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Between Bleakness and Hope in a Large Urban School District Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in Special Education

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BETWEEN BLEAKNESS AND HOPE IN A LARGE URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT:
CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN URBAN EDUCATION

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my grandparents, Benjamin and Delois Williams. Thank you for planting in me the *seeds of hope*. I also dedicate this work to my daughter, Kalilah: you remind me that hope never disappoints us. You make me proud. I love you.

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I give honor and glory to The Lord, His faithfulness and mercy are everlasting! Thank you Lord for allowing me to complete this journey, I am humbled. As I end this season and enter the next, I ask the Lord to guide me in His truth and faithfulness.

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BETWEEN BLEAKNESS AND HOPE: INEQUITY IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

KAMILAH WILLIAMS

ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study explored the experience of teachers in special education settings within an urban district in the Midwest. The particular emphasis of the study was to attend to efforts used by teachers to address the issue of equality of opportunity in special education settings serving low-income students of color. Using a case study approach, the research explored what barriers teachers see as getting in the way of equal educational opportunity and how teachers reduce barriers of inequality for their students. In particular, the study looked at the ways in which educators facilitate equality by creating opportunities for students to use their voice and become engaged in their learning. Data collection methods included semi-structured interviews and a focus group with a small group of teachers in special education. The results from this qualitative analysis suggest that teachers act as agents of change in providing resources and attending to the social, emotional, and physical needs of their students. As teachers worked for students' academic success in designing interventions for students and school environments, they authentically empowered both themselves and the youth. Study findings also reveal the persistence of home, community, and school barriers, and the need for school systems to address in concert economic and educational inequity. This research has implications for pre-service teacher education programs, policy, and educational practice.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

My Story

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, that whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to affect their Safety and Happiness”
(United States Declaration of Independence).

I have often wondered about “the dream” which Langston Hughes refers to in his 1951 poem, *Harlem*. Could he have been referring to the “American dream”; attainable by all Americans? While history has shown many instances of inequality, I remained hopeful that the unalienable rights including the pursuit of Happiness, professed in the United States Declaration of Independence, was my dream; my right. As a high school student, I thought, like Hughes, whether the American Dream was like a *raisin in the sun* or did it *fester like a sore*? In March of, 1991 I watched news footage of Rodney King, an African American male, being beaten by police in the streets of Los Angeles. I was horrified by this brutality in these United States and I immediately drew a connection between the viciousness of 1991 and the inhumanness detailed during the Civil Rights

Movement. Conversations with family members revealed harsh details of their personal experiences while trying to achieve their American dreams, causing me to question whether or not I could turn my dream into a reality.

As my teacher on that afternoon spoke of the statistics of varying demographic groups, Rodney King's words, "Why can't we all just get along!" resonated in my mind. I began listening intently when he stated the statistics for African Americans. Every statistic that he mentioned was negative. I thought, "Is this how people view African Americans?"

I heard stories retold through music (hip hop) detailing police brutality, but I had not witnessed such things personally. The stories that were chronicled by artists were controversial and many times the albums were banned. After viewing this video of Rodney King, I realized that the music may have been banned in an effort to mute the voice of young African Americans and keep other people from knowing what was going on. I wondered if our voices matter. Does my voice count?

There were critical people in my development that helped formulate the lens through which I view the world. In particular members of my family, who were my greatest influence, provided the support and resources necessary for success and the awareness of my history to guide my future plans. My grandparents both graduated from a historically black college in Mississippi. Living in the Jim Crow South, they were very familiar with racism, but they learned how to be successful in spite of the obstacles. They were able to stand on the shoulders of their ancestors who paved the way for them and future generations. My grandfather brought our family to Cleveland because he received a scholarship to Western Reserve University (now known as Case Western Reserve

University). Upon graduating from Western Reserve University in 1957, he remained in Cleveland because of the job opportunities. My grandparents ensured that my mother and uncles graduated from college, in the fields of education and business. The encouragement and support that I received from my family, created a sense of self-confidence and resiliency. More importantly, my family modeled its expectations and provided the tools necessary to be successful as a minority in the United States of America. Through this lens I was able to envision and create my own dream that would not be deferred.

As a result of extended conversations with my family, I realized that in order to be successful, American culture preferred that individuals use the values and morals of the mainstream culture. Individuals that chose not to follow the dominant culture tended to become stagnant. Existing social structures such as schools may desire individuals who would assist in maintaining social order, which included maintaining the capitalist structure. Individuals who thought or existed outside of the norm tended to be excluded. I knew that if I obtained an education, regardless of how someone felt about me, they could not take education away from me.

The realization after the Rodney King beating and police verdict, as well as graduating from high school and college, helped me develop tenacity to weather the storm and still stand. These experiences challenged me to excel in education and the workforce. In particular I began to examine the world critically, investigating the interplay of race, gender and social economic status on all areas of my life. The realization that disenfranchised groups have dual worlds with dual rules helped me learn

how to successfully navigate the mainstream culture, while maintaining a sense of self. The question then became how could I give to others what was given to me?

I became an educator so that I could give back to my community. The more I learned about the public educational system, the more cognizant I became of the magnitude of inequality in urban education. As a special education teacher of predominantly African American children in a public educational system, I have witnessed holds being placed on my students. The hold spoken of earlier with the illustration of Rodney King was physical, but what I have observed in the educational system is a psychological hold that is more difficult to break. Too many of the students, particularly those with special needs, come into my school with limited literacy skills, which ultimately increased their potential to join the ranks of lower income adults or to remain in lower socio-economic status, drop out of high school, even to be incarcerated.

Overview

Contemporary mainstream educational systems, special education systems, as well as the fabric of the United States social structures, facilitate the reproduction of the patterns of inequality (Apple, 2011). The patterns perpetuated in the foundation of the country have become a part of the status quo and the contribution to inequitable structures within which mainstream institutions prevails. American history is steeped with exclusionary and oppressive practices against students of color, including but not limited to slavery, segregation, civil injustices, and educational inequalities (Anyon, 1997; Spring, 2007; Woodson, 1990). These practices are sustained in the complex structures of the current educational system (Apple, 2011; Beachum, Blachett, & Mumford, 2005; Kozol, 1991).

This history of exclusion within the U.S. educational system has contributed to the barriers students of color face in education. This is evident by the achievement gap between white students and students of color as well as poor, middle class and affluent students. For example, on average, African American students achieve below national norms as early as first grade (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998, p. 68). According to Mau and Lynn (1999), there are racial and ethnic differences in the average educational achievement of students in the United States. This educational discrepancy in academic performance among African American students in comparison to middle class white students is significant (Hosp & Reschly, 2004). The gap progressively widens after the first grade, continuing into adulthood. In particular, “The latest National Research Council report confirmed, again, that learners from historically underserved groups are disproportionately represented in high incidence categories” (Artiles, Kozleski, Osher, Ortiz, & Trent, 2010, p. 280). The fact that African Americans have been historically denied equal access to the public educational system raises concern about their education within programs guided by equity-minded laws, such as special education (Blanchett, 2006; Hosp & Reschly, 2004). Beachum, Blanchett and Mumford (2006) asserted, “For many African Americans and some poor students, special education has become a form of segregation from the mainstream” (p. 25). Are students of color indeed receiving equal access in special education?

Purpose

The purpose of the study was to explore the experience of teachers in special education classrooms in a Midwestern urban school district. The study attended to efforts by teachers used to address the issue of equality of opportunity in special education

settings serving low-income students of color. The study looked closely at what barriers teachers see as getting in the way of equal educational opportunity and how teachers reduce barriers of inequality for their students. In particular, the study looked at the ways in which educators facilitate equality by creating opportunities for students to use their voice and become engaged in their learning. Further, the study explored how inequality might persist in special education and how teachers might address it. The study also examined what teachers perceive as structures utilized to reach equal educational opportunities. It is the contention of the researcher that the overrepresentation of students of color has been a manifestation of inequality in the urban public schools.

Statement of the Problem

The history of inequity in public education and the current persistence of inequality have limited the full potential of judicial rulings and laws, such as The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) and the procedural safeguards and principles set forth by IDEA were put in place to create an equitable education system for all learners. However, the persistence of racism and the misinterpretation of cultural expression and behavior have contributed to the disproportional representation of students of color within special education (Blanchett, 2006). The *Brown* ruling and the IDEA law are designed to facilitate equality. Something has gone awry in the way in which IDEA is carried out, given the disproportional representation of students of color who have been categorized as special needs. Gravois and Rosenfeld (2006) asserted, “Disproportionate placement generally refers to the representation of a particular group of students at a rate different than that found in the general population” (p. 42). The United States Department of

Education Office of Civil Rights has documented patterns of disproportionality every year since 1968 (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Hosp & Reschly, 2004). Chung, Cuadrado, Gibb, Rausch, Ritter, Skiba, and Simmons (2008) posited, “At the national level, African-American students account for 33% of students identified as mentally retarded, clearly discrepant from their representation in the school age population of 17%” (p. 267). Cross and Donovan (2002) asserted that at a national level, “. . . 2.64% of all African Americans enrolled in public schools are identified as having mental retardation (MR)” (Chung, Cuadrado, Gibb, Rausch, Ritter, Skiba, & Simmons, 2008, p. 267).

The promises of the enactment of educational policies and laws on the battleground for equity have influenced the landscape of education and special education in a number of ways. However, it is imperative to understand the backdrop on which past proceedings were formulated. Well before the enactment IDEA, the demand for equality in education was part of education litigation. *Roberts v. City of Boston* (1850) instituted the doctrine of “separate but equal” in education in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. The courts ruled to deny Sarah Roberts, a five-year-old African American student, access to school with white students that offered more desirable facilities. Separate but equal was expanded to public education in the aftermath of the decision of *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) (Cushner, 2000; Spring, 2007).

Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (1954) marked the first step towards access to equitable schooling and was the most significant ruling in American history in the battle for equitable educational opportunity. In the case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954), the United States Supreme Court recognized the importance of providing all children with an appropriate education. Moreover, the court relied on the

Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment to justify the decision to overturn *Plessy* and educate African Americans in the same school system as whites. *Brown* (1954), unequivocally, is the cornerstone on which all subsequent legal developments protecting the rights of disenfranchised and marginalized groups are grounded (Cushner, 2000; Spring, 2005). Hence, it is not surprising that the precedence of *Brown* (1954) informed a number of early special education cases.

A line of legislation that began in 1965 culminated in P.L. 94-142, The Education for all Handicapped Children Act of 1975. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) was the first legislation to be passed that addressed the education of poor children. The act provided a comprehensive framework for addressing the inequitable educational opportunity for children from low socio-economic backgrounds. This act also provided the framework upon which early special education legislation was drafted (Underwood & Mead, 1995).

In 1975, Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, was signed into law. This legislation contained mandatory provisions providing free and appropriate public education for all children ranging from ages 3-18 and it ensured the following: due process rights, the implementation of an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), education in the least restrictive environment, parental involvement in the educational decisions related to their children with disabilities, and fair, accurate, and non biased evaluations (Chinn & Gollnick, 2009, pp. 168-169). This legislation changed the face of public education in America. Prior to this legislation nearly half of the nation's students with disabilities were not receiving a publicly supported education (Gollnick & Chinn, 2009, p. 170).

In 1990 President George H. W. Bush signed Public Law 101-336, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), into law. This legislation ensured the right of individuals with disabilities to nondiscriminatory treatment in other aspects of their lives (Hallahan, Kauffman, & Pullen, 2009, p. 28). It provided protections of civil rights in specific areas of employment, transportation, public accommodations, state and local government, and telecommunications. Additionally, the reauthorization of IDEA (1997), called for continued support to help children with disabilities. The major provisions of IDEA (1997) stated that each state and locality must have a plan to ensure the following: a) identification, b) Free, Appropriate Public Education (FAPE), c) due process, d) parent/guardian surrogate consultation, e) least restrictive environment, f) individualized education program, g) nondiscriminatory evaluation, h) confidentiality, and i) personnel development and in-service (Chinn & Gollnick, 2009, pp. 170-171). On December 3, 2004, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was reauthorized and signed into law. In particular, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2004) Part B regulations focused on several critical issues, including the following: a) discipline, b) disproportional representation of minorities, c) early intervening services (EIS), d) evaluation and reevaluation, e) funding, f) highly qualified teacher (HQT), g) identification of special learning disabilities, h) individualized education program (IEP), i) monitoring and enforcement, and j) national instructional materials accessibility standard (NIMAS). The enforcement of IDEIA (2004) required a substantial financial base and it recognized the distribution of funds as a complex and in depth procedure. Despite legislation, amendments, and refinements, many aspects of IDEIA (2004)

remained a concern, particularly the lack of funding. Chinn and Gollnick (2009) posited the following:

Congress itself is part of the problem. It has mandated extensive provisions for children with disabilities. Many of these are time and staff intensive, and expensive to implement. Congress, however, has failed to meet its fiscal obligations to make IDEA fully viable. Yet, school districts are required to implement expensive mandates without promised fiscal support. Thus when many states and school districts are experiencing budget shortfalls, special education can be a challenge for educators to find necessary resources (p. 172).

Most importantly to this study, IDEIA (2004) made significant changes in how states and LEAs addressed the disproportionate number of students of color, poor students, and English language learners in special education. In particular, Part B regulations required a more extensive scan for instances of disproportionality, more extensive remedies, and a focus on personnel preparation models to ensure appropriate placement and services for all students. IDEIA (2004) mandated that if a determination of significant disproportionality was found, a review should be provided in addition to revisions of policies, procedures and practices, in an effort to ensure compliance with the requirements of IDEIA (2004). Additionally, IDEIA (2004) stipulated that when states identified significant disproportionality, they must require LEAs to reserve the maximum amount of funds for the site where disproportionality exists. However, many times states are required to implement the reauthorization for the improvement of programs without ample funding.

The use of unfunded mandates in special education to implement judicial rulings and laws as a means to rectify the overrepresentation of students of color gave the same results. By illuminating inequality in such rulings and laws, one can explore other avenues to address the disproportionate representation of students of color in special education settings. This research focused on inequality in special education, which has limited the full potential of judicial rulings and laws, such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The study explored the experience of teachers in special education settings. It focused on efforts used by teachers to address the issue of equality of opportunity in special education settings. The study looked closely at what barriers teachers see as getting in the way of equal educational opportunity and how teachers reduce barriers of inequality for their students. In particular, the study looked at the ways in which educators facilitated equality by creating opportunities for students to use their voice and become engaged in their learning.

Theoretical Framework

To conceptualize why the reform efforts of the public school system have not always delivered increased academic achievement, this study was guided by social reproduction theory as an overarching theoretical framework with attention to cultural capital and relations of power. Social reproduction theorists attempt to unravel why there is minimum social mobility for certain sectors of the population. According to the social reproduction theory (MacLeod, 1995), social relations of capitalist societies are reproduced invariably at one site—the school. Schools actually reinforce social inequality while presuming to do the opposite. MacLeod (1995) noted that Bowles and Gintis

(1976) conclude that schools train the wealthy to take positions at the top of the economic ladder and condition the disadvantaged to accept their lower class status.

Bowles and Gintis (1976) described the correspondence principle, which highlights the similarities between the social relations of production and personal interactions in the schools. These social theorists argued that strong structural similarities can be seen in the following: a) the organization of power and authority in school and the work place, b) students' lack of control of curriculum and workers' lack of control in their jobs, c) the role of grades at school and the role of wages at work, and d) competition among students and competition among workers. By examining the similarities of the school and the work place, Bowles and Gintis (1976) displayed how both settings work to maintain the social order. The wealthy remain at the upper tier and the poor remain at the lower tier. In other words, the policies and practices within schools maintain the advantages of the wealthy, who sustain networks with other actors who share similar attributes, high status-positions, or social backgrounds, which serve as capital in ensuring success. In this manner, cultural capital plays a role in social reproduction.

The concept of cultural capital was developed by Pierre Bourdieu (1977) as part of a larger framework that analyzed the reproduction of class as cultural formations—based on power and privilege. The study of cultural capital examines how culture impacts processes of inequality. In Bourdieu's schema, cultural capital was the focal point of cultural reproduction. This dynamic model emphasized the importance of three forms of capital: social, economic, and cultural. Cultural capital generally refers to cultural background, knowledge and skills that are passed from one generation to the next

(Bourdieu, 1977; Lareau, 2003). In mainstream institutions, cultural capital of the most value reflects the values of the dominant class. For example, Reese (2005) contended that modern schools were formed for nation building and socialization of the young. Students from privileged backgrounds enter school with advantages in these areas and are rewarded for this type of aptitude. Schools are not culturally neutral, and students from low socio-economic backgrounds are disadvantaged by their lack of cultural capital. Therefore, this lack of cultural capital may impact their academic achievement, which may also play a role in the overrepresentation of minorities in special education.

Three particular aspects of cultural capital as originated by Bourdieu and modified by Lareau (2003) make it an appropriate and compelling framework for examining the mechanisms underlying group disparities in educational outcomes. First, cultural capital is noted as being passed from one generation to the next, which is a critical component. If students are not taught explicitly how to gain valuable cultural capital, they will lag behind. For example, Lareau (2003) found that working class students, both African American and White, lacked linguistic cultural capital to navigate the educational system. This is in contrast to, the students of the upper tier who knew how to navigate the educational system.

Secondly, in addition to the school system systematically valorizing upper class cultural capital and depreciating the cultural capital of the lower class, there is a privileging of students by race. Hence, children are rewarded for meeting institutional standards and proficiencies that are heavily influenced by class and race. Thus the students' success cannot be completely attributed to their quantifiable performance. For example, in Lee's (2005) study of the Hmong children in the context of the school and in response to school

experiences, the standard for excellence and good citizenship that teachers and staff used to gauge students was closely related to whiteness. Lee (2005) asserted that “Whiteness is associated with economic self-sufficiency, independence, and self-discipline, while blackness is associated with welfare, dependency, failure, and depravity” (p. 3). Lee further stated, “Specifically, whiteness is associated with all that is obstinately good about America and ‘being American’” (p. 4). Consequently, the Hmong children, when striving for excellence, in essence were striving to obtain qualities of their white counterparts. Similarly Obidah and Teel (2001) found that the lens in which individuals view others affects our perceptions of others. Moreover, when Teel (2001) reflected on her own beliefs and misconceptions, she found that she used the dominant culture as the standard or excellence and cultural differences were viewed negatively. Hence, the dominant culture does not have to quantify their performance because they are the standard for excellence. Test scores normally compare one group to another and the standard comparison is to the dominant culture. This reflects how relations of power operate within educational institutions. The final aspect of cultural capital that informs my theoretical framework includes the attitudes, preferences, and practices that are learned throughout the socialization process. The work of Delpit (1988) discusses some of the practices as well as a means to make visible for poor students and students of color the capital associated with middle class schooling.

Delpit’s (1988) *The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other’s Children* proposed a solution, which is to understand the “silenced dialogue” of marginalized groups. In the development of a theory of what Delpit termed “the culture

of power” five complex themes are elicited. First, the classroom replicates the power structures of society.

These issues include: the power of the teacher over the students; the power of the publishers of textbooks and of the developers of the curriculum to determine the view of the world presented; the power of the state in enforcing compulsory schooling; and the power of an individual or group to determine another’s intelligence or “normalcy.” Finally, if schooling prepares people for jobs, and the kind of job a person has determines her or his economic status and therefore, power, then schooling is ultimately related to power (p. 283).

The second dimension of power relates to the rules of engagement required for participation in the schooling realm. In particular, Delpit referred to the “...linguistic forms, communicative strategies, and presentation of self...” (p. 283). Those who are able to navigate the culture tend to have more power. Third, Delpit noted that the culture of power is based on ways of thinking and communicating from those in power - the upper and middle classes. The students sent to school in the upper and middle class carry codes of power with them.

The fourth element according to Delpit (1988) is an essential task for teachers to explicitly teach the rules necessary for engagement:

If you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of the culture makes acquiring power easier. In my work within and between diverse cultures, I have come to conclude that members of any culture transmit information implicitly to co-members.

However, when implicit codes are attempted across cultures, communication frequently breaks down (p. 283).

Finally, Delpit (1988) underscored how disenfranchised groups are often aware of the existence of power, whereas, those with power are least willing or least aware of its reality. Delpit (1988) suggested that students of color be taught explicitly the codes necessary to participate in American social structures, in conjunction with the power structures that comprise these complex structures. Moreover, students should be helped to see their value and acknowledge their own “expertness” as well. A teacher may address cultural capital and support students in coming to understand the rules of the culture of power, and a teacher may assign explicit value to the culture of the children—perhaps the use of culturally relevant pedagogy, multicultural education, and/ or the encouragement of voice among children. Delpit (1988) posited that reform efforts created for marginalized students should be developed in collaboration with adults who share their culture.

In summary, this study utilized two key areas within the literature to inform its theoretical framework. First, it included *social reproduction* as an important element in the study that attempted to capture the experience of teachers in special education settings in an urban district, exploring the ways in which educational institutions may reproduce social inequality. The study recognized that students with special needs in urban settings may be particularly vulnerable due to their need for accommodations and resources within school systems that are generally under-resourced. Second, the study drew on the literature of *culturally responsive pedagogy* as critical to understanding how teachers respond to barriers in their experience that may be related to the social reproduction of

inequality. A more complete discussion of *culturally responsive pedagogy* will proceed in Chapter 2. In particular, the study was interested in exploring efforts used by teachers to address the issue of equality of opportunity in special education settings. This second dimension of the theoretical framework revealed teacher practices, which were explicit in giving students the tools necessary to navigate the educational system. Possessing and activating cultural capital can lead to important advantages and greater access to resources and well–designed special education. In particular, what advantages were gained by students of color in special education with teachers that employed greater cultural capital?

Research Questions

In order to explore the experiences of teachers and students in special education settings, the following questions will guide the study:

1. What is the experience of teachers in special education settings within a large urban district?
2. What does their experience suggest concerning barriers to equal educational opportunity in special education?
3. What does the experience of teachers reveal about their efforts to address these barriers?

Methodology

Using the case study qualitative approach, the methods of data collection included interviews of 9 teachers and a teacher focus group. These methods were useful in exploring the experience of teachers in special education settings, as well as the efforts teachers utilize to address equality of opportunity in the special education setting.

Numerous studies have focused on the overrepresentation of students of color. This study examined what teachers do as agents to bring down barriers to equality and to navigate cultural boundaries.

Guided by the interpretive community of Critical Race Theory, the analysis of the qualitative data will attend to the key tenets of critical race theory: (i) race is an ever-present part of American society; (ii) the dominant worldview needs to be disrupted; (iii) inter disciplinary connections must be made; (iv) social justice is the central issue; and (v) the lived experience of all people is valued (Connor, 2007, p. 38). Critical race theory also attends to the intersection of race, ethnicity, class, and linguistic background with the assignment of a disability category. In doing so, this theoretical framework creates a point of reference illustrating how power structures and social networks in education are not equal.

Additionally, analysis of the qualitative data will involve a study of the data for themes not anticipated in theoretical framework. To do so, the analysis will follow repeated close readings of the text to locate thematic patterns in the data. Through analysis that is ongoing, these themes will be explored for their meaning and relationship to the research question.

Implications of Research Findings

Through the research proposed in this study, I analyzed the experience of teachers in special education settings to examine the barriers teachers see as getting in the way of equal educational opportunity and how teachers reduce barriers of inequality for their students. Analysis of these data has the potential to assist in the national effort to develop and implement strategies that will ameliorate student achievement for students of color in

special education. The results from this study are useful in the discourse about how to break the barriers of inequity. This research may have policy implications for pre-service teacher education programs, educational policy and practice as carried out by teachers and administrators, and efforts to create and sustain professional development. Research findings may have policy implications for higher education, schools, school districts and the state.

Definition of Terms

For the purposes of clarification, the following list of terms and operational definitions is provided.

Achievement Gap –The National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) asserts that, “Achievement gaps occur when one group of students out performs another group and the difference in average scores for the two groups is statistically significant” (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). Here the focus is on the achievement gap between poor students and middle class and affluent students as well as Whites and Asians in comparison with African Americans and Latinos.

Assimilation – “Educational programs designed to absorb and integrate cultures into the dominant culture. American schools have primarily used assimilation programs to integrate immigrant groups into mainstream American culture” (Spring, 2007, p. 8).

Cognitive Disability (CD) –significantly below-average general intellectual capability that exists along with deficits in adaptive behavior, it is demonstrated during the child’s developmental period and negatively affects a child’s educational performance (Ohio Department of Education, 2012).

Cultural Capital – “Endowments such as academic competence, language competence, and wealth that provide an advantage to an individual, family, or group” (Chinn & Gollnick, 2009, p. 405).

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD) — a term used to describe communities other than the majority Anglo community (Adams, Bought, Kyriazopoulos, Pond, Rowland, Santalucia, & Shanley, 2011, p. 366).

Cultural Pluralism – “Educational practices designed to maintain the languages and cultures of each cultural group” (Spring, 2007, p. 8).

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy – an approach to teaching and learning that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Ladson-Billings, 1994). A discussion of works on culturally relevant teaching is developed in Chapter 2.

Disproportionate representation – Refers to the representation of a particular group of students at a rate different than that found in the general population (Gravois & Rosenfeld, 2006, p. 42).

Emotional Disturbance (ED) – a condition showing one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a degree that it affects a child’s educational performance, resulting in: a) an inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory or health factors; b) an inability to build or maintain satisfactory relationships with peers and teachers; c) inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances; d) a general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression; or e) 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, 2012).

Evaluation – the process and procedures used to determine whether a child has a disability and the special education and related services that a child needs (Ohio Department of Education, 2012).

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, 2012).

Individualized Education Program (IEP) – a written statement for a child that is developed, reviewed and revised in accordance with federal and state regulations (Ohio Department of Education, 2012).

Intervention Assistance Team (IAT) – a team of educators from a child’s school that meet to design interventions for children who are experiencing difficulty (Ohio Department of Education, 2012).

Intervention Specialist – term used for Special Education teachers in Ohio.

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) – as much as possible, children with disabilities (including children in public or nonpublic schools or other care facilities) are educated with children who do not have disabilities. A child with a disability is removed from the regular educational environment only when the child’s disability is severe enough that the child cannot be educated in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services (Ohio Department of Education, 2012).

Multicultural Education – Neito (1992) defines “multicultural education is a process of comprehensive school reform, basic education for all students; a confrontation

with and rejection of racism and other forms of discrimination and oppression in schools and society; an affirmation of ethnic racial, linguistic, religious, economic, and gender pluralism; and a value and substantive presence throughout the entire educational process. I permeates all curriculum and in structural operations used in schools, school-community and parent-teacher relationships and the very way that schools conceptualize the nature of teaching and learning” (Sleeter, 1995, pg. 160). Chapter 2 will discuss interpretations of multicultural education.

Other Health Impairment (OHI) – impairments that occur simultaneously (such as cognitive disability-blindness and cognitive disability-orthopedic impairment), the combination of which causes such severe educational problems that they cannot be accommodated in special education programs solely for one of the impairments. The term does not include deaf-blindness (Ohio Department of Education, 2012).

Special Education – specially designed instruction to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability (Ohio Department of Education, 2012).

Specific Learning Disability (SLD) – 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 cognitive disability, of emotional disturbance or of environmental, cultural or economic disadvantage (Ohio Department of Education, 2012).

Voice – “is a basic entitlement with implied rights and boundaries.

Multiculturalists believe that all students have the right to speak and provide differential knowledge. To deny students voice limits equity of outcome, impedes access to equality of educational opportunity, and hampers the development of the skills needed to become active, critical, and productive change agents”(Grant & Ladson-Billings, 1997, pg 253).

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The disproportionate representation of students of color has been a concern for over four decades (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Dunn, 1968). The overrepresentation of minorities in special education is a complex phenomenon not easily explained or understood. As a framework for examining the concerns in this study, this chapter will review theory and research related to the notion of different intelligences, including how norm referenced IQ exams are used to measure intelligence despite cultural differences and questions about the reliability and validity of measures used to identify children for special education. This review of literature will also address the disproportionate representation of students of color within under-resourced special educational settings that fail to offer equal educational opportunity. Finally, the review will include research on strategies for reducing overrepresentation, such as the following: multicultural practices, multicultural education, high teacher expectations, positive teacher beliefs, effective teaching expectations, and teacher preparation programs.

Assumptions of Intelligence

Arguably, the most controversial issue surrounding the placement of children in special education is test bias. The use of IQ or standardized norm-referenced tests to

correctly assess students of color has been extensively criticized (Dunn, 1968; Ford, 2012; Skiba et al., 2008). The argument has been grounded by the fact that culturally diverse students are consistently assessed using measures in which disenfranchised groups were not included as part of the sample to establish reliability. The educational and personal experiences of African American and Caucasian American students vary considerably. As a result, the reliability and validity of norm-referenced exams used with African American students is questionable (Fagon & Holland, 2006).

Intelligence is a complex construct that is not easily defined. Despite numerous studies on intelligence, the complexity of the issue still creates a debate concerning how it is defined and measured. Throughout the course of the debate, key concerns have reoccurred, such as the following: the lack of widespread agreement in regards to the meaning of intelligence, the lack of widespread agreement in terms of the purpose of IQ testing, and the research and educational implications of intelligence testing (Fagon & Holland, 2006; Kellogg, 2003). Kellogg (2003) defines intelligence as "...the ability to adapt, to shape, and select environments for the benefits of survival" (p. 423).

Furthermore, intelligence is thought to encompass perception, attention, memory, language, problem solving, reasoning, and decision-making. The intelligence quotient is defined as, "... a person's mental age divided by chronological age and multiplied by 100" (Kellogg, 2003, p. 423). Although educational practice in the United States has generally accepted consensus of the definition of intelligence, there is still controversy surrounding the issue. The concept of labeling a person using a single analysis such as the IQ test (Gould, 1981) has prompted researchers to broaden the concept of intelligence and IQ in particular (Gardner, 1999).

The expansion of general intelligence has been instituted in an attempt to provide greater depth. Traditionally, general intelligence "...refers the underlying factor that accounts for an individual's performance on an IQ test and in other situations demanding intelligence" (Kellogg, 2003, p. 424). Kellogg (2003) discussed the importance of fluid and crystallized intelligence. Fluid intelligence "... is the ability to solve novel problems" (Kellogg, 2003, p. 426). Crystallized intelligence "... refers to breadth and depth of a person's knowledge" (Kellogg, 2003, p. 426). However, with the expansion of the concept, these definitions are thought by some to be stringent and restraining. The success of an IQ test in predicting performance outside of school is far less than that of predicting academic success. Gardner (1999) posited that examining a broader conception of what counts as intelligence may better relate to success in everyday tasks. Gardner (1993, 1999) has investigated the potential constraints on the lack of widespread agreement in regards to intelligence. His belief is that there is more than one kind of intelligence, and a restricted definition excludes individuals with varying intelligences.

The notion of what is intelligence clearly differs from one culture to the next. Grigorenko and Sternburg (2005) and colleagues sought to obtain a picture of intelligence outside the classroom in a study in Usenge, Kenya. A test of practical intelligence was developed and measured children's informal tacit knowledge of natural medicines. The results of the study suggested that the general factor of intelligence may tell more about patterns in the United States policies and practices, informed by a long tradition in Western culture, than about the structure of human abilities. Moreover, children of Western societies generally study a variety of subjects, thus they have a variety of skills. Children reared in this type of setting are prepared for a test of intelligence because the

test measures skills in a variety of areas in which they have experience. However, as noted by Rogoff (1990), this is not a universal practice for the rest of the world (cited in Grigorenko & Sternberg, 2005). Children in other parts of the world are required to specialize in certain areas, whereby they become experts in that area.

The widespread research and educational implications of the lack of agreement of the definition of intelligence and its constructs have led to group stratification in educational outcomes (Grigorenko & Sternberg, 2005). There are large gaps in test scores between students of color and Caucasian students (Ferguson, 2003). In many cases these discrepancies are attributed to genetic differences in intelligence. As Kellogg (2005) noted, “Eysenk (1986) argued that IQ test scores and g in particular, depend on the neural efficiency of the brain. Individuals with high efficient neural systems are presumably those who score well on IQ tests” (p. 425). Examining why there are such varying degrees among and within groups is contested. While Eysenk ties IQ scores to brain function, others link IQ test performance to the quality of a student’s environment. Dickens (2005) asserted that “Studies of young children show that environmental differences explain more variation than do genetic difference” (p. 60). If this is in fact valid, then this suggests that the test score gap can be reduced by attending to these environmental difference and devising interventions. Furthermore, Dickens (2005) asserted that if a small intervention saturates a community, then in turn modest changes may occur. However, if the interventions are targeted to disenfranchised families the improvement may be greater. Finally, Dickens (2005) stated that “Effects are particularly likely to be large if an intervention saturates a social group and allows the individual multiplier effects to be reinforced by social multipliers or feedback effects” (p. 65).

Interventions might be most effective if they are systematically implemented and engrained in ethnically diverse communities. However, without systematic interventions the overrepresentation of students of color in special education will continue.

Disproportionate Representation

The extensive accumulation of evidence noting mass overrepresentation of minorities in the special education system has been discussed and debated continuously since 1968 (Artiles, Kozleski, Ortiz, Osher & Trent, 2010; Artiles & Trent, 1994). The Elementary and Secondary Schools Civil Rights Compliance Report of the United States Department of Education Office of Civil Rights (OCR) has documented patterns of disproportion every other year since the critique written by Dunn (1968). Upon each update the most consistent documentation of disproportion has been noted for African Americans and Native Americans with the greatest disparities being noted in the categories of mental retardation and emotional disturbance (Skiba et al., 2008).

In the classic critique of the field, Dunn's (1968) article introduced the educational community to the disproportionate representation of culturally and linguistic diverse students. Prior to the critique, in the case *Hobson v. Hansen* (1967), Judge Wright found that denying children from low economic status backgrounds the same opportunity afforded to affluent children was a violation of the Due Process Clause of the Fifth Amendment. *Hobson v. Hansen* (1967) relates to the overrepresentation of students of color in that it reflects a flawed implementation of IDEA, which is particularly contradictory to the intent of IDEA. Underwood and Mead (1995) asserted that, "Not only are plaintiffs and their class denied the publicly supported education to which they are entitled, many are suspended or expelled from regular schooling or specialized

instruction or reassigned without any prior hearing and are given no periodic review thereafter. Due process of law requires a hearing prior to exclusion, termination of classification into a special program” (p. 61). Dunn’s critique built upon a history of structural inequalities, which helped to underscore the concern of overrepresentation.

Dunn (1968) posited that in the early years of special education, children who were from ethnically diverse backgrounds were excluded from school. Furthermore, Dunn asserted that, “Then as Hollingworth (1923) pointed out, with the advent of compulsory attendance laws, the schools and these children ‘were forced into a mutual recognition of each other.’ This resulted in the establishment of self-contained special schools and classes as a method of transferring these ‘misfits’ out of regular grades” (p.5). Dunn estimated that in 1968 approximately 60 to 80 percent of the students being serviced were students of color. Moreover, “This extensive proliferation of self contained special schools and classes raises serious educational and civil rights issues which must be squarely faced” (p. 6).

Since the call for an investigation was made by Dunn in 1968, continued challenges were brought to court for litigation to take action to provide equal access to education. In *Larry P. v. Riles* (1979) the initial complaint was filed by six black school children from the San Francisco Unified School District. The complaint was that IQ tests used by the school system to place children into special education for the educable mentally retarded (E.M.R.) violated the Equal Protection Clause of the United States and federal statutes. Underwood and Mead (1995) asserted that, “There, the court enjoined the use of non-validated intelligence tests and ordered the reevaluation of all African-American children whose placements were based on the use of invalid IQ test” (p. 88).

Strategies for Reducing Disproportionate Representation of Students of Color in Special Education

Multicultural practices. The Civil Right Movement of the 1960s promised full participation in mainstream American society; however, during by the 1970s this still eluded students of color (Ramsey & Williams, 2003). The multicultural education movement in the United States grew out of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, reflecting recognition of experiences of culturally diverse students. Consequently, a number of theorists called for greater infusion of multicultural literature into the curriculum. Taylor (1995) emphasized that literature can serve as a platform in which the students see positive reflections of themselves. An implementation of multicultural literature contributes to the understanding of how students perceive others as well as themselves. When students see themselves mirrored in books and literature they gain an affirmation of themselves and their identities, according to Taylor. Yakota (as cited in Vacca, 2000) suggested that images children glean from literature have a powerful impact on their sense of self and view of others. The author further declared that literature can influence values and beliefs; it also challenges existing thoughts that may prove destructive. Therefore, literature that displays positive depictions has a positive influence on self-worth and identity, whereas literature with negative depictions has an adverse effect.

Montgomery (2000) and Norton (1995) also contributed to literature on cultural congruence in instruction by stating that educators are often drawn to what is familiar. This is also true in the selection of reading materials (Vacca, 2000, p. 504). It is common for educators to select literature based on familiar themes, experiences, characters and

values. Since the teaching force in the United States is predominantly middle class and white (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Nieto, 2000; Villegas, 1988), the literature choices and themes are often congruent with the dominant culture. Put another way, if educators select literature congruent to their culture and if whites comprise the majority of the teacher population, then the literature tends to affirm the dominant culture. Therefore, the exclusion of other cultures inherently becomes a standard practice for the educator as well as well as the student.

Norton (1995) further asserted that goals of multicultural education could be met through the inclusion of multicultural literature into the curriculum. Doni Kwolek Kubulus (as cited by Norton, 1995) indicated that multicultural literature provided the following: a) understanding and respect for each child's cultural group identities; b) respect for and tolerance of cultural differences, including differences of gender, language, race, ethnicity, religion, region, and disabilities; c) understanding of and respect for universal human rights and fundamental freedoms; d) preparation of children for responsible life in a free society; and e) knowledge of cross-cultural communication strategies, perspective taking, and conflict management skills to ensure understanding, peace, tolerance, and friendship among all peoples and groups (p. 561).

Textbooks overwhelmingly perpetuate the beliefs of the dominant culture (Gay, 2000). In a study conducted by Grant and Sleeter (1991), the findings revealed that little attention is given to different groups of color interacting with each other, in textbooks in grades first through eighth grade and in the areas of mathematics, social science, and reading. Additionally, Grant and Sleeter (1991) found that "...there is an imbalance across ethnic groups of color, with most attention given to African-Americans and their

experiences” (Gay, 2000, p. 114). The content educators provide on ethnic issues is conservative in nature. The disparities in gender and social class prevail, since the curriculum is closely aligned with mainstream culture. Concerns set forth by minorities are not consistently featured in the elementary and secondary curriculum.

Although empirical research does not substantiate how the bias of textbooks affects students of marginalized groups, the inadequacy of textbooks to represent culturally diverse groups is clearly problematic. Studies of textbook bias provide a number of accounts that express the discontent and feelings of exclusion among students as a result of the inaccuracies on minority groups that exist in textbooks (Gay, 2000).

Studies of culturally congruent teaching practices suggested that the infusion of ethnic content alone is not sufficient to meet the needs of non-white students. The notion of cultural relevance is greater than language; it encompasses other aspects of the student and school culture (Ladson-Billings, 1992). Tharp (1982) suggested that teachers use instructional mechanisms and curriculum to integrate concepts with the students’ prior knowledge. Ladson-Billings (1992) defined culturally relevant teaching in the following way:

Culturally relevant teaching is a term I have used to describe the kind of teaching that is designed not merely to fit the school culture to the students’ culture but also to use student culture as the basis for helping students understand themselves and others, structure social interactions, and conceptualize knowledge. Thus, culturally relevant teaching requires the recognition of African American culture as an important strength upon which to construct the school experience (p. 314).

Furthermore, Yamauchi (2005) contended that “The notion is that all students learn – but what and how they learn may differ across groups, depending on who students interact with and the kinds of expectations, beliefs, and knowledge that are emphasized in those interactions” (p.105). The social-cultural perspective attributes the student’s success or lack of success to the alignment between the home, community, and school. In addition, “When teachers and students come from different cultural backgrounds there tends to be less intersubjectivity between them and cultural clashes or misunderstandings are more likely to occur” (p. 105).

There have been a number of other significant studies that contribute to the concept of culturally sensitive pedagogy. Au and Jordan (1981) conducted a case study of the Kamehameha Early Education Program (KEEP), a language arts development project. The project examines methods utilized to teach native Hawaiian children to read. The hypothesis is that poor school achievement by many minority children is related to the nature of teacher-pupil classroom interaction. In a related study, Tharp (1982) further examined (KEEP). The results provided substantial evidence that decisions about instructional objectives and instructional style can have a direct impact on student performance. The findings were congruent with that of Au and Jordan (1981), which found that the lessons of the teacher with high student-teacher contact resulted in higher levels of achievement than those of the teacher with low contact.

Banks (1994) in his book *Introduction to Multicultural Education* discussed three approaches to multicultural education. He used these approaches to frame the discussion for multicultural education, which included: curriculum reform, achievement approaches, and intergroup education. In particular, Banks (1995) formulated four approaches to

integrate cultural content into the school curriculum, and he ranks them in terms of dedication to ideals of multiculturalism. First is the *contribution*, or *additive*, approach, which focuses on “heroes and heroines, holidays, and discrete cultural elements” (p. 112). The additive approach adds culture, content, concepts, and themes to the existing curriculum. The *transformational* approach “changes the paradigms which allows students to view concepts from different perspectives” (p. 112). The *social action* approach is an extension of the transformational approach, which facilitates learning by completing projects as well as implementing solutions to resolve issues. Finally, the *action* approach brings in an activist component to promote social justice for marginalized groups.

Ladson-Billings (1992) explained common themes of effective teaching practices for African American students. After examining two educators individually as well as comparing and contrasting both teachers, Ladson-Billings asserted that “Both teachers provide support for the students to ‘be themselves’ and choose academic excellence rather than allow academic achievement to seem alienating or foreign” (p. 317). The teachers see value in their students’ culture, and they embrace their backgrounds while displaying the importance of academic excellence. The author further argued that both teachers modeled positive student to student as well as teacher to student relationships, empowering the students by sharing power. These positive interactions assisted in creating a supportive classroom environment, recreating a more familial structure.

Ladson-Billings (1994) extended the framework of culturally relevant teaching in her book *The Dream Keepers*.

The notion of “cultural relevance” moves beyond language to include other aspects of student and school culture. Thus culturally relevant teaching uses student culture in order to maintain it and to transcend the negative effects of the dominant culture. The negative effects are brought about, for example, by not seeing one’s history, culture or background respected in the textbook or curriculum or by seeing that history, culture, or background distorted. (p. 17).

Ladson-Billings (1994) suggested that by using the culture of the students as the focal point, this assists in empowering the student. The author asserted that, “Specifically, culturally relevant teaching is a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills and attitude” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 17-18).

Gay (as cited by Sleeter & McLaren, 1995, p. 174) provided illustrations of techniques for practicing “border” pedagogy and giving voice to culturally diverse groups. Gay posited two fundamental pedagogical principles:

1. Differences in how students assign meaning to learning stimuli and how this is affected by diverse social and cultural formations which give them voice, agency, and identity; and
2. The obligation of teachers to use the cultural frameworks of students to make knowledge more relevant and accessible (Giroux, 1992). (cited by Sletter & McLaren, 1995, p.174).

Gay discussed how African American, Latino, Native Americans and other disenfranchised groups are communal in nature and tend to benefit from more participatory practices.

African American, Latino, Native American, and poverty cultures tend to be highly communal, group based, and action oriented. Therefore, teaching and learning strategies that are participatory, cooperative, collaborative, and that use frequently varied formulas are likely to be more culturally compatible and successful for students from these backgrounds than the more traditional use of competitive, individualistic, passive and monotonous routines. Using a variety of cultural pluralistic materials, experience and examples to illustrate practice and demonstrate mastery of theoretical principles and intellectual skills has significant potential for improving the academic success of cultural different students (pp. 173-174).

By using culture as a framework, this made knowledge more real, relevant, and accessible to the students.

Using their voices to raise awareness, Obidiah and Teel's (2001) study focused on improving the teaching practice of the second author, Karen Teel, as well as examining the impact of racial and cultural differences on teaching and learning in the classroom. The results of the study indicated that beliefs, intentions, and personalities of individual teachers play a greater role in student success than materials or text. Obidiah and Teel purported that the unintended biases of "white" teachers, may interfere in the process of teaching and learning as experienced by students of color. Teachers can have a significant

influence on the education of African American children; however, many teachers do not feel adequately prepared. Obidiah and Teel (2001) asserted “Making connections between teaching in an urban classroom and learning educational theories was unimaginably difficult. The knowledge I was gaining from my experience as a public school teacher was difficult to bring into the discussion in the university classroom” (Obidiah & Teel, 2001, p. 25). Obidiah and Teel learned that dialogue and critical reflection assisted in helping to put together the pieces of this complex illustration. The authors noted the following:

Our story is a difficult and complex one to tell because it has been quite an emotional process for both of us. Singly and simultaneously, we have experienced such difficult emotions as frustration, confusion, pain, suspicion, disillusionment, fear, anxiety, and anger. On the other hand, we have each found the process to be encouraging, rewarding, moving, thought provoking and invaluable (p. 103).

The study accentuated the value of critically reflective practice; by reflecting on their roles as teachers, researchers, and writers, they discovered how to know and act with their evolving understanding of their role as a teacher and the influence of their racial background. Connected to the issue of the role of the teacher is the study of teacher expectations.

Teacher expectations. Gay (2000) provided a review of teacher expectations that point to trends that offer insight for improving instruction. A plethora of variables influence teacher expectations, ranging from student and teacher racial identity, gender, ethnicity, social class and home language. All of these variables facilitate in formulating

teacher expectations. Gay (2000) asserted that teacher expectations have a direct impact on student achievement. Furthermore, Gay (2000) stated, “Culture also influences student and teacher expectations as well as how they engage in classroom interactions” (p. 54). In particular, in Western Caucasian cultures the rules of engagement deemed necessary for success in the classroom are typically incompatible with culturally diverse groups, which could create disequilibrium. The students may seem quiet or disengaged when they are overwhelmed or baffled. Expectations held by teachers from the dominant culture that exclude the historical context of students create an environment that could compromise the educational landscape for the students. Often students that do not comply with policies and procedures are labeled as non-compliant, requiring constant redirection and reprimanding from the teacher (p. 54). The source of non-compliance is frequently not students’ resistance to learning but more commonly a result of students’ lacking mainstream cultural competence.

Gay posited, “Before a genuine ethos of caring can be developed and implemented on a large scale, educators must identify and understand current non-caring attitudes and behaviors, and how they can obstruct student achievement. This understanding will help to locate places and spaces in classroom interactions that need to be changed and to determine which aspects of caring will be most appropriate to expedite student achievement” (p. 53). Trends in teacher expectations offer some insight for improving instruction. Specifically, teacher expectations influence the quality of instruction. For example, teachers who assert they believe all children can learn, but who allow students to sit all day without insisting that they learn fail to carry out their belief. The assumptions teachers have about intellectual capabilities, ethnicity, and gender are

directly related to their expectations for the students. Teachers tend to have higher expectations for European Americans students than students of color and these expectations aligned to their beliefs.

Teacher beliefs. In research that explored individuals who are effective with diverse students (e.g. Ladson-Billings, 1994; Gay, 2000), caring was identified as a pillar of culturally responsive teaching that brings together the individual with the society, the community, and each other (Gay, 2000, pg. 45). Historically, common practice in Western cultures or in the school setting is to fix the culturally “deprived” students and conform to Eurocentric norms. Educators who genuinely care for the students have children who perform well academically, socially, morally, and culturally (Gay, 2000). In research conducted on students of all diverse backgrounds in the United States, Mercado (1993) indicated that students’ memories of schools were characterized as “homes away from home” (Gay, 2000, p. 47). In particular, educators who cared were concerned about the whole child, creating an environment in which the students wanted to learn and higher levels of achievement were assured. In order for teachers to implement an effective culturally responsive framework, teachers “...must have commitment, competence, confidence, and content about cultural pluralism” (Gay, 2000, p. 52).

McAllister (2002) conducted a study with 34 practicing teachers examining teacher’s beliefs and perceptions about the role of empathy in their teaching practices. McAllister noted that empathy is necessary in helping educators become more effective teachers; however, empathy is not the only element that should be considered when working with diverse learners. Educators should also utilize tenets of successful

culturally responsive teachers in conjunction with empathy in the classroom. The educators in McAllister's study reported that "...empathy was an implicit part of being a caring supportive and responsive teacher with culturally diverse students" (p. 442). In particular, teachers reported that an empathetic disposition resulted in a more supportive classroom climate, positive interactions with students, and student centered pedagogy. Characteristics of successful culturally responsive teachers consist of the above traits (Gay, 2000).

In examining the basis on which teaching decisions were made, Sleeter (2005) asserted that beliefs partially come from prior experience. Marginalized groups tended to have a different ideology than the mainstream culture, which creates disequilibrium. The beliefs and assumptions of teachers dictated the lens through which students are examined. Guskey (1984) gathered data on 117 intermediate and high school teachers, and from 52 teachers who participated in an in-service on Mastery Learning. Although there are several variations of Mastery Learning, "...most involve whole-group instruction followed by a diagnostic formative test designed to help students identify and then correct their learning errors. This 'feedback-corrective' process is usually followed by a second formative test on which the majority of students would be expected to attain a predetermined mastery standard" (p. 246). The results suggested "...teachers who become more effective in their teaching tended to accept the increased responsibility for the learning outcomes of their students and tended to become more positive in their attitudes toward teaching" (Guskey, 1984, p. 253). The findings from Brookover and Lezotte (1979) asserted that teachers in effective schools felt a strong sense of responsibility for the learning of their students (Guskey, 1993). Conversely, teachers

who believed that they had less control of students considered these students to be low ability, and consequently these teachers felt less able to influence the learning of the presumed low-ability students (Guskey, 1984). Ferguson (2003) posited that the improved skills on the part of some teachers participating in Guskey's study "...showed that teachers could learn responsive teaching methods that weaken the link between the past and future performance" (p. 495). These instructional practices have the potential to improve student performance. In particular, professional development on effective teaching practices would help in lessening the achievement gap.

Effective Teaching. There is extensive research on "best practices" for preparing students to excel in the classroom (Darling-Hammond, 1997; 2004; Rosenshine, 1986). This work has not delineated one single model or framework. Research into teacher effectiveness does posit that teachers have the greatest impact on student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2004). Guskey (2005) found in his analysis of Bloom's work that feedback, corrective, and enrichment processes and instructional alignment are essential variables for teachers that utilize Mastery Learning (p. 80). In particular, by providing frequent feedback from formative assessment, the teacher reinforces learning expectations. The teacher through the assessment identifies what is learned and is able to identify what needs to be learned. Guskey (2005) asserted that, "Significant improvement requires that feedback be paired with correctives—activities that offer guidance and direction to students on how to remedy their learning problem"(p. 8). Instructional alignment must be coupled with feedback, correctives and enrichment to ensure the greatest gains.

Ladson-Billings (1992, 1994) attributed an increase in academic achievement of African American children to the use of culturally relevant teaching practices. The findings in Ladson-Billings' (1992) research revealed common themes that indicate that the effective teachers made the African American culture the frame of reference for all text, and students are celebrated collectively and as individuals. The teachers utilized non-instructional time to engage with students, as well as display their ability to understand the students' perspective. They were also better able to translate information to the students. In a broad spectrum, the teacher's culturally relevant teaching included the following: culturally relevant conceptions of self and others, culturally relevant conceptions of the classroom social relations, and culturally relevant conceptions of knowledge (Ladson-Billings, 1992, p. 316).

Brophy (1986) examined trends from research findings over 50 years, which consistently replicated the link between students' achievement to their opportunity to learn the material. The ability of the teacher to carry the students through the instruction and move the students through the curriculum in a brisk manner is considered essential. The quality of teaching as it relates to student achievement revealed three common instructional tasks. First, information provided to students, should be provided in a clear manner, with enthusiasm. Second, the questions for students should be focused on higher levels of Bloom's Taxonomy, in an effort to maximize student learning. Third, the teachers should provide feedback to students consistently (p. 1076).

Summary

In summary, this chapter contained a review of theory and research related to the notion of different intelligences, including how norm referenced IQ exams are used to

measure intelligence despite cultural differences, and the problems with the reliability and validity of measures used to identify children for special education. Also discussed here is the issue of the disproportionate representation of students of color in special educational settings that fail to offer equal educational opportunity. Finally, the literature review covered strategies for reducing overrepresentation, such as the following: multicultural practices, multicultural education, high teacher expectations, positive teacher beliefs, effective teaching expectations, and teacher preparation programs.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of the study was to explore the experience of teachers in special education settings to reveal efforts used by teachers to address the issue of equality of opportunity in these settings. It was out of both personal and professional concern that I have developed an interest in this work, and have thus formulated these working questions. As a second year teacher of students with special needs, I realized that their opportunities were not equal to their regular education counterparts. Currently, as an administrator I have witnessed teacher recommendations for testing and placing of a students within the special education setting, at times inappropriately. Our special education population in our building is over 20%. I began to question the rationale for the placement of students. Are too many students being placed in special education? This question extends to issues of race and class, since the students in our school are 99% African American and 100% of the students are eligible for free and reduced lunch.

In order to construct understanding, I drew on my experience as a teacher of students of color with special needs. I wanted to know more about the experience of teachers who have been identified as in working with students with special needs.

How have their life experiences and their socio-cultural backgrounds influenced their teaching practices? Moreover, how did their cultural awareness and beliefs develop? What is their experience in settings designed to address equality for children with special needs? Have they found equality of educational opportunity to be absent from these classrooms? Have they developed a practice that they see as facilitating equality?

The research questions I will in this study address are as follows:

1. What is the experience of teachers in special education settings within a large urban district?
2. What does their experience suggest concerning barriers to equal educational opportunity in special education?
3. What does the experience of teachers reveal about their efforts to address these barriers?

Using a case study qualitative approach, with teacher interviews and a teacher focus group as methods of data collection, I explored these questions and have added insight to the current educational research. Numerous studies have focused on the overrepresentation of students of color. Recognizing what teachers do as agents to bring down barriers to equality and to navigate cultural boundaries is essential.

In this chapter I described the site, participants, method of data collection, and analysis to be utilized in the study.

The Context of the Study

According to the Ohio Department of Education, the total enrollment for the site of this study, a large Midwestern school district, during the 2010-2011 school year was

44,000 students. African American students represented 68.2%, American Indian or Alaska Native 0.2%, Asian or Pacific Islander 0.7%, Hispanic 13.2%, Multi-Racial 3.0 %, and White 14.6% of the student body. The district was identified as having 100% of the student body as economically disadvantaged. In the 2010-2011 school year 6.1% of the student body was identified as limited English proficient and 22.9% of the student body was identified as students with disabilities.

Procedures

Participating teachers were selected from a large urban Ohio school district. The criterion to recruit and select participants was presented to the district leadership team. Upon the district leadership team reviewing and approving the research and Institutional Review Board approval, recommendation forms were e-mailed to the principals of ten buildings within one district region, along with an informed consent form and a synopsis of the study. The recommendation forms clearly indicated that not all recommended teachers would participate in the study but, instead, a smaller representative group of participants would be recruited from the pool of recommended teachers. While principal selection may have influenced participant selection in reflecting the participant, the design included several schools and allowed for diversity of experiences and perspectives among teachers.

Recruitment and Selection of Participants

Purposeful sampling was utilized in this study. Merriam (1998) stated, “Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p. 61). A total of nine teachers were selected; the decision was guided by

efforts to achieve representativeness among teacher participants until there were some thematic saturation points—i.e. not encountering wholly new ideas, or experiences.

Teachers were selected for this study based on the following criteria:

1. Success as an educator (i.e. recommendations from administrators based on their observations and evaluations of teachers in the field of education). Teacher effectiveness was the *primary* criterion for recruitment and the selection of participants. The teacher must have a proficient or above to be considered.
2. Professional involvement (i.e. Fulbright Scholar, active participation in professional development, and participation university seminars and classes)
3. Experience working with students of color
4. Willingness to participate
5. Extent to which potential participant reflects the representativeness of the following: the number of years teaching, the grade level, teacher's race or ethnicity and gender, and location of school. Among participants, their school location was less representative of the region itself, with teacher participants coming primarily from one side of the city.

The selection of teachers by administrators was guided by measures of effective teaching, which in this study was measured utilizing the Framework for Teaching Model, created by Charlotte Danielson (Danielson, 2002). In an effort to define teacher effectiveness, the Ohio Teacher Evaluation Writing Team within the Ohio Department of Education did an exhaustive search during 2009-2010 of model evaluation systems. The

search included examining the work of Charlotte Danielson, Laura Goe, New Teacher Center, and Learning Point Associates. The urban Midwestern district that this study focused on adopted the Charlotte Danielson model to evaluate teachers. The Framework for Teaching divides the outline of teaching into four domains. Danielson (2002) described in narrative form 22 components of the four domains, and explicitly defined four levels of performance: unsatisfactory, basic, proficient, and distinguished.

The four domains are illustrated in Figure 1:

<p>Domain 1: Planning and Preparation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Demonstrating knowledge of content and pedagogy b. Demonstrating knowledge of students c. Selecting instructional goals d. Demonstrating knowledge of resources e. Designing coherent instruction f. Assessing student learning 	<p>Domain 2: Classroom Environment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Creating an environment of respect and rapport b. Establishing a culture for learning c. Managing classroom procedures d. Managing student behavior e. Organizing physical space
<p>Domain 4: Professional Responsibilities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Reflecting on teaching b. Maintaining accurate records c. Communicating with families d. Contributing to school and district e. Growing and developing professionally f. Showing professionalism 	<p>Domain 3: Instruction</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Communicating clearly and accurately b. Using questions and discussion techniques c. Engaging students in learning d. Providing feedback to students e. Demonstrating flexibility and responsiveness

Figure 1. The Framework for Teaching (Danielson, 2002, p. 107)

The Framework for Teaching Model utilized specific research on learning, teaching, and motivation to guide the framework. In particular, Danielson (2002) asserted, “According to the process-product researchers Brophy and Good (1986), the practices of effective teachers include careful lesson planning, articulation of learning goals to students, monitoring of student work and use of time-on-task tactics” (p. 24). Moreover, effective teachers implement learner-centered and active learning practices, utilize assessment to inform data, as well as utilize research based instructional strategies

to improve instruction (p. 24). Danielson (2002) also examined the role of expectations as well as intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (p. 25). Use of Danielson's framework influenced the administrator's recommendation of teachers for this study, the first of my criteria for teacher participants.

Method of Data Collection

The study used semi-structured interviews and a focus group for the purpose of data collection. Through open-ended questions, I sought to understand the experience of teachers in special education settings. Additionally, I explored how the experience of the teachers revealed efforts to address equality of opportunity in special education settings.

The first phase in data collection consisted of interviewing the teacher participants. The interview was semi-structured and lasted approximately 60 minutes. The areas of questioning that were posed entailed obtaining their background in teaching, their biographical narrative, and their narrative of teaching experience.

The second phase in the study was the teacher focus group. By conducting teacher interviews first, the ongoing analysis of the data from the teacher interviews guided the nature of the probes used to support the teacher focus group questions.

Data Analysis

I began the data analysis during the data collection phase. Once each interview was completed, my first step towards analysis was to provide a reflection on the interview itself—my initial thoughts and any key metaphors or points coming out of the interview as well as lingering questions. I then transcribed the audiotaped recording of the interviews. The act of transcribing the interviews allowed me to become intensely familiar with the data. I also reviewed notes included in the interview protocol, which

provided additional data. I made every effort to transcribe one whole interview before moving to the next interview.

Analysis of the qualitative data followed the tenets of grounded theory (Merriam, 2002). A rigorous coding procedure guided the analysis. The analysis progressed through three systematic stages: open, axial, and selective coding. The purpose of the interviews was to elicit the descriptions and perceptions of teachers and students and their perception of how to overcome obstacles.

Data analysis was an on-going process throughout the data collection phase. The first level of coding required breaking down data, naming, and organizing data. The interviews were read and reread, then highlighted in order to discern points in the interviews and focus groups that spoke to the research questions, or that stood out in a meaningful way. These were identified as codes. The next level, axial coding, required taking initial codes and clustering them together within broader categories using further comparisons between relationships. I recorded all the relationships that emerged. This process required that I use a chart with all the meaning evident in the categories. I used the information from axial coding to identify key themes. Finally, the third level was further analysis that described the interrelatedness of themes that emerged from the data.

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by social reproduction theory as an overarching theoretical framework with attention to cultural capital and relations of power. The study explored how effective teaching and teaching guided by one's biographical experience might resist the reproduction of inequalities and strengthen students' cultural capital. In particular, the study focused on strategies for reducing the overrepresentation of students of color in

special education. These strategies reflected the literature, such as the following: multicultural practices, multicultural education, high teacher expectations, positive teacher beliefs, effective teaching expectations, and teacher preparation programs. The study looked for ways in which teachers mobilize and/or provide resources and support to students, to effectively navigate the community, school, and society (Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

Educational programs, mediations, judicial rulings and laws designed to promote equality for students of color in the special educational setting may not achieve the equality they seek because of the level of racial and economic isolation within schools. Current efforts intended to provide resources and equitable special education services for all students do so with limited success. As such, they become an artifact of segregation, which may constrain access to resources and well-designed special education. However, with these constraints, hope is possible if the teacher is effective. As Obidiah and Teel (2001) have argued, the beliefs, intentions, and personalities of individual teachers play a greater role in student success than materials or text.

Students of color in special education not only need the same access to cultural capital that is valued; students of color need a supportive network that instructs how to activate and use culture to gain access as well as decipher hidden codes of our society and its institutions. In *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire stated that the position of the oppressor is not possible without the existence of the oppressed. “Freire’s theory emerges from the context of poverty, literacy, and oppression and is set in a larger framework of radical social change” (Merriam, Cafferalla, Baumgartner, 2007, p. 140). The *banking education* concept that Freire discussed, argued that the present state of schooling is a

tool of oppression (Freire, 2000). The schools teach children to obey and comply with directives. Hence, the more passive an individual is, the more the individual will conform. Within Freire's banking metaphor, teachers deposit the information they want the children to learn, which is in alignment with the norms of society. Many times students are not given an opportunity to cultivate their own thoughts. Alternatively, in the classroom setting the teacher can prompt dialogue and model critical reflection thereby creating an understanding of the forces that shape their lives (Merriam, Cafferalla, Baumgartner, 2007, p. 141).

The study looked at culturally responsive teaching to explore the experiences of teachers as well as understand how teachers remove barriers of inequity for their students. Artiles, Duran, Harry, Klinger, Kozleski, Riley, Tate and Zion, (2005) asserted, "Culturally responsive educational systems instill ethics of care, respect, and responsibility in the professionals who serve culturally and linguistically diverse students" (p. 8). The approach seeks to empower students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using culturally referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Culturally responsive pedagogy cultivates spaces for teacher reflection, inquiry, and mutual respect around issues of cultural differences (Klinger, Artiles, Kozleski, Harry, Zion, Tate, Duran & Riley, 2005, p. 8).

Researcher's Perspective

As an educator in an urban setting, I am committed to reforming public education. I have a particular interest in improving the quality of schooling for disadvantaged youth in an urban setting. As a result of my own experiences, I am familiar with the despair and frustration endemic to individuals struggling to survive. I am convinced that increasing

individuals' access to quality education can make the difference between bleakness and hope.

I began preparing for this mission early in life. As a child I often accompanied my grandfather (an administrator) to his school. During this time I observed him, I became fascinated with his ability to relate to the students as well as the staff. When I was older I shadowed him for a classroom project in high school, and I realized that I must enter the field of education. These experiences instilled in me the desire to become an educational leader.

In my past position as a mild-moderate intervention specialist, my primary role was to individualize the curriculum for the students I was servicing. In addition, my position required that I evaluate the students four times a year, to gauge their progress. I also coordinated programs for crisis intervention; and I was the lead coordinator for peer mediation in my building. Furthermore, I led a team in the implementation of inclusion into the building, which required having a working relationship with the students and the teachers. Presently, I am an administrator, and my role encompasses a plethora of responsibilities, specifically driving instruction in the building for typically developing children and children with disabilities. Each of these experiences informs my conceptualizing of the research question and my conviction of the significance of this research.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

In this chapter the results of a cross case analysis will be presented. The cross case analysis involves a comparison of teachers' backgrounds, biographical narratives, and narratives of teaching experience. In looking for evidence and examples within the educator's individual cases, similar patterns and themes emerged and became meaningful. Nine classroom teachers were interviewed and a focus group with five teachers was conducted. Key similarities and differences across the cases will be discussed.

The purpose of the study was to explore the experience of teachers in special education classrooms in a Midwestern urban school district. This research explored efforts by teachers to address the issue of equality of opportunity in special education settings serving low-income students of color. The study looked closely at what barriers teachers saw as getting in the way of equal educational opportunity and how teachers reduced barriers of inequality for their students. The study considered ways in which educators facilitated equality by creating opportunities for students to use their voice to engage in their learning. Further, this study considered how inequality might persist in special education and how teachers address inequality. The study also examined

what teachers perceived as the structures used to reach equal educational opportunities. It is the contention of the researcher that the overrepresentation of students of color in special education has been a manifestation of inequality in the urban public schools. The results of this study were drawn from data that addressed the research questions that guided the study:

1. What is the experience of teachers in special education settings within a large urban district?
2. What does their experience suggest concerning barriers to equal educational opportunity in special education?
3. What does the experience of teachers reveal about their efforts to address these barriers?

Data from this study included interviews and focus groups. Analysis of data included attention to teachers' experiences in the special education setting, their experience concerning barriers to equal educational opportunity in special education as well as the experience of teachers as they address these barriers.

Chapter Four begins with a brief portrait of the nine interview participants that teach in the same large Midwestern district. The purpose of these portraits is to provide the reader with insight into their backgrounds and biographical narratives. Deeply embedded in the portraits is the importance of relationships. The names of the participants are pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality. The portraits are followed by a thematic summary for each data source (teacher interviews and teacher focus group).

Portraits of Participants

Ms. Belle. Ms. Belle is an African American who has taught for 30 years in the city in which she was raised. Ms. Belle is dually certified in elementary and special education. During her classroom tenure, as a special education teacher she attained a Master of Education. Ms. Belle's positive experiences in elementary school fostered her love for learning. Ms. Belle became an educator as a result of her experiences, "...that love of learning transferred into me wanting to transfer that love of learning to children, and I decided to become a teacher when I grew up." Ms. Belle described that from kindergarten through fifth grade she wanted to please her teachers. As a student she described herself as obedient, polite, and hardworking. Ms. Belle was inquisitive, and she loved asking questions as well as answering questions. Through these experiences she learned how to be a model student.

Ms. Belle recalled the great learning experiences she had in elementary school and the caring relationships with her teachers who influenced her teaching. She felt that her teachers were nurturing, caring and positive. As a result, she wanted to attain the same traits. For Ms. Belle, the relationships cultivated by her elementary teachers created in her a belief that students can achieve at high levels.

Raised during the Civil Rights era, Ms. Belle expressed that the community in which she lived was closely connected. Both parents, who stressed the importance of education, raised Ms. Belle to strive for excellence. Her parents endured the social challenges of their time in addition to the lack of opportunity for formal education, which likely was a factor in their strong emphasis on education for their children. Ms. Belle expressed that the adage, "... it takes a community to raise a child" was certainly true

during the 1960s. She described the community as a large family that was connected both academically and socially. The community's expectations for excellence paralleled her parent's expectations, because every adult wanted their children to attain a higher level of education than they had achieved.

Ms. Smith. Ms. Smith began her career in the field of education in 2007, but her journey as an educator began 20 years prior as a Sunday school teacher. Before entering the field of education, Ms. Smith worked in the field of business. She received a Bachelor of Arts in Business Administration in 1988. Ms. Smith, an African American woman between forty and fifty years old, and relatively new to the field of education, began her experience in the district as a substitute teacher. At some point, she earned a Master of Education. Ms. Smith began substitute teaching in 2007 and she was hired as a licensed teacher in 2010. She holds a license as a mild-moderate intervention specialist and she also holds a reading endorsement (K-12).

Ms. Smith has five siblings who were raised by her mother. She said that her eldest brother was like a "father" figure. Ms. Smith recalled that as a child she was a good student because she always wanted to make her family proud. She stated that while in elementary school, she struggled to read but her sister helped her overcome that obstacle. Once she entered junior high school it was a "breeze," but when she entered high school the course work became more challenging.

Ms. Smith expressed that her decision to become an educator was guided by her experience as a Sunday school teacher. As a Sunday school teacher for many years, Ms. Smith recognized that the children struggled with reading. She realized that she wanted to assist struggling readers. Her own children encouraged her to go back to school once she

expressed her desire to help struggling readers. Ms. Smith felt that her college preparation helped her to “teach one student at a time, changing the world.”

Mr. Pride. Mr. Pride has been a licensed intervention specialist in this urban Midwestern district for over 10 years. He has worked in the high school setting for his tenure. Mr. Pride is an African American male who holds a degree in Sports Management Marketing, as well as a Master of Education. Mr. Pride was raised in a lower-middle class family, by his father, grandmother, and aunt who is a college graduate. Mr. Pride stated that he would not describe his family as poor but “we made do.” As a student in school Mr. Pride said that he was personable, he spoke well and his “great mouthpiece” caused him to get additional supports from other students as well as teachers.

In reflecting on his desire to become an educator, Mr. Pride described a high school thematic program in which he was involved as being one of the catalysts that caused him to go into education. This program began while he was a freshman and continued through his senior year. While in the program he had an eight-week student teaching experience during his senior year. He felt that the experience was valuable and life altering.

Mr. Pride expressed that the most important factor that influenced his teaching was his relationship with his students. Mr. Pride stated that building a rapport with students begins at the beginning of the school year. He makes sure that he dresses in a manner that is professional yet fashionable. Mr. Pride said he tries to model the appropriate attire of how an African American man should carry himself. Mr. Pride also shares personal stories with the students to influence, motivate, and inspire them.

Ms. McDowell. Ms. McDowell is an African American who has been working in the field of education for about 30 years. Ms. McDowell received her Bachelor of Science in Special Education five years ago, since that time she has been working as an intervention specialist with students in 6-8th grades. Prior to that she worked as a reading tutor as well as a paraprofessional in the district. Ms. McDowell stated that when she graduated from high school she received a job as clerk and she realized that the job was not for her. Ms. McDowell began working with students as a Chapter 1 reading tutor, and she worked in that capacity for several years until she earned her degree in special education.

Ms. McDowell shared that her family is very close-knit. As a child Ms. McDowell stated that her parents stressed the importance of family, and they wanted their family to have positive caring relationships with one another. Ms. McDowell said that her family speaks daily. The family has gatherings and celebrates major holidays and events together; they also attend the same church. Ms. McDowell expressed that as a student she also had positive relationships with her peers as well as teachers. She said that other students looked up to her and enjoyed being around her.

Ms. McDowell described her uncle as being a pivotal person who influenced her teaching. Ms. McDowell stated that as a child she enjoyed listening to him speak about their ancestors and the history of African Americans. He inspired her to teach because when he spoke to her as a child she learned so much. As a teacher she wanted to possess the same traits as her uncle, the ability to transfer knowledge. Ms. McDowell stated that she experiences the greatest fulfillment when students have learned as result of her teaching. She stated that this is the most important factor that has influenced her teaching.

Ms. Todd. Ms. Todd has been teaching for over 10 years in the district. She holds a Bachelor of Arts and a Master of Education. As an African American child growing up in an urban area, Ms. Todd stated that her parents sheltered her. She was allowed to do things in the community, but often times it was church related. She stated that she attended camps and events that were church sponsored. As a student, Ms. Todd described herself as staying on task, being a hard worker, and doing work that allowed her to use her creativity. She stated that she really appreciated when teachers provided feedback, in particular, words of praise, stickers, or work on the board.

Ms. Todd attributed her decision to become a teacher to her father and her husband. She stated that both her father and husband encouraged her to pursue a career in education. Ms. Todd also narrated a particular moment when she acted on the decision to go into teaching. She described how she read an article on a Sunday afternoon, written by Maya Angelou that was uplifting and motivating and she decided to go back to school. On Monday she enrolled in college in the field of education. While Ms. Todd was pursuing her degree in education she acquired experience as a substitute teacher. Ms. Todd expressed that this was the greatest influence on her teaching. As a substitute teacher she was able to tell what was beneficial to the students and what was not working. As a result, she modeled her teaching after the elements that were successful in the classrooms she substituted.

Ms. Roosevelt. Ms. Roosevelt is a Caucasian woman who has been teaching for over 20 years in this district. Ms. Roosevelt has a license in special education, elementary education, as well as a reading endorsement (K-12). She holds a Bachelor of Liberal Arts and a Master of Education. Ms. Roosevelt was raised in a small rural community. Her

experience with her community was limited because she attended Catholic school throughout her educational career; as a result she really did not interact with other children in the community because they went to public school.

As a student in school (K-12), Ms. Roosevelt described herself as being “obsessive-compulsive.” She always wanted to make sure everything was done early and correctly. Ms. Roosevelt wanted to have the best work in everything she did; she always had to get straight A’s. Ms. Roosevelt stated that her mother was a teacher, and she knew she wanted to be a teacher since she was in the fifth grade. She stated she loved school as a child loved *playing school*. As a child she enjoyed helping others, she loved working with students that were having difficulty getting the lesson.

Ms. Roosevelt described her four children as being the greatest influence on her teaching. She observed the different ways they learned and interacted, and she incorporated some of that knowledge from her observations into the classroom. The love and desire of teaching, that she had as a child has been the most influential factor in her teaching. Ms. Roosevelt reported that her love for her students is the force that propels her to continue teaching.

Ms. Ryan. Ms. Ryan comfortably followed in her mother’s footsteps, attained a Bachelor of Science in Education and settled into teaching in the same large Midwestern district as her mother. Ms. Ryan has taught for five years and she is currently seeking her Master of Education. Ms. Ryan’s mother heavily influenced her desire to become a teacher, and as a child she always played school and she felt that she was good at helping others. As a child she grew up in a predominantly African American neighborhood and the children in the community played sports together and hung out with one another. As a

student she stated that she was a hands-on learner and that she was well behaved. Ms. Ryan expressed that the teachers liked her and expressed their contentment with her as a student.

Ms. Ryan is an African American female in her mid-twenties, who expressed that she enjoyed playing basketball as well as coaching basketball. This concept of team and coaching the students to success is used in her classroom. Ms. Ryan shared that building relationships with the students is the first thing she does in the classroom. She works to “get a feel” of the students so that she can connect with the students and address their needs. Ms. Ryan recalled that as a student in elementary school she had a teacher who greeted her and her classmates every morning, and she tried to connect with all the students. Ms. Ryan stated that no one taught her how to build relationships, she more or less learned on the job.

Ms. Allen. Prior to working in this large urban Midwestern district Ms. Allen worked in another large urban Midwestern district in which she taught first grade for a number of years. Mrs. Allen is African American, reared by her mother and father; she described her family as being very close-knit. Ms. Allen also described her church community as being close-knit as well; she mentioned that many of the church members were her family members. As a child Ms. Allen described herself as being social and not working up to her potential. In high school she was involved in the choir, band, and drama club. Ms. Allen stated that once she entered college she began to see her full potential.

Ms. Allen’s mother worked for the County Board of Mental Retardation and developmental disabilities, where she spent her tenure as an educator. Ms. Allen

described her mother as firm, and as a result has acquired her mother's firmness. Ms. Allen's mother was her greatest influence, she recounted going to her mother's classroom as a child. She remembered thinking that her mother was strict, but now realized that the students needed the structure. The students loved her mother and she loved them. Ms. Allen found that the rapport her mother built with her students was valuable, and as a teacher she works to create similar relationships. Ms. Allen stated that she does whatever she can to make her students the best they can be. She also seeks to develop the same rapport with parents.

Ms. Wilson. Ms. Wilson is African American and lives in the same city the district serves. Ms. Wilson has taught in this community for over 10 years. She has also supported extra-curricular activities central to the schools' sports and recreation programs, particularly with young women. Her own child attended the public schools in the community she teaches. Growing up, Ms. Wilson "truly admired" her third grade teacher, and when she played school with her friends, she would emulate this teacher. Ms. Wilson mentioned that her school experiences from preschool through fifth grade were very positive. Ms. Wilson described herself as a good listener, good note taker, but she stated that she did not express her thoughts as a child in elementary nor high school. Ms. Wilson described her family as close knit; she frequently visits and speaks with her family members on a daily basis.

When describing the factors that most significantly influenced her teaching, Ms. Wilson mentioned the high expectations her parents as well as grandparents held for all their children. Ms. Wilson stated that her stepfather stressed the importance of education all through their schooling and that her parents would not accept any grade below a "C."

Ms. Wilson also recalled her grandfather stating that it is important to be educated and he frequently reminded her of the importance of education. Ms. Wilson further asserted that the positive experiences she had with her teachers played a significant role in her teaching. Her teachers instilled the importance of helping others and modeled the importance of building relationships with students.

Experience of Teachers in Special Education Settings in an Urban District

The portraits of the nine participants displayed the importance of relationships in their experience. The experience of teachers in special education settings further revealed the following themes: the admiration for their own teachers; the role teachers play in building a connectedness with students; the influence of high teacher expectations; the relevance of on-the-job experience, how key learning moments shaped these teachers' professional development; and the frequent narrative about their passion for working with students.

Admiration for their own teachers. Admiration of elementary school teachers was mentioned throughout the interviews. Ms. Belle said, "...my teachers' helped me to become the teacher that I am today. They would take time with me, they would talk to me, if I was hanging with the wrong crowd, they would pull me to the side and talk to me." Ms. Belle reported that she had teachers who cared about her and they wanted her to succeed. Ms. Belle asserted that as a child her teachers fostered a positive relationship with her and she created a similar relationship with her students. Ms. Allen stated that she loved her first grade teacher. In fact her first grade teacher attended her wedding. She shared that her teacher saw the ability Mrs. Allen possessed and helped to build her self-

confidence. Ms. Wilson also reiterated that she admired her third grade teacher as well. She said she would play school and pretend she was her teacher.

Descriptions of the admiration the participants held for their elementary teachers from the focus group was similar to the interviews. Ms. Dean and Ms. Robin stated that their teachers fostered a positive relationship with them, and they desired to create a similar relationship with their students. Their teachers modeled caring, nurturing, positive relationships, and they noted as teachers they are modeling the same traits for their students. Their teachers believed that they could succeed, similar to how Ms. Allen believes in her students. Ms. Allen believes that each child possesses something great inside him or her and she works to build that greatness. This belief in cultivating a strong relationship between the student and teacher appeared to be fundamental to the teachers approach to their profession.

Role of the teacher in building a connectedness with students. Building a connectedness with students was a reoccurring theme mentioned throughout the interviews. The participants explained that in order to teach students or correct student behaviors, the teacher must connect with the students. Ms. Ryan spoke of her efforts in building a connectedness with students as the foundation of everything she does. Mr. Pride also stated that when a teacher has a rapport with a student, the student is more apt to listen to the teacher and the teacher has a greater ability to reach students. Ms. Ryan stated that building a relationship, enables her to connect with the students.

Influence of high teacher expectations. Teachers frequently commented that they held high expectations for their students. Several participants stated that having their students grow academically was one of their greatest accomplishments. Ms. White noted

during the focus group, that as a first year teacher a student thanked her for helping him learn to read. Ms. Belle also stated that one of her greatest accomplishments was watching her students grow academically. During the 2012-2013 school year, all of her students attained skill mastery in at least one area on their IEP goals.

Mr. Pride shared that it was rewarding when students visited him after graduating and expressed their gratitude for the expectations he held. He further reported that he also felt one of his greatest accomplishments was when students applied what they learned while they were in high school. Ms. McDowell said that she was happy to see her students reach the expectations she held, and it made her feel good to know that they learned as a result of her teaching.

Relevance of on-the-job experience. Having first-hand experience was also mentioned as influential to teachers' in their experience teaching students with special needs. Mr. Pride noted that the best training for a teacher is learning on the job. Mr. Pride reported that it was essential to talk to the veteran teachers in the building to learn about the students as well as teaching practices that work well for the teachers. Mrs. Roosevelt echoed similar thoughts. She asserted that as she gained experience she would tailor instruction to student needs.

Ms. Allen stated, "I think experience is the best teacher because they [the university] can teach you methods of teaching and how behavior should be...you have to develop your own structure/ routine with what works for you as well as what works for your kids." Ms. Wilson further reiterated that she wanted to see what veteran teachers were doing, so that she could pick and choose what fit the student population.

Key learning moments shape professional development. Another theme mentioned throughout the interviews was the importance of learning moments. Ms. Todd said, "...being a substitute teacher for a number of years really influenced my teaching. I learned what to do and what not to do..." She went on to say that her experience as a substitute teacher helped her learn how to design the classroom and lesson plans for student learning. Ms. Roosevelt stated that she learned from her experiences with her children. She reported that she observed how they interacted as well as, the different things they learned. Ms. Roosevelt asserted that she incorporated the things she observed and learned into her teaching. Ms. Allen shared that she observed her mother, who was a teacher, throughout her childhood, which influenced Ms. Allen's teaching. Her mother was firm with the students, and she stated that she applied the same firmness to her students.

Teachers' frequent narrative of their passion for working with students.

Another theme mentioned in the interview was a passion for working with students. Teachers commented how they loved what they were doing, and they believed in the work they were doing. Ms. Roosevelt openly professed her love for teaching as well as her love for the students. Ms. Roosevelt's "love" for her students is the force that keeps her "driving." She intentionally builds strong relationships with her students because she loves teaching and she loves her students.

Barriers to Equal Educational Opportunity

The experience of teachers suggests that the barriers to equal educational opportunities include home and community related barriers, such as—attendance and safety, as well as school related barriers, such as—educational needs, poor

implementation of inclusion, limited resources, and the flawed design of the educational system.

Student attendance. A key home-related barrier narrated by teachers was student attendance. Teachers stated that students' chronically poor attendance greatly impacted student performance. Mrs. McDowell reported that she would call students in the morning to wake them up so that they would come to school. Mrs. McDowell asserted that it was difficult to make sure chronically absent students were following the curriculum because she would need to continuously back track. Ms. Ryan also said that it was challenging to get students to come to school because they may have moved several times during the year, and sometimes they did not have clothes or transportation.

Student safety. A community related barrier narrated by the teachers was the concern about students' safety beyond the school facility. While added security measures such as security officers and metal detectors have been established in school, the safety of students once they leave school remains a concern. Ms. Ryan and Ms. McDowell reiterated that student safety is a concern that they have for their students. Ms. Ryan reported, "As a teacher we don't have control over the neighborhood, the type of environment they're in, but just...going home, they might be in a fight or something. I can't go home with them to control all of that."

Different educational needs. A key school-related barrier that teachers frequently commented on was the varying levels of students in one classroom. Teachers frequently commented on the varying levels of students in one classroom. Mr. Pride stated, "For example, [in] one particular class, I've got an individual that can read extremely well...three individuals that can not read at all...so now the challenge is how

can I relate everything?” Mrs. Roosevelt echoed a similar concern. She shared that her students come with such a varied array of disabilities, “So that sometimes it is a challenge because I have a little girl who is in a wheel chair on tube feed and she can’t do anything; and then I also have a kid who likes to throw things, bites, and he is very aggressive.”

Poor implementation of inclusion. Another consistent school-related barrier mentioned throughout the interviews was the poor implementation of inclusion. Ms. Todd stated, “...inclusion is great, but you have to have teams of people working together collaboratively.” Ms. Todd further reported that “...it’s not going to work and I’ve seen it not work so many times because...teachers don’t understand what it means to have inclusion or they don’t want inclusion...” A focus group participant echoed similar thoughts, “...you just throw all the students in inclusion and you threw all of the special education teachers with the regular education teacher with no planning.” Ms. Belle also stated, “...there needs to be a lot more inclusion. The problem with that is that the general education teachers aren’t familiar with how to do it because there are so many types of inclusion and so many models.”

Limited resources. Teachers frequently identified that they had limited resources. Ms. Smith asserted that the regular education teachers received books, kits, and materials first, while typically the special education teachers ended up having to copy the materials or sharing with regular education teachers. Similarly, Ms. Ryan and Ms. Allen said that as special education teachers they received the last of all resources, and as a result the students did not have everything they needed to master their IEP goals.

Ms. Roosevelt shared that she gets some of the materials she needs but she ends up buying a lot of the materials because her students need a variety of resources because of

their various needs. Ms. Roosevelt stated that she has to buy equipment for her students' various skill levels often most evident in the range of fine motor and gross motor skills among her students. Ms. Roosevelt asserted that she seeks out resources from many different sources to ensure the students have everything they need.

Participants from the focus group echoed similar thoughts. One participant stated, "...it is inequality across the board, from resources to technology to opportunities participate in after school activities." Another person also reported that, "...there is still some inequality as it relates to staff, equipment, supplies..."

Flawed design of educational system. During the focus group session, teachers frequently referred to design of the educational system as being flawed. One teacher stated, "...the quality of education...is not what it should be...and I believe that it is by design. I believe that these children are being programmed [into menial work]...someone's got to clean the toilet, someone's got to push the broom." As indicated in the next section, teachers appear to see their role as reducing these home, community, and school related barriers in some way. In this manner, their expressed desire to address these barriers, as noted by a focus group participant when she told the group "...so my thing is to try to give them the best that we can give them..."

In particular the essence of this phenomena stems from the failure to understand and confront exclusionary practices endemic to the education system (Berliner, 2013). The exclusionary practices have created stratified school opportunities and outcomes.

Teachers noted systemic flaws within the school, home and community, all which create barriers for students of color.

Teachers' Efforts to Address Barriers

The experience of teachers suggests that the efforts used to address barriers center around equality of opportunity—teachers as agents, points of connection, always learning, “I do it all the time,” exposing students to the same curriculum giving voice, and real and relevant experiences. In particular, teachers discussed their agency in providing resources, and attending to the social, emotional, and physical needs for their students, many times as a result of non-academic concerns. Further, the narratives of the teachers drew on their experiences when they were students, creating autobiographical points of connection that helped when addressing concerns in the classroom. The study also revealed that teachers desired to be life-long learners and many times this new knowledge could be integrated into their lessons. Participants reported that they do not think about every obstacle they remove because they *do it all the time*. Moreover, teachers identified that they worked to make sure that their students had the same experiences as regular education students. Furthermore, the participants noted the importance of giving students’ voice, learning how to express themselves in front of others. Finally, participants stated the importance of providing real and relevant experiences for their students, in particular simulating how to apply for jobs, filling out applications, or exploring future career opportunities.

Teachers as agents. A theme that emerged from many of the participants reflected how teachers acted as institutional agents to provide resources, serve as mentors and attend to social, emotional, and the physical needs for their students, particularly for non-academic concerns. Ms. Belle shared a story about a student who experienced a great deal of trauma in a short amount of time. She discussed how she worked to gain his

confidence. Ms. Belle stated that she learned to “love” this student. Ms. Belle asserted that as a result this student gained a great deal of pride in himself and he felt smart because he was learning. Mr. Pride also shared a story about an exceptionally bright young man in his class. He said that the young man passed all five parts of the Ohio Graduation Test, but his home life was very challenging. Mr. Pride noted that as a result of the challenges he faced at home, the young man was chronically absent. Mr. Pride stated that the student would share some of his concerns with him, and Mr. Pride decided to help the young man. Mr. Pride asserted that he began giving the young man clothes because many times the student stated that he did not have any clothes to wear to school.

Ms. McDowell echoed a similar story in which one of her students also had non-academic concerns that were impacting her academics. Ms. McDowell shared that she noticed the young lady before she became her student; the other teachers were having a difficult time with her. Ms. McDowell stated that she that it appeared that the young lady wanted to be successful and she just needed someone to love her. Ms. McDowell noted that she took the young lady “under her wing,” and she learned to love the young lady. Ms. McDowell reported that she saw a lot of potential in this student, so she began to help her. Ms. Roosevelt shared a story about a student in her classroom who was very ill. She said that the student had surgery and he remained in the hospital for some time. Ms. Roosevelt stated that she went to visit the young man in the hospital and also while recuperating in a rehabilitation center. Ms. Roosevelt noted one outcome of her support for this student was that his mother asked if she could put Ms. Roosevelt in her will so that if something happened to her, Ms. Roosevelt would be able to adopt her son.

Autobiographical points of connection. Many of the teachers stated that they drew on personal experiences when addressing concerns in their classroom. The narratives of many of the teachers revealed that their experiences were parallel to their students. They understood some of their students' circumstances because they had similar circumstances. Many of the teachers cited growing up in an urban area, and they drew upon these points of connection to help their students.

Some teachers asserted that they had positive experiences with their teachers, which helped to shape their teaching. In particular, good experiences with teachers and challenging economic conditions growing up merged to create in teachers a sense of obligation toward their students. Many teachers alluded to feeling pressure or a sense of a burden to help students become successful.

Always learning. The experience of teachers revealed that teachers had a desire to be life-long learners. Ms. Wilson stated that she is "always learning" and she uses this knowledge to help her students. Ms. Smith also cited, "With my population, I'm not satisfied even though we've tried a lot of different things to make our students successful. I'm always at the drawing board, I'm always reviewing what my students did, their attitudes, did they get it, are they making progress." Ms. Smith has a desire, "...that each of my children are able to read." She emphasized that she was not content with one or two students reading. She wanted all of her students to read.

I do it all the time. Many of the teachers identified that they never really thought of how they remove barriers for their students. During the interview they paused for a moment to think of an instance when they helped remove obstacles for students, some teachers were not able to think of an obstacle they removed. Their experience revealed

that they do not think about every obstacle they remove because they do it all the time. As a teacher the demands on them are great, and they do not have time to log everything they do to help students.

While teachers seemed to not view their everyday support for their students as “removing obstacles,” they clearly narrated the ways in which they leveled the playing field for their students and facilitated for their students equality of opportunity through the following: exposing students to the same curriculum as regular education students; using instructional strategies that nurtured their students’ voice and level of inquiry; and providing curriculum that had meaningful connections to students’ lives and futures.

Equality of opportunity: exposing students to same curriculum. Exposing students to the same curriculum as regular education students was also a reoccurring topic of discussion with teachers. Teachers identified that they worked to make sure that their students had the same experiences as regular education students. Ms. Belle stated, “...the material was presented by myself as well as the general education teacher, and all the assignments were the same.” Ms. Allen also asserted, “...I would piece and part things together to work for my students and find resources of my own.” Teachers stated that although their students did not receive the same resources as regular education students, the teachers often leveled the playing field through their personal investment of educational materials. Ms. Wilson reported, “I go out and purchase books that my students can relate to and they give me titles of books that they can relate to...by doing that, they have a voice.”

Giving students’ voice. Another consistent theme mentioned throughout the interviews was the importance of giving students’ voice. Ms. Smith stated that, “...I

really wanted my students to have a voice in the classroom. And so I wanted them to be able to speak in a group and not feel apprehensive or worry they weren't listened to or what they was saying was not important." Mrs. Wilson cited that she allows the students to have a choice in the curriculum, noting "And so bringing those materials in, and having them do project-based learning, having them have debates, having them compare and contrast novels, movies and they see their own race, their own culture in these movies, so they relate."

Real and relevant experiences. Several participants in the focus group spoke of the importance of exposing students to experiences that were real and relevant. One participant reported that she saw that her students were not attending college so, "...we started to have webcasts from different trades." Another participant echoed similar thoughts, "...I gave my students chances to go on-line to look up jobs and have them fill out applications giving them the chance to learn about the real world." One participant stated that she would expose her students to different restaurants and areas outside of their neighborhoods.

Summary

The cross case analysis confirmed themes that emerged from the data. In particular, the teachers noted the autobiographical experience of family and community as key social networks and forms of social capital. Additionally, they cited the level of professional and personal investment. The question then becomes the following: is it possible that the autobiographical experience of family and community, as key social networks and forms of social capital, and the level of professional and personal investment *inform* what is happening in special education for these teachers and their

students? Although, teachers did not explicitly state that they were trying to provide their students with the same social networks they had as children, their narratives suggest they worked tirelessly to support their students in ways in which these teachers had been supported as children. Teachers were aware that the social networks they had as children were valuable and that they benefited from these social networks. While conditions appeared to place their students in far more vulnerable circumstances, the teachers maintained, as much as possible, an effort at critical social supports.

In each case, teachers consistently narrated that even as they faced the structural conditions within the school system and the broader community, they generate *hope* through their agency. Teachers referenced feeling a sense of obligation, pressure, and/or burden. How might the references to “obligation” and “pressure” and “burden” illustrate the *bleakness* as they generate *hope* through their agency in providing resources, serving as mentors, and attending to students’ social and academic needs?

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

This cross case research study explored the experience of teachers in special education classrooms in a Midwestern urban school district. In particular, this research aimed to explore the efforts used by teachers to address the issue of equality of opportunity in special education settings serving low-income students of color. The study looked closely at what barriers teachers saw as getting in the way of equal educational opportunity and how teachers reduced barriers of inequality for their students. The study looked at the ways in which educators facilitate equality by creating opportunities for students to use their voice and become engaged in their learning. The study also examined what teachers perceive as structures utilized to reach equal educational opportunities.

The problem of the disproportionate representation of students of color in special education calls for educators, parents, lawmakers and community leaders to join together to challenge the constitutionality of the placement in special education (Beachum, Blanchett & Mumford, 2006). The examination of this concern through this study underscores the experience of teachers of students with special needs, including the

barriers teachers see as getting in the way of equal educational opportunity. It also provides an intimate look at how teachers redirected barriers of inequality for their students, often so regularly that it was normative. A discussion of my findings as it relates to equality of educational opportunity for students in special education from the perspective of teachers follows.

Addressing the disproportionate representation of students of color within under-resourced special education settings continues to be one of the nation's highest priorities. In the preceding chapter, the cross case data from the study were presented. Part I of this chapter examines the synthesis of study findings concerning barriers to equal educational opportunity, organized into two categories: home and community-related barriers and school-related barriers. This chapter also includes a synthesis of coded material related to teachers' efforts to address such barriers through their focus on equality of opportunity and exposing students with disabilities to the same curriculum as typically developed students. I will provide an interpretation of my results and make connections with relevant theory. Part II examines implications, recommendations for educational policy, limitations, recommendations for future research and concluding thoughts.

Beyond the School Walls—A Dream Deferred

Participant reflections suggest that students' school experiences are greatly impacted by external factors outside of the school. Several teachers noted that students were missing a large amount of school. To address this home-related barrier, teachers communicated with parents, sometimes calling up to three times a week to check on students, wake them up, and at times pick up or drop off students. However, despite their efforts, teachers reported that students still missed a substantial amount of school.

Teachers noted that more needed to be done to intervene on behalf of the students to address the concern of chronic absences. Additionally, they saw these home-related barriers were connected to broader social issues, such as families' limited resources and the problem of homelessness.

Several teachers noted that student attendance was adversely impacted by external factors. Nonetheless, while teachers did not feel they had much control over the students' attendance, they narrated a sense of responsibility and a desire to help with their attendance concern. Mrs. Ryan along with other participants clearly felt a sense of shared responsibility and in turn did not cite excuses nor placed the blame on the students. Participants clearly narrated that although the students faced barriers, the teachers, did not feel hopeless. The expectations they held for their students remained high. They reiterated that systems of support needed to be created for their students.

The stories shared also highlighted the importance of safety as a concern for participants. Participants reported that the district added additional security measures over the past 5-7 years. For example, each building has a security officer and metal detectors. However, these safety measures focused solely on security at the school. Teachers were also concerned with the students' safety outside of the school.

The factors of home and community barriers exacerbate the school experiences of students with disabilities, creating challenges for teachers beyond the school walls (Berliner, 2013). Berliner (2013) elaborates that despite efforts to provide an equitable education for all students, almost all-contemporary school reform has failed to address poverty. Berliner further asserted that, "...the general case is that poor people stay poor and that teachers and schools serving impoverished youth do not often succeed in

changing the life chances of their students” (p. 2). Moreover, poverty was not an excuse for schools to do little; however, it was reason for why schools are not able to do much. The hope participants’ felt about what they could do for their students, even with the stresses related to poverty, was deeply embedded in the interviews as well as the focus group.

Teacher Agency—Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness

Creating an educational environment that exposes special education students to the same curriculum provides equality of opportunity for the students and in turn is a way in which teachers address barriers of inequality in special education. Teachers in the study brought rich personal experiences to the classroom, and actively connected with the students to enhance their classroom experience. The teachers reported that they used their own personal experiences as a platform to help their students succeed.

Embedded in the interviews was the conscious effort of the teachers to provide real and relevant experiences. Teacher participants stated that not only did they work to make sure the students had the same experiences, but they made sure that the students had real and relevant experiences that they could connect to. They also shared their experiences so that the students would have more than one point of reference.

Teachers also talked about creating opportunities for students to express themselves increasing their voice in the classroom. By giving the students voice, teachers give the students an opportunity to not only answer questions but to formulate their thoughts. Giving students voice serves multiple purposes; it empowers greater academic success and social consciousness. Much of the teachers’ views on their teaching strategies reflect the writing of multicultural education.

Gay (as cited by Sleeter & McLaren, 1995, p. 173) asserted that African American, Latino, Native American, and poverty cultures tend to be highly communal, group-based, and action-oriented. Therefore, teaching and learning strategies that are participatory, cooperative, collaborative, and that use frequently varied formats are likely to be more culturally compatible and successful for students from these backgrounds than the more traditional uses of competitive, individualistic and passive routines.

Education in America—Systemic Inequality

Bourdieu (1977) articulated a theory of reproduction that emphasized the importance of three forms of capital: social, economic, and cultural. Cultural capital generally refers to cultural background, knowledge and skills that are passed from one generation to the next (Bourdieu, 1977). According to Bourdieu (1977) schools are organized around cultural capital of the dominant culture. Hence, students from the dominant culture will experience greater success than students of color because they are familiar with the cultural capital of the dominant culture.

Stanton-Salazar (2011) theorizes about teachers who "go against the grain" as well as understanding that schools work against the social and economic mobility of working class students and students of color. Elements of the participants' narratives connect to Stanton-Salazar's work. Stanton-Salazar defined institutional agents as "...an individual who occupies one or more hierarchical positions of relatively high-status, either within a society or in an institution" (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1075). The role of an institutional agent "...becomes manifest when on behalf of another, he or she acts to directly transmit, or negotiate the transmission of, highly valued institutional support, defined for now in terms of those resources, opportunities, privileges, and services which

as highly valued...” (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1075). Institutions still impede these agents because of structural inequalities. Also, external factors with the family and community have created multiple levels of inequity which influence student success and create a perpetual cycle of poverty.

In addition to home and community barriers, the participants evidenced in their stories school-related barriers. The findings in the study were aligned with Bowles and Gintis (1976) that schools train the wealthy to take positions at the top of the economic ladder and condition the disadvantaged to accept their lower class status. These narratives illustrate that the teachers are aware of and have experience with the flawed design of the educational system. During the focus group, a teacher reported, that she did not believe there is equal opportunity in education. In particular, students of color were being trained to take menial positions. Participants clearly stated that they did not feel that there was equality of opportunity in education, and they narrated personal experiences with the injustice of the educational system.

For example this study found stories of participants noting limited resources as a barrier to equal educational opportunity in education. Teachers stated that many times they received left over books and resources. At times their students did not receive the necessary materials they needed. The teachers shared that sometimes they would either share with the regular education teachers or copy materials so that their students had access to the curriculum offered to student in the regular education classes. Some teachers said that they have gotten accustomed to the lack of resources and they have learned to work around this concern. Quite a few teachers reached into their own pockets to cover the cost of supplies.

Several teachers noted that they do not go without the things their students needed so they have become masters at researching and finding things on the Internet. A teacher said that during the summer she goes to sales to find gross motor and fine motor devices for her students. Teachers also made note of the importance of networking with other teachers to get the resources they need.

In the individual interviews teachers narrated a sense of being individuals in isolation; however, when they were in the focus group it appeared they shared a common critique. It is not surprising that teachers might view their agency more from an individual perspective and less from a collective endeavor because of the nature of their work. In particular, teachers in urban settings are at times in classrooms with the students most of the day with limited opportunities for planning, questioning, or organizing for changed policies. Teachers noted the ways in which they work alone or network to fill in the gaps in resources. In particular a teacher reported how she worked to "piece and part things" together to assure her students had the resources they needed.

It seemed as if the teachers were able to adapt to this concern because many teachers identified that although they did not get all of the resources they needed, they made a way to get their students the things they needed. One teacher reiterated that she was proud because she learned how to navigate the various systems and she was able to tap into various resources to get the things she needed. The teachers recognized that this concern exists and they worked to assure that the concern was not evident to the students.

Many participants noted that they were witnesses to or encountered social injustice. Encountering social injustice first hand or as a witness resulted in the personal discovery of how to cope with or overcome inequalities. They also recognized the

importance of both receiving and giving help to others. Many participants said that as children they had positive experiences with their teachers. In particular participants spoke about how the teachers helped them graduate or helped them accomplish a goal. In turn now as teachers they help their students in the same manner. While teachers recounted a sense of obligation to give back (as others gave to them), they were nevertheless participating in a flawed educational system doing their best to counter the bleakness from the social injustices of American society. Participants in the study were able to speak to the larger systemic concerns of inequality that directly impact the educational system. I would argue this was attributed to their conceptualization of inequality being larger than the educational system.

Connor (2007) asserted that the disability studies model challenges historical beliefs in the field of education that frame disability as focused on the individual. The social disability studies model conceptualizes disability as related to the "...failure of society to remove disabling barriers and social restrictions..." (p. 36). Instead of perceiving the students as having a deficit, the proponents conceptualize that something is wrong with society. Connor (2007) stated that "The claim is clear: people are not inherently disabled; it is society that disables them" (p. 36). While participants did not explicitly discuss the issue of disproportionality, they referenced the concern of the flawed educational system as underserving their students who were students of color living in poverty. They linked the failure of the system to contributing to their students' limited economic and social mobility.

While key school related barriers described by teachers included different educational needs, poor implementation of inclusion and limited resources, there was a

sense that some participants were aware of social injustice in special education. However participants have not had a platform to vocalize their thoughts. For the majority of teachers, it appears that naming their reality of working tirelessly to correct a flawed system or being asked to describe realities are ignored or have had limited value.

The individual interviews alluded to an essential element of critical race theory, in which participants spoke from an individualistic perspective, i.e. what they do for their students as opposed to how the system short changed their students (Connor, 2007). Participants in the focus group narrated a different experience than interview participants. In particular, once a focus group participant shared specific stories as it relates to inequalities from her or his own experience, group members noted commonalities. The participants needed the opportunity to ask critical questions as well as think critically as part of a professional learning community. In particular, Connor (2007) asserted “Simply put, communal stories of experiences within (and perception of) the dominant discourse by members of an “othered” group can provide relief, support, an opportunity for humor, and a place to build strength and forge an alternative perspective grounded in commonalities”(p. 40). In an attempt to acquire an accurate and authentic critical reflection, dialogue and questioning is necessary. Listening to multiple voices in the educational process allows for listeners to see the value in their thoughts as well as others.

Implications

The question of bleakness. The findings of this study suggest that persistent inequalities in urban education, particularly in special education, need to be addressed with an understanding of the interlocking nature of the economy and educational

institutions. This means attending to the role of inequality on wealth, education, and poverty in influencing academic outcomes, such as social mobility, dropping out of school, rates of imprisonment among students of color, low-income students with disabilities, and school achievement (Berliner, 2013). An examination of schools in the United States noted that schools alone could not address poverty. It is important to examine the historical, economic, political and cultural context of communities. According to the social reproduction theory (MacLeod, 1995), social relations of capitalist societies are reproduced invariably at one site—the school. Schools actually reinforce social inequality while presuming to do the opposite.

The failure of current school reform to respond to external factors within the family and community that influence student success creates a perpetual cycle of poverty, high levels of incarceration, and high rates of school dropouts. The ideals expressed by the nation's founding documents become a *dream deferred* for many people of color. Some argue that the ability to access educational equality for people of poses a bleak reality, proven by a manifestation of multiple levels of inequity as it pertains to historical, political, economic and cultural factors.

While the teacher narratives address problems associated with special education classrooms and the lack of resources for low-income students of color who have been identified as having a disability, the broader issue of disproportional representation of these students in special education remain problematic. If urban school special education programs wish to reduce the disproportionate representation of students of color, it is best if they begin to consider how to address *in concert* economic and educational inequity. This study, while restricted in the conclusions it can draw, offers valuable insight into

how to best serve students with disabilities, as well as insight into possible best practices for educational programs. If economic and educational inequity are not addressed in concert, the results of overrepresentation will persist. Systematic issues coupled with educational inequalities will incrementally increase.

Additionally, within the current arrangement of programs and instructional support for students with disabilities, more resources must be devoted to level the playing field. The competition for limited resources in special education is not a new concern. In 1997, the Ohio Supreme Court declared Ohio's school funding system inequitable and unconstitutional. The idea that people of color in special education have to compete for access to a relatively small set of resources is a significant contributor to the perpetuation of education inequality. The education for students with disabilities that learn differently than students without disabilities needs to be individualized and requires specific training. Moreover, when funds are limited, this training is unlikely.

This notion is supported by literature by Irvine (2012) who asserted, "Limited resources translate into reduced educational resources, fewer opportunities for quality instruction, and an educational system in which low-income special education students of color routinely receive an inferior education" (p. 267). Competition further translates limited opportunities for on-going training and support of teachers.

The results of the study offer unique insights as to what teachers find to be critical resources needed for an educational program for educating this population of students. Taking these components into consideration when developing a district program would serve to strengthen the overall program and also allow for individualization of student programming so that learning can be maximized.

The question of hope. Eighty years ago, Carter G. Woodson (1933) asked, “Can you expect teachers to revolutionize the social order for the good of the community?” (p. 145) Recognizing that teachers are agents in helping to improve the human condition, Woodson responded:

Indeed we must expect this very thing. The educational system of a country is worthless unless it accomplishes this task. Men and women of scholarship and insight must show us the right way and lead us into the light which shines brighter and brighter (p. 140).

The agency of teachers in providing resources, attending to social, emotional and physical needs and working for academic success can help in designing interventions and school environments that can authentically empower both youth and agents. Such teacher agency provides hope that change can occur. Stanton-Salazar (2011) noted “Socialization processes during childhood and adolescence are theorized to play an important and mediating role in social stratification, with attention to the role of parents, teachers, and peers, as key agents” (p. 1073). Stanton-Salazar (2011) argues that these processes are central to the formation of students’ social capital, such as “...instrumental relationships with high-status non-kin” involving “institutional agents who occupy relatively high positions in multiple dimensional stratification system, and who are well positioned to provide key forms of social and institutional support” (p. 1075), which has the potential to provide positive change. A teacher can become an institutional agent when on behalf of student “...he or she acts to directly transmit or negotiate the transmission of highly valued institutional support, defined for now in terms of those resources, opportunities, privileges and services which are highly valued, yet differentially allocated within any

organization or society that is invested in social inequality and in hierarchal forms of control and organization” (p. 1076).

During the study at times teachers narrated a collective critique of a refusal to give up to a certain extent. When teachers felt they held the forms of support that could assist their students, they felt empowered; however, when they felt the system was working against them they felt disempowered. Although the teachers acted as institutional agents and they shared similar attributes of some high status agents, many of the teachers are people of color and they may not have the same access to levels of institutional resources as their Caucasian counterparts. However, despite institutional lack of responsiveness to these teachers, the benefits of their direct support for the students was a source of hope for the teachers.

Recommendations for Educational Policy

As noted in the literature review that frames this study, Delpit (1988) posited that reform efforts created for students of color should be developed in collaboration with adults who share their culture. The task will then be to amplify the voices of African American educators to position them to inform school reform efforts and policy making. Federal and state policies and practices need to be reexamined and revised to promote equitable culturally responsive educational systems. Though there are several policies worthy of scrutiny, here I discuss just a few.

First, carefully scrutinize and restructure governmental policies related to school financing and the allocation of resources. In particular, a number of Ohio school districts engaged in a lengthy court battle known as the *DeRolph* litigation; the Ohio Supreme Court declared Ohio’s funding system inequitable and ruled it unconstitutional. It is

important to note that “Culturally and linguistically diverse children living in high-poverty areas are more likely to attend schools that are inadequately funded and staffed”(Klingner, Artiles, Harry, Zion, Tate, Zamora-Duran & Riley, 2005). As a result, governmental policies that determine school finances and how resources are allocated need to be scrutinized and restructured. By reconfiguring the educational funding system as instructed by the Supreme Court of Ohio to address inequity, we can ensure that all students receive an equitable free public and appropriate education

Second, attention should be given to examining and reforming teacher licensure requirements to make sure that every effort is made to include people of color and specific standards to teaching students of color. Participants narrated points of connection between their autobiography and the lives of their students. These connecting points informed their teaching and their support for their students. Participants also used their experience in and outside the classroom as a source of professional development. Having been a Sunday school teacher noticing students’ literacy struggles, or a substitute teacher, the participants reflected on these experiences and “learned what to do and what not to do.” For teachers of all racial and ethnic backgrounds, a criterion for those teaching in urban settings should be a capacity for persistence and efforts to excel when the individual is faced with barriers. Additionally, professional development should recognize the knowledge and skill black educators bring to the classroom already, with resources and support to build on that knowledge and skill. Sometimes "low performance" is tied to students' test scores, and this measure has been subject to much debate about whether it is valid or not. However, if it is found that a teacher lacks the desire to work with students of color, immediate action should be taken to remove the

teacher. Teachers with weak skills but high motivation should be offered remediation. Hillard (2000) noted that “Master teachers and master educational leaders can design teaching and learning processes, school structures, and, yes, assessment approaches that exhibit both standards of excellence and valid relationships to excellent educational achievement. They can also rescue most of the low-performing teachers and help them to become powerful agents of student change in achievement” (p. 302).

Third, Congress should reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) with attention to in and out of school factors. Additionally, in many instances courts have acknowledged inequalities in the educational system; however, the enforcement of noncompliance has been insufficient, especially noncompliance to IDEIA (2004). In particular, in-school factors considered in the reauthorization of ESEA (1965) should specifically focus on attending to the agency of teachers in providing social support and resources, and teachers’ attention to social, emotional, and physical needs of the students. Extending accountability beyond test scores but also to the social and emotional development of students may help in formulating a framework to intervene and increase student success. Additionally, out of school factors should be considered to simultaneously address economic and educational inequity in education. Beachum, Blanchett and Mumford (2006) assert that in cases of promoting equity and quality the courts tend to state that the issues are legislative rather than judicial matters. Beachum, Blanchett and Mumford (2006) state, “In doing so the courts have given states and school systems wide latitude to go ahead with smoke-and-mirrors or good-faith reform efforts, with no real accountability for what actually happens in schools” (p. 79). Therefore, it

would imperative to make noncompliance a legal issue and violators should face severe consequences.

The struggle to address educational inequality must be grounded in an effort to improve the policies and structures that produce inequity. Anyon (2009) discussed mobilizing social movements; “They offer a forum for working together to develop community power and to collaborate with others in making fundamental shifts in the political and social arrangements that have caused inequities, exclusions, and subordination” (p. 194). Building momentum creates the press for policy change.

Limitations

This research, like all research, is not without limitations. The first limitation of the current research is that as the researcher I may have learned more about the teachers' view of their role as institutional empowerment agents had I included additional methods of data collection, such as observations of the following: teachers' classrooms, faculty meetings, professional development sessions.

A second limitation is in relation to the participants. This research used interviews and a focus group with teachers. Perspectives of students and parents may offer additional insight. Additionally, majority of the participants were people of color and females, and they primarily taught African American students. As a result, the research is not exhaustive in covering greater cultural diversity.

In addition, the sample size consists of only a small number of teachers who were studied in one Midwestern city. Additionally, the participants did not represent schools across the city, as they were primarily in schools located on one side of the city. The

findings cannot be generalized to all special education teachers. Another study would need to be conducted with a larger sample size.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study examined, what teachers do as agents to bring down barriers to inequality and to navigate cultural boundaries. The findings indicated that the agency of teachers in providing resources, attending to social, emotional and physical needs of their students and working for academic success can help in designing interventions for students. Future studies might further explore strategies noted by the teachers in this study and pursue additional strategies offered by other effective teachers using additional methods of data collection. Additional research questions that address how teachers bring down barriers to inequality would contribute to this discussion and provide answers to some of the new questions that arose. In particular, it would be interesting to examine the experience of students in a special education setting in an attempt to see what their experience reveals about teachers efforts to address barriers.

Final Thoughts

The purpose of the study was to explore the experience of teachers in special education classrooms in a Midwestern urban school district. This research explored efforts by teachers to address the issue of equality of opportunity in special education settings serving low-income students of color. The study looked closely at what barriers teachers saw as getting in the way of equal educational opportunity and how teachers reduced barriers of inequality for their students. The study considered ways in which educators facilitated equality by creating opportunities for students to use their voice and

become engaged in their learning. Further, this study considered how inequality might persist in special education and how teachers address inequality.

The dream professed in the United States Declaration of Independence is a dream for all citizens of the United States. Although much more is needed to realize the full dream, it has not faded away. Carter G. Woodson's words remind us that there is hope.

Can you expect teachers to revolutionize the social order for the good of the community? Indeed we must expect this very thing. The educational system of a country is worthless unless it accomplishes this task. Men and women of scholarship and insight must show us the right way and lead us into the light which shines brighter and brighter (p. 140).

Banks and Banks (1997) assert that "...educators must not only educate the mind, they must also educate the heart and create a sense of hope, commitment, and possibility among you people. They must teach students to know and to care, as well as to act" (p. 188). The results from this qualitative analysis suggest that the agency of teachers in providing resources, attending to social, emotional and physical needs of their students and working for students' academic success can help in designing interventions for students and school environments that can authentically empower both youth and agents. However, if urban school special education programs wish to reduce the disproportionate representation of students of color, it is best if they begin to consider how to address *in concert* economic and educational inequity.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW TEMPLATE

Teacher Questions

My first set of questions relates to your background in teaching.

1. How many years have you been teaching? In what areas are you certified to teach?
2. What degree/s do you hold?
3. What was your area of specialization?
4. From what institution did you receive your degree?
5. How many years have you been in your current school?
6. What grade level/s have you taught in the past?
7. For how long have you been teaching at your current grade level?
8. What subject areas are you currently teaching? (Area in special education)
9. What, if any, are your professional associations/memberships?

Biographical Narrative

This next set of questions relates to your decision to become a teacher and what may have influenced that decision.

1. How did you decide to become a teacher?
2. How would you describe your family and the community in which you were raised?
3. Is there anything in your family, education, or teaching experience/s that influenced your teaching?
4. What would stand out to you as the most important factors that influenced your teaching?
5. How would you describe yourself as a student?
6. How did your professional preparation influence your current teaching (methods, relationships with students, content, what you're doing in the classroom)? Please explain.

Narrative of Teaching Experience

This last set of questions relates to your current experience as a teacher.

1. Could you describe your current classroom experience? (Challenges, accomplishments, concerns)
2. Could you tell me a story that illustrates the challenges you face in your teaching?
3. Could you talk about some of your accomplishments with your students? (Probe: Given the focus on equality that is a primary intent of IDEA, how do you see equality of educational opportunity in your classroom? School?)
4. Describe a situation in which you removed a barrier/ obstacle for a student. What specifically was the barrier?
5. Is there something in your biography that has influenced what you do in the classroom now? ...For example, were you ever in a situation in which someone removed a barrier for you as a child/adult? What specifically was the barrier? How did you feel?
6. Could you talk about the issue of equality of opportunity for special education students in your classroom? School? In the school district? [probe here on what happens for students in inclusion classes, in self-contained classes, and where resources such as teachers, equipment, and quality instruction play a role]

7. In the most recent reauthorization of IDEIA in 2004, the issue of the disproportional representation of students of color and poor children in special education was a key focus. Could you talk about your thoughts on this topic?
8. Is there anything else you want to add?

APPENDIX B

FOCUS GROUP TEMPLATE

1. The first set of questions is about who you are and your experience as a student.
Could you introduce yourself and talk about a really positive experience you've had in school – recently or in the past and what that meant to you?
2. Describe a time when you felt a teacher held your best interest (had your back).
Describe a time when you felt a teacher cared. What did the teacher do?
3. Describe elements/ attributes of successful students. What is your definition of academic success? Share a time or some times when you felt you could achieve academic success during your high school career.
4. Could you talk about any time you might have struggled in class or in your school, either academically or socially? (Probe: What else would you like to happen to make your education better?)
5. What else do you think teachers should do to help students learn?
6. It is important that schools provide students with equal opportunities. In what way does your school provide students with equal opportunities? In what way does it not?
7. Is there anything else you would like to add?