the playground looked segregated because one group knew nothing about the other, so we all just stayed with our “look-alike” friends and stared at the “others”. By the

time I was 14, I had begun to process situations in more racial terms and felt that my English teacher was racist because she had given me such positive feedback on my work and good grades but did not recommend me for the advanced sophomore English class. Finally, when I was about 16 or 17 and was in a car going home from a movie with my boyfriend and a girlfriend and a group of white teens threw cans and shouted racial obscenities at us from their car. These early experiences greatly impacted my knowledge formation about race and its impact on life.

Fast forward to where I am today, and how this all relates to my research as a doctoral candidate in urban education, exploring disproportionate representation of African American students in special education. I received my Bachelor and Masters degrees in Social Work. When I began working in the educational setting, I was incensed by the words of an Administrator. She informed me, off the record, that we could not say that environmental causes were the reason that a student was having difficulties in the classroom. She said that if we state this, he would not qualify for services. I recall questioning her further about this and her telling me “that’s just the way it is”. I accepted this at the time, but was bothered by it. I now find myself wanting to change that mindset and ultimately outcomes for students who are at the mercy of people who feel so matter of fact about an enormous injustice being carried out in a system that is supposed to allow all students to meet their maximum potential. I understand that major societal, political and economic changes are necessary to affect changes for all students but I have to start somewhere and for me this research is a beginning at changing thoughts, beliefs and ultimately systems.

### *Research Design*

A case study methodology was utilized to answer the research questions. The qualitative research methods used were interviews, and questionnaires. Purposeful sampling was utilized with the staff. This method allowed for different types of staff to be included but does not require a certain number or proportion (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). The staff was then interviewed and they completed questionnaires.

### *Participants*

I interviewed general education teachers, intervention specialists (special education teachers) and school psychologists who were employed in Euclid City Schools. These staff members were not randomly selected. I utilized purposeful sampling as I needed staff from each school in the different staff roles. The personnel interviewed were closely involved in the identification process for special education and helped reveal what occurs in the process. They were information-rich cases. Approximately half of the staff being interviewed were special education teachers or school psychologists. These participants were very knowledgeable about special education services since their positions require such knowledge. The other half interviewed were regular education teachers. Theoretically, these staff should be knowledgeable about special education, but from a practical perspective, were not as aware as they should be. Nonetheless, the information they provided shed light on the issues being explored. The staff interviewed also completed questionnaires.

There was a total of 24 staff members utilized and the breakdown was as follows: a regular education teacher and intervention specialist from each of the six elementary

buildings (12); and two middle school buildings (4). I included 5 staff members from the high school. There were also 3 school psychologists recruited.

#### *Data Collection/Instruments*

The interview questions were open-ended questions that sought to understand the participant's role in special education, their understanding of the process involved in identification of students for special education, their understanding of the goal(s) of special education and their interpretation of quantitative data findings (see Appendix A). The questionnaire consisted of open-ended questions that elicited the participant's views on student behaviors' that indicate a problem, classroom dynamics that may impact behaviors, including numbers of students, race and gender and any other contributing factors. The participants' thoughts on impact of current environment in education (standards-based instruction, testing, etc.) were also solicited along with their knowledge of special education laws and involvement in education plans for students in special education (see Appendix B).

#### *Institutional Review Board*

Prior to beginning the aforementioned research, an application was made to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Cleveland State University. The approval of the IRB was necessary because the study involved human participants. Concurrent approval was also sought from Euclid City Schools, Office of the Superintendent. Copies of the informed consent, interview questions, and questionnaire are included in the appendix.

#### *Data Analysis*

I elected to use the risk index and risk ratio to determine disproportionality for several reasons. First, studies that rely on a comparison of percentages are often

confusing and arbitrary (Coutinho & Oswald, 2000). “For example, a district with 10 percent African American membership in which 15 percent of the students with disabilities are African American, might be described as displaying either 5 percent over representation ( $15\% - 10\% = 5\%$ ) or 50 percent over representation ( $(15\% - 10\%)/10\% = .50$ )” (Coutinho & Oswald, p. 137). Second, with percentages, the calculations are different depending on whether you are describing the percent of students with disabilities that are African American, for example, or the percent of African American students that have disabilities. Finally, use of the risk index and risk ratio offers a clearer understanding and is recommended by the OSEP.

As a preliminary approach to examining the data, I secured state-reported data for the number of students in Euclid City Schools, the number of students in special education and the number of students in the categories of SLD, CD and ED. Additionally, I aggregated the data for race in these categories and performed risk index and risk ratio calculations. For this study, anything over 1 in the risk ratio calculation is considered disproportionate for that group.

As described in the literature review section, risk indicates chance. I statistically examined the chance of a student from a particular race being identified as SLD, CD, or ED in Euclid City Schools. Being identified as such is a risk or chance because it may be beneficial to the student or it may be harmful. If they are receiving appropriate services and accessing the educational curriculum, then it is beneficial. However, if the student is not truly in need of the services or the services do not fit their need, then harmful long-term effects can occur in relation to self-concept and self-worth.

Although this study is qualitative in nature, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the quantitative statistical procedures involved in examining the data. In particular I utilized the procedures associated with descriptive statistics. Because I needed to describe the data, I used percentages and when appropriate calculated averages.

Additionally, calculations were performed for risk index and risk ratio for the categories of SLD, CD, and ED (OSEP, 2001). The equation for risk index is:

$$\text{Risk Index} = \frac{\text{Students with disabilities from racial subgroup}}{\text{Total student enrollment for racial subgroup}}$$

The equation for the risk ratio is:

$$\text{Risk ratio} = \frac{\text{Risk Index for racial group for disability category}}{\text{Risk Index for comparison group for disability category}}$$

I utilized the NVIVO 7 qualitative software to assist me in the coding and organization of my findings. With the use of this software, I was able to establish relationships between and among the responses I received. I developed models that assisted me with the themes that seemed to emerge from the data.

As I analyzed the data collected from interviews, I identified emerging themes. The process utilized was most similar to modified analytic induction. This was my approach for collecting and analyzing the data. Analytic induction can also provide a way to develop and test a theory (Bogden & Biklen, 2003). “The procedure of analytic induction is employed when some specific problem, question or issues become the focus



of research” (Bogden & Biklen, p. 63). The goal was to develop a descriptive model. This model was developed as I encountered the data, held it up to my beliefs and explanations and modified or redefined as needed.

Because I used multiple data sources (interviews/questionnaires with staff who have different functions), I also used a constant comparative method. This method is typically used for multi-site studies. For the current research, it was similar to the analytic induction process as I looked for themes or key issues in the multiple data sources. I attempted to “discover basic social processes and relationships” as I coded, analyzed and wrote about the findings (Bogden & Biklen, 2003).

#### *Personal Reflections*

Throughout the interview process, I struggled, at times, with keeping an open-mind and with not letting my own thoughts and feelings guide or influence the responses of my participants. I occasionally shared my personal thoughts or agreed with the responses of the participants. It was a struggle not to respond when I did not agree with their responses or wanted them to consider an alternate view. My non-verbals may have had an influence at times, as they would often ask me, “Is that the rights answer?” or state, “I don’t know if this is the rights answer, but...”. I repeatedly assured participants that there was no right or wrong answer and that their responses were my data.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

My focus in this research study was the disproportionate representation of African American students, in particular, receiving special education services under disability categories of Specific Learning Disability(SLD), Cognitive Disability(CD) and Emotional Disturbance(ED). The data revealed that in the Euclid, Ohio public school system, African American students are disproportionately represented in the categories of CD and ED. White students are disproportionately represented in the category of SLD. The purpose was to examine, from staff perspectives, these disparity issues. This chapter discusses the findings from the interviews and questionnaires.

#### *Risk Ratios*

Risk ratios were performed with school data for the disability categories of SLD, ED, and CD (see Table 1).

Table 1

Risk Ratio

| Disability Category | African American | White |
|---------------------|------------------|-------|
| ED                  | 1.23             | .885  |
| SLD                 | .938             | 1.12  |
| CD                  | 2.56             | .292  |

The ratios reveal that in the category of SLD, white students were slightly over-represented. White students are 1.12 times more likely to be determined eligible for services under the category of SLD in Euclid City Schools than African American students. In the category of ED, African American students were slightly over-represented. African American students are 1.23 times more likely to be determined eligible for services under the category of ED in Euclid City Schools than white students. Finally, in the category of CD, African American students are significantly over-represented. African American students are 2.56 times more likely to be determined eligible under the category of CD in Euclid City Schools than white students.

*Participant Demographics*

Interviews were conducted with a total of 26 staff members. Table 2 shows the breakdown for participants in relation to interviews and questionnaires.

Table 2

Participants

|                | General Educators | Intervention Specialists | School Psychologists |
|----------------|-------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|
| Interviews     | 13                | 10                       | 3                    |
| Questionnaires | 13                | 9                        | 3                    |

The staff was asked to complete a questionnaire after the interview. There were 25 questionnaires returned. One staff member resigned from the district and left no contact information to obtain the questionnaire. Thus, the percentage of questionnaires returned was over 96 percent.

The staff ages ranged from 26-69 years old. The median age was 37, the mode was 30 and the mean age for the group was 40.5. The group consisted of 20 females and six males. The racial composition was 19 white and seven black staff members.

The number of years of experience in the education field varied considerably among staff members. The range was from two years to 40 years. The mean number of years experience was 15.3. The median was 10 years and the mode was seven. The experience of the staff was vast.

*Interviews and Questionnaires*

The interview questions (see Appendix A) focused on the participants' perceived role in working with students in special education; their knowledge of the identification process; their thoughts on race and special education; the goals of special education and their thoughts after reviewing the calculated risk ratios for disproportionality in Euclid

City Schools. The respondents represented intervention specialists, who work specifically with students in special education, general education teachers and school psychologists (see Table 2.). These respondents provided a good sample from which to explore the problem of disproportionality.

The respondents were asked to complete a questionnaire (see Appendix B) after the interview and return it to me via mail. The rationale behind the use of the questionnaires was to elicit additional information that the respondents may not have been comfortable sharing in the interviews, as well as to allow them more time to think about their responses. The questionnaires elicited information from the participants on: perception of contributing factors to problems in the classroom; additional thoughts on race and problems in the classroom; impact of standard's based instruction and accountability; and knowledge of special education laws and procedures. Because the questionnaires did not reveal a large amount of data that was unique from the interviews, the data have been combined from both interviews and questionnaires. When there are significant results from the questionnaires, it will be indicated as such. The results are presented in the following order: disparity explanations, context of the identification process, and other issues.

### *Disparity Explanations*

Once the study participants were presented with the risk ratio data for disproportionality for Euclid City Schools, they began to offer their thoughts on what caused the disparities. The prodigious responses seemed to fall into several categories when organizing the data. The categories that evolved through the data analysis are race, parent/family, nature vs. nurture and SES/poverty. Many responses overlap and relate to

multiple categories. A bi-directional association, meaning the relationship of responses are such that they can qualify as a response under more than one category, should be noted. To begin, some quotes are provided that offer a prolific view of the complexity of explanations for the problem of disproportionality. It should be noted that some of the responses do not explain disproportionality, defined here as the percentage of students from a particular racial group in a given disability category exceeds what it should be given the numbers of students from that particular racial group in the entire student population.

Yes, more African Americans are identified than Whites. This school happens to be majority African American. There are cultural misunderstandings. Many times this is seen as cultural inferiority. Even in schools where Af. Am. are the minority, the teachers are White, middle-class and bring their own views and perspectives.

I feel that students are assigned these labels and they don't necessarily apply. I feel the way we deal with students and it's impact on their self-concept and self-esteem is crucial and we're doing a disservice, obviously, if the numbers are that high.

Yes, more African Americans are identified than White students. Since we are a 70% minority district, you would expect more to be identified.

Yes. Our building is majority minority. There are only about 5 white students in the building. There are more males identified than females.

Yes. I think there is some impact [of race]. It's a case by case basis. I've always been in minority schools. There are kids that are environmentally deprived and

they look like SLD. I don't think it's necessarily race, it may be poverty. (pause)

There also kids who don't test well. (Pause). I believe that it is cultural not racial.

It has to do with knowledge of language and exposure. Vocabulary is sometimes different for different people. I believe it is more socio-economic but could look racial.

Well, for CD students I think it has to do with prenatal care, nutrition, effects before birth. It's hard to say that staff are wrong in identification. Something has to have occurred to cause damage... or are parents who have difficulty with kids moving here to get the services? There are a lot of foster homes in this area, this may also contribute.

Yes. In Euclid it seems to be more African American because I think the community is more African-American. This is part of it. Research indicates other reasons. Many of my African American students come from 1 parent households. The mother is usually working very hard to maintain home and stimulation may be low because the parent's time is limited. I don't know.

As I said, I really don't think in terms of Black and White. But I do have 1 girl. I think that Black culture does not expect males (boys) to perform. We (teachers) see them as streetwise but not academically capable (according to our adaptive screening tools). I wonder...How can this be? (pause) This makes me question the way we're presenting information for students to learn. Yeh, some are CD, but some are possibly "school phobic". We need to change how we do things, that may make a huge difference. A misunderstanding of culture may be the reason. Have we created these deficits by protecting our children? I don't know.

Language differences also have an impact. Children don't always come to school with the same understandings of words and language.

CD is what sticks out for me. We are a transient district. One of the most transient in Ohio. I'm thinking that students come to us at different levels and from district to district and this has affected learning.

As is demonstrated in these responses, the perceptions on causes of disproportionality are varied. The reasons and rationales are as vast and divergent as the persons who made the statements. The responses in this section lend to the themes of racism and definitions and labels as problematic. As I present the data, I will allude to themes that will be discussed more in-depth in Chapter V.

### *Race*

In both the interview and questionnaire, staff was asked how and whether race has an impact on problems in the classroom and on special education. It was very evident that most respondents did not want to attribute causes solely to race. It also seemed apparent during the interviews that white respondents were not comfortable with discussing or attributing problems to race. On the questionnaires, 10 respondents simply wrote: "Race is not a contributing factor to problems in the classroom". Another respondent wrote: "I do not feel that race is an issue when it comes to problems in the classroom. Although, some regular educators say that black boys can be more aggressive". On the other end of the continuum, a few respondents wrote: "Because I am African American, I relate well to our kids". Does the teacher "know" the culture of the children in her classroom? Is curriculum relevant to the race of the student? These questions make race very relevant



and a contributing factor in the classroom. The remaining responses on the questionnaires did not address race as a single issue.

The interviews provided seven responses to the race question that were affirmative and eight that negated race as having an impact. There were a few that were uncommitted to either side. The affirmative responses were as follows:

I believe that a lot of African American males should not truly be in Special Education. Teachers cannot relate to them. The student in turn chooses not to listen to them. There are many cultural issues. The Af. Am. male student doesn't like the way they've been taught and they rebel. But they are identified early and the label stays with them.

Yes, race has an impact. There are cultural assumptions and misunderstandings between staff and students. There are differences in how the students act, react and learn as opposed to how the teachers do the same.

Yes, I think race impact special education. I don't think we've outlived the circumstances of the Larry P case. There are cultural differences between white and black kids! Most staff does not want to acknowledge this. I see this immediately, from K – on.

This same respondent stated: "I've been here 20+ years and have seen a progression. Contrary to stereotypes, our most needy and dysfunctional families are not minority!"

The others continued:

Yes, race definitely impacts special education. I think that upper middle class values are imposed on children and we try to extinguish behaviors and make them what we think is right!

Culturally the ED category may be indicative of who we are as a people. Our way of speaking, and acting is interpreted as aggressive. I have ED students all the time. I feel it is cultural misunderstandings, because I don't experience problems per se with these students but they are behind because they've missed instruction due to behaviors.

Yes. That's tricky because in the past I was at the middle school, which is majority African American. Here my class is more diverse. Nobody is identified here! No...(she laughs). A lot is culture. We are not taught to teach across cultures. And if we don't know the cultural learning styles, then we may not be effective.

Yes. This district is predominantly Black. From my observation, it seems a lot of times teachers confuse behavior problems with learning problems. They see behaviors and think the kid has a disability.

The eight respondents that negated race stated: "No. It's hard, because the majority of students are African American. I have 2 white students and there are only 7 in the entire building." "No. Personally race does not impact it for me. I feel that I'm teaching a group of students and I'm not thinking race. I'm not sure I always felt that way, but I'm there now."

No, not really. At least for myself I say no. I have to think when people ask me for race or gender of my students. I don't think of them in terms of these qualities or traits. They're just students to me. There is a perception in the school community that race has something to do with it. [This perception is held] without knowing all the information.

“No. I think [race does not impact] because a child is identified by their weaknesses. I have done DH inclusion in the past and can’t see that race has an impact.” “No. I think every school depending on population [will have special education students]. I think the percentage will compare from district to district. Race does not impact this.” “No. I think there are other factors, like family history, genetics.” “No. I just think everybody’s equal. It could be an economic or hereditary thing.” “No, or at least I like to think it doesn’t”(pause).

Those who “straddled the fence” stated: “It’s hard to say because of where I work. Population is more African American than white. I see boys more than girls in ED and Black more than White”.

Yes. Since 80% is African American. But you walk into a white suburban school and [the answer is] No. I taught in Orange and the majority in special education were white. In society is there a bias? I’m not a good one to ask. I don’t know what others think. I’m in my own cocoon.

This section provides strong evidence for the emerging theme of the struggle with racism. Sixty-six percent (17) of the respondents addressed race specifically. Of the 66%, 27% (7) stated that race had an impact on special education, while 31% (8) stated that race had no impact on special education. Eight percent (2) of the respondents were non-committal and the remaining 34% did not address race specifically.

#### *Parent/Family*

The responses about the impact of race naturally led into and often overlap the parent and family dynamic. Because 69.8% of the student population is African American, the responses can be reflective of staff feelings and attitudes about African

American families. My research participants began to discuss the family and parent as contributing factors to problems in the classroom, as well as to help explain the disparity issues in this district.

Thirty-six percent of the questionnaires reported that lack of parental or home support was a contributing factor to problems in the classroom. Several respondents offered more insight by writing: “Students who don’t care about their future and school. This is sometimes systemic of home”. “Parental educational background and importance of education in the home”. “Emotional/ family difficulties that students have to deal with”. “Lack of sleep – tired students”. “Students come to school unprepared, malnourished and carrying the weight of the world” “Family issues – when a student experiences a life change, e.g. –divorce, loss of a parent, moving, and these are not addressed. These have tremendous impact on how students behave”. The interview responses were consistent with the questionnaires, with 54% providing responses that focused on parental involvement and support, and family issues that may impact students. These responses seem to depict students’ families from a deficit model. The responses seem to focus on the number of parents in the home, attention provided in the home, expectations in the home, stability of the home and pre-natal/pre-school experiences. “However, I don’t fault the system, because there’s a family component”.

Part of it is related to more stress on Black mothers, bringing students to school, economic deprivation, lack of other resources. African American students are highly likely to be raised in daycare centers. The more 1:1 interaction that younger children can receive, especially in terms of language development, can

impact success in schools. Grandparents may be likely to impact the situations but they are rarely the caregiver. As a result minority students come to us with a different level of readiness. Most CD kids are identified prior to 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. Once they're in, they stay in! There are currently new efforts in place – RTI [response to intervention], that would theoretically diminish this over-representation issue. Well, social capital is one factor. Also, white parents tend to seek counseling and therapies for their students outside of school. Along those lines, parental involvement is another factor. Teachers become sensitized to the needs of the student when the parent is present, involved and talking to the teacher on a regular basis. Parents whom the teacher feels may question them will be more on their p's and q's than if teacher feels parent won't understand, question or care.

Popular media has a strong impact, working mothers. Mothers role has changed over the years. There are many single younger moms. This plays a role in emotion/behavior problems. I don't feel race is the reason or cause. It seems to me to be more like cycles of lifestyles. That parents had a certain lifestyle growing up and it does not change. They don't know any different. They may change their group or class affiliation but they take their previous lifestyle vales and attitudes with them.

No. The environment impacts special education. The environment that students are raised in. Students don't come to school ready or prepared. They are not getting enough nutrition or sleep. There is a lack of attention in the home. The kids want and need this attention, so in school they act out. Race is not necessarily the factor. Consistency in homes is the key.

Perhaps the time spent in the home to help students and support education is a factor. Parents often see us as the experts and tend not to question what we suggest. Parent's education may be limited or they may have had difficulty in school themselves.

Sometimes culturally, African American boys are not expected to perform. I mean like at home the girls are expected and supposed to perform tasks, like take care of siblings, unload dishwasher, etc. This is not the same for the boys.

“Children don't always come to school with the same understandings of words and language.” “I wonder if they are not often placed in CD to make-up for environmental issues. Students that move around and family issues are not shared with the school.”

I have also coached and seen kids in a different light. When I coached, the majority of my African-American athletes had single parents (usually Moms) and she would say [to me], “Do what you have to do”. But that's different now.

“From students living in Euclid, my experience is that a lot of teachers recommend students to IAT [intervention assistance team] for socio-economic status and family factors”.

I think ED [students], in my experience need counselors in the building to help solve or address these problems. Something traumatizing happened in the child's life and they need the help. I think perhaps there are not enough resources in the home for both CD & ED [students]. Children are lashing out as a sign that they need help.

Sometimes kids lash out because they can't do the required work. I had a student who couldn't even write her name or recognize the letter-A. This tells me that she needs help and either did not get it at home or has a disability.

“Tough question. I feel socio-economic status and family life impact these problems.

Two parent vs. one parent homes. Is the parent home when the student gets home from school. Those sorts of things.”

I see that parents and their choices have an impact. I think children could be identified earlier and problems alleviated before school-age. But I think families talk to other families and parents want these services. Parents may even push for services for the financial or monetary benefits that are sometimes available for students with disabilities.

“I believe that early education is very important, in terms of pre-school and head start. We need to catch students early. The parents also need to be supported more.”

As is demonstrated in this section, the parent and family are considered an integral part of the equation when examining the issues around disproportionality. It seems that the view of the parent and family is that they are lacking resources, education or time. The lack of these commodities, from the staff perspective, may contribute to the disproportionality that is seen in this district.

#### *Nature vs. Nurture*

The concept of nature vs. nurture or the beliefs about whether human form and behavior are attributable to environmental influences, genetics or a mixture of both, arose from my direct interview question about race and its impact on special education. In the following quotes, three seem to ascribe to a nurture philosophy, three to nature and two to

both. Unofficial beliefs that school personnel hold have been found to contribute to the problem of disproportion in Special Education (Harry, et al, 2002). These responses can be considered unofficial beliefs but also seem to help demonstrate how we socially construct our beliefs and the meanings associated with race.

*Nurture:*

“Yes & No. I think it is hard to link it to race but environmental issues are very strong. I was raised in Wickliffe and we were poor and it was hard”.

Again, I think environment is crucial. It’s you classic nature v. nurture issue playing itself out here. I don’t think race has anything to do with it. I look at children as individuals, their race is not considered to me. I work majority with African American students.

“I wonder if they are not often placed in CD to make-up for environmental issues. Students that move around and family issues are not shared with the school.”

*Nature:*

“I believe in nature vs. nurture. I believe it goes back to biology and genes and how family raises you.” “Possibly genetic factors. I don’t think it is economic factors, not in this district.” “As for the data, I think genetic factors may be the reason for the SLD numbers.”

*Both:*

“No. I just think everybody’s equal. It could be an economic or hereditary thing.”

I’m not sure. I think SES plays a part. We see failure-to-thrive and malnourished children. These definitely have an impact. Genetic factors also have an impact. I think we’re seeing and identifying disabilities more now than ever before. It



seems the number of students with Autism has increased. I don't think we're over-identifying. I think this is what we see. Transient populations also seem to have an impact.

This section also seems to shed light on some staff members' perspectives of the African American families serviced in this district. Again these responses seem to describe the families by what they lack, a deficit view. The belief systems revealed in this section highlight the way in which ideas are socially constructed.

### *SES and Poverty*

Comments from the interviews that included references to SES and/or poverty were related to how staff perceive the families that we work with in this district. The cultural values that staff possess in relation to how they view their students and families can have a great impact on the issue of disparity. In Chapter II, it was noted from prior research that poverty is not sufficient to explain disparities that exist (Skiba, et al, 2005; O'Conner & Fernandez, 2006). The following responses seem to suggest that poverty or SES can explain the disparities that exist in this district and that poverty and SES are distinct from race. "A lot of families do not have resources to help their children". "Economic deprivation, lack of other resources." "There are kids that are environmentally deprived and they look like SLD. I don't think it's necessarily race, it may be poverty." (pause) "Lower income students come with emotional baggage. This raise two questions for me. 1). Do we have a competent way of diagnosing categories? And 2). Are the categories intelligently constructed?"

Socio-economically, it seems that for the last 5-6 years, we're getting more and more African American families that are middle class. It has changed. I'm seeing

more 2-parents coming to conferences. When it first changed in 1990, it appeared to be low-income inner city kids.

“The problems associated with low socio-economic, like drug-abuse and child abuse, impact this as well.” “Parents may even push for services for the financial or monetary benefits that are sometimes available for students with disabilities.”

These responses seem to lend towards the theme of struggle with racism and special education as a solution. The participants seem to seek tangible reasons to explain the disparities. Some of the staff seem to have a belief that the families in this district live in poverty. The 2000 Census Data would refute this belief.

#### *Context of Identification*

In an effort to elicit staff thoughts and beliefs on the how and why of student identification, the participants were asked in the interviews about the goals of special education, how they perceived their role and how it was determined that a student is eligible for services. This line of inquiry yielded information on the team process, definitions and labels, the staff’s perceived goals of special education and their role, the staff’s frame of reference and expectations, staff training and the setting. The issue of staff training was also documented in the questionnaires.

Responses about the process of identification of students generally fell into two categories – an uncertainty about the process or comments that described the process as clear-cut and well-defined. An uncertainty is reflected in the following five responses. “I really don’t know. I don’t think there is a real team process going on here. There is not a lot of collaboration or team atmosphere at this school.” “I get an IEP or some written documentation (504s & IEPs).” “Sometimes I think we identify students who should not

be there. But we appreciate the extra help.....we probably should have tutors”. “Many students enter the system with deprivations. Social promotions are also an issue. (Pause) I also wonder if we are really meeting the needs?” “I feel we [teachers] need a course to follow for help with kids, a flowchart if you will. We need a guide. There does not, to my knowledge, exist any intervention forms.”

Those who seemed to describe the process as clear-cut and well-defined made the following statements.

Students are identified through teacher or principal referral. This along with documentation of student weaknesses in whatever area is processed with team and intervention or accommodations are implemented. If these don't work, we meet with parents and go through testing, review data and along with the parents, make a group decision about eligibility.

We have a process. First, a teacher fills out the referral. Second, the team meets, that is the principal, psychologist, speech, and general and special ed teachers.

Finally we go over the referral and talk about strengths and weaknesses. We then choose two interventions to address weaknesses.

“Through the IAT, referral process. Then we use classroom data, teacher observations, and formal and informal testing. We compare this information with that of their peers to see if they qualify for services.” “Through testing. A lot of them come from the pre-school programs for students with disabilities. Every three years we re-evaluate.”

In addition, many of those who described the process as clear-cut and well-defined seemed to be disconnected from the process. They responded as if they are

describing an event that is happening and they are not a part of it. “We follow federal and state regulations which indicate that identification follow prescribed interventions.”

Students with behavioral problems must exhibit the behavior for over a year, they must fall in the average to low-average IQ. Also, achievement tests must reveal that the student is working below level. This tells us they are not working at level due to their behavior.

“Through intervention and testing”. “The student must take an Multi-Factored Evaluation (MFE) and must qualify in 3 areas for CD: IQ, achievement and adaptive. They must demonstrate deficits in each of these areas, then they may qualify.” “Through many ways. From the teacher, based on performance in the classroom, weaknesses being noted. Also, by parent who takes them to the doctor”. “Students can be referred by teacher, parent, doctor or whoever to the Intervention Assistance Team (IAT). Once a disability is suspected, the multi-factored evaluation (MFE) is done and decisions made.” “They’re usually recommended by a teacher with a concern. The team is then set up to discuss the needs. The student then goes through testing if the team feels there may be a disability”. “Through the classroom teacher who observes and monitors classwork and the makes a referral to the IAT team.” “Testing based on parent or teacher request.”

Well, first the teacher gathers information through tests, journals and any problems that are displayed by the student, then that information is taken to committee to discuss and decide whether to evaluate. Communication is then made with parents through conferences and phone calls.

“Through testing (MFE), teacher observations and parent participation.”

Well, it starts with the teacher or parent. If it starts with the teacher she takes it to the team and then the parent is contacted. If it starts with the parent it goes directly to the team. The teacher may notice behavioral or academic weaknesses, document them, and then speak to parent then the team. It is usually a 45 day documentation period.

“Well, there are steps. Step #1 is a referral is received from the homeroom teacher. Step #2 is to come together at the intervention assistance team. Step #3 is to test the child. Step #4 is to write the IEP.” “Through testing and teacher recommendation.”

Paradoxically, one staff member seemed to have a perspective that spoke to the issue on a more personal level:

Black professionals want choice, flexibility and autonomy in how we deal with students. We practice control and segregation in the schools currently and the kids just rebel! Knowledge and understanding of roles and clear definitions of the lines between special education and regular education is needed.

These responses began to address the theme of disconnect versus feeling central to the processes. This theme continues in the next section. The notion of connectedness reveals a great deal about underlying beliefs and thoughts.

#### *Team Process*

Many of the preceding quotes alluded to “the team” as an element in the identification process. Theoretically, “the team” should be central to the identification of students with special needs and everyone (staff, parents, and students) should feel, and participate as an integral part of the team. The following quotes speak more directly to

the team process, however by responding in the third person, it seems as if they are speaking of some nebulous action taking place elsewhere that they are not a part of.

“The results of the MFE inform the team and they make decisions about the solution in most cases.” “We also have to be mindful of the team process, it can be very intimidating to parents.” “They’re usually recommended by a teacher with a concern. The team is then set up to discuss the needs. The student then goes thru testing if the team feels there may be a disability.”

Basically the teacher completes paperwork and submits it to the intervention assistance team and then they meet with parents. Sometimes parents may suspect this and relay concerns to teacher. The teacher will then make the determination. Sometimes in Kindergarten, it’s tough to tell but if behavior issues arise, then it’s easy to tell right away.

“First there has to be a lot of observations and documentation from the classroom teacher. Then a 2-page report is filled out and the team along with the school psychologist evaluates and develops a report.” “Through the IAT process, the regular education teachers may see discrepancies (cognitive, behavioral, or other) and convene the team to talk about behaviors and strategies. This is done prior to labeling or identifying for special education services.”

These responses support the idea of a disconnect from the processes. As stated, the responses seem distant and outside of what the staff is involved in directly. This theme gains further support in the perceived goals and role section.

### *Definitions and Labels*

There were no specific questions about the definitions or labels used to categorize students in special education. The respondents made statements about definitions and labels when attempting to explain the disparities that exist. The responses that addressed the various disability categories seem to express both confusion around the definitions and uncertainty about the proper use of the categories. “I see an increase in the lower functioning (Downs & MH). I don’t know. Possibly the change in discrepancy data has impacted our numbers.”

Changes have been made to the criteria for identification of students in order to decrease the numbers, but the reverse has occurred. The criteria set by the State and Federal Government for identifying ED & SLD is the most confusing and flexible. (Pause) It is confusing. A district like Euclid where there is a lot of socio-economic factors, would account for this. SLD almost equates to learning difficulties as opposed to disability. Kids can qualify now who 5 years ago would not have. Trends in Ohio and criteria for identifying have caused this.

“But they are identified early and the label stays with them.”

I think there is an overuse of ED when kids are really OHI. We are moving away from CD and pushing them into SLD. Kids are really CD & MH and we put them in SLD. I feel that ED, CD and MH need more support and resources in our district.

From my observation, it seems a lot of times teachers confuse behavior problems with learning problems. They see behaviors and think the kid has a disability. I don’t always think students are special education. There is an automatic

connection made when a child displays off-task behaviors [that they are special education students].

These responses again support the theme of labels and definitions as problematic. The respondents were confident in responding but their responses demonstrated confusion and misunderstanding. This misinformation can create problems in referral and identification of students for special education services.

### *Perceived Goals and Role*

It is important to gain an understanding of how staff define the goals of special education and describe their role. Their self descriptions help illuminate their belief systems, which in turn affect their behaviors. The staff were asked to state the goals of special education and whether or not the district meets these goals. Many (12) of the respondents felt that the district meets their stated goal(s).

To provide all strategies to manage emotions and behavior in an educational setting, in order for them to learn throughout their school career. If they have a strong sense of how to handle self and situations, they will be o.k. in middle and high school. I feel like as a building we meet these goals. I also feel that we are strong district-wide in relation to Special Education.

“Make students feel positive about self, successful, interested in learning, and protected, because the environment is hostile. Yes we meet these goals.” “Helping kids with daily routines and teaching them strategies on how to be successful with peers and adults. I feel I do [meet this goal]. I can’t say everyone does but a lot are meeting needs of students.”

First to help the student to achieve at a level that they are capable of. This is different for everyone. I think it is also to help students to fit-in and feel



comfortable with the general populace. To be accepted and mix-in. I feel we do meet these goals.

For our students to be productive, responsible, independent adults. Yes, it appears that we do accomplish this goal. I recently saw some students who graduated from our school system and were a part of the CEVEC training program and they were successfully employed and demonstrated responsible, independent behaviors.

“I can only talk about it here. Our goal is to treat students with respect and know that they can learn and see them move to another level. I see that happening here. It’s about the children here, nothing else.” “The goal for the kids I teach is to make them comfortable in the academic setting. Make them able to grow socially and academically and make them comfortable while doing so. I think we accomplish this most of the time.”

To help bridge the gap between student needs and help them reach their potential. There should be a connection between their curriculum and the regular curriculum. To provide a network or support system for them, using as many resources as possible. To a certain extent we meet them in Euclid. I see a need for more support in the regular education classroom. Possibly para-professionals in regular education. To me self-contained is not working.

“To meet the educational needs of students. In elementary grades it is to meet the social needs also. We probably meet those goals about 75% of the time. The parental side of the equation is important also.”

“To help students develop a sense of self and develop to fullest potential (socially, cognitively, emotionally, etc). Yes, I feel we accomplish these goals.”

I see the goal as remediation, so that they eventually are included more in regular education. Also, to provide them with skills so they can cope in the real world and in regular classrooms. Personally, I don't believe in self-contained classrooms. They are artificial and children get a false sense of what the school experience is about. Euclid definitely meets these goals. There is a lot of cooperative learning and pro-inclusion work that goes on in Euclid.

“It seems to be a joke these days! No child left behind is leaving students behind! Euclid does a good job, despite the bureaucratic nonsense!”

Others (6) felt that their stated goal(s) were not met by the district. “To provide services to support students who have identified needs. No we don't meet this goal.”

I see the goal as trying to level the playing field so all students have opportunity for an education. No, I don't think we always meet this goal. My guess is that graduation rates for disabled students are lower than general education students. I would like to think that the goal of special education is to help students identify their learning styles and become expert at it. My fear, my quasi-elementary opinion is too much emphasis on the grade piece. I think the grade piece would take care of itself if we got kids to be expert in their learning styles. Like anything else (this may sound horrible, but) for a greater percentage of special education professionals, they get lost in the day to day and it becomes about filling out forms and less about helping kids to become better students. Education in general and special education too is doing a horrible job. I do not think we're meeting the needs of the population at all.

“To place a child in the least restrictive environment (that’s what they tell me (laugh)). To allow the child to work in smaller environments and get the attention they need to achieve equal opportunity. No, we don’t.”

To provide free and appropriate public education (FAPE). With some categories, it is to remediate until no more special education services are needed (LD, Speech, ED, OHI (?)). I don’t think we entirely meet these goals. At least not met as often as we should.

To have students mainstreamed as much as possible. For teachers to have an understanding of how much and when student needs to be a part of larger group or needs smaller group. Do we meet these goals? Overall, I’d have to say no. But we’re trying!

The remaining respondents (8) were non-committal about whether the district met the goal(s) or not. “I see the goal as helping kids who are struggling. I think we meet that goal. Knowing of course that you can’t help every child. I guess it also depends on how you measure whether the goal is met.”

I see the goal as trying to ensure that all students learn. To ultimately have all students involved in the general education population. At least to an extent. I am constantly faced with “your students”, or “all the special education kids...” statements from other faculty. They’re my students when they are acting out or not passing state tests, but they become “our” students when they test high or behave appropriately.

The goal of special education is to offer the child the same learning (ideas, topics) at a level that they can comprehend. They may just need extra modifications.

Goals should also help them understand their disabilities and how to continue to learn despite these.

I know that recently it is inclusion. But we need to identify students who really cannot be included. I'm all for having kids who try and can interact with others.

That's life. But if they cannot that's a problem.

“The goal is to provide education to students with special needs and to accommodate them and provide them with meaningful experiences as with other students.”

We try our best to meet them. We see more and more students becoming special education students. Then we need more special education teachers or Aides. The goal is to help children learn at their own pace without embarrassment and with the option of being with their peers, if that is best. If not, then another place. The goal is to have them in school.

My personal goal is to see more inclusive environments to disabled students and convey this to regular education teachers and push for their inclusion. I think as a district we try to accomplish this. Some specialists are better than others.

Personality has a lot to do with it and this unfortunately has a bearing on students.

I am constantly an advocate that these students be entitled to participate.

I see it as trying to meet all needs of students. The social needs, academic, and behavioral so they can function successfully. I feel our district needs more resources. Resources in terms of people. More Aides, Intervention Specialists and more specifically trained persons, like for Autism.

Additionally, the staff was asked to describe their role in working with students in special education. The majority (21) of the respondents were clear about their role, while two described confusion concerning their role.

I've been extremely confused in working with these students. Things are not clear. I mean you receive the IEP, but let's say in a class of 25 students, say 5 have IEPs. I want them to learn but when I modify, I am not able to check that the student is understanding in the classroom environment. I mean the intervention specialist is involved but it's not coordinated well. It is frustrating and makes me irritable that they don't get served, they get left out. One student in particular that comes to mind in my class doesn't seem to be getting what he needs. He is very quiet. Stays off in the corner to himself. I feel he gets lost due to overworked staff. Cause they do have high caseloads. I had an inclusion experience with a Special Education teacher in this classroom. It didn't work out too well. I think due to a lack of understanding on both our parts. I could go on forever on this topic because it concerns me.

This is my first year having a visually impaired student. I have students with learning disabilities and emotional disturbances. This is actually the first time I've had ED students. I don't always feel as if I'm meeting the students' needs. I do small groups and centers to help meet the needs.

As some staff provided descriptions of their role, their words seemed to express a feeling of centrality to the process, a connectedness to what occurs in the schools and their classrooms.

I am the liason between general and special education services, between family and outside services. I am an educator. I am often the first line of defense. They (parents and students) generally talk to me first with an issue or problem, before speaking to general education teachers. I develop a relationship with students and families because I'm usually involved for over 1 year.

I work with students with behavior issues in a self-contained classroom. At least it is self-contained, initially. I work with the students to address self-control issues, then reintegrate into the general education classrooms. Once behaviors are under control, we can focus on academics. I assist staff in working with students in their classroom. I am a resource person. I help with interventions.

I assist with reading, math, writing, and other areas that teachers need support in. I do a pull-out. I work with individuals and small groups. I perform academic testing. I meet with parent/teachers to develop plans. I participate in team. I have a diplomatic role.

“It’s a matter of me getting the kids in my class and finding ways to help them learn. Better yet, find the ways that they learn”.

I perform assessments for special education. I participate in the IAT process to meet needs of all students. I assist with crisis intervention, and I consult with parents and teachers to meet needs of all students.

I am the lead teacher in an MH classroom. I have 9 students with various disabilities or labels. I am responsible for gathering resources, modifying age-appropriate and grade level materials, usually in all subject areas. I am responsible

for communicating with parents and collaboration with other teachers. I coordinate IEPs. I manage 3 para-professionals.

“I am the person that helps students develop to their fullest potential, through various functional living activities.” “I have a cross-categorical class. It is SED/Mixed for grades 6-8. It is a self-contained model. I teach across the 5 content areas. I teach both behavioral and academic lessons.” “My role is to facilitate learning in Resource Room with small groups of children.” “My role is to facilitate learning, regardless of who they are. I see special education and gifted as a continuum, and the role is to provide students with relevant and enriching learning experiences.”

Of interest in these quotes is the fact that seven out of 10 of these respondents are intervention specialists and one is a school psychologist. Four of these respondents are African American. Perhaps only the school psychologist and intervention specialists feel connected to the processes going on in the schools.

The following staff members’ description of their role seem to depict a disconnect from the process as demonstrated by their terse responses. This also seemed evident in the responses described earlier under context of identification and team process:

“I am part of the evaluation team.” “I work with students who have ED. A lot of them have ADHD. OHI (Other Health Impairment) usually encompasses ADHD.” “I teach CD students.” “I have minimal contact with special education teachers. It only occurs if I happen to hand deliver a document or issues with a student, then I may, but it’s rare. They do their own thing.”

“I have an inclusion classroom. My special education students are with me more than 70% of the day and 1 in particular is out 50% of the day. I have 5 special education students out of 24, and 1 currently being tested.”

“I don’t have a big role. It has become more inclusive. I am aware of IEPs and will often give child a different test. Most often, however, they work with the special education teacher.” “My room is not designated as special education. If I happen to get a student not identified yet, I may begin to collect data.” “Do I have a role? (laugh) I am the primary teacher and I work closely with special education teacher. We work together in planning his lessons.” “I have inclusion students. In particular, I team teach with an Intervention Specialist one period/day. I work through her.” “Until this year I didn’t have many [special education] students in my classroom. Now I have students who require more mainstreaming, like OHI (Other Health Impairment) & TBI (Traumatic Brain Injury). In the past I had a student with cerebral palsy.”

”I work with 2<sup>nd</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> graders – all categories (CD, Autism, OHI). I provide services cross-categorically. The service I provide is according to their IEP goals, both academic and behavioral.”

Of note here is that seven out of 11 of these respondents were general education teachers and one was a school psychologist. Nine of these respondents were white. Of great significance in this section are the beliefs that come through in the responses. The responses provide support for the themes of struggle with racism as well as disconnect versus feeling central to the processes. These responses also impact the question of influence of race on decision making in this district. The responses in the next section continue to provide answers to the question of influence of race on decision making.



### *Teacher Frame of Reference and Expectations*

Many of the staff's perceptions and expectations have been demonstrated through their responses in previous sections. Some staff made specific references that would support the notion that staff perceptions and expectations may impact disparity in this district. The following quotes examine this possibility.

I feel we have a very good special education department. There is a lot of love and concern for the success of our students. I feel we go above and beyond the call to meet the needs! With the population changes that have occurred in Euclid, I feel the needs of Black students may not be met. There exists differences in learning styles, and socio-economic differences (in terms of education and background). I feel that African American students are not being challenged to perform to the best of their ability and are not appropriately disciplined. African American students need to be challenged to learn!

“With your data, I noticed that white children tend to have softer labels. I think this goes back to how we view things and our perceptions and interpretations of behaviors, academics, etc. This data is surprising!”

Culturally the ED category may be indicative of who we are as a people. Our way of speaking, and acting is interpreted as aggressive. I have ED students all the time. I feel it is cultural misunderstandings, because I don't experience problems per se with these students but they are behind because they've missed instruction due to behaviors.

We (teachers) see them as streetwise but not academically capable (according to our adaptive screening tools). I wonder...How can this be? (pause) This makes

me question the way we're presenting information for students to learn. Yeah, some are CD, but some are possibly "school phobic". We need to change how we do things, that may make a huge difference. Have we created these deficits by protecting our children? I don't know. Language differences also have an impact. Children don't always come to school with the same understandings of words and language.

"Also, mismatches between teacher expectations and student behaviors."

I believe that the special education population is increasing rapidly. Too often, special education is seen as the only option for students not meeting academic or behavioral expectations. Additionally, we see a lot of students struggling and the category of specific learning disability (SLD) is so ill-defined.

"It is important to establish expected behaviors in the classroom and to celebrate cultural events, but maintain expectations."

As an educator, I want to see more about promoting growth about the issues in Special Education. I think we need more speech services. I see the classroom community as a means of alleviating problems before they start. That is, if you develop a community in your classroom.

I would say that 80% of all behavioral or other problems stem from cognitive factors. A lot of times, acting-out behaviors indicate a problem with academics or trouble mastering material. A student doesn't know what is going on and then disruption occurs. Teacher perceptions affect how we view students, specifically African-American males. How we [teachers] view things affect the numbers and

identification. We are quick to judge. Individual teachers perceptions have an impact.

Kids can figure out who knows and who doesn't. You have to work at getting them to appreciate that all students add value to the classroom. You must teach an appreciation of differences. Some people don't know how to deal with Black children. If you have no expectations, you get nothing! I feel that discipline has a lot to do with it. Add on classroom management skills. It is crucial to know the students that you teach – I mean really know them. Know their culture. I see a lot of blaming going on and teachers with no expectations of their students. So, like I said, they get nothing. I also see teachers teaching above students heads. Then they say something is wrong with the student when he/she doesn't understand.

These responses reveal more of the personal thoughts, beliefs and attitudes of the staff. They seem to support the theme of struggle with racism and disconnect versus feeling central to the processes. This section also helps answer research question three.

### *Teacher Training*

Lack of teacher training is an area that staff indicated both in interviews and questionnaires that may be impacting the disproportionate numbers of students identified in this district. Many felt that general education teachers could use more training.

Training may be crucial for all staff in the final analysis of this issue.

Training may depend on the level of education they have, if they've pursued continuing education or graduate work, perhaps. One of my concerns is the lack of education and training [in our district]. Specifically related to procedures for

special education identification, why and how kids qualify. This is needed for the regular education teachers.

“I think in-service is done but not a lot. Some [teachers] may get training in school but probably not much.” “Possibly teacher training. SLD may be over-inflated because teachers aren’t trained to reach that population that requires more help or different help.” “There have been a few professional workshops in the 5 years since I’ve been here”. “Well, the intervention specialist is trained. The regular education teacher may take sensitivity training or an inclusion class in college. This is limited, however, and may only be one class.” “In undergraduate or masters degrees programs you receive training and take assessment classes. You really learn a lot on the job.” “The training I received was in the process of referring and the data that needs to be brought to team, oh, and intervention to try prior to team meetings.” “Lack of teacher training Re: exceptional children.” “Lack of regular education teacher training and comfort level in working with ALL students.” “I feel that regular educators need to be more educated in this area.” “Regular education teachers are not trained to teach/identify/adapt curriculum for special education kids.” “I would like to see more collaboration and professional development opportunities for regular education and special education teachers.” “Lack of training for regular educators in dealing with inflexible – explosive children.”

The staff seemed comfortable with finding tangible ways to address the problem. These responses can provide insight and direction for the district. These responses align with the theme of special education utilized as a solution.

### *Setting*

The urban school district in which this research was conducted has a majority African American student population. However, the community remains majority white (66.4%) and the teachers are majority white (87%). Because of these particulars, this community may have important implications for the problem of disproportionality. Six respondents made remarks specific to this community and the district.

Yes, I think case loads are too high. When they are too high it is more difficult to provide services in the manner in which they should be provided. There are student who need self-contained. I'm all for inclusion but self-contained is sometimes needed.

It's tough. I'm over in my numbers of kids receiving services. I have up to 16 and the design was 6-8 children. I don't know the answers. I can't help but wonder what our schools would be like if all the community residents [white and black] attended the public schools together. They would be more diverse and stronger I feel.

"No. I think it's pretty balanced, when you look at our population. I have worked here 17 years. When I started there was a flip-flop in the population. I mean, now it's just the opposite."

I have all African American students in my class of 15. I lost a lot due to moving.

This is my 8<sup>th</sup> year teaching and at my previous school (TJ) I had some white students. I think it depends on where you are. In this building there are more African Americans.

“The way we handle special education students is very good in Euclid. The staff in this area are good. I believe inclusion is working well. There are difficulties but a good thing is happening.” “Euclid has a good Special Education Department. I think it’s one of the best. I’d like to see the ratio of teacher to students improved. We need more manpower!”

These responses related to the setting speak both to the community as well as the school district as an organization. They reveal how the community has changed and the impact this has on the schools and teacher’s perceptions. Of note here also are the suggestions for how the organization can alleviate the concerns.

#### *Other Issues*

Most of the staff responses fell into the previous sections of disparity explanations and context of identification. During the interview, one staff member spoke of pressure from staff. Harry, et al (2002), found that school psychologists often feel pressure from staff and because of this pressure may find students eligible for special education services in order to appease co-workers. One of the school psychologists that I interviewed stated:

The need to “do something” has transpired into a referral for special education. We are still in the refer, test, place mode and this should not be occurring. An overwhelming need to help kids in this district probably accounts for some of the numbers. “I don’t know what to do, so you take them”. “Put them somewhere else”. Education parallels how you see mental health concerns, in that, higher SES areas you don’t necessarily see the mental health persons, but they exist.

Finally, in the questionnaires, 32% of the staff commented on the current environment in education and how this may have an impact on the issue of

disproportionate representation. Teachers must adhere to state guidelines of the content to be taught. In addition, state tests are utilized to hold teachers accountable for educating students. Staff had these things to say:

In the sense that state content standards proceed at such a rapid pace and high level that does not allow for student differences. Results of proficiency and state achievement tests fall on the bell-curve and don't account for cognitive development in their assessments. Students may not be cognitively developed enough to respond to some questions.

“I think the testing climate expects all children to learn same skills at the same rate and because that is not possible, special education is looked at as a solution.” “If there is a standard that students must meet – a child unable to meet these standards might need special education. It can be used as an identification tool.”

In the past, some of my CD students “tested out” of special education and were able to do fairly well independently in the regular education setting. Most of them were in basic/career track classes not college track. Today, due to the climate of testing and accountability, the basic track classes are virtually gone and the college track classes are too difficult for most CD students with out intense intervention. Couple that with having to pass the OGT ( Ohio Graduation Tests) to get a diploma. These factors have probably led to more students being identified as special education.

I think we over test, over write standards and other educational jargonistic activities. I wrote Management by Objective curriculum in the sixties, student

centered curriculum in the eighties and now standards based curriculum. New formats for the same thing. Time wasted.

In some ways, teachers have a better idea of exactly what a student can or can not do, what they should be able to do and how far from the goal/benchmark the student is. However, a student may have entered school way behind in experiences and expectations but still learns at the same rate as his peers. Is she/he spec. ed.? I don't think so. We need to look at each student's growth and track that to see his/her progress and factor that into the decision. This is rarely done in my experience.

"I focus more on mastery of daily lessons and classwork, than on testing." "If a student is not retaining information based on grade-level standards, it is possible that they need some form of intervention."

The current environment in public schools and the pressure that staff can feel may be important factors to consider when examining disproportionality. These areas were not a major focus of the respondents in this research. However, these quotes highlight additional beliefs that staff hold.

This chapter has provided a detailed examination of the data I obtained from the interviews and questionnaires with the staff. There is constant overlap of the issues and many themes have evolved, including, a struggle with racism, a debate of nature versus nurture, the problem existing within the organization versus within the student, a disconnect from the process versus feeling central to the process, impact of personal experiences, definitions and labels as problematic or unclear, and the utilization of special



education as a solution The following chapter will provide an examination of these themes and provide an in-depth analysis of the findings.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION, SUMMARY & IMPLICATIONS

The problem of disproportionate representation of minority racial groups in special education has been identified and well documented in the United States (Donovan & Cross, 2002). The examination of this problem in an urban school district has yielded information that helps to underscore the complexity of the issues surrounding disproportionality. It also provides an intimate look at how staffs' thoughts and beliefs can impact systems and programs that are intended for one purpose (equal educational access) but unintentionally create or maintain racism.

As was demonstrated in the previous chapter, there is constant overlap of the issues involved in trying to understand and conceptualize the problem of disproportionality. When speaking about race, respondents often spoke of culture or cultural differences. They would go on to speak of family issues and poverty or socio-economic status. All of these words: culture, race, family, poverty, help define who a person is. Their identity, if you will. As individuals, we develop meanings for these words determined by our own life experiences. These meanings become a part of our belief system and in turn impact our actions and reactions (Bogden & Knoll, 1988). This

applies both to students and teachers. Many responses revealed a struggle with considering race and racism as a contributing factor to the problem of disproportionality. An examination of what this struggle may imply for decision making in this district follows.

### *The Struggle with Racism*

“Whatever those of us in the United States – and in many other countries as well – might wish to be the case, we live in a racialized society, a society in which race is engraved upon our beings and perceptions, upon our identities” (Winant, p. 37). If we accept that racism is normal and the system of power in the educational arena, we can begin to see how staff’s beliefs, attitudes, perspectives and thoughts impact judgment and maintain the status quo. Once we begin to explore mindsets, the subtle nuances are revealed.

If racial oppression and inequality were not such major issues in our society, we would not be talking about problems such as disproportionate representation. But the fact of the matter is that race relations have been and continue to be problematic in our society. However, during the interviews, there seemed to be a constant struggle with racial oppression. More specifically, apprehension around discussing whether racial oppression truly exists for African American students in this school district. Staff members stated, “I don’t think it’s race, it may be poverty”. “The population is more African American, so naturally you see more African American students in Special Education”. “The environment impacts special education...race is not necessarily the factor”. “I think it’s more environment than race”. Similar to society at large, staff members did not want to talk about racism. This theme permeated the discussions. There

appeared to be a conflict between acknowledging racism as a cause of disproportionality and searching for something else, perhaps something more tangible. This line of thinking is consistent with the functionalist worldview described in the introduction. The staff responses support the notion that social reality is orderly and objective.

A quandary arises around the degree to which we believe that culture, poverty, SES and family issues contribute to the disproportionality problem. They seem to be just as difficult a concept as race to grapple with. But somehow, there appeared more comfort in talking about these concepts or attributing the cause to these factors. Ladson-Billings (1994) found that poverty and lack of opportunity were often seen as the only credible reasons for poor academic outcomes. Subsequently, interventions proposed try to compensate for deficiencies. When these concepts were mentioned, it was usually discussed from a difference or deficit perspective. As described in Chapter IV, during the interviews, 54% or 14 respondents made comments that portrayed students' families from a deficit model. The staff spoke of how the majority of students were African American and how they perceived the home structure or lack of structure and lower SES to justify the numbers. As discussed in Chapter II, however, poverty or SES alone cannot explain disproportionate representation. Add to this the fact that the city of Euclid does not have a high rate of families living below the poverty level (according to the US Census Data, 2000). In actuality it seems that most African American families are working class and probably have family incomes close to their white peers in this community.

The struggle with racism may be indicative of the complexity of the issue of disproportionality or may lend towards revealing implicit biases that staff have about the students they teach. What seemed significant in this research was how staff

overwhelmingly described the African American families as “poor”, “lacking a positive home environment”, “transient”, and “aggressive”. This belief system in turn will guide the actions of the staff. One teacher pointed out, “a lot of teachers refer to the intervention assistance team for socio-economic or family factors.” Another teacher stated, “But I think families talk to other families and parents want these services. Parents may even push for services for the financial or monetary benefits that are sometimes available for students with disabilities.” When statements such as these are made, staff are not having difficulty with the ability of the student but with other elements of the student that do not coincide with their perceptions of white students and their families values and beliefs. If this is the mindset of the staff, then it would appear as though black students face a discriminatory environment in which their home circumstances are interpreted as disabilities.

From the student perspective, if this is how they are identified by the staff, their self concepts and identity formation are being harmed. The school environment is a large part of the life experience of the young. Kunjufu (1985) advances the notion that it is during childhood that our system of racism and oppression in this country begins to “cripple” African American males, causing them to become ineffective as adults. If your teacher perceives you as “poor”, “aggressive”, “lacking a positive home environment” and “transient” and subsequently treats you in this manner or feels you may be disabled, what does it do to your self concept and psyche? Although many black students are able to overcome such perceptions on the part of school authorities, it is a burden that white students do not face. At its worst, educators negative perceptions challenge and even thwart positive identity formation.

In a similar vein, what does it do for a student's identity, to not be seen as a black or African American boy or girl? "I have to think when people ask me for race or gender of my students. I don't think in terms of these qualities or traits. They're just students to me". "Personally race does not impact it for me. I feel that I'm teaching a group of students and I'm not thinking race". The concept of identity is very complex, but a part of the equation is social context (Tatum, 1997). As these quotes exemplify, a few staff members spoke of not seeing the race of their students. "If teachers pretend not to see students' racial and ethnic differences, they really do not see the students at all and are limited in their ability to meet their educational needs" (Ladson-Billings, p. 33). Can you effectively deal with someone and not consider their race and cultural nuances that may be important to helping them learn? To deny their race or gender, is to deny their identity and discount who they are. Murrell (1999) suggests that adolescents require "intellectual tools" in the form of a strong racial identity, self-agency and self-determination. Murrell (1999) continues, "these are necessary to counter the manner in which racism works to decompose the cultural integrity of blackness" (p.7)

For black students, their race is a major part of their culture and helps define their experiences and who they are. "While it is recognized that African Americans make up a distinct *racial* group, the acknowledgement that this racial group has a distinct *culture* is still not recognized" (Ladson-Billings, p. 9). One staff member remarked "...there are cultural differences between white and black kids! Most staff does not want to acknowledge this." If staff refuses to acknowledge first the race of the student and second who that student is, apart and separate from others of their race and others in the classroom, the staff members' beliefs and attitudes will impact their judgements,

including identifying students for special education services. In short, teachers should consider the race, gender, and age into account when a student is assigned to them, but then get to know the student and something about their home and life experiences so that decisions can be based on facts and not underlying biases. One teacher's comments summarizes this nicely. "I'm wondering (in my three years experience) if teachers mindsets are a factor. If you've predetermined in your mind that certain kids or races are limited or cannot achieve, it will impact how they teach them or not teach them. When you allow these prejudices or feelings to cloud your thinking, it can impact their futures."

#### *Nature vs. Nurture Debate*

The nature vs. nurture debate seemed to be another theme in my interviews. I had not anticipated these discussions to segue into attributing behaviors and human form to genetics or environmental influences. I was truly surprised when respondents would mention "genetics" or "nature v. nurture". Again, this seemed to be an effort to find something tangible and was consistent with the functionalist worldview. Personally, as a critical theorist, I would ascribe to the school of thought that states that a "complex mixture of genetics and environmental influences" impact behaviors and people" (Gould, p. 34).

It seems that those who ascribe to nurture or environmental influences only, feel that problems can be alleviated by manipulating or impacting those things that go on outside of school. Perhaps they believe if their students and families were not poor, or did not have to move around so much, we would not have so many in special education. This line of thinking could be accurate. Yet, even if we manipulated all environmental factors,

some genetic factors would come into play. This nurture perspective seemingly does not assign blame on the student but on the circumstances in which the student is born.

In sharp contrast is the nature perspective. Those who made statements about genetics being responsible for the problem of disproportionality are conveying that behaviors and intelligence are unchangeable. When teachers feels that a student is the way he/she is because of genetics, why would they even bother to teach them? If they did bother to teach, would they expect much from them? Would teachers' belief system and actions have an impact on the disparity issues? In most cases, yes. This line of thought is akin to racial prejudice with biological justification (Gould, 1996). Those who ascribe to this thought process "impose limits from without that are falsely identified as being within" (Gould, p. 50).

When these perspectives are combined to allow for both environmental and genetic influences, the teacher can be more open to have hope and see areas of opportunity to assist students. He or she is not constrained by thoughts of their work being fruitless. He or she can find ways to work within the limitations that their environments may have or their genes have imposed. The teachers' thinking is not "boxed-in" when they consider the various factors that may be involved or having influence on the students.

A major disqualifier for students under consideration for the disability category of ED is that social maladjustment related to environmental influences are not the cause of the problems exhibited in the academic setting. With this being said, staff beliefs that attribute the students' problems to environmental factors would potentially disqualify many students who are labeled ED. The fact that this theme evolved sheds light on a



possible reason for the over-representation of African American students in the ED category in this school district.

When considering social construction theory, the nature/nurture debate seems to be a way to justify our thinking. Educators may have had experiences or interactions that make them ascribe to one line of thought or the other. These ideas are social constructs rather than objective viewpoints. This consideration helps to illuminate a reason for disproportionality existing only in the judgemental categories.

*Problems Exist Within Organization vs Within Student*

A related theme that seemed to evolve was that of problems existing within the system or organization vs. within the student. Obviously, staff who attributed causes to nature, believe that the problem is within the student. It also seemed apparent that staff's racial perspectives on the student and family (poor, aggressive, transient, lack of supportive environments) would be consistent with the problem being within the student. One staff member commented that "students who don't care about their future or school" cause problems in the classroom. Another staff member stated, "...students who are not willing to challenge themselves" cause problems in the classroom. When staff attribute the problem as residing within the student, it absolves them of any responsibility. They can separate themselves and go on about their business. There is no ownership of outcomes, because the student is the one with the problem. This line of thinking may have implications for the problem of disproportionality in this district. If it is believed that the problem exists within the student, the referral for evaluation to determine disability is seen as the only option.

When staff members attributed problems to the system or the organization, they seemed to identify things that could make a difference. They spoke of “teaching styles” and “teacher expectations”; “General education teachers are not trained to teach/identify/adapt curriculum for special education students.”; “Lack of training for general educators in dealing with inflexible-explosive children”; “administrative support is not always present”; “lack of adequate books/materials”; “poor or non-existent curriculum”; “time”, “inadequate staffing levels”, and “money”. This perspective seemed to be more optimistic. It also seemed to show some ownership, in that staff felt if these problems were addressed improvements would be noted. These also seemed to be more tangible and staff were more comfortable with tangibles.

*Disconnect from the Process vs. Feeling Central to the Process*

In another related theme, some staff gave me the impression that they felt central to the process or very involved in what goes on in the schools, versus others who gave the impression of being disconnected from the process or provided responses that seemed as if what was going on was outside of their locus of control. If one feels central to what is going on, you feel some ownership and responsibility about the students and outcomes. Whereas, if you disconnect yourself, then it is someone else’s problem or concern. This may explain the expressed need for training and understanding of roles and responsibilities of general education vs. special education.

It seems that those who ascribe to nature or genetic causes, see the problem as residing within the student, and detach from the process. Feeling central to the process and connected to one’s role are similar to qualities that Ladson-Billings (1994) identifies as exemplary of culturally relevant teachers. She states that culturally relevant teachers

can be identified by the way they view themselves and others. Additionally, these teachers strongly identify with teaching. If a teacher has a poor opinion of themselves and their profession, the message that students receive is that what's going on here is unimportant. Subsequently, referrals and recommendations are made to special education, that could potentially be diminished through staff development, or more specifically education and training that addresses cultural differences.

For staff who are disconnected or don't feel central to the processes going on in the schools, their apathy helps to maintain the status quo. "I have minimal contact with special education teachers. It only occurs if I happen to hand deliver a document or issues with a student, then I may, but it's rare. They do their own thing." "I don't have a big role. It has become more inclusive. I am aware of IEPs and will often give a different test. Most often, however, they work with the special education teacher." They seem to accept the given as inevitable and carry on. They seem to perpetuate the notion that failure is inevitable for some students. This can again translate into an over-referral to special education that can be alleviated through education and training.

#### *Impact of Personal Experiences*

The next theme seemed to be the impact of personal experiences. Many respondents shared what their life experiences had been growing up or over the adult years that impacted their thoughts and responses. In some cases, these personal experiences help staff to feel connected and involved in the school processes. They have developed understandings that give their role purpose. In other cases, their life experiences prevent them from being concerned and cause a disconnect from school processes.

Staff whose personal experiences seemed to help them feel connected and have an understanding, spoke of growing up poor. One teacher stated, “I was raised in Wickliffe and we were poor and it was hard.” Another described his circumstances as similar to the students’. This association with students’ was limited to economics. “We were poor, don’t get me wrong. We moved 27 times by the time I was age 11!” He went on to qualify his position by stating that he had two parents in the home and education was a priority in their home.

Another respondent described her childhood situation as poor. She continued with a discussion about how class and the values and lifestyles associated with class are cyclical and impacted students. This particular respondent seemed to be insightful and very dedicated to her profession and self-enhancement to benefit students. Her responses about her role were connected and she sounded as if she was central to the processes.

A few of the staff members who had over 25 years experience in the field seemed disconnected from the processes and their role. These persons seemed discouraged in some ways. One described feeling as if the profession needed an overhaul, the other merely seemed cynical in his responses. But not all veterans expressed discouraging viewpoints. For example, a female respondent with over 25 years of experience seemed more optimistic. She attributed her positive outlook to a “good building leader” with “novel ideas”.

Life experiences impact our belief systems. In the school and classroom these beliefs help form our thoughts and ideas about students and learning problems. When these thoughts and ideas are negative, it can impact decision making and contribute to the problem of disproportionality.

### *Definitions and Labels as Problematic*

The issue of definitions and labels as problematic seemed to be a theme throughout. Some staff seemed to be clear about the various disability categories and definitions. Others seemed unclear or expressed confusion around this issue.

The fact that disproportionality occurs in the judgemental categories of ED, SLD, and CD, helps support the notion that disabilities are social constructs. This along with the confusion and unclear understandings by staff illustrate how we give meaning to concepts that are arbitrary. Bogden & Knoll (1988) discuss how professionals in special education and researchers can arrive at a definition and rate of disability based on one dimension of the concepts and attest to that being the “true” definition. The authors advance that “definitions are the product of the assumptions used and the concepts employed”(p. 463).

It is important to consider the interactional and situational nature of these disability categories. The influence of social pressures and structural forces in the schools impact how definitions are applied and addressed. “There are kids that are environmentally deprived and they look like SLD.” “Lower income students come with emotional baggage. This raises two questions for me: 1). Do we have competent way a competent way of diagnosing categories? And 2). Are the categories intelligently constructed?” “But they are identified early and the label stays with them.” “I think there is an overuse of ED when kids are really OHI. We are moving away from CD and pushing them into SLD. Kids are really CD & MH and we put them in SLD.” If we are not cognizant of the fact that personal and institutional biases determine what these labels mean and how they are applied, we may fall into the trap of believing that these terms are

unequivocally accurate and without discretion. As a result, we may unknowingly contribute to the over-representation of African-American students in the categories of ED and CD.

### *Utilization of Special Education as Solution*

A final theme that emerged from the data was that of special education being utilized as the solution when a student presents behavior or learning difficulties in the classroom. This seemed to occur when teachers spoke of the context of identification as well as state testing and accountability. Some teachers weren't even sure or did not communicate how students even get identified.

If teachers do not have an understanding of how students are identified, this is a problem. I believe the system is deficient when staff cannot verbalize how students are identified. This speaks to the arbitrary and biased nature of the process. If all staff are not educated, trained and re-trained, you are going to have discrepancies and disparities.

When staff spoke of state testing demands, it became clear that this has some impact on referrals to special education. One staff member even stated that if a child is unable to meet state standards, they may need special education. They stated that this inability to meet the standard could be used as an identification tool. I do not believe that state standards were developed to assess whether a student might have a disability. This again speaks to the biased nature of the identification process for special education. Teachers may need additional help to meet needs of students, but referring them to the evaluation team and advocating that something is wrong with the student, especially something as serious as a disability, is an injustice.

Mehan, Hertwick, & Meihls (1986) suggest that children's poor performance may be due to the way in which schooling is organized for students with different rates of learning as opposed to their lack of skills or abilities. This places the focus away from the student and places it on the school system. Our schools need to begin to examine our practices and fine tune these as a way to address disproportionality. This thinking is consistent with staff who wanted something tangible to help address the problems and believed it to be an organizational or system problem.

### *Research Questions*

The data I have compiled and the themes that emerged have helped answer my research questions. The practices, procedures and underlying beliefs of staff in this district contribute to the problem of disproportionality for African American students. The questions have been answered and the information has inspired me to continue pursuing this multifaceted issue.

*Question 1. Is there disparity in the representation of any specific racial group of students in the categories of CD, ED and SLD in special education in Euclid City Schools? If so, what is the nature of this disparity?*

Yes, there are disparity issues in this district. The manner in which I chose to calculate disproportionality was through the risk ratio. The risk ratio or odds ratio tells us the probability that a member of a particular racial group will be evaluated and/or placed in a specific disability category.

In the category of cognitive disability (CD), African American students were found to be 2.56 times more likely than white students to be evaluated and/or identified. This figure, though consistent with prior research, was shocking to me. This significant

over-representation was not only documented through this and prior research but also by the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) who cited the district for disproportionality in this category. The district must find ways to address this problem.

There are major negative consequences of identifying students as CD if this is not truly accurate. First, as described by a few respondents, students are typically identified early and the label stays with them. As a result, the student's potential may be limited. The student may not ever be given the opportunity to excel in any area because their services are now structured in such a way that the opportunities to be challenged are minimized. Second, the impact on identity and self-concept can be enormous. It may become a self-fulfilling prophecy that he/she cannot grasp concepts, so the student does not even try. The families may even "buy-in" to this thinking and will not challenge the student. Finally, the strain that could occur on society when these students enter adulthood is a negative consequence. They may need to be provided services into adulthood, thus becoming recipients as opposed to contributors to the economic base of society.

In the category of emotional disturbance (ED), African American students were 1.23 times more likely than their white counterparts to be evaluated and/or identified. This figure was surprising to me because I'd expected to find a higher ratio for this category, similar to the one above for CD. Although students are over-represented, the ratio is small. Nonetheless, this finding is consistent with previous cited research.

In the category of specific learning disability (SLD), white students were 1.12 times more likely than their African American counterparts to be evaluated and/or identified. This finding was unexpected. However, this finding is consistent with data for



the State of Ohio, as reported in Chapter II. African American students are underrepresented in the SLD category (Parrish, 2002). When considered in juxtaposition with the CD findings, this SLD ratio seems to indicate a predisposition, consciously or unconsciously, towards having whites labeled as SLD in this district. National data available in the mid -1990s indicated that African American students have been found to be under-represented in the category of SLD ( Warner, et al, 2002). However more recent national data shows African American students overrepresented in the SLD category (U.S. Department of Education, 2000).District level data indicating over-representation of whites was not obtained.

The factors that contribute to the disproportionate representation of certain racial groups in disability categories are many as has been pointed out. This research examined the impact of race and associated attitudes and beliefs. The following questions examine these issues closer in an attempt to understand disparities in this district.

*Question 2. How does the context and activities of the identification process currently in place for special education influence disproportionate representation of certain racial groups in the categories of CD, ED and SLD?*

Throughout the discussion of themes, it has been demonstrated that the context of the identification process and the activities involved in the identification process are ambiguous at times and involve staff's perceptions and understandings. These areas influence the problem of disproportionate representation. The ambiguity that was noted was in relation to race, definitions/labels, and the problem of disproportionality. The staff perceptions and understandings of their role, of the goals of special education, of the decision making process, and of the students has a large influence on how

disproportionality has become a problem for this district. Responses such as, "...I think every school depending on population [will have special education students]. I think the percentage will compare from district to district. Race does not impact this.", demonstrates that staff's perceptions and understandings literally dispute the notion of disproportionality.

When ambiguity exists for staff in any type of organization, problems will be encountered. The first area of noted ambiguity was the race issue. The staff seemed to initially want to avoid the issue of race. When they did speak of race, they did not see race as culture. Thereby, not acknowledging the students for who they are. Our prejudices about race will influence our thoughts and beliefs if we do not get to know individual students and affirm their race.

The second area of ambiguity was around definitions and labels. First, staff are not always clear about what the definitions and labels are and how or when they are applied. Second, these definitions and labels seem to be like gospel for some. In other words, the staff does not question these definitions and labels. They see the categories as objective, when they are really subjective.

The third area of ambiguity is around the word "disproportionality". Because there are different formulas for calculating disproportionality there will be confusion. Many staff persons stated, "this district is majority African American, so naturally you'll have more African Americans in special education". This rationale simplifies the issues and negates examining our practices to see where we can make changes.

Staff's perception of their role also has an impact on the problem of disproportionate representation. As stated previously, their belief system and behaviors

can be gleaned from these perceptions. Staff who give the impression of being disconnected from what they do or have confusion about their role are not capable of making appropriate decisions or judgements. When these decisions and judgements affect student identity formation and subsequent life paths, we need to become very concerned and active in implementing changes.

Along these same lines, perceptions about the goals of special education also impact the disproportionate representation problem. Over half of the respondents were either non-committal or felt that the goals were not met in this district. Everyone seemed to have an understanding of the basic premises of special education but no consensus was demonstrated. An understanding of where we're headed with special education efforts is necessary if we are to ever meet this goal.

In relation to the decision-making process, there seems to be a lack of clarity about who is involved. All staff should feel a part of the process. If some are excluded and others are seen as the experts, the result will be disproportionate representation. Those who are excluded feel disconnected and show no ownership for what occurs. Those who are seen as experts believe the process is objective and don't consider input from all staff and parents.

Finally, staffs' perceptions of students impacts the problem of disproportionality in this district. Students are seen as "poor", "aggressive", "lacking a positive home environment", and "transient". Staff can become hopeless when they perceive their students in this way. These issues are not ones that staff can readily impact. The staff's beliefs and attitudes then perpetuate the notion of failure and the status quo is maintained.

A major problem with this line of thinking is that the notion of “poor” is relative and may only apply to a small percentage of the students and families in Euclid if we consider the Census data statistics from 2000. We must be clear when we speak of “poor” and “poverty”. What one person may think of may be quite different from the next person. If we refer to families that are eligible for “free and reduced meals”, does this equate to “poor” or in “poverty”? Is this the same as poverty guidelines established by the federal government?

*Question 3. How do racial differences among staff, and between staff and students influence special education decision making and service delivery in Euclid City Schools?*

The majority of the teaching staff (87%) in Euclid City Schools is white. Only 12% of the teaching staff is African American. For this research, 73% (19) of the staff interviewed are white and 27% (7) are African American. In stark contrast is the student population. The majority of the students are African American (69.8%). Only 24.6% of the students are white.

The racial make-up of the sample staff members closely resembles that of the entire school staff. There were more African American represented in the sample than are represented across all teachers in the school district. This is probably related to bias on the part of this researcher.

The only area throughout the questionnaires and interviews where racial differences were noted in the responses given was when staff spoke of their role. Over one-half (4) of the African American teachers expressed feeling central to the processes that occur in the school and connected to those processes. The majority of respondents who felt this same way (8) were intervention specialists and a school psychologist.

Of the 11 respondents who depicted a disconnect from the process, nine were white, and seven were general education teachers. The staff positions have implications that will be discussed later. The responses by race have a great impact on decision making and service delivery.

The issue of whites being over-represented in the category of SLD seems related to staff's underlying beliefs, attitudes and perceptions. One staff stated, "...we're moving away from CD and pushing them into SLD". "Kids are really CD & MH and we put them in SLD". Because the White students in Euclid are more likely to be evaluated and identified as SLD, the issue of racial bias seems apparent. White teachers and staff in this district are making decisions that overwhelmingly portray African Americans students as mentally retarded (CD) and White students as having an average intellect with a discrepancy in ability caused by other factors (SLD).

It seems that racial differences between staff and students as well as between staff members may be attributing to the disconnect. As pointed out earlier, how teachers perceive themselves and others impacts relationships and effectiveness with students. The disconnect that teachers experience is in turn experienced by the students. This is how the impact of biases affect practice. Teachers must strive to develop importance for the student as an individual. If teachers can find the humanity and dignity in their students, they may feel more positive about their role and subsequently achieve better outcomes.

Murrell (2002) found a disconnect between what teachers value and what they actually do. He advances an African-centered pedagogy which looks at the systems of practice in which the teacher has a central role. "This permits the specification of culturally relevant practice not just in terms of individual teacher's thoughts, values and

actions, but also in terms of human systems of productive interaction where positive student outcomes are manifest in their performance over time” (p. 15).

### *Implications*

The findings of this research have many implications for this district as well as other districts struggling with similar problems. The implications are for the individuals as well as the organization. Implications for individual perspectives, as addressed earlier included: facing racism and its influence in the classroom; understanding underlying beliefs and opinions about families and students; understandings and perceptions about role and education of all students. The remaining implications are structural and impact organizations.

This research indicates that training and education for staff in Euclid City Schools is imperative. Training must focus on our system and practices. We must change the focus from “the student with a problem” to “the school system with a problem”.

Training should address the notion of “team” in the schools. Everyone including students and parents are a part of the team. The team should not be a “fixed” group of people who are seen as “experts”. The majority of staff who feel connected to the work are intervention specialists and a school psychologist. This should not be the case.

As discussed in Chapter II, Donovan and Cross (2002) suggests that schools should be doing more and doing it earlier, while students are in general education to address the issue of disproportionality. The findings from the current research would indicate that this is the direction that Euclid City Schools should take as well. Gravois & Rosenfield (2006) have done research on Instructional Consultation (IC) Teams. These teams work differently from the Intervention Assistance Teams required by law under

IDEA. The goal of their model is to “create and maintain student success within the general education environment by supporting the classroom teacher” (p. 45). This method seeks to improve student achievement through improving teachers performance. Their study examined data on referral and placement patterns of minority students. Utilizing risk indices and odds ratio, the researchers compared schools with the use of IC teams to schools without the IC teams. After two years, the schools with the IC teams had a close to 50 % decrease in the odds of a minority student being referred and placed in special education. In other words, the problem of disproportionality can be addressed with such a model. The focus of intervention is the quality of instruction and intervention provided to students. The focus is taken off the student as having a problem.

Implementation of a program such as IC teams can also address the mandate under IDEA (2004) for districts to show response to intervention (RTI). This mandate requires districts to demonstrate baseline data for how students are achieving. Follow-up data is then required that demonstrates how instructional changes have impacted student performance. All of this is required prior to referral to special education.

An adoption by this school district of an African-centered pedagogy (as advanced by Murrell (2002)), and instructional consultation teams as developed by Gravois & Rosenfield (2006) would possibly address the difficulties that staff described for themselves with their role and goals. Staff that believe problems are within the organization would be open to both these initiatives. These practical solutions could have tremendous effects on teachers and students. “Individual excellence in culturally responsive teaching can only become collective tradition when the contexts in which

teachers practice and learn are able to support, sustain and expect culturally responsive practice” (Klingner, et al, p.9).

Additional training and education efforts should focus on special education. Specifically, staff spoke of receiving little to no training in special education laws. The staff who are school psychologists and intervention specialists were mostly abreast of the laws. Again, all staff should be aware. There is a pervasive sense of “us vs. them” in this district. Not only should education and training efforts focus on the laws, but on the definitions and labels also. Staff should understand what these labels and categories mean for the student. Greater understanding and training around these issues along with system-wide initiatives, will impact the problem of disproportionate representation.

Another implication from this research is in the area of Human Resources. Efforts should be made to attract and retain African-American teachers. Culturally responsive teaching does not always come from teachers with the same cultural background as the students they are teaching. However, there are many benefits, including an impact on disproportionality, to having culturally and linguistically diverse teachers and staff (Blanchett & Shealey, 2005; Salend, et al, 2002; Serwatka, et al, 1995).

Implications of this research should also be insightful to city officials in Euclid, Ohio. The city of Euclid has been found guilty of violating the federal Voting Rights Act. The city’s system of electing City Council members has been found to discriminate against the growing number of black voters (Guevara & Atassi, 2007). These



developments are relevant to the purposes of this research because urban schools are impacted by city politics and dynamics (Blanchett, et al, 2005). The implications of this research for the city of Euclid is that when policies and practices negatively impact any members of a community or organization, then those policies and practices should be examined and changed, if necessary, for the benefit of the greater good.

Finally this research has implications for Schools of Education at colleges and universities. All teachers need/require training around special education. If all teachers have training in this area, decisions will not be placed on the “expert” few. Implications of special education, with its labels and categories can be taken more seriously. Colleges and universities would also be helpful in supporting efforts by local school districts to address disproportionality. Support in the form of assisting with research to determine effectiveness of programs aimed at diminishing the disparities would be practical.

### *Limitations*

This research, like all research is not without limitations. The first limitation is related to the applicability of findings to other districts. Caution should be utilized to ensure that characteristics (staff and student racial composition and numbers, income levels and other community demographics) of districts are the same or similar.

Another limitation of the current research is in relation to participants. This research used interviews and questionnaires with teaching staff and school psychologists. Perspectives of students and parents may offer additional insights.

Finally, this research is limited by the researchers own opinions and biases. I have attempted to address these when I was cognizant of their impact. All interpretations are mine and should be attributed as such.

### *Conclusion*

In this research, I have attempted to explore a very complex phenomena through interviews and questionnaires with people who are central to the processes that occur. The issue of disproportionate representation of African American students in special education has been examined in this local school district to elicit biases and procedures that impact the numbers. Staff have identified and revealed personal and professional tendencies that impact disproportionality.

As a critical researcher, it is imperative to push for action around this issue. To know that our practices in the school system are biased and do nothing about them would be a travesty. It is my hope that district officials will take these findings and suggestions and implement changes.

This research has been helpful in identifying the beliefs and practices that may be influencing the problem. The problem of disproportionality has been around a long time and efforts to address the issue have not been successful. Current research suggests that special education and general education attempt to address the problems together (Blanchett & Shealey, 2005; Klingner, et al, 2005).

Klingner, et al (2005) advance that “to be fruitful, efforts to address disproportionality must cut across three interrelated domains: policies, practices and people” (p. 10). The implications already suggested for this school district will do just that. This is not an easy task but it is a necessary one.

A focus on education for all students is mandated. The mindsets of teachers can be altered by educating and supporting them through change. Teachers may want to be effective but have not been given the necessary “tools” to do so. The community of Euclid has changed drastically. The teaching staff however has not. They need new “tools” to do the jobs for which they were trained.

Given the data generated from this research, it would be interesting to examine a historical analysis that investigates the percentage of students identified for special education in this school district when the majority of students who attended the schools were white. Additional research in this area should be completed on the school district level in other cities. Research in Ohio districts who face similar and additional challenges would add to the knowledge base. Also, research that examines effectiveness of strategies that are being utilized to impact the problem of disproportionate representation in special education are warranted.

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Publications.

**-APPENDIX A-**

**Interview Questions**

**Job Title**\_\_\_\_\_

- 1). Tell me about your role in working with students in special education.**
  
- 2). How are students identified for special education in Euclid Schools?**
  
- 3). Do you think more African-Americans are identified than White students?  
( ) YES ( ) NO Why or Why not? Explain.**
  
- 4). Do you think race impacts Special Education? ( ) YES ( ) NO Why or Why not?**
  
- 5). What do you see as the goal(s) of Special Education? Do we meet that/those goals?**

**I will now provide the interviewee with my data on risk ratio and our student population.**

- 6). Are there any factors that you feel impact the numbers of students we see in Special Education? Please explain.**

- 7). Is there any additional information you would like to share with me today about Special Education in Euclid City Schools?**

**Thank You.**

**-APPENDIX B-**

**Questionnaire**

**Directions: Please answer all questions with as much detail as possible. Provide explanations where indicated. Please use additional paper, if necessary. You can return this questionnaire to me today or send through inter-office mail within 48 hours of our interview. Thank you in advance for participating.**

**Job Title**\_\_\_\_\_

**Age**\_\_\_\_\_

**Gender**\_\_\_\_\_

**Race**\_\_\_\_\_

**Grade Levels you work with**\_\_\_\_\_

**Years in Education Field**\_\_\_\_\_

**1). What behaviors or classroom work habits do students display that may indicate a problem that requires special education support? In other words, what would a student be doing or not doing that would make you think they may need Special Education Services?**

**2). Does the number of students in your classroom have an effect on your thoughts or responses to question #1? ( )YES ( )NO Please explain.**

**3). Do you wait a certain amount of time before you ask for help with a student? ( ) YES ( ) NO Please explain.**

**4). When do you contact a parent about a student's problem?**

**5). How does special education help a student?**

**6). What do you see as contributing factors to problems in the classroom? Please explain.**

**7). Does standards-based instruction and the climate of testing and accountability impact whether you think a student needs special education services? ( ) YES ( ) NO Please Explain.**

**8). Have you ever written an IEP? ( ) YES ( ) NO Have you ever collaborated on writing an IEP? ( ) YES ( ) NO If yes, when you write IEPs, do you use a standard format for students with the same disability? Please describe.**

**How long after meeting a student is the IEP written?**

**9). Are you aware of special education laws? ( ) YES ( ) NO If yes, how did you learn about these laws?**

**-APPENDIX C-**

**Informed Consent**

My name is Charlotte D. Ivey. I am a doctoral candidate at Cleveland State University and I am doing research on Special Education in Euclid City Schools. Through this research I hope to gain information on the identification process and services to students once identified. I am asking you to take part in an interview and complete a questionnaire. The interview will take approximately 20-30 minutes and the questionnaire should take 10-15 minutes. Although I will be aware of your responses, when coding and reporting the data, I will only identify responses by job title, age, sex and gender. Your identity will be kept confidential.

The questions call for brief responses. Please be honest and open with your thoughts. The sharing of some of this information may be uncomfortable for you. If this is the case, and you do not want to proceed, simply inform me and I will remove you from my data. This is the only foreseeable risk to you associated with this research.

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. If, at any time, you wish to withdraw from the research, you are free to do so.

Please sign the following paragraph:

I have read and understand the information that has been provided regarding the procedure, my tasks, and the risks that may be involved in this research project. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time. I understand that if I have any questions about my rights as a research subject, I may contact the Cleveland State University Institutional Review Board at (216) 687-3630, or that I may contact Dr. Jim Carl at (216) 523-7303 or Charlotte Ivey at (216) 491-1735.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date