THE CONTEXT OF MINORITY DISPROPORTIONALITY: LOCAL PERSPECTIVES ON SPECIAL EDUCATION REFERRAL

A Status Report

INDIANA EDUCATION POLICY CENTER
Indiana University

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Contents

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The theme of this report, like previous reports, is that the issue of minority disproportionality is extraordinarily complex. The dedication of IDOE Division staff to gaining a fuller understanding of these issues has been remarkable, and continues to keep Indiana in the forefront in addressing important issues of educational equity.

Executive Summary

While there has been extensive documentation of the fact of minority overrepresentation in special education, we know less about what causes disproportionality, and less still about how it should be addressed. Our best knowledge suggests that there are three major factors that make a contribution to racial and ethnic disparities in special education placement: socio-demographic issues associated with poverty, unequal educational opportunities for students of color and disadvantaged students, and the special education referral and placement process itself. Yet we know little of which of these are most important or how they may interact to produce overrepresentation of minority students.

In order to begin moving toward remediating the problem of minority disproportionality in special education in the state of Indiana, it is necessary to understand the issue more fully. This report describes an intensive study undertaken across 14 schools within seven Indiana school corporations to improve our understanding of the factors that may contribute to the disproportionate referral and placement of minority students in special education. We interviewed 66 educators—teachers, principals, school psychologists, and special education directors—about their perspectives. We spoke with them on the challenges faced in urban education, on the process of special education, on resources both available and needed, and on the specific topics of diversity and disproportionality. Analysis of the rich data that resulted from those conversations led to a number of clear themes:

- Teachers and schools feel highly challenged to meet the needs of students whose economic disadvantages may have left them less ready to meet the complex demands of school. Many teachers feel that they are provided with insufficient resources to meet those challenges.
- Classroom behavior appears to be an especially challenging issue for many teachers, and cultural gaps and misunderstandings may increase the contribution of behavioral issues.

- High-stakes testing may be one factor that contributes to the referral of disadvantaged students, by increasing pressure on teachers to access resources for their low-achieving students.
- The majority of respondents did not believe that the process of referral and identification contributed in an important way to disproportionality, although some critiqued the process-oriented nature of special education referral.
- Most teachers make a substantial effort to meet the needs of all their children before beginning an explicit process of special education referral. But many also felt there are simply too few resources available to help those students who are struggling in their classrooms.
- Pre-referral or general education intervention teams may be useful in increasing resources or supporting teachers working with students with academic or behavioral challenges. But the effectiveness of those teams appears to vary greatly from building to building.
- Special education is widely perceived as the only resource available for helping students who are not succeeding. As a result, many teachers will err in the direction of over-referral if it means they can access more resources for their neediest students.
- There was a surprising reticence to discuss issues of race among many of the respondents. These difficulties in communication may hamper actual problem solving efforts.

Together these results paint a surprisingly complex picture of the factors that may cause and maintain minority disproportionality in these districts. Three particular conclusions stand out from these conversations:

- *The factors that create and maintain racial disparities in special education referral and placement are highly complex and interactive. It is critical, therefore, to avoid simplistic solutions in addressing these issues.*
- *Reducing minority student referrals to special education without reducing students' access to needed educational resources will require substantial*

increases in the resources available in general education to meet the needs of disadvantaged students.

- *The difficulty in confronting the inescapable facts of racial disparity in education may itself contribute to the continued inability to effectively address these problems.*

Together these conclusions suggest that, in order to create meaningful change in practices that can reduce disparities, school personnel must be willing to confront those disparities that exist, identify practices that may contribute to disparity, and begin to develop strategies to address those issues. Indiana's planning districts are beginning to develop pilot projects undertaking just such a process. The tremendous progress made in this state in recent years in identifying and describing the issue of minority disproportionality in special education provides encouragement that Indiana educators will continue to make progress in meeting the needs of all Indiana's students.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The facts of minority disproportionality have been well documented. We know less, however about the causes of disproportionate referral and placement . . .

In a field grounded in the principle of non-discrimination, the disproportionate representation of minority students represents a central and continuing challenge for special education. Concerns about the issue reach back to seminal works in the field (Dunn, 1968; Mercer, 1973). The belief that test bias was responsible for over-referral led to a massive exploration of test bias in the 1970's (Braden, 1999), and important legal challenges (*Larry P. v. Riles*, 1979; *PASE v. Hannon, 1980*). Three National Academy of Sciences panels (Heller, Holtzman, & Messick, 1982; Morrison, White, & Feuer, 1996; National Research Council, 2002) have been convened to study the issue. Yet despite such continuous attention, a host of recent national reports indicate that disproportionate minority placement remains a serious and significant problem (Coutinho & Oswald, 2000; Ladner & Hammons, 2001; Losen & Orfield, 2002; National Research Council, 2002).

A fairly extensive descriptive literature at both the national (Chinn & Hughes, 1987; Finn, 1982; Harry & Anderson, 1994; Oswald, Coutinho, & Best, 2002; Oswald, Coutinho, Best, & Singh, 1999; Parrish, 2002) and the state levels (Ladner & Hammons, 2001; Skiba, Chung, Wu, Simmons, & St. John, 2000; Skiba, Wu, Kohler, Chung, & Simmons, 2001) has documented a consistent pattern of disproportionality across disability categories and ethnic classifications (see e.g., National Research Council,

2002). In general, students of color tend to be overrepresented in the disability categories of mental retardation and emotional disturbance, and disproportionality appears to be especially significant for African American students. Disproportionate representation of minority students in learning disabilities has also been reported, although less consistently.

Yet there have been fewer investigations that have explored the variables that contribute to disproportionality, and fewer still that have investigated how those factors might unfold at the local level. Although minority disproportionality is an issue of national scope, the dynamics and processes that result in over-referral or over-placement of minority students begin at the local school and community level. Understanding the complex forces that contribute to inequity will thus almost certainly require exploration at the local level, perhaps through qualitative methodology that allows for a richer description of those local processes (Harry, Klingner, Sturges, & Moore, 2002; Mehan, Hartweck, & Miehls, 1986).

The conversations that a qualitative approach entails become more complicated in discussions concerning disproportionality, since it bears directly upon the complex and emotionally-loaded issue of race. A national report on conversations about education and race, *Quality Counts*, noted: "With identities, long-held beliefs, and futures at stake, it is not surprising that Americans find it difficult, and even painful, to engage in open and honest conversation about education and race" (Ingersoll, 2003, p. 13). Yet the widely divergent and often hidden views held by individuals of different racial/ethnic groups makes it critical to hold such conversations as a start toward understanding the complexity of issues involving race (Tatum, 2002).

In this report we describe a qualitative study of factors that may be associated with disproportionality. We interviewed school practitioners in seven urban and near-urban school districts to gain a fuller understanding of their perspectives concerning variables that may contribute to disproportionate placement in special education. Those conversations touched upon issues of placement, resources, SES, and race. Prior to describing the research, we highlight factors that have been considered as possible contributors to disproportionality.

Variables Contributing to Minority Disparities in Special Education

To place the findings of this study in context, it is helpful to consider factors that have been found to be associated with minority disproportionality in special education. In the following sections, we draw upon both the recent report of the National Research Council (2002) and other previous literature to review what is known about the causes of disproportionality in three areas: *socio-demographic contributions*, *general education and resource inequity*, and *special education process.*

Socio-Demographic Factors

A number of demographic factors related to geographical location and socioeconomic status have been shown to have an effect on student educational achievement or on early cognitive development prior to school entry. These include neighborhood and housing stability (Chase-Landsdale & Gordon, 1996; Schmitz, Wagner, & Menke, 1995; Shumow, Vandell, & Posner, 1998), the student's home environment (Caldas & Bankston, 1999; Miedel & Reynolds, 1999; Oswald, Coutinho, Best, & Singh, 1999), family health care (Kramer, Allen, & Gergen, 1995; Yeargin-

Allsopp, Drews, Decoufle, & Murphy, 1995), and geographic location (Huebner, 1985). In a comprehensive review of literature on the association of poverty and child development, McLloyd (1998) found that the effects of poverty on early cognitive development, school achievement, and to a lesser extent socio-emotional functioning are to some extent dependent on the duration, timing and neighborhood context of poverty; deep and persistent poverty consistently predicts more deleterious effects.

The extent to which biological, social and environmental factors contribute to early cognitive disadvantage constitutes the first of four questions considered by the National Research Council (2002). The panel described the influence on cognitive and behavioral functioning of a number of biological factors, including low birth weight, nutrition and development, fetal exposure to alcohol, tobacco or drugs, and exposure to lead. The report also synthesized a vast literature relating to the impact of social and environmental stressors, including quality of parenting, family interactions that contribute to language development, maternal depression, and child care quality. The panel affirmed that biological and social/environmental factors that disproportionately affect minority students have been found to contribute to poor cognitive and behavioral outcomes. They concluded that early intervention can make a significant difference in the school learning of students who arrive with poverty-related risk factors, and recommended a national commitment to early intervention programs to offset socioeconomic risk factors.

It is important to note, however, that the influence of poverty on cognitive development and school achievement may or may not implicate poverty directly in the disproportionate representation of students of color in special education. Yeargin-

Allsopp et al. (1995) found that, although African American children were more likely to be found eligible for special education services than white children, statistically controlling for socio-economic status reduced the influence of race, suggesting that at least some of the influence of race on disproportionate placement can be explained by poverty status. Yet the relationship between poverty and special education placement is by no means linear. The nature of the relationship between SES and probability of placement for minority students appears to vary in complex ways by disability category (Oswald et al., 1999), as well as percent non-white enrollment and per pupil expenditure (Oswald et al., 2002). Others have suggested that poverty accounts for little of the explained variance in minority placement in special education (Parrish, 2002). Thus, although poverty must be considered to be a variable that contributes to disproportionality, we may not yet able to determine how much or in what direction.

Unequal Opportunity in General Education

One of the most consistent findings in educational research is that students achieve in direct proportion to their opportunity to learn (Greenwood, Delquadri, & Hall, 1984). It might well be expected that students whose educational opportunities are limited will be more likely to be referred for special education services (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Harry, 1994). Unfortunately, differential access to educational resources has been consistently demonstrated for some minority groups in a number of areas, ranging from issues of building quality to school discipline.

Few investigations have explored the link between educational quality and special education referral. Serwatka, Deering, & Grant (1995) investigated several variables that could significantly contribute to the overrepresentation of African American students for

programs for students with emotional disturbance, and found that as the percentage of African American teachers increased, overrepresentation of African American students in the category emotionally disturbed decreased. Similar results were reported in a cross-state comparison by Ladner and Hammons (2001).

More generally, however, inequity in the quality and quantity of educational resources has been extensively documented. Students in urban schools have been shown to receive instruction that is less effective in promoting student learning (Greenwood, Hart, Walker, & Risley, 1994). Curricula and instructional presentation appear to disfavor working class students or students of color (Anyon, 1981; Sleeter & Grant, 1991). Serious deficiencies in physical facilities and resources in urban schools have been documented (Kozol, 1991; Oakes, Ormseth, Bell, & Camp, 1990) that may have their origin in inequitable school funding formulas (Rebell, 1999). Finally, African American students, especially African American males, appear to be at unequal risk for a range of disciplinary consequences (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002b; Townsend, 2000). Although the influence of such factors on special education referral and placement has not been directly studied, it is reasonable to presume that factors that limit educational opportunity will impact educational achievement, thereby increasing the risk for special education referral (Skiba, Bush, & Knesting, 2002a).

The National Research Council report affirmed that schooling independently contributes to "to the incidence of special needs or giftedness among students in different racial/ethnic groups through the opportunities that it provides" (NRC, 2002, p. 4). The review found evidence that poor and minority students are more likely to be taught by teachers with less experience and expertise, in more poorly-funded schools that have

difficulty recruiting and maintaining both teachers of color in particular and a sufficient teaching force in general. Further, students of color may face lowered expectations, or a cultural mismatch regarding expectations concerning ability (Heath, 1982) or behavior (Townsend, 2000). Finally, the panel concludes that impediments to parent participation linked to cultural differences may make students of color more vulnerable to referral and placement.

Special Education Eligibility and Decision-Making Processes

The possibility of bias in the referral and assessment process leading to determination of special education eligibility has been widely researched. There is evidence suggesting that contributions to the disproportionate representation of minority students in special education may be made by a number of components of the eligibility process.

Referral. Initial decisions made in the referral and pre-referral process appear to highly influential in determining ultimate decisions concerning service. The evidence suggests that, even in these initial stages of the special education process, students may be treated differently depending upon their race. Macmillan and Lopez (1996), examining pre-referral practices for 150 students in five school districts, found no significant differences in the overall rates of referral for pre-referral intervention by race. Differences in the severity of reasons for referral for white and black students, however, led the authors to conclude that black students may receive pre-referral interventions only when their academic or behavioral problems reach a higher level of severity. Gottlieb, Gottlieb, and Trongone (1991) studied randomly selected records of students who had been referred for special education evaluation within an urban school system. Results

indicated that teachers referred minority children more often than non-minority children and tended to refer minority students for behavioral issues rather than academic difficulties.

Assessment and decision-making. Investigations of the possibility of bias during the assessment and decision-making process are less recent, but may provide suggestive evidence of contributing to racial disparities. Analogue studies using a case study vignette (Prieto & Zucker, 1981; Zucker & Prieto, 1977) found a greater willingness among both regular and special education teachers to refer minority students given identical referral information. There are also indications that information on race and SES information may contribute to special education decision-making in practice. Reviewing tapes of case review teams making placement decisions, Ysseldyke, Algozzine, Richey, and Graden (1982) argued that factors such as student race and SES contributed more to placement decisions than did performance data. Tomlinson, Acker, Canter, and Lindborg (1978) examined factors contributing to actual special education referral, and found that minority students were referred more often than majority students, that their parents were contacted significantly less often to participate in the special education process, and that the recommendations to minority parents were more restrictive and less diverse than recommendations for non-minority parents.

Findings of NRC Panel. The potential contribution of special education processes to the placement of minority students in special education was the third question assessed by the most recent NRC panel. In its review, the panel found the evidence of bias at various points in the referral to placement process to be mixed. The report concludes, however, that the entire process has sufficient conceptual and

procedural shortcomings as to be unable to ensure that the "right students" are being identified. Further, the panel contended that the entire process is weighted toward referral and placement only after a student has experienced failure, thus ensuring that children's problems will be relatively intractable by the time they are finally placed in special education (Kauffman, 1999).

Understanding the Local Context of Disproportionality

Clearly, minority overrepresentation in special education is an issue of national scope and consequence. Yet the dynamics and processes resulting in the differential placement of minority students begin at the local community, school, and classroom level. An instructive perspective from which to view the contributions of local process is the theory of *cultural reproduction* (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). The theory posits that both racial and class inequities are reproduced over time through institutional and individual actions and decisions that maintain the status quo at the expense of less-privileged groups (Oakes, 1982; Skiba et al., 2002b). One important implication of cultural reproduction is that such actions or processes may be driven by individual or institutional habit patterns, without ever reaching a level of conscious bias on the part of those who participate in those institutional actions (Mehan et al., 1986).

The possibility that racial and socioeconomic inequity can be simply passed on unaware through day-to-day decisions and actions suggests a strong need to study local processes and perspectives on inequity. Yet there are currently little data documenting the processes through which disparities in special education service might unfold. This absence of local data may be a critical barrier to understanding and remediating disproportionate representation.

The purpose of this research, then, was to explore local perspectives on dynamics and processes that may contribute to special education disproportionality. These data were generated by the Indiana Disproportionality Project (IDP), a collaboration between the Indiana Education Policy Center and the Indiana State Division of Special Education to explore the extent of minority disproportionality in the state of Indiana. This report describes the results of a series of qualitative interviews of school practitioners in urban and near-urban school districts in order to represent a local perspective on variables that may contribute to minority disproportionality in special education.

CHAPTER 2

METHODS

Teachers, principals, psychologists, and directors of special education were interviewed about special education referral, challenges in urban education, and diversity and disproportionality . . .

Description of Project

The current study is part of a multi-year project describing the extent of, and factors contributing to, minority disproportionality in special education in the state of Indiana. The goals of this study were to a) gain insight into the special education referral process as it relates to the treatment of minority students, and b) to assess practitioner perspectives on, and knowledge of, minority disproportionality in special education.

Sample

Seven school corporations in and surrounding a large Midwestern city participated in this study. All seven corporations had previously been identified as having disproportionate numbers of minority students served in special education (Skiba et al., 2000, 2001). Each corporation became involved with the project through the voluntary participation of the corporation's special education director.

Two elementary schools from each corporation were selected and agreed to participate in this study, totaling 14 elementary schools. Each pair of schools from each corporation included one school with statistically significant minority disproportionality using a z-score test, and a second for which statistical analysis showed proportional

representation of minority students in special education.[1] We used a purposeful sampling technique (Patton, 1990) for selecting classroom teachers. Within each school, two teachers were selected by their principals to participate in the study, one with relatively frequent referrals to special education and the other with a low referral rate. This helped ensure that our sample of teachers was representative of a broad range of referral practices.[2]

A total of 66 individuals were individually interviewed for this project. The participants included seven special education directors representing each corporation, nine school psychologists from the seven corporations whose caseload included primary responsibility for the schools included within this study, 22 school principals and assistant principals, and 28 teachers. Descriptive information for the interviewees is provided in Table 1. A $100 certificate, designated for classroom supplies, was awarded to participating teachers as remuneration for their time.

Instrumentation

Protocol development. To focus the conversation on perceptions of the special education referral and placement process and the issue of minority disproportionality, a semi-structured interview protocol was developed. The development of each protocol began with an extensive review of current literature pertaining to minority disproportionality in special education (Skiba et al., 2001). From this review,

[1] A full description of the methodology for determining extent of disproportionality may be found in Skiba et al. (2000) and Skiba et al. (2001).
[2] Specific differences in responses between schools or teachers are not explored in the current report, but will be the subject of further analysis.

Table 1

Descriptive Information: Teachers

Teachers	Low Referring	High Referring	Total
Total	**14**	**14**	**28**
Male	1	0	1
Female	13	14	27
Black	1	5	6
White	13	9	22
Mean Years Teaching	19.18	16.27	17.73

Descriptive Information: Special Education Directors, Principals, and School Psychologists

	Spec. Education Directors	Principals/ Asst. Principals	School Psychologists
Total	**7**	**22**	**9**
Male	4	6	1
Female	3	16	8
Black	0	1	0
White	7	21	9

factors that potentially influence minority disproportionality were organized into three categories: demographics, differential educational opportunities, and the referral, assessment, and placement process (NRC, 2002).

Specific questions for each of the three topic domains were constructed. Carspecken (1996) suggests that, in order to ensure that interview protocols focus on the key research questions, broad or *covert* themes be identified that appear to underlie the overt interview questions. In our review and continuing discussion of the literature on both determinants for special education referral (Gerber & Semmel, 1984) and minority disproportionality (National Research Council, 2002), four such themes emerged: perceived challenges related to demographics, attitude and perception of diversity, resources (tangible and personal), and accommodations for non-modal students. Once these themes were identified, we revised and reorganized the interview questions to ensure that the protocol was sufficiently focused to tap perceptions of these themes. Understanding that race and racism can be difficult topics that can elicit defensive reactions, specific questions pertaining to minority disproportionality in special education were reserved for the final section of the interview. Finally, in order that the format was relevant for all the practitioners we interviewed, separate interview protocols were tailored to each of the four groups of respondents: classroom teachers, school administrators, school psychologists, and special education directors.

Protocol review. Protocols were pilot tested through complete interviews with an elementary school teacher, a school psychologist, a classroom teacher, and a special education director, none of whom would be participating in the study proper. Each interviewee was also asked after the interview for feedback on the appropriateness and

clarity of the questions for someone in their role. In addition, two experts in the field of minority disproportionality and a prominent qualitative researcher reviewed the protocol and made suggestions for increasing comprehensiveness and clarity.

Procedures

Interviewer description and training. Ten interviewers were trained to conduct the interviews. Interviewers consisted of project staff and graduate assistants, and education graduate students recruited through electronic mail. One interviewer was an Asian male, another was a white male, and the remaining interviewers were white females. All of the interviewers were experienced in interviewing techniques and in qualitative research.

Interviewers received approximately four hours training on qualitative interviewing strategies and reviewed the protocols and covert themes several times before the actual interviews. Finally, the interviewers simulated interviews with one another using the final version of the interview protocol. These practice interviews were taped and transcribed, and were used to provide feedback to interviewers from project staff regarding their interviewing techniques.

Interview procedures. Face-to-face interviews with school personnel took place on site during the course of the school day. Substitute teachers were provided to release classroom teachers for the interview period. Interviews were taped with the permission of interviewees, and in accordance with Indiana University human subjects review. All but one individual, a classroom teacher, agreed to be taped. All of the interviewers were blind to the referral status (high or low referring) of the teacher and disproportionality status of the school, with the exception of one interview. In order to

correct a taping error, an individual who had knowledge of the referral status of the teachers conducted one teacher interview.

Analysis

Audiotapes were transcribed and those transcriptions served as the basis for further analysis. One school, including a principal, two teachers, and a school psychologist, was not included in the final analysis due to taping errors.

The organization of the interview material into themes involved several phases of analysis. In order to ensure fidelity and comprehensiveness of analysis with respect to the interviews, the researchers cycled through the data several times to make sense of the information (Creswell, 2002). In the first phase, researchers extensively reviewed and familiarized themselves with the interview transcriptions, reading over them several times to get a general sense of the material. In the second step, the data were coded by locating text segments and mapping them onto one or more of the four covert themes (Carspecken, 1996) or into a new coding category. In the third step of the analysis, we reviewed the material within each coding category, synthesizing across the comments to identify prominent sub-themes. Analyses during each of the three phases were completed individually, followed by a group meeting of all coders to synthesize their individual results. The resulting comparisons of both coding techniques and overarching themes that emerged in these discussions enabled us to continually "triangulate observers" (Patton, 1990) to ensure reliability and prevent bias in subsequent phases of coding.

CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

Factors that educators perceive as contributing to disparities are complex, often surprising, and sometimes difficult to talk about . . .

The sections below summarize the themes that emerged from the analyses of the interviews, organized into five sections: *sociodemographic factors*, *general education factors*, *special education process, available and needed resources,* and *perspectives on minority disproportionality and diversity*. It is important to note that our interest is in representing the full range and complexity of reactions to this topic that we encountered. We do not necessarily endorse all opinions presented; while we found the majority of responses to be compelling and extraordinarily insightful, we also found some phrases that we are frankly uncomfortable in presenting. But all of the responses give a sense of how complex school reactions are to these issues, especially given that all of these quotes were essentially shared with outsiders.

As might be expected, administrators, especially district level special education directors, tended to frame their views more broadly in terms of issues of service across classrooms and schools, while classroom teacher responses tended to be based on their own immediate experiences in the classroom. Yet in terms of the general themes that emerged, the perspectives of the four groups tended to be more similar than different. Thus, responses from all groups are included within each theme; any differences that emerged between subgroups of respondents will be described specifically.

I. Contributions of Socio-Demographic Factors

Even prior to school entry, the devastating consequences of poverty leave some children ill-prepared to meet the educational and behavioral demands of school settings (Entwisle & Alexander, 1993). The school practitioners we interviewed as part of the Indiana Disproportionality Project described, often in sharp detail, the strong contribution of factors associated with poverty to the problem of school readiness. Almost universally, respondents commented on the impact of poverty on students in their schools and classes:

> I think there is a large percentage that have a troubled home life in my classroom... Too many kids in the house sleeping on couches, not getting enough sleep, and you just get to the point where it doesn't surprise you anymore. I know that is sad. (Classroom Teacher)

> We have children coming to school who are old because of all they have experienced with their parents and the community. (Classroom Teacher)

In particular, respondents identified a number of particular challenges that students from disadvantaged conditions bring with them. Respondents noted a lack of academic readiness skills at school entry among their students from poverty backgrounds:

> This year, in particular, is—as the question remains in 1st grade, every year it comes up a little lower—how low can you go? Honestly, academically, they don't even have one-to-one correspondence for playing tables games where you spin a dice and move. So, it affects the way that I teach. (First Grade Teacher)

> We get kids in first grade that do not know their colors. They do not know their letters. They don't know what the alphabet song is. They are very street savvy... But they don't have those educational tools.... (Principal)

There may be social-behavioral discrepancies as well; a number of respondents noted that the increased violence of poor communities may teach children survival skills such as aggression that may be ill-suited to school settings:

> Some of our children feel that fighting is the way to solve problems, and this doesn't correspond with one ethnic group or another. It seems to be kind of a broad understanding from our children's background. (Classroom teacher)

High transience, called by one special education director "an artifact of poverty," was cited by many as making both academic and social continuity more difficult:

> So the kids kind of come in having gone to six schools already by second grade. (Classroom Teacher)

> Our most mobile population has been African American, resulting in learning problems. (Principal)

> It's difficult because there's always a "pecking order" in your room, and when a new child comes in sometimes they are accepted immediately and sometimes there's a problem getting them accepted. (Classroom Teacher)

Although problems of parenting and parent involvement were cited by many respondents, it is interesting to note that the tone of comments about parent issues varied considerably. Some tended to describe their students' home lives in rather harsh terms:

> They [parents] don't prioritize education, and they are young, really young. They had babies at a very young age and the cycle repeats itself. [Students] are exposed to a drug-ridden environments and not very quality home lives…. (Classroom Teacher)

Others empathized more with the difficult situation that many working-class parents face:

> And most of my parents are not able to come in during the day because of their work schedules which I understand of course being working parent. (Classroom Teacher)

Finally, some teachers, sympathetic to the plight of low-income parents, seem to blame the school system in part for the mismatch between school and parent expectations concerning parent involvement:

> They [the school] will say call the parents and say they need to be studying this and this and this, could you help them with their spelling, I think a lot of the parents gets frustrated. They are kind of overwhelmed, they can't help themselves and they can't help their child either. I just don't feel there's help [from the system]. (Classroom Teacher)

Thus, although the relationship between poverty and educational disadvantage was almost universally recognized, individual reactions to that perception varied significantly, ranging from criticism to advocacy.

The relationship between socioeconomic risk factors and academic readiness has been documented in detail in quantitative analyses (Phillips, Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov, & Crane, 1998) and comprehensive reviews (NRC, 2002). But what those sources cannot capture is the emotional impact on school staff who are facing what they perceive to be an ever increasing number of children suffering from the effects of poverty. Some classroom teachers emphasized the effects on their students:

> I can tell you honestly that some of the things that I hear that go on at home, you are just amazed by it, and you think 'how can a child come in here and learn when they are dealing with all these issues at home?' And some of those issues are mom and dad are fighting, there is abuse going on, someone shot someone, someone was killed.

Others focused on the impact on their own teaching:

> I don't really get to teach as much as I want to teach because I'm dealing with social problems, discipline problems, the welfare of the students, do they have clothes, do they have shoes, do they have socks? Just basic survival things that I deal with before they can even do academics.

Clearly, a majority of teachers raised serious questions about the extent to which students can learn, and teachers can teach, in the face of the effects of poverty.

These feelings were further exacerbated by respondents' frustration with the insufficiency of district and school resources for assisting students from disadvantaged backgrounds. One school psychologist summed up the typical reaction to our question "Do you have sufficient resources to meet the needs of your students?" by responding "Does anyone ever say yes?" A number of teachers told us they frequently made up the difference between inadequate resources and student needs out of their own pockets:

> What I do takes extra time and resources. For example, I can't send [school district] books home, so I go out and buy books that I can send home... We need to do more with less time, less resources and it's hard to do all that. (Classroom Teacher)

Indeed, far from having resources sufficient to meet increasing needs, most viewed school resources as shrinking. Many described the imminent loss at their school of social workers, teacher aides, or special program assistants in the face of state budget shortfalls. The feelings of frustration among teachers at lacking the resources to meet the needs of their students were palpable:

> They need more than what I can give them... I don't have the time. I don't have the resources. I'm not trained. And yet I am losing all this instructional time. There must be a way we can fix this. (Classroom Teacher)

> There are days that I walk away with like 200 pounds on my shoulders thinking 'it keeps getting worse.' The stories are more bizarre, more traumatic; how can we possibly meet all these needs? (Classroom Teacher)

> I'm tired. It gets harder and harder and there is less and less help for us. (Classroom Teacher)

II. Contributions of General Education

Referral to special education, especially in the more judgmental disability categories, is not simply a matter of individual difference or deficit, but takes place within the context of the resources of general education (see e.g., Gerber & Semmel, 1984). In its review of the literature, the National Research Council (2002) concludes that schooling independently contributes to disproportionality in special education by providing unequal educational opportunity in areas such as teacher training, school funding, differential expectations, and cultural barriers to parent participation.

Our respondents remarked on differences in the way in which school interaction with poor and minority students and their families might make a contribution to special

education referral. Of these, problems related to classroom management were most often mentioned by school personnel:

> African American children seem to be more outspoken. They seem to be louder. They seem to be active. They seem to be what we would call 'disrespectful', and for that reason sometimes teachers don't want to deal with them. (Classroom teacher)

Others amplified on this theme, suggesting that there may be a disjuncture between typical classroom behavioral expectations and what some have termed an African American behavioral style (Hosp & Hosp, 2002):

> Sometimes we tend to put 'middle class' values and expectations on another group and another culture. And when you look at a school setting... the majority of teachers are Caucasian, middle class... as I said, I find a lot of my African American boys need movement. They've got to be able to get up and move. So I've talked with these teachers and you know, just because they like to do that, it isn't ADHD or any of those things, this is just a kid who's got to move. So you've got to provide them the opportunity to do that. (Principal)

Some teachers stated the problem somewhat differently:

> We talked about it at lunch the other day and one of the black teachers said, 'You know, sometimes I think some teachers are afraid of the little black boys.' (Classroom Teacher)

Respondents also echoed the need identified by national reports for smaller class sizes, with several suggesting that reduced student-teacher ratios could significantly improve the capability of teachers to attend to student needs. A number also concurred with the NRC panel in identifying barriers that may differentially affect parent involvement:

> So probably the proximity to the school could be [related to parental involvement], and because it's our African American children who are bussed, they would be the one that would be farthest away. (Classroom Teacher)

> Language seems to be a barrier for our Hispanic children. Many of the parents appear to be a little shy about speaking English, so we have interpreters that help us and assist us, and when you're calling a home and they don't speak English or

> limited English, it's hard to know whether you got your question across. (Classroom Teacher)

In addition, however, a surprising number of our interviewees identified a national policy choice that they believe makes a strong contribution to minority disproportionality in special education: high-stakes testing and accountability. Despite recent state and federal changes that have mandated the inclusion of students with disabilities in high-stakes testing, respondents still believe that standardized testing creates a pressure on teachers and parents to refer students to special education:

> Our expectations for youngsters have sky-rocketed, more and more aren't attaining the standards the feds and state think should occur. A lot of stressed teachers feel tremendous pressure to get kids to a certain level and if I don't then by gosh I better... find a reason why. (Special Education Director)

> We've gotten a huge increase in the number of parents wanting their child tested. And part of that has to do with our district policy on retention and the fear of ISTEP [Indiana State Tests of Educational Performance] and all that so, whenever a teacher starts talking to a parent about the child being in trouble or probably going to be retained, then the parent asks for testing. (School Psychologist)

Both teachers and psychologists felt that accountability standards as expressed both in standardized testing and in local "no social promotion" policies may limit the school's ability or willingness to be sensitive to students' individual developmental needs:

> The idea that all students have to make progress at a certain rate I think is really difficult, because it puts us in a situation where if you're not making progress at that rate, there has to be something wrong with you, which we should test for and we should put you in special education. Which may not be true. Some kids just take longer to get it together than other kids, but we don't have the privilege to wait for them. (School Psychologist)

> Learning is so developmentally determined, but I feel a lot of pressure from [the school corporation] due to the rules about no social promotion. (Classroom Teacher)

In at least one school, the relationship between the state's minimum competency test and referral to special education was quite explicit:

> This year we were told that we had to refer anyone who didn't pass ISTEP. So I had to refer 13 kids to [the teacher assistance team] and I don't really need that. (Classroom Teacher)

III. Contributions of Special Education Processes

Throughout the history of concern about minority disproportionality in special education, there has been a strong focus on the possible contribution of the processes of referral, assessment, and decision-making that lead to eligibility determination. A number of junctures where bias may enter into the process have been identified, including teacher bias in judgment of social or academic behavior (Zucker & Prieto, 1977), inadequate preparation of teachers in classroom behavior management (Townsend, 2000), or examiner unfamiliarity during the testing process (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1986).

IDP interview respondents were mixed in their reactions as to whether the referral to placement process contributes to minority disproportionality. Many felt that the process is in general sound and does not make an appreciable contribution to disparities in placement:

> I think minority overrepresentation has gotten much better here, because we look at the whole child, we look at more than test scores. (Classroom Teacher)

> When I first started teaching, special ed was a dumping ground, but that's really changed. I think we've gotten better. (Classroom Teacher)

Others however, criticized the process-oriented nature of special education in much the same way that process has been critiqued in recent national discourse (see e.g., Finn, Rotherham, & Hokanson, 2001; President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education, 2002):

> You had better have every single paper done exactly right. You'd better have all your boxes checked, and everything had better be exactly right. So what we end up doing is spending a lot of time with the process and not enough time with the kids. So that's the issue. (School Psychologist)

One teacher said she avoided making referrals to special education because of the complexity and deliberateness of the process:

> Sometimes they're referred and it seems like nothing is done because the process is so slow... It's a time consuming process. And if you're the teacher in charge of that individual it's a real long time. (Classroom Teacher)

Respondents also noted a number of specific processes or issues that may be related to special education referral or disproportionality in placement, including classroom behavior management, pre-referral processes, or issues of cultural competency in referral or assessment.

Classroom behavior management. In its consideration of the contribution of special education processes to minority disproportionality, the National Research Council (2002) concluded that it is likely that the lack of resources for classroom teachers to effectively manage disruptive behavior contributes to racial disparities in referral and placement. Judging from the sheer volume of comments regarding behavior, our respondents seemed to agree. As one special education director noted:

> I think behaviors are driving referrals. A very quiet child who cognitively has a depressed IQ is much less likely to be referred than a child with acting out behavior. (Special Education Director)

A number of teachers described the drain on their ability to teach the rest of the class that an acting-out child represents:

> I start balancing, this child is disrupting the learning environment for 23 other children and for whatever reason we are not making a lot of headway on changes, I need to address the children that are there to learn. (Classroom Teacher)

> When the behavior is a detriment to everybody in the class, you know you can't do anything with helping the other children because you're so busy wondering when this one is going to explode and try to keep them from exploding, then to me that's the point that child should be referred and something else needs to happen. (Classroom Teacher)

Many of the teachers we interviewed described a general insufficiency of resources for assisting them in dealing with classroom behavior problems, and that this lack of resources may contribute to referral:

> Behaviorally I don't feel that the needs of the children are met adequately at all. (Classroom Teacher)

> If we had more resources for behavior and we could take care of those problems and address those issues in class with peer mediators with different available resources [to the point] that we could get that behavior controlled in the classroom they might not need a referral. (Classroom Teacher)

As a result, a number of special education directors and school psychologists believed that African American students were over-referred as a result of behavior. As one special education director put it:

> A lot of things that go on if the teacher doesn't understand it, while it isn't really acting out behavior it could appear to be... threatening behavior. (Special Education Director)

The perspectives of classroom teachers, administrators, and researchers on behavior and behavior management probably differ in some particulars. While administrators and researchers (see e.g., NRC [2002]) are likely to consider the contribution of behavior management skills to referral, teachers facing classroom disruption will more likely emphasize the extreme nature of student behaviors rather than focusing on teacher deficits in behavior management. Yet it is clear that both teachers and administrators in this sample strongly believed that more resources are needed to address the behavior of their students in an effective manner.

IV. Available and Needed Resources

In order to better understand the relationship between special education referral, diversity, and resources, we asked interviewees about available resources as well as

resources they felt could make a difference in supporting diversity in the classroom. Four subthemes emerged: classroom accommodations, needed resources, pre-referral teams, and special education as the primary resource.

Classroom accommodations. One could not help but be impressed by the level of accommodations that responding teachers described prior to referring a child to special education. The vast majority of interviewees could not be described as wishing to remove students from their classrooms; indeed one teacher even referred to "losing" one of her children to special education this year, as if it were a personal failure that she could not find ways to make that child succeed in her classroom.

Many teachers echoed the feelings of one teacher who stated, "You have to tailor your instruction to meet the needs of your kids" and described a wide range of interventions they used prior to considering special education referral:

> I will send home re-teaching materials to their parents to do with them. However I can't always be sure that is going to happen because they may be working late hours and so I do try to do that on my own. Some other steps that I take are peer tutoring—as I said my class works very well together... I also give reduced assignments... Peer groupings of different abilities levels, we put them in peer groupings of different ability levels to pull some information out of them. I may send them to another teacher, sometimes we will do grouping as teachers and I will send them to another teacher if I feel they need a different approach. (Classroom Teacher)

That individualization requires effort however, and may create additional time and resource burdens for teachers:

> Usually I start with me. And I start spending time on my breaks, on my after school, before school, and I start going over their word list with them. I take them through stories, we discuss comprehension and I ask their parents to do the same. (Classroom Teacher)

> There are so many different ways to work with children, and the assessments in the books don't work for it all, so I have to be creative. It takes *a lot* of work. (Classroom Teacher)

Although the vast majority of teachers we interviewed were willing and able to accommodate their instruction to fit their students' needs, a number expressed frustration at the number of skills and roles that are required of them in dealing with the diversity of needs in their classroom:

> They tell you, you are a nurse, you are a going to be a social worker... you *are* a social worker, you *are* a psychologist, you *are* a nurse, you *are* a mother, and then way back on the burner is the teaching part. (Classroom Teacher)

Needed resources. As noted, the vast majority of school personnel felt resources were insufficient to meet the needs of their students. A number of respondents blamed the state government for lack of support for education in general:

> I don't think the state has taken education very seriously in, in the city schools. ...they don't want to put forth [a sufficient] amount of money. But yet on the other hand, they're making all these rules and dictating stuff and I don't think the state really knows what's going on. (Classroom Teacher)

> The answer is for the state to come up with some money, which probably isn't going to happen, to buy things that they [the students] can actually feel, touch and experience. (Classroom Teacher)

We were surprised that a number of respondents had some difficulty identifying resources that would make a difference in meeting the needs of their students, but a number of possible interventions were identified, including parent support for families, instructional coaches to better understand how to meet the needs of diverse learners, more remedial services, a website with a bank of differentiated instructional lessons, and a full time counselor. The single resource identified most frequently as needed to address the types of problems our interviewees identified was early intervention. As one principal noted:

> I do have to sometimes wonder why we don't invest a little bit more resources at the primary level when things are a little smaller, when parents are more interested in listening to what you have to say because they're not real sure either,

> and guiding them in a direction that might be a little more helpful to the child as opposed to waiting till they get to middle school and high school and their parents have just about given up. (Principal)

Pre-referral teams. A number of writers have identified pre-referral interventions or teams as a positive resource that may reduce the over-referral of minority students through the development of a process specifically designed to meet individual needs prior to referral (Harry, 1994; Maheady, 1983; National Alliance of Black School Educators [NABSE], 2002). Yet for those who have experience with such teams on a regular basis, we found reactions to the pre-referral process and especially pre-referral teams to be decidedly mixed.

In some schools, teachers were highly positive about their experience in bringing a particular student's case before the pre-referral team. In those schools, teachers clearly felt that the team was functioning as a peer-driven process for increasing the resources of a teacher for addressing a particular student problem:

> You know, I really feel that most of the teachers in our building have tried all that they know before they come to the [prereferral team], and then the team adds more to their expertise, and it has been really amazing the knowledge that we can help each other with. (Classroom Teacher)

Even where new information is not forthcoming as a result of the prereferral team meeting, teachers at these schools tended to find the experience positive in affirming that they are doing all they can:

> It is helpful to have that committee, just giving you one more idea or even just to say, "Hey, you know, you're doing good, you're doing good things there, keep on pluggin'." (Classroom Teacher)

Yet that positive experience with pre-referral teams was by no means universal. At other schools, the team was viewed primarily as less helpful, or even simply an obstacle to be cleared prior to placing a student in special education.

> If I can speak freely I think it is a waste of time... Because I think it's just delaying the testing that ultimately is going to be done anyway... Maybe for inexperienced teachers, maybe that is a good thing because they don't have the knowledge or the tools but for teachers who have been at this for a while I think it is just delaying the inevitable. (Classroom Teacher)

As another teacher put it, "I figure they're not going to tell me anything I don't know after all these years." As a result we were told by a number of respondents that it was not atypical for teachers who believe that their students truly need to be referred for special education to actively short-circuit the pre-referral process by encouraging parents to request assessment prior to the convening of the pre-referral team:

> A lot of times I'll try to bypass [the pre-referral team]. I think if you get a parent to call in for testing, you get it done much quicker. So I think a couple of times last year I did that. I just tell them, if you call in, I mean, *you* know he's got a problem, *I* know he's got a problem, why do we want to go through this 30-day thing? I don't tell them what the 30-day thing is… If you call the counselor and request testing, it might be done a little bit quicker. And it's their right. (Classroom Teacher)

Ultimately, as one psychologist noted, the effectiveness of the prereferral process may depend on which attitude participants in the pre-referral team are bringing with them.

> If the teacher's attitude is I have this problem, and I'm looking for some more ways to see what I can do about this problem, then it can be real effective. If the teacher is coming in because it's a formal step you have to go through but what you really want is for the child to be tested and put in special education, then it has limited success. (School Psychologist)

Special education as the primary resource. In the course of these conversations, it became very apparent to us that special education was viewed almost universally in these districts as the primary or perhaps even the sole resource available for students with particular academic or social needs. Administrators tended to view this as a negative, increasing the probability of inappropriate referrals:

> [Teachers] know that something is not working for a child and they feel that they can't tap into some resources. One stable resource that they have to tap into is

> special education. It has funding to support it, it's a process that is in place. So it is easy to tap into that subsystem. (Special Education Director)

Teachers, in contrast, viewed the availability of special education in a highly positive light, almost a lifeline in the face of a general scarcity of resources:

> I am pretty open to referring any child that is not finding success. My goal is for every child to be successful. (Classroom Teacher)
>
> If there's a chance they might qualify, it's always to their benefit to have them checked. (Classroom Teacher)
>
> We are thinking of sending them on to middle school and they can't read yet. It is scary—let's get these kids tested, let's see what we can do. If we can give them a label, at least we can get them help as we let go. (Classroom Teacher)

Mehan et al. (1986) described the over-identification of students for special education as largely an unconscious process. These responses would suggest that it is also well-meaning, intended to help students who are failing academically or socially. Until a range of other resources that can support students with academic or social needs becomes widely available, teachers cannot be blamed for continuing to use, and perhaps overuse, one of the only reliable resources at their disposal.

V. Perceptions of Minority Disproportionality and Diversity

From the broad perspective of policy, the overuse of special education for students of color constitutes a serious problem demanding remediation. For teachers facing academic and social problems among the students in their classrooms, however, referral to special education is primarily a method of providing additional resources for any student that is struggling:

> If you look at the big picture, overrepresentation of minorities in special ed is a serious problem. But [at the individual teacher level], I truly believe they just want Johnny to succeed." (School Psychologist)

> I don't think they ever look and say well there are two African Americans over there, I had better get my [pre-referral team] started... I mean they look at their students after their first six weeks or 12 weeks... and they think I have got to help. (Principal)

Indeed, for most of the classroom teachers we interviewed, the disproportionate representation of minority students in special education appeared to be a topic that had not been previously considered. While special education administrators were keenly aware of the disproportionate representation of students of color in special education programs, that awareness in no way permeated to the classroom level. A common response among classroom teachers to the question "why do you think there is disproportionality?" was simply to equate high numbers of minority students in special education with high rates of enrollment of students of color in general education, sidestepping the phenomenon of *disproportionate* representation:

> I guess that I don't see it that way because here at our school we're almost 90% African American and 10% white so logically more would be referred because we have more African American students. Especially in our district, there are more African American students to pick from, I mean to test. (Classroom Teacher)

> I think it's obvious because we have a higher percentage [of African American students]. (Classroom Teacher)

Views on diversity. We asked teachers to comment on the level of diversity in their classroom, and the effects if any that had upon their teaching. In order to allow individual perspectives to emerge, we did not define the term diversity initially, but allowed teachers to choose the aspect of diversity they wished to focus upon (e.g., diversity of academic needs, socioeconomic diversity, racial diversity). As the interview progressed, we asked more specific questions about the cultural and ethnic makeup of their classroom.

Most of the teachers we interviewed regarded the diversity of their classroom as a positive. In speaking about diversity, this classroom teacher was perhaps the most eloquent in her description, but did capture the positive feelings expressed by many of our respondents:

> Children need to learn how to act, relate, respond to all backgrounds and socio-economic levels and behaviors and talents and so on. So I think the more diversity you have, the more opportunities the children have for getting practice in a classroom, kind of mini-world situation for the big world. (Classroom Teacher)

There were of course also outliers in responses from our interviewees, particularly with respect to racial and ethnic diversity. We were surprised by the level of racial stereotyping in a few of the responses, such as this one that occurred in response to a question about whether the nature of referrals in any differs by race:

> Whenever we are having chronic behavior problems, it is a little black boy—every time. We call them the Duwan's.... They have a brother at home who dropped out at 16, and he gets to play Nintendo all day. Why should they try? He is wearing his Nikes and playing basketball at the gym. ... When I say 'little,' I am talking 5th grade and below, who come from African American homes. There might be one or two out of a batch of a dozen who are taking up all of our time, who are not black. (Classroom Teacher)

Yet there were also teachers who expressed a strong degree of personal commitment to teaching students about diversity and building an accepting and tolerant community in their classroom. One teacher had become a trainer for her district in a national program on diversity instruction and conducted her own research to supplement what she viewed as a limited discussion of diversity in many texts:

> The research that I found said that over a third of the cowboys out West were African Americans, and I even found a coloring book which had African American cowboys in it. ... And that is, unfortunately, not something that was presented there in the text book. (Classroom Teacher)

Difficulty in speaking about race. One of the more unexpected themes that emerged from these conversations was a reticence in discussing the topic of race. In general, we found that, in particular for white respondents, race proved a difficult topic about which to speak. Administrators who in general impressed our interviewers with their practical eloquence on a variety of topics became tongue-tied or taciturn when the conversation turned explicitly to race. Some teachers who demonstrated great precision in describing the disadvantages and educational needs of their students became unexpectedly vague when asked for detail about the ethnic breakdown of their class, as in the following exchange between a classroom teacher and one of our interviewers:

Tchr: I think we're over 52%, 53% percent, something like that. We're over 50%. So you would expect that percentage to be of…
Inter: To be of…52% minority?
T: Minority…yeah. I don't have those numbers.
I: Is that primarily one minority? ...like African American?
T: I think that's all minorities.
I: So like do you have…
T: Indian, we have a lot of Hispanic…

A number of the classroom teachers who were interviewed claimed not to have noticed or thought about the racial or cultural diversity present in their classroom:

> The racial diversity, I always have a hard time with that when people ask me, because I don't pay any attention. (Classroom Teacher)

We were surprised by one teacher's response to one of our early questions about demographics, and even more surprised that it repeated itself in an interview with another teacher:

> When you say minorities, are you, what are you speaking of?... [*INTERVIEWER: Ethnic and racial minorities*]... Oh.... OK... Alright... We have like... I guess we have about half and half. I don't know that I've ever really paid attention to it. (Classroom Teacher)

> When you're speaking of diversity what are you referring to? (Classroom Teacher)

It was also interesting to note that our admittedly small sample of African American teachers seemed to be markedly less reticent in describing the racial makeup of their classroom. The following description was volunteered to our interviewer by an African American teacher when asked to describe her class in the first question of the interview, even before any specific probing concerning diversity:

> We have 23 students and out of the 23, I have 5 who are white and the rest are black. (Classroom Teacher)

In summary, we found that, as the discussion turned more explicitly to issues of race and diversity, some respondents become increasingly reticent. The inherent complexity of discussions involving racial equity thus appears to be further intensified by what appears to be an inability or unwillingness among some school personnel to even discuss issues involving race.

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

The emerging picture from these conversations is complex, and requires attention to issues of resources, training in classroom management, and a willingness to face the difficult issue of race in education . . .

Our goal in conducting this research was first and foremost to bring to light the sheer complexity of the processes and perceptions that may contribute to differential rates of minority placement in special education programs. In reviewing the broad and intricate array of themes that emerged from these conversations, readers could be forgiven for feeling that the project may have succeeded almost too well in achieving its initial goal. In order to manage that complexity, this section will be organized in accord with the major themes presented above.

Sociodemographic Factors

Teachers and administrators in this study echoed the findings of previous research on the impact of poverty (e.g. NRC, 2002; Phillips et al., 1998) in describing, often in disheartening detail, a host of risk factors associated with low SES, including both biological factors such as exposure to alcohol or drugs, and social/environmental stressors such as quality of parenting interaction, family interactions that contribute to delayed language development, and child care quality. Respondents also appeared to resonate with a perspective that a "culture of poverty" creates disjunctures between school expectations for students and families, and what students and families from poverty backgrounds bring with them (Payne, 2001). Likewise, our respondents were in substantial agreement with the conclusion of the National Academy of Sciences report

that a strong commitment to early intervention could significantly offset socioeconomic risk factors.

In describing the struggles of their students our respondents vivified the statistical relationships between poverty and academic failure, and raised intriguing issues. Although the fact that poverty creates disadvantage was a virtually unanimous theme among respondents in these districts, the tone of individual responses to that fact varied significantly, ranging from harsh judgment to resignation to compassion and even advocacy. Further research is needed to determine whether this attitudinal continuum is in any way related to actual referral to special education. Nor do statistical explorations of the educational impact of poverty capture the depth of concern and occasionally even despair expressed by classroom teachers facing those issues personified in their students every day. Simply put, these teachers made it clear that the needs of students from poverty backgrounds vastly outpace the resources available for meeting those needs.

The impact of poverty on educational readiness has indeed been widely documented (NRC, 2002). Yet it must also be noted that empirical investigations of disproportionality have found the relationships among race, SES, and special education placement to be anything but straightforward. Rather the impact of poverty on the likelihood of special education referral appears to vary considerably by disability category and percent minority enrollment, and often reveals relationships that are in a direction opposite to that expected (Oswald, Coutinho, Best, & Singh, 1999; Parrish, 2002; Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002). In these interviews, the simple fact that the issue of cultural mismatch in expectations or behavior management was a significant subtheme among our respondents argues that SES is not the sole predictor of minority

disproportionality. In short, while the powerful impact of poverty on educational readiness cannot be doubted, it is not yet clear how or to what extent the relationship between SES and achievement affects minority placement in special education.

Nor should it be assumed that the negative effects of poverty on individual cognitive development are sufficient to implicate poverty directly in school failure. Stanton-Salazar (1997) argues that success in school is determined, not only by a student's cognitive and academic skills, but also by their ability to "decode the system," that is, to learn and respond to the implicit expectations and communication patterns of school settings. It cannot be denied that many students from disadvantaged backgrounds lack the skills they need for such decoding. Yet Stanton-Salazar also argues that schools are not particularly successful in helping students learn the "decoding" skills that will help them be successful in school. There can be no question that students from troubled or disadvantaged backgrounds pose a challenge to classroom teaching. Yet it may also be the case that a "predisposition to blame families for children's learning and behavioral difficulties" (Harry et al., 2002, pp 78-79) can stand in the way of appropriate efforts to help children overcome disadvantage, by relieving educators of the responsibility to assist disadvantaged students in learning what they need to know in order to negotiate the complex maze of schooling.

General Education Context

As the 50th anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education* approaches, it remains clear that equity of access to education does not guarantee equity in terms of educational quality. Substantial disparities in schools serving minority vs. non-minority students have been and continue to be documented in a variety of areas related to instruction

(Ferguson, 1998), discipline (Skiba et al., 2002b), and even physical plant (Oakes et al., 1990). Given these multiple sources of unequal schooling, it is in no way surprising that the National Academy of Sciences review found affirmative evidence that schooling independently contributes to the unequal rates of achievement that predict minority disproportionality in special education (NRC, 2002).

Our interviewees echoed some of these same themes, chief among them the contribution of a cultural mismatch regarding social behavior. Hosp and Hosp (2002) reviewed the literature regarding what they term African American Behavioral Style and conclude that there is evidence of such a style in schools. If our respondents are correct, it is not uncommon for teachers unfamiliar or uncomfortable with that behavioral style to react in ways that are educationally unproductive. This suggests a path to special education referral wherein an energetic or boisterous African American male engages in behavior that may well be adaptive within the norms of the local community, but may be taken as disruptive or threatening to a teacher unfamiliar with that student's cultural context (see e.g., Townsend, 2000). This does not necessarily mean that referrals coming out of this context are inappropriate, in the sense of failing to meet the assessment criteria required for eligibility determination. Rather, it may mean that of the group of students with elevated levels of instructional or social needs in such a classroom, African American students are more likely to stand out, and thus more likely to be referred. Such a hypothesis is congruent with higher levels of minority disproportionality in the category emotionally disturbed.

One of the more interesting outcomes of the current study is the strongly-held belief among respondents that accountability testing creates subtle and occasionally

blatant pressures that likely increase inappropriate referrals to special education. Heubert (2001) notes that high-stakes testing can be expected to have a strong impact on the achievement of students of color, but that it is not clear whether that impact is positive or negative. On the one hand, pressures on schools and classrooms created by a strong focus on accountability have the potential to strengthen both teacher training and classroom instruction. On the other hand, unless accountability testing is paired with high quality instruction, it may be linked to a number of negative outcomes for disadvantaged learners, including disparate failure rates (Natriello & Pallas, 2001), increased dropout (Madaus & Clarke, 2001), and the shift in local resources away from teaching and toward testing, especially in districts with a high poor and minority enrollment (McNeil & Valenzuela, 2001). Allington and McGill-Franzen (1992) found evidence that some schools reporting higher scores on high-stakes tests achieve that outcome by removing lower-achieving students from the "accountability stream" through increased rates of grade retention and referral to special education.

Accountability testing represents a fundamentally different kind of contributing factor to minority disproportionality in special education. In general, the variables identified as possible general education contributions to disproportionality by both our respondents and the available research (e.g. NRC, 2002) are related to resource deficits at the classroom, school, or district level. High-stakes and minimum competency testing, however, are driven by national and state level policy choices. It would be an uncomfortable and ambiguous position for policy-makers if a key national policy choice, accountability testing, makes a significant contribution to another federal priority, the disproportionate placement of minority students in special education.

Special Education Eligibility and Decision-Making Processes

The process that begins when a teacher considers referring a student to special education, and continues until that student is deemed either eligible or ineligible for services, is highly complex. The National Academy of Sciences report found evidence of bias at various points in the referral to placement process to be mixed, but also concluded that the entire process has sufficient conceptual and procedural shortcomings as to be unable to ensure that the "right students" are being identified.

Respondents in this study identified a number of points in the referral to placement process that may contribute to an increased likelihood of minority referral to special education. Teachers, administrators, and psychologists all complained about the excess proceduralism of special education, although in some cases, the cumbersome nature of the process may lead teachers to make *fewer* referrals to special education. In addition, the responses of all respondent groups indicated a serious gap between the level and types of classroom behavior that classroom teachers face, and their preparation and resources for addressing that behavior. Finally, these data suggest that pre-referral teams may or may not contribute to decreasing minority over-referral. In some cases, teachers believed such teams to be of strong benefit for themselves and their students; in other schools, the teams appeared to be viewed simply as an additional administrative obstacle to be cleared prior to actual referral. Clearly, further investigation is necessary to explore the school or classroom characteristics that may make pre-referral teams more or less effective.

Yet there was also evidence that teacher beliefs regarding the value of special education referral (and even disproportionality in referral) may run contrary to generally

held perspectives in policy and research. Both research and policy perspectives concerning minority disproportionality in special education (e.g. Coutinho & Oswald, 2000; Losen & Orfield, 2002; NRC, 2002) appear to make an implicit assumption that the disproportionate referral of poor and minority children to special education is at best a cause for concern, at worst a serious failing. We found that special education directors in our sample tended to share that concern, viewing over-referral as a negative for their district. But among classroom teachers, special education was almost universally viewed as a valuable, and sometimes the only, resource for students with learning and behavior problems. If anything, teachers preferred to err on the side of over- rather than under-referral, in order to ensure that needy students received any and all resources they might qualify for. Debates about whether or not special education is effective (Finn et al., 2001; NRC, 2002) seem to matter less to these teachers than the simple fact that it is there for those who need it.

This finding, counter-intuitive from the perspective of national policy yet highly rational from the standpoint of maximizing instructional resources, has important implications for attempts to remediate special education disproportionality. We cannot know how many of the referrals made by any of these teachers would be judged "appropriate" if reviewed by policy-makers, researchers, or assessment specialists. As Gerber and Semmel (1984) noted, however, teachers *will* seek out additional assistance when they perceive evidence of a mismatch between student needs and their own resources, regardless of whether that action meets external criteria for an appropriate referral. Thus, serious attempts to remediate and reduce the over-referral of underachieving students to special education almost by definition demand a dramatic

increase in the availability of resource alternatives in general education that can be called upon to meet student needs prior to special education referral.

Perspectives on Race and Minority Disproportionality

Policy decisions are simpler and more straightforward if it can be assumed that there is some source of objective and value-free data that can point policy-makers assuredly to an almost inevitable conclusion. Unfortunately, questions of racial and economic equity do not fall in that category of decision. The topic of race has never been value free in America, and there is no reason to believe that it has suddenly become so. Indeed, the unfortunate history of the "science" of race suggests that more often than not purportedly objective data have been shaped for political, often racist, ends in the name of science (Gould, 1996; Tucker, 1994).

There are currently at least three different frameworks within which to view problems of racial and economic inequity; each of these lenses takes the same data on disparity and arrives at very different conclusions. The most longstanding perspective grows out of the *hereditarian* tradition in psychometric theory (Burt, Jones, Miller, & Moodle, 1934; Galton, 1869). Exemplified most recently by *The Bell Curve* (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994), this perspective tends to support fixed genetic over environmental explanations of the black-white test score gap, and typically attempts to make the case that social programs have not and probably cannot close the gap in measured performance on standardized tests (Jensen, 1969). A dramatically different perspective is provided by *critical race theory* (Delgado & Stefancic, 2002). Growing out of a discourse of legal scholars in the 1980's and 90's, critical race theory focuses on the concept of race as a social construct, and on the ways in which that construct has been

used to maintain the relative privilege and power of the dominant group. A third discourse that has provided a productive framework is *cultural reproduction theory* (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Originally used to explain class differences, the model has been expanded (Mehan et al., 1986; Oakes, 1982) to explain how everyday actions by institutions and individuals, conscious or not, support and reproduce both racial and socioeconomic inequity in school and society.

There was similar evidence of a range of perspectives on disadvantage and diversity among our respondents. While interviewees appeared to share a common perception of severe economic disadvantage as an important contributor to academic and behavioral failure among their students, their attitudes regarding that disadvantage has varied dramatically. Some teachers seemed harsh in their judgments, almost angry at their more difficult students or at the inadequate care provided by the parents of those students. Many others viewed the failure of their most disadvantaged students in terms of a cultural mismatch between students and their families and the expectations of schools. Some placed the blame for the failure of disadvantaged students primarily on the attributes of public schools.

In addition, however, our interviews suggest a fourth paradigm among some practitioners, a perspective that might be termed "Maybe We Just Shouldn't Talk about It." The majority of our respondents denied that minority disproportionality in special education was a race-based issue, preferring to view it as an economic issue that affects minority students only because of their disproportionate representation in lower socioeconomic classes. Indeed, the issue of race proved almost impossible for many of our respondents to discuss, eliciting hesitation and uncharacteristically vague answers. In

light of the high level of discomfort that the mere mention of the topic of race elicited, one might well ask whether the emphasis placed on the influence of poverty in these interviews was in part a way of avoiding the more troubling issue of racial disparity. Despite its tragic effects, poverty remains a less emotionally charged and cognitively complex topic than race.

The difficulty that educators, especially white educators, have in openly talking about race and racism has been well documented (Haberman, 1991; Henze, Lucas, & Scott, 1998; King, 1991). Those difficulties may be compounded to the extent that one views oneself as a representative of an institution in which the possibility of racial disparity has been raised. Trepagnier (2001) suggested that the inability to discuss the topic of racism may arise in part from a tendency to view the concept of racism as categorical in nature. That is, the general understanding may be that either one is or one is not racist. If school practitioners implicitly accept that they and the institutions they belong to either are or are not racist, it may be important to one's self concept as "not racist" to ignore or even actively minimize evidence of racial disparity in the institutions they represent.

Systems change is a difficult undertaking in any organization, even when it does not involve an emotionally-laden issue. If this analysis of the concept of racism is correct, however, it compounds the difficulty of change. School practitioners may well resist attempts to solve the problem of disproportionality if they believe they first have to admit they are currently engaging in racist practice. Further, the magnitude and apparent intractability of the problem often leads to recommendations for sweeping reform in assessment, classroom management, or teacher training (National Resource Council,

2002). Independent of the merit of such proposals, the ability to implement reforms in any meaningful way is dependent on the participation of school staff, and in particular on the leadership of school administrators. It is highly unlikely that schools that are unwilling to fully explore racial disparities will understand or accept the need for extensive reform. Those seeking to implement interventions addressing inequity may need to attend not only to the data and the recommendations for reform that flow from those data, but also to the way in which "dysconcious" attitudes and beliefs about the topic of race (King, 1991) may prevent some listeners from being able to fully respond to data indicating racial disparity.

CHAPTER 5

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Although there is no clear road map for change, some districts are making important progress in understanding and addressing racial and economic disparities . . .

Implications

If nationally-representative statistics on minority disproportionality can be depicted as a relatively straightforward set of bar graphs, documenting the consistent disparities between majority and minority students in special education service, these local level data seem more to resemble an intricate and kaleidoscopic painting. The factors that appear to make a contribution to inequity at the local level are numerous, and seem to interact in subtle and often counterintuitive ways, defying any straightforward attempt to "explain" racial disparities. We believe, however, that these data, and in particular the understanding that inequity is multiply caused, lead to three important conclusions.

1. The factors that create and maintain racial disparities in special education referral and placement are highly complex and interactive. It is critical, therefore, to avoid simplistic solutions in addressing these issues. A tempting policy solution for minority disproportionality in special education would be to "draw a line in the sand" by simply setting a numerical or proportionate cap on the enrollment of minority students in special education. Yet the extensive needs of students who are referred to special education suggest that simplistic responses may harm the very

students who are the target of reform, by closing the door to an important resource for some disadvantaged students.

2. Reducing minority student referrals to special education without reducing the access to needed educational resources will require substantial increases in the resources available in general education to meet the needs of disadvantaged students. Analyses of the determinants of referral to special education (Gerber & Semmel, 1984; Skiba, McLeskey, Waldron, Grizzle, & Bartley, 1992) suggest that teachers *will* refer students to special education that they perceive as exceeding their classroom's resources, regardless of whether that referral is validated by standardized assessment. Meeting student needs outside of a special education referral thus requires an increase of resources in general education classrooms to enable teachers to meet those students' needs without compromising their responsibilities to the rest of the class.

In particular, the likelihood that a cultural mismatch regarding classroom behavior is driving special education referral suggests that the strong commitment to increased training of classroom teachers and school psychologists in classroom management must be among the highest priorities of reform in this area (NRC, 2002). Providing teachers a framework for sharing expertise through a pre-referral team may also hold some promise for increasing classroom resources and reducing referrals. But the mixed success reported for such teams suggests that their mere implementation is less key in changing referral practices than ensuring that participants are trained in effective collaborative strategies and supported in their efforts.

3. The difficulty that many educators, in particular white educators, have in confronting the inescapable facts of racial disparity in education may itself contribute to the continued inability to effectively address those problems.

Systems change requires an awareness on the part of those participating in the process that there is something that needs to be changed. These and previous data suggest that there may be inability or unwillingness on the part of some educators to perceive or accept the fact of continuing inequity in education. A clear challenge facing those seeking to bring an end to the remnants of educational inequity will be to find methods of sharing data that can enable evidence of racial disparity to become a motivator for commitment to program improvement, rather than a stimulus for defensiveness and denial.

Future Directions

If we were to summarize this research and these conclusions, the message would be this: *in order to create meaningful change in practices that can reduce disparities, school personnel must be willing to confront those disparities that exist, identify practices that may contribute to disparity, and begin to develop strategies to address those issues.* Unfortunately there are few road maps for how to conduct such a process. While Individuals with Disabilities Education (IDEA) disciplinary regulations mandate that states begin documenting interventions and strategies for reducing racial disparities, there have been few descriptions of actual school-based reform that could serve as a model to local districts seeking to reduce disproportionality.

In the 2002-2003 school year, the Indiana Disproportionality Project began working with three urban and near-urban planning districts in central Indiana, attempting to develop a process to guide reform in the provision of special education services to

minority students. Leaders in special and general education in those districts met to define issues that they felt may be contributors to disparities in their districts. Focus groups with teachers, psychologists, administrators and others helped those districts develop pilot programs to address the unique issues they had identified. The three programs that were developed this past year were:

- *Improving the process of pre-referral teaming to reduce chances of inappropriate referrals for culturally and linguistically diverse students.*
- *Working with the pre-school, kindergarten, and early elementary programs to improve family involvement.*
- *Addressing issues of cultural competence in instructional and behavior management through teacher collaboration.*

Initial results are promising; all three planning districts have been able to identify a key process that they believe contributes to disproportionality in their school corporations and have begun a process of reform. One of the corporations has established a task force to address issues of racial and economic equity in their corporation. Further reports will describe the progress and outcomes of these efforts.

In addition, the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs has recently funded a national center on issues of educational equity, the National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems (NCCRESt). The Indiana Division of Exceptional Learners and the Indiana Disproportionality Project are currently working with NCCRESt to ensure the availability of technical support for those districts that are seeking to meet the challenges of improved equity.

Conclusions

This investigation has attempted to provide a window on local perspectives that can enrich our understanding of the forces that drive the disproportionate placement of minority students. The overriding theme that emerges from these conversations is that the processes that may produce and reproduce special education disproportionality are complex, interactive, and perhaps even contradictory. Exposure to poverty and poverty-related stressors clearly increases the likelihood of referral to special education for many students of color; yet poverty alone does not seem sufficient to explain the various sources of cultural incongruence cited as a factor by some of our respondents. Lack of resources, particularly for managing disruptive behavior, does appear to be linked to over-referral for minority students; yet in seeking additional resources to help struggling students, classroom teachers do not share the negative perspective on referral that seems to be implicit in the national policy discussion. The referral and placement process may indeed be sufficiently flawed in some areas to differentially increase the likelihood that minority students will be referred and found eligible for services; yet any inequities that characterize special education must be placed within the context of general inequities of educational opportunity that still pervade American public education. Finally, discussions with these committed and often eloquent educators deepened our knowledge of local processes that may make a contribution in reproducing inequity; yet we also discovered a reticence to discuss issues of race that may itself serve as an obstacle to addressing problems of racial disparity. Ultimately, multiple and sometimes conflicting sources suggest that serious efforts to address the critical problem of unequal placement in special education will be a complex task. Yet the progress made in our state in the past three

years in identifying and understanding these issues has been great, and provides encouragement that Indiana educators are ready and willing to meet the challenge of providing a quality, culturally responsive education for all students.

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APPENDIX A

Protocols for Interviews of School Personnel

- **School Administrator**
- **School Psychologist**
- **Special Education Director**
- **Classroom Teacher**

PROTOCOL FOR SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR

Check equipment prior to beginning the interview

- **Thank you for taking the time to meet with me.**
- **Before we get started, I'd like to discuss a few things with you.**
- **Did you get a chance to review the Study Information Sheet I sent earlier?**
- **The purpose of this interview is to gain a better understanding of school administrators' perspectives regarding the special education referral process and factors that might contribute to the overrepresentation of minorities in special education.**
- **The interview should last approximately one hour.**
- **We would like to tape this interview for purposes of our data collection. The taping is confidential, the tape will be destroyed after it has been transcribed, and you will not be identified in any of our reports. If at anytime you do not feel comfortable being recorded, please let me know and we can turn off the tape.**
- **Do you have any questions before we get started?**

A. GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

First, tell me about your role as administrator in this school.

- How long have you been with this school?

1. As the principal, what is your particular philosophy or personal vision for this school?

B. DIVERSITY / RESOURCES STUDENTS

Thank you. I have a better understanding of your role as principal. Now I'd like to talk about the diversity of students in this school and the resources that are available.

1. Could you describe the student population of your school?

- Paint a verbal picture of the students in your school
- Describe this school to someone who has never stepped inside before
- Describe the families of students
- Greatest needs of the students at your school
- Academic needs of the students in this school? Behavioral?
  - Do these needs differ by ethnicity or race?
  - Do you feel student of different ethnic groups differ in need?
- Have your training and experiences prepared you for handling the diversity of students in this school?

- What types of experiences or training?

2. In general, do you think that this school has sufficient resources to address the needs of students throughout the school?

- What types of things would be most helpful in addressing those needs?
- Are there some groups of students that resources are more adequate for?
  - Less adequate for?
  - Which groups?
- With students having *learning* difficulties, are there sufficient resources to meet their diverse needs in the general education classroom? Overall, in the school?
  - What resources, if available, would be helpful in changing the rate of special education referral for these students?
- With students having *behavioral* difficulties, are there sufficient resources to meet their diverse needs in the regular education classroom? Overall, in the school?
  - What resources, if available, would be helpful in changing the rate of special education referral for these students?

C. PREREFERRAL PROCESS

Now, I'd like to talk with you about what happens when teachers identify students who are struggling.

1. Are prereferral interventions a required component of the referral process?

If no:	If yes:
1. Are there certain steps that occur between the identification and referral of a student?	**1. Is there a structured process in place that you follow for the prereferral intervention?**
2. If yes, who ensures that these steps are met? If no, begin Section D.	2. Describe how the prereferral process works here • Who participates in the process?
3. Who works with this person in developing and implementing the steps?	3. How are decisions made?
4. How are decision made on what steps should be taken?	4. Do parents participate in the process? • Is there a difference in the participation between minority and non-minority parents?

5. Do parents participate in the process? • How are they involved in the process? • Clarify whether parents typically participate in the process at this point • Does parent involvement differ between minority and non-minority parents?	5. If an intervention has been developed, who is responsible for implementing it?	
X	6. Do you think the prereferral process is achieving its purpose?	
X	If no: 1. Why not? 2. Is it ineffective for all students or certain groups? 3. Are there ways that the prereferral process could be more helpful to teachers?	If yes: 1. How do you assess whether the prereferral intervention is successful? 2. Are there certain students that the process is more effective for? 3. Which students?

D. REFERRAL PROCESS

1. Tell me about the process of referral for special education

- What role do you play in the process?
- What role do parents play?

2. What factors are most important in whether or not a child is referred to special education?

- What is the typical profile of a referred student?
- Are behavioral or academic concerns more primary?
  - How do they differ?
- Influence of student's home environment or family situation on the placement decisions made by the case conference committee
  - Give me an example

3. **Earlier, we talked about your personal vision and philosophy of this school. Do these have an impact on the process of special education identification and referral?**

E. MINORITY DISPROPORTIONALITY

One of the most important issues in education, particularly in urban districts, is minority overrepresentation in special education.

1. **Do you have any speculation as to why this may be happening?**

2. **Do you think that teachers and staff are aware of minority overrepresentation in special education?**
   - If yes: What impact does being aware of the issue have on how things are done here in regards to special education referral?

PROTOCOL FOR SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST

Check equipment prior to beginning the interview

- **Thank you for taking the time to meet with me.**
- **Before we get started, I'd like to discuss a few things with you.**
- **Did you get a chance to review the Study Information Sheet I sent earlier?**
- **The purpose of this interview is to gain a better understanding of school psychologists' perspectives regarding the special education referral process and factors that might contribute to the overrepresentation of minorities in special education.**
- **The interview should last approximately one hour.**
- **We would like to tape this interview for purposes of our data collection. The taping is confidential, the tape will be destroyed after it has been transcribed, and you will not be identified in any of our reports. If at anytime you do not feel comfortable being recorded, please let me know and we can turn off the tape.**
- **Do you have any questions before we get started?**

A. GENERAL INFORMATION / CASE MANAGEABILITY

First, I'd like to find out a little about you and your role as a psychologist in this district. Describe your role as a school psychologist in the special education process:

- How long as a school psychologist?
- How long at this school?

1. Tell me about your caseload.

- Number of schools
- Total number of students

B. PREREFERRAL INTERVENTIONS

One of the areas that we are interested in learning about is the role that school psychologists have prior to the beginning of the actual referral for special education.

- **Tell me about the role that you have with students prior to special education referral**
    - Formal or informal steps that happen between the identification and placement of a student

- **Are prereferral interventions a required component of the referral process?**

<table>
<tr><th colspan="2">(IF YES) Is there a structured process in place that you follow for the prereferral intervention?</th><th>(IF NO) What steps occur between the identification of a student who may need additional assistance and the actual referral process?</th></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">1. Describe how the prereferral process works here
• Who participates in the process?
• Do parents participate in the process?
• Difference in participation between minority and non-minority parents?
• How are decision made?</td><td>1. Who ensures that these steps are met?</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">2. Do you work with teachers in developing those interventions?
• How would a new teacher here figure out how the prereferral process works?</td><td>2. Who works with this person in developing the steps?</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">3. If an intervention has been developed, who is responsible for implementing it?</td><td>3. Do parents participate in prereferral phase of this process?
• How are they involved?
• At what point do parents become involved?
• Does parent involvement differ between minority and non-minority parents?</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">4. Do you think that the prereferral process is achieving its purpose?</td><td>4. How are decisions made on what steps should be taken?</td></tr>
<tr><td>If no:
a. Why not?
b. Is it ineffective for all student or certain groups?
c. Are there ways that the prereferral process could be more helpful to teachers?</td><td>If yes:
a. How do you assess whether the prereferral intervention is successful?
b. Are there certain students that the process is more effective for?
c. Describe those characteristics</td><td>X</td></tr>
</table>

5. Do you think that prereferral interventions have helped teachers in their ability to handle the needs of their students?		X
If no: a. Are there ways that the prereferral process could be more helpful to teachers? b. Are the interventions suggested by the team aligned well with the reason for referral?	If yes: a. In what ways?	X

C. ASSESSMENT AND REFERRAL PROCESS

Tell me about your role in the referral process when a child is referred for a special education evaluation.

- Do you spend most of your time in one area (assessment, interventions, decision making) or is it divided evenly between each?

1. What is the typical profile of someone referred?

- More for academic or behavioral concerns
    - How do the characteristics of the population affect your assessment practices?
    - Does the process of assessment differ if the reason for referral is for academic or behavioral concerns?
        - If yes, how?
- What other individuals are involved in this process?
    - Teachers? Administrators?
    - Role of parents through the assessment and referral process
    - Does parent involvement differ between minority and non-minority parents?

D. INFLUENCES ON DECISION MAKING PROCESS

Thank you for that information. I have a much better understanding of your role in the referral and assessment process. Let's shift our focus to the case conference.

1. **Outside of assessment, do you have a role prior to the case conference?**
   - Organizational issues or meeting with parents
   - Who is involved?
   - Is there one person on the case conference committee that has the most significant influence on placement decision-making?

2. **In your experience, what is the most important information in the case conference for coming to a decision?**
   - Factors most influential in coming to a placement decision
   - Influence of unique characteristics of the student's home environment or family situation on placement
     - Give an example of how those characteristics influence decisions regarding placements

E. DIVERSITY / RESOURCES

Thank you, I have a better understanding of what your role as a psychologist is like here at this school. Now, I'd like to talk to you about the students in this school.

1. **If I asked you to paint a verbal picture of the students in this school, what would you say?**
   - Describe this school to someone who has never stepped inside before
   - Tell me about the families of your students

2. **Do you think that the school receives sufficient resources to address the needs of students throughout the school?**
   - Are there some groups of students that resources are more adequate for?
     - Less adequate?
     - Which groups?
   - Are there sufficient resources to appropriately meet the needs of students that you work with
     - (IF NO) What resources would be helpful to adequately meet their needs?
   - In taking into consideration the students you see, is your caseload manageable?

- Resources available to teachers to guide them in handling the needs of students at this school
- What resources, if available, would be helpful in changing the rate of referral?

F. MINORITY DISPROPORTIONALITY

One of the most important issues in education, particularly in urban districts, is minority overrepresentation in special education.

- **Why do you think this might be happening?**

- **Do you think school psychologists might play any role in addressing this issue?**

PROTOCOL FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION DIRECTOR

Check equipment prior to beginning the interview

We are trying to get a better understanding of what's involved in identifying and referring students for special education services. Toward this end, we're interviewing special education administrators to get your perspective so that we can understand the decision making process more fully. (Note that we will be taping but you can turn it off at any time. Be sure to give a copy of the information form. Remind them that it's totally confidential. We will destroy tapes, they won't be identified, etc. Note the phone numbers that they can reach us through). **Do you have any questions before we begin?**

A. GENERAL INFORMATION

1. First, I'd like to find out a little about you and get a sense of what your role as administrator is like in this district.

- How long have you been with this district?
- Is there a particular philosophy or mission statement for special education in the district? Is that different from the school corporation's mission statement?

B. MINORITY DISPROPORTIONALITY

As you know, the main purpose of this research is to explore what might be contributing to minority overrepresentation in special education. For other interviews, we are talking about the general process of identification and referral first, and only asking about overrepresentation at the end. But since you have been so involved in the planning and organization of this study, I'd like to start directly with talking about minority overrepresentation in our conversation today and see where it takes us.

1. What are your guesses or hypotheses about what is most contributing to disproportionate referral of some groups to special education?

- Explore each reason they give
- If it leads into one of our topical areas, use that to move to the probe questions in that block of questions

C. DIVERSITY / RESOURCES

Thank you for that information. Now I'd like to talk to you for a bit about the students in your district.

a. Tell me about the students within your district. How would you describe the student population in your school district?
   i. What are the greatest needs of students within this district?

ii. Tell me about the families of your students
iii. How would you describe the effects of such challenges on teachers?

b. Does the nature of students vary by school?
i. How so?

c. Does the nature of the school response to these student (or family) issues vary by school within the district?

d. How would you describe the relationship that schools have with parents in this district? Does that vary by school?

e. In general do you think that schools in this district receive sufficient resources to address the needs of students?
i. Are there groups of students that resources are more adequate for? Less adequate? Which groups?
ii. Do you feel that teachers have adequate resources to address the needs of students within their classroom?

f. What resources, if available, would be helpful in changing the rate of special education referrals? or of minority disproportionality?
i. What is the caseload of school psychologists? Do you believe that school psychologists could be important resources in addressing some of these issues?
ii. Are there other personnel who could be of assistance in addressing these issues?

g. Do you feel that there are adequate resources to address the needs of students in special education?

D. PREREFERRAL AND REFERRAL PROCESS

Thanks very much. Now I'd like to shift our conversation to discussing what happens when teachers identify a student who is struggling.

a. Do you feel that there are any explicit or implicit processes in the way teachers identify students that would make it more likely that they would identify a greater proportion of minority students?
b. In your experience, what are the main reasons why teachers refer students for special education?
c. Are there some teachers who make fewer or no referrals? Why do you think they don't refer as many students?
d. Do you feel that the availability of resources in the district influences teachers' decision to refer or not to refer students to special education? In what way?
e. To what extent do you feel teachers make accommodations or implement interventions for students in their classes even prior to a formal prereferral process in your district?
f. Is there a prereferral process or team that works with teachers prior to their making an actual referral?
   i. (IF NO, MOVE ON)
   ii. (IF YES) How does the prereferral process operate?
      1. How are decisions made?

2. Who is on the prereferral team? (probe for presence of parents if need be)
3. Do you feel that prereferral interventions are used more for academic or behavioral concerns?
4. Who implements the interventions? Teacher alone? With support?
5. Are there differences in the interventions selected due to race or ethnicity? If so, what are they?
6. Do you think that the process is effective? How do you know it's effective or ineffective?
7. Are there differences between schools in the effectiveness of the prereferral process? (IF SO..) What characterizes effective vs. ineffective prereferral teams?
8. Are there other barriers to the effectiveness of the interventions?

g. I hate to put you on the spot, but no process is foolproof, and certainly you're probably aware of places in which the special education process does not always go according to plan. Is there any point in that process of identification, assessment or referral that you think might be likely to lead to an increase in minority students being referred or placed in special education?

E. SUMMARY AND CLOSING

1. Do you have any other thoughts on the process of referral in general or minority overrepresentation in particular?

Thanks so much for your time. We will be doing interviews this month, analyzing the data during April, and convening some time during May or early June with our consultants. Please let us know via email if you haven't already what dates work for you.

Please don't hesitate to call Shana or Russ if you have any further questions.

PROTOCOL FOR CLASSROOM TEACHER

Check equipment prior to beginning the interview

- **Thank you for taking the time to meet with me.**
- **Before we get started, I'd like to discuss a few things with you.**
- **Did you get a chance to review the Study Information Sheet I sent earlier?**
- **The purpose of this interview is to gain a better understanding of teachers' perspectives regarding the special education referral process and factors that might contribute to the overrepresentation of minorities in special education.**
- **The interview should last approximately one hour.**
- **We would like to tape this interview for purposes of our data collection. The taping is confidential, the tape will be destroyed after it has been transcribed, and you will not be identified in any of our reports. If at anytime you do not feel comfortable being recorded, please let me know and we can turn off the tape.**
- **Do you have any questions before we get started?**

A. GENERAL INFORMATION

First, I'd like to find out a little about your classroom, particularly the types of students you teach:

- How long teaching
- How long at this particular school
- Total number of students in class
- Total number of special education students

1. Tell me about the makeup of your class

- Verbal picture of the students in your class
- Describe them to someone who has never laid eyes on them before
    - How many students of color?
    - How many non-minority students?
    - What proportion of students would you estimate are coming from some type of economic disadvantage?
    - Describe families of students

B. IDENTIFICATION

Part of our purpose in this interview is for us to come to a better understanding of how students come to be in special education, and the types of students who are referred to special education. In the next few minutes, I'd like to talk with you on how you see the process of identification, pre-referral and referral of students to special education. First of all, I'd like to talk about when a student in your class may be a possible referral for special education services.

1. **In your career here as a teacher, have you ever referred a student for special education services?**

If no:	If yes:
1. Why do you think you have never had to refer a child?	**1. What would indicate to you that the process of special education referral might need to be initiated for this student?**
2. Do you think there might be a point where you would refer a student to special education?	2. What pieces of information would be most important?
3. What types of situation would prompt you to refer a student?	3. Is there a certain line or point that you decide the needs of a student require special education services? Describe that.
4. Of children who pose a potential problem in your classroom, are behavioral or academic concerns more primary?	4. Do you view academic or behavioral concerns as more primary in your decision to refer? How do they differ?

C. CLASSROOM ACCOMMODATIONS AND PRE-REFERRAL INTERVENTION

If NO to B: Thank you for that information. I'd like to talk with you about the process after you've made a determination that a student needs additional assistance.

If YES to B: Thank you for that information. I'd like to talk with you about the next step in the process after you've made a determination that a student in your classroom ought to receive special services.

1. **At this school when you become aware that a student needs additional supports, what steps do you take?**
   - Things done in classroom prior to contacting anyone else
     - Examples of the things done
   - Success of instructional/curricular/behavioral accommodations preventing kids from being referred for special education
   - Anyone called on for assistance prior to making an actual referral?
   - How does what is done in classroom differ from a formal pre-referral intervention process?
   - Do you refer students to the prereferral intervention?

2. **Is there a pre-referral intervention process at this school?**
   - Describe how the pre-referral process works here
   - Who participates?
   - Do parents participate?
   - Differences in the participation of minority and non-minority parents
   - How are decisions made?
   - Receive training into how the pre-referral process and team operates
   - Who implements the intervention? (Team or you)
   - Is pre-referral process achieving its purpose?
     - Certain students that the process is more effective for
     - Describe characteristics of those students
   - Have pre-referral interventions helped with handling the needs of students?
     - (IF YES) In what ways?
       - How do you determine whether the intervention is successful?
     - (IF NO) Are there ways that the pre-referral process could be more helpful?

D. DIVERSITY AND RESOURCES

We've had a chance to talk about the process that occurs when you are concerned that a student is struggling. Next, I'd like to talk about the diversity of your students and the resources that are available to you. Tell me about the role of diversity in your classroom and how that diversity affects your teaching.

1. **How, if at all, does the diversity of students in your classroom affect your teaching?**
   - Are there opportunities that the diversity of your class provides?
     - Does diversity prevent you from doing certain things?
   - How do academic differences in your students affect your teaching?
   - How does behavioral diversity affect your teaching?
     - Does one affect your teaching more than the other?

- Are needs of racial and ethnic minorities students different from majority students?
    - (IF YES) In what ways, if any, do these differences (academic, behavioral, ethnic, racial) affect your teaching?

2. **In general, do you feel that you have adequate resources in your classroom to meet the diversity of needs of your students?**
    - Have your training or experiences adequately prepared you for handling the diversity you have in your classroom?
        - Types of experiences or training
        - Professional development opportunities in district that assist in learning how to deal with these issues
        - Do you have to go beyond what the district provides in dealing with the diversity?
            - (IF YES) In what ways do you do that?
    - What resources are available to support the needs of students with learning and behavioral difficulties in your classroom?
    - Does the school have sufficient resources to address the needs of students throughout the school?
        - Are there some groups of students that resources are more adequate for?
        - Less adequate for?
        - Which groups?
    - **What types of things would be helpful in addressing their needs?**

3. **We talked previously about factors that contribute to your decision to refer students when they are having difficulties. Does the level of resources factor into your decision to refer or not refer a student?**
    - With students having *learning* difficulties, do you feel that there are sufficient resources to meet their diverse needs in your classroom?
        - In school?
        - What resources, if available, would be helpful in changing the rate of referral for these students?
    - With students having *behavioral* difficulties, do you feel that there are sufficient resources to meet their diverse needs in your classroom?
        - In school?
        - What resources, if available, would be helpful in changing the rate of referral for these students?

4. **Thinking about all of the steps we've talked about in terms of identification, steps you take in the classroom, and the referral process, are there differences in the way that the process unfolds for African-American and White students, based upon their needs?**
    - What about other students of color?

E. MINORITY DISPROPORTIONALITY

One of the most important issues in education, particularly in urban districts, is minority overrepresentation in special education.

1. Why do you think this might be happening?