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DISPROPORTIONALITY WITHIN SPECIAL EDUCATION
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TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF SPECIAL EDUCATION AND RACE
DISPROPORTIONALITY WITHIN SPECIAL EDUCATION CLASSIFICATIONS

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

to the faculty of the

DEPARTMENT OF ADMINISTRATIVE AND INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

of

THE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

at

ST. JOHN'S UNIVERSITY

New York

by

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Date Submitted: 5/4/2022

Date Approved: 9/30/2022

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ABSTRACT

TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF SPECIAL EDUCATION AND RACE DISPROPORTIONALITY WITHIN SPECIAL EDUCATION CLASSIFICATIONS

Debra J. Daly

The lack of involvement of students with disabilities in a regular classroom has remained a major concern in education. Every year, the number of special students escalates. For instance, in the United States, students with disabilities accounted for 13.7% of all students between the ages of three to 21 by 2018 (Kositsky, 2019). According to several reports, it is evident that the lack of inclusion of these students in normal school curricula causes emotional distress, depression, withdrawal from society or suicide in some cases. Every child has the right to access quality education.

Institutional leaders know that it is not a must that special students are isolated from their peers or placed in separate institutions for learning. Gaps in the existing literature have led to a confusing perception of classified students, especially those of minority backgrounds.

The purpose of this qualitative singular case study is to examine the perceptions of special education and general education teachers of the students who are classified as special education in their classrooms. The biases of the teachers, as it relates to race disproportionality in special education was also looked at. The study was conducted in a suburban New York school district and will use the data collected from individual and

group interviews of teacher participants, and look at the special education classification process, from both the federal and district level.

Analysis of the collected data revealed key findings for this study. First, that changes in the classification process of special education students have forced a closer look into the perceptions of teachers and their implicit biases regarding the classification of special education students. Second, a disconnect in communication between teachers, administrators, and the district has caused teachers to become frustrated, which has led them to rely more on collaboration with colleagues for the support they need. Third, teachers felt that the rigors of the classification process, and the pressure to get the students in correct placements has meant that collaboration, and professional development is more necessary than ever. The implications of these findings for all stakeholders will be discussed.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this accomplishment and the research to my family and friends. A special feeling of gratitude to my loving parents, William and Mary Anne Daly whose words of encouragement and push for greatness has always rung in my ears. Education was always an important ideal you both set forth for me, and this moment concludes my education journey. I thank you for instilling in me the drive to follow this path.

Mom, you have always believed I could do whatever I set my mind to, so much so that you saw this day as possible, and your belief has helped make this happen. The fact that whenever I looked behind me, you were there means more than you will ever know. Your steadfast belief in me will always drive me forward and encourage me to reach for the stars.

Additionally, I want to dedicate this to the friends who have become family who believed this was possible even when I had doubts in myself. Cory Lopez and Megan Stocker, your tough-love, support, and encouragement throughout this process has helped to guide me through even the darkest of times. You absorbed this work like it was your own and afforded me the ability to know I always had support. I am where I am because of your unwavering support.

I am extremely blessed to have you all in my life.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to express my gratitude to all the teachers and administrators that were involved with this study. They were willing and eager to share their thoughts, insights, and experience with the special education policies they have shaped how they do their job.

I am also extremely grateful for the members of my dissertation committee members. Each of you have played a vital role in my journey to complete my doctoral journey at St. John's University. To my mentors, Dr. Anthony Annunziato and Dr. Richard Bernardo, I cannot thank you enough for all of the encouragement, support, and guidance that you have provided. Your breadth of knowledge of qualitative research, as well as the dissertation process provided me with the confidence, I needed to complete my research. Your belief that I had what it took got me through on even my darkest days.

I would also like to thank all of my professors at St. John's University. I have been able to learn valuable lessons from some of the preeminent minds in the field.

Lastly, I would like to thank all of my doctoral cohort members. We have stuck together through college closures, restructuring, and long weekends away from our families. It has been a long and difficult journey, but we have made it through, and that has been essential for my journey. Good luck to each one of you.

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Many people hold the general assumption that disabled students are a nuisance to the school program as they may lag behind the other students. Contrary to public opinion, special students are just like the rest, and their disability does not necessarily mean they are also psychologically impaired (Webster, 2020). These students should have access to the same learning resources that are available to other students as well as access to social interaction with other students. According to Walsh (2017), the U.S. government requires the inclusion of special students in the school community, as established under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This legislation ensures that all schools provide an environment that adequately supports the special students in achieving their desired goals in the institution.

Inclusion education affects several groups, including the students themselves, parents, administrators, and teachers. Walsh (2017) goes on to state that many learning institutions—especially the newly established ones—have shown significant improvement in terms of embracing inclusion education and thus have started integrating the special students in the regular academic curricula and programs full-time. However, whether this move is beneficial to all learners is a question that still remains. Research from both viewpoints is needed to ensure that this directive does not discriminate against anyone. Fortunately, inclusion education will benefit all groups involved, especially the special students. The motivating factor in this discussion stems from the idea that when a student with a disability is in a class alongside the average students, the probability is that they will perform as well as the rest.

Inclusion programs are quite beneficial to those that embrace them. While the benefits related to the individual outcomes of the student with a disability are more apparent, there are several other unseen benefits of inclusion education. Some of these benefits include the effective utilization of resources—as there are specialists and professionals who accompany the special students in class—and reduced levels of stigma towards the special students—as these professionals treat each student as an individual with unique education needs. Furthermore, as a result of the inclusion programs, the teachers and the entire school personnel are equipped with skills and strategies needed to provide proper support to the special students, and the ability to provide instruction aimed towards each student’s unique style of learning (Anderson, 2018).

Within an effective inclusion education program, the special students will not only have ease of access to quality education, but also to the institutional facilities. By developing an establishment in which their movement around the school is monitored and well maintained, these students will be able to travel the school campus with less risk of harm from their fellow students. Because the special students will be able to enter a regular classroom with or without another student assisting them, it is less likely that the other students will consider the disabled students a nuisance.

In some circumstances, a special student may require an aide. An aid’s purpose is to assist the student with listening skills, communication skills, written language elements, math skills, and reading assignments as well as encouraging them and helping them maintain focus. This is just one example of the many provisions that a learning institution may need to provide to ensure they are adequately meeting the special students’ needs.

Learning within a regular classroom can motivate a student with a disability to strive to perform at the same level as the other students in order to fit in. On the other hand, the setting may become a source of frustration for the special students because of the high expectations from their peers. They may also struggle to grasp the lesson content at the same pace as their peers. As a result, they may feel a decrease in motivation and subsequently may underperform or even want to leave the institution. Students might also show changes in their behavioral patterns, display increased feelings of inferiority, and in some cases, decide to give up and cease making an effort at all.

When formulating an inclusion education program, it is important to consider all factors that may hinder the effectiveness of the entire process. In any inclusion program criteria, there are both positive and negative factors. One of the positive factors is the special students' involvement in the various activities that are typical for other students. These may include extracurricular activities or even taking on certain responsibilities in the classroom. This type of involvement plays a very huge role in the improvement of the special students' motivation and general attitudes towards the school. However, an inclusion education program may also affect the students negatively. For instance, the surroundings may trigger a change in their behavior. Factors like noise, classroom activities, or changes in school routines and schedules may lead to changes in attitude and can influence students' general view of the inclusion program. These factors may cause the special students—especially those with a sensitive personality—to become increasingly defiant and aggressive, even to the extent that they are unable to interact freely with the rest of the students.

It is important to consider if the inclusion education program will ensure that the special students achieve better post-secondary results, have fewer absences, and receive adequate instructional time. Studies have shown that the inclusion of students with disabilities in the regular classroom has no negative impact on their academic achievement, as they mostly benefit from learning ways to interact with and form positive social relationships with their peers (Mader, 2017).

However, as more countries continue to establish inclusive classrooms for special students, they have faced a lot of difficulties in sourcing teachers who are ready to embrace the change. As a result, the outcomes for the students with disabilities have only slightly improved over the past few years, even when schools are integrating increasing numbers of special students into these inclusive programs. Often, special students have lower probability of earning a general diploma than their fellow average students, and instead mostly achieve an alternate diploma, which many managers and colleges do not consider equivalent. In addition, these special students continue to have poorer performance than their peers, especially on standardized tests. Professionals who have analyzed this situation conclude that the problem is the effort put into the inclusion education programs, as many administrators fail to consider the many factors that necessitate the establishment of an effective program. They continue to stress that successful integration requires a lot more than simply adding the special students to the classroom. The administrators should first work to ensure that the teachers receive adequate and professional training and support so they are able to enhance the quality education and maintenance of the students with disabilities (Mader, 2017).

Administrators also must fully consider both the social and technical aspects involved in the establishment of a conducive environment for the special students before they implement them in the classroom. The social aspects include effects such as stigma, where a student with a disability may feel disturbed when hearing their peers or teachers mention a sensitive word or phrase, such as “resource room” or “special education.” The effect of this on the special students is dangerous as it may spark harsh reactions from them or lead them to feeling frustrated or depressed. Therefore, the teachers should receive ample training to ensure that their students feel comfortable around their peers with less fear of being mocked or hurt.

Teachers must lend a lot of focus to the special student. It is important to note that all students, whether disabled or not, will want to fit in with their fellow peers. A student with a disability may feel overwhelmed by the things they learn and experience in the company of their peers, and thus want to socialize with them a lot. In the event that this student feels like they are not in a position to understand something, they may become demotivated and start showing signs of loneliness or dissociation from their peer groups. Mader (2017) asserted that on-the-job training is essential to enhance teachers’ individual skills necessary to facilitate the achievement of all students’ needs—particularly for teachers that might have received their professional training years ago or who did not receive any special education training at all.

Purpose of the Study

This study was conducted in order to identify ways in which students with disabilities can be included in the general school community without being disproportionately represented. Extensive research showed that inclusion has remained

among the most talked about topics in the world today, however, it is very hard to find a readily available inclusion classroom that fits the needs of all students. Hence, the main focus of this study was on identifying the best ways for a special education teacher to facilitate an effective inclusion education program without misrepresenting minority students.

It is important to note that many people define inclusive education differently, and that different authors and stakeholders provide varied opinions on the matter. For the purposes of this study, the main conceptualization of inclusive education was the idea that it is a new way of enhancing education. Inclusive education calls for the interaction of values that then guide the students with disabilities to develop certain actions and practices. Some may also see inclusion education as an ethical project, in the sense that it employs ethics in the usual learning programs to guide the students in growth and development both physically and mentally.

Statement of the Problem

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has pushed teachers and learning administrators to keep searching for adequate strategies and measures to improve the overall academic performance of students with disabilities. Among the most effective strategies of inclusion education include adding the special students into the general class population with the regular students, teacher, and also a specialist or a paraprofessional that can assist the students with various activities around the classroom. The greatest result of this action is an improvement in the academic achievement of the special students. However, it is important to question the cost of installing an effective inclusion

program. Does the inclusion of the students with disabilities in the regular classroom affect the academic performance of their peers?

Nilholm (2020) provides that the currently available research on inclusion education programs indicate that very little effort is being made to ensure progress of this directive towards equalization of students, especially since the international breakthrough for inclusion with the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994). Classrooms with regular education students, which therefore allows for the disproportionality.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is Weick's (1993, 1995) Sensemaking in Organizations theory. Weick (1995) defines sensemaking as a way of turning circumstances into a situation that is comprehended explicitly in words and that serves as a springboard into action. The seemingly transient nature of sensemaking belies its central role in the determination of human behavior, whether people are acting in formal organizations or elsewhere. Sensemaking is central because it is the primary site where meanings materialize that inform and constrain identity and action (Weick, 1995).

Individuals primarily make sense of their experiences through the construction of stories that feature themselves as protagonists, and by imposing sequences and connections between their experiences and actions (Weick, 1995). People reveal the conceptions of themselves and of their roles and responsibilities through the stories they tell themselves and others about their lives (Weick, 1995). Therefore, the stories and narratives that teachers express about their professional experiences and backgrounds may reveal personal individual perceptions or biases that strongly influence their pedagogical practices. Attempts to influence these pedagogical practices are filtered

through each teacher's individual experiences. As Weick (1995) pointed out, coherence in life is as necessary as coherence in organizational experiences.

Sensemaking theory posits that people partially construct their reality by creating meanings for their experiences (Coburn, 2001; Spillane & Miele, 2007; Spillane et al., 2002; Weick, 1995). Weick (1995) explained: "To talk about sensemaking is to talk about reality as an ongoing accomplishment that takes form when people make retrospective sense of the situations in which they find themselves and their creations" (p. 15). In constructing their experiences through retrospection, people do not consider all possible stimuli, but instead filter their experiences through their existing knowledge, paying attention to some stimuli and ignoring others (Spillane et al., 2002; Weick et al., 2005).

Data use is an act of sensemaking that is influenced by teachers' past experiences and beliefs (Datnow et al., 2012; Spillane, 2012; Spillane & Miele, 2007). At the same time, teachers' sensemaking in the present may influence their beliefs and how they understand the past, including past student outcomes. The application and formation of these mental models may give rise to attributions—entailing decisions about the locus of causality, stability, and controllability—that allow teachers to link present outcomes to past phenomena, such as student characteristics. For example, teachers' expectations of English Language Learners (ELLs) and students in special education likely influence their sensemaking and attributions. In this way, sensemaking (and the associated attributions) have implications for teachers' beliefs and can motivate them to respond in certain ways (Spillane & Miele, 2007).

Significance of the Study

A review of the relevant literature revealed that there has been little to no research conducted on the relationship between the implicit biases of teachers and the disproportionality of minorities in special education. The majority of studies examining special education do not factor in the biases of the teachers that are responsible for classifying the students into special education programs but instead focus mainly on the idea of inclusion within special education. Training teachers and preparing them for work with minorities is fundamental to the successful integration of all students in special education. The involvement of teachers in the classification of students helps to ensure that the classes benefit all students, both regular and special. Hence, this study centered on highlighting the significance of training school personnel in order to ensure that the educators can provide high quality education. Educators who have a positive attitude towards the involvement of minority special students in the regular classroom are more likely to adapt their style of teaching to benefit of all their students. They are also likely to influence their fellow teachers in a positive manner, encouraging them to embrace inclusion education.

Overall, attitudes toward both students in special education and minorities range from positive to negative, possibly reflecting low expectations and suggesting serious consequences. This literature is important considering the research on teachers' expectations of some groups of students of color. This is the case because ELLs are often students of color, and students in special education are disproportionately students of color (Artiles, 2011; Aud et al., 2010; Gutiérrez & Orellana, 2006; Jimenez, 2012; Tefera et al. 2014; Waitoller et al., 2010). For this reason, teachers' expectations for these

groups may intersect with their potentially low expectations for some groups of students of color. In short, expectations may be shaped by more than ELL or special education designations.

This study and related research will benefit all stakeholders in the special education classification process who are responsible for including all learners in the best and most suitable educational setting. The insights revealed by this study will clarify the perceptions and implicit biases of special education and general education teachers and highlight the ways that they influence the diagnosis and classification of special education students.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study.

1. How do the implicit biases and perceptions of special education teachers influence their classification and treatment of students?
2. What levels of race disproportionality exist in special education?
3. To what extent does the culture of a school community help to affect levels of disproportionality in schools?

Design and Methods

Research Design and Data Analysis

This study was a qualitative, singular case study of special education and general education teachers' perceptions and implicit biases towards race disproportionality in the classification of special education students (Merriam, 1998). This study was conducted in a suburban New York school district that utilizes federal mandates to classify students. This study was conducted during the 2021–2022 academic school year. The researcher

collected qualitative data from two teacher-participant focus groups, six individual teacher-participant interviews, an administrator-participant interview, group interviews of both special education and general education teachers, and a content analysis of documents that govern special education policies. The qualitative data was stored in the computer program Dedoose and analyzed through a series of three rounds of coding including an initial coding, pattern coding, and code weaving (Saldana, 2013). The researcher then used the qualitative data to help format a deeper understanding and conceptualization of the research topic and relevant research questions.

Participants

The participants for this study included six special education teachers, six general education teachers, and one administrator from a suburban New York school district. All participants were licensed and had between three and 20 years of teaching experience. The researcher conducted interviews with individuals as well as with small groups or focus groups. One group consisted of teachers with 10 years of experience or fewer, and the other group consisted of teachers with more than 10 years of teaching experience. The data collection and sampling techniques used for this study deliberately allowed for the highest variation in order to ensure the diversity of the sample.

Definition of Terms

The following terms appear throughout the study.

- *Equity* is the quality of being fair and impartial.
- *A singular case study* is an intensive analysis of an individual unit (such as a person or community) stressing developmental factors in relation to the environment.

- The *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)* is a law that makes free and appropriate public education available to eligible children with disabilities throughout the nation and ensures these students receive special education and related services.
- *No Child Left Behind (NCLB)* was the main law for K–12 general education in the United States from 2002–2015. The law held schools accountable for how students learned and achieved.
- A *minority* is a culturally, ethnically, or racially distinct group that coexists with but is subordinate to a more dominant group.
- *Race disparity* refers to the unequal outcomes of one racial or ethnic group as compared to another.
- *Race disproportionality* is the underrepresentation or overrepresentation of a racial or ethnic group as compared to its percentage in the total population.
- *Sensemaking* is the process by which people give meaning to their collective experiences. According to Weick et al. (2005), it is “the ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing” (p. 409).
- *Special Education* is the practice of educating students in a way that addresses their individual differences and special needs. Ideally, this process involves the individually planned and systematically monitored arrangement of teaching procedures, adapted equipment and materials, and accessible settings.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter presents the discovered findings from the current literature review. To compile this review, the researcher sourced literature from peer-reviewed journals, state and national education policies, books, and government websites. The first part of the chapter will include a discussion of the theoretical framework for the study. The second part will focus on the review of the literature. Findings from the various literature fall into the following themes: 1) the history of special education; 2) is general education the answer?; 3) disproportionality in special education; 4) health data; 5) federal policies on special education; 6) teachers and the implicit biases that color their judgement. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the gaps in the existing literature, which this study directly addresses.

Theoretical Framework

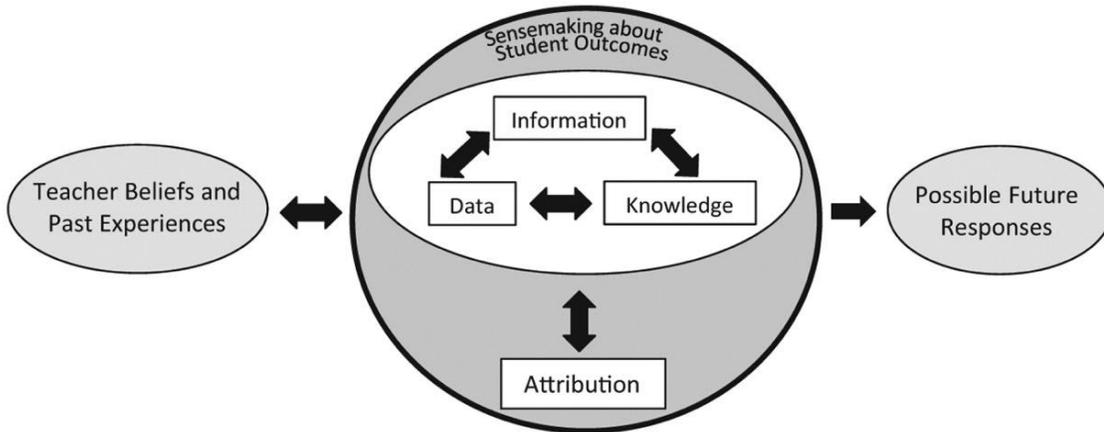
The theoretical framework for this study is the theory of Sensemaking in Organizations developed by Karl Weick (1993, 1995). Researchers can employ this theory when considering how sensemaking can apply to education, retrospective sensemaking, and sensemaking of race and equity. This framework also encompasses differing opinions by those in the education field.

Sensemaking in Education

Weick's (1988, 1993) most widely cited works in sensemaking focused on intense crisis situations. Scholars of education have also often used the sensemaking lens to determine how school leaders and teachers respond to new educational policies. There are other theorists who use sensemaking but see it through a different lens.

Figure 1

Sensemaking about Student Outcomes



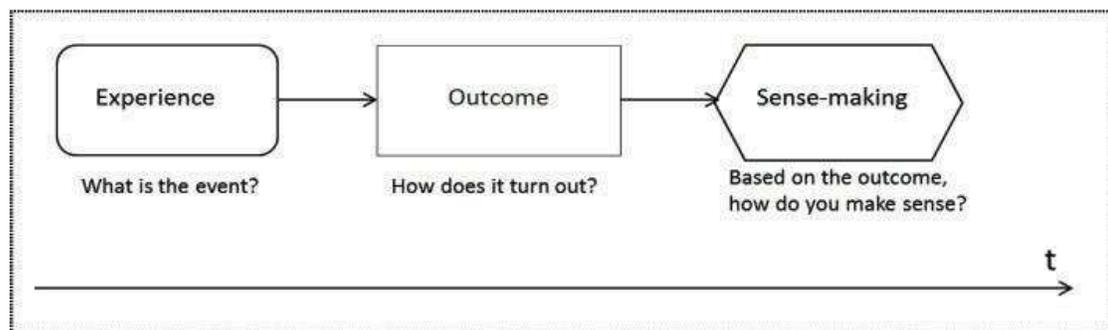
Spillane et al. (2002b) explored how actors in educational organizations make sense of new policies. They do not view sensemaking as a primarily social activity. However, they see that sensemaking can also occur within a group of individuals, but that these individuals are making their own sense rather than coming to an understanding. Like Weick, Spillane et al. (2006) posited that sensemaking in education is particularly shaped by the artifacts and materials involved. Understanding the ways that institutions constrain sensemaking and the way that human agents work within those bounds is central to understanding life in schools (Spillane et al., 2002a; Spillane et al., 2006).

Coburn (2001, 2005) focused on how teachers' networks or contacts shape their reactions to policy stimuli. In education, ongoing sensemaking tends to be related to developing rich and thorough interpretations of a single initiative. These interpretations often originate from important actors in the school's or district's environment (Coburn, 2001; Spillane et al., 2002a). The majority researchers studying sensemaking in education pay particularly close attention to the relationship between principals and teachers. This is important because the way that a building leader interprets or positions a policy can

also affect the way that a teacher interprets the same policy as well as how they apply that policy to the students they teach. Evans (2007) adopted a similar perspective in understanding how school leaders make sense of racial and demographic changes. If the teachers and leaders of educational buildings are in a position to understand and interpret the policies, there would then be room for them to contribute their own opinions to the organization and vice-versa. In the present study, the researcher evaluated the implicit biases and teacher perceptions of their students at a suburban New York school district in order to examine the impact that sensemaking has on teachers' view of the disproportionality in special education in their individual schools as well as the district. The collection of qualitative data through individual and group interviews allowed the researcher to highlight the implicit biases and perceptions of the teachers involved in the organization and make sense of their opinions and beliefs. The data was then used as a basis for the next phase of the study focusing on the disproportionality in special education and the reasons for it.

Figure 2

Conceptual Sensemaking Process



The structure depicted in Figure 2 shows the conceptual sense-making process in chronological order. A solid arrow shows the flow of the time from the past through the

future. At first, an individual experiences an event which leads to a certain outcome. Then the individual derives the most reasonable meaning from it.

Retrospective Sensemaking

Weick (1995) argued that sensemaking is a retrospective activity, saying that “we act upon our understanding of the present based on our understanding of the past.”

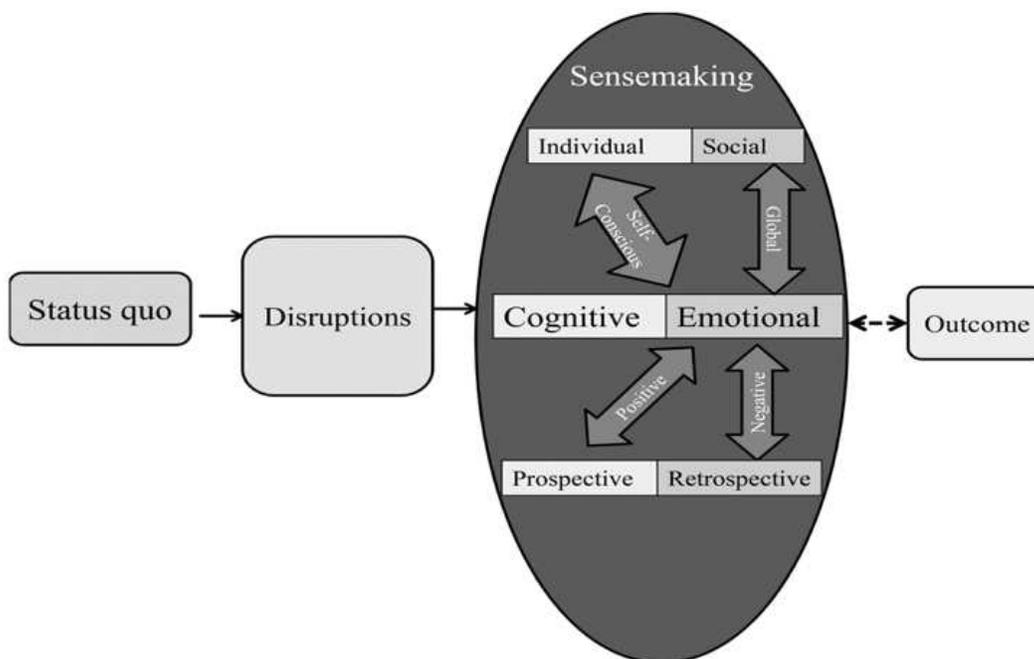
Individuals “extract cues and plausible sense retrospectively, while enacting more or less order into ongoing circumstances” (Weick et al., 2005, p., 49). Sensemaking cannot occur without an understanding of what has happened before. This is especially true in education, where policies and decisions are often made by drawing from events and situations in the past. The creation of legislature dictating educational decisions are all based on what has happened in the past of both the student and the teacher. Both groups bring their own biases into the organization daily. Weick references Paget who points out that, “A mistake follows an act. It identifies the character of an act in its aftermath. It names it. An act, however, is not mistaken; it becomes mistaken” (as cited in Weick et al., 2005, p. 412). What is happening in the present can only be understood based on what has happened in the past.

Walls (2017) has tried to establish a new sensemaking framework that can explain why an individual makes a decision and how the status quo can be disrupted, relying on differing types of sensemaking to determine the outcome. Sensemaking begins with a disruption to the status quo. In education, this disruption is most often a change in policy or school practice. Importantly, the status quo is an individually and socially constructed state or opinion. Weick (1995) also astutely noted that all sensemaking is retrospective in the sense that individuals evaluate a disruption with respect to their understanding of the

state of affairs prior to the disruption. During the collection of qualitative data through individual and group interviews for the present study, the researcher focused on the specific policies and changes that the teachers had to follow and how their own past experiences influenced the ways that they implemented these policies. During the data evaluation process, the researcher focused on the recurring themes of implicit bias, teacher perceptions, and the disproportionality that existed in their own schools and districts.

Figure 3

Types of Sensemaking



Sensemaking and Race and Equity in Education

How can researchers critically make sense of the racial inequities present in special education in order to transform public education? Sensemaking refers to a conceptual awareness through which individuals interpret their personal thoughts in order to orient themselves within their world (Weick, 1995). Furthermore, “Sensemaking

involves the ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing” (Weick et al., 2005, p. 409).

Sensemaking begins when something unusual, unexpected, and important happens outside a person’s normal routine. As Weick (1995) explained, sensemaking involves a constant association between interpreting events and acting upon those events within social contexts. Teachers who wish to transform public education and policy with regards to equity and closing the racial/ethnic achievement gap must first understand how past racial experiences have impacted the sensemaking of racial inequities present within their schools and districts. “As the organizational sensemaking process is shaped by the sensemaking efforts of the organization’s members, strategic change is possible only if the stakeholders understand and accept—that is, make sense—of the new cognitive orientations of the organization,” (Gioia et al., 1994). It requires individuals to label and categorize their experiences in order to derive meaning from them (Weick et al., 2005). In the present study, the researchers used the individual and group interview questions to examine the participants’ current views on teaching minorities as well as their opinions on the disproportionality of minorities in special education. The researcher then took the opinions of these educators into account to determine central findings.

Review of the Literature

History of Federal Policy on Special Education

Special education refers to specially designed instruction that is aimed at meeting the very unique needs of a child with a disability and comes at no cost to the parents. Special education law ensures that a free and appropriate education is available to all, including students who fall under the umbrella of special education. The IDEA ensures

this. IDEA was first passed in 1975, at which point it was called the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. The law was renamed to IDEA in 1990 and is the law that ensures that all children receive an education tailored to their individual needs. Section 618(d) of IDEA requires states to identify school districts with significant disproportionality (in terms of race or ethnicity) in the identification, placement, or discipline of children with disabilities.

Such school districts must reserve 15% of federal funds provided under IDEA, Part B to implement comprehensive intervening services to address the disparity. To ensure the greatest access to rigorous academic content, IDEA statute requires that children with disabilities receive their education in the least restrictive environment (LRE). This includes learning alongside children without disabilities to the maximum extent appropriate. The passing of P.L. 94-142 (IDEA) resulted in many benefits for students with disabilities. A range of conditions fall under the special education umbrella, including speech and language disorders, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), intellectual disabilities, specific learning disabilities, developmental delay, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), sensory disorders, emotional disorders, and physical disabilities. Students who have one of these disabilities receive an individualized education plan (IEP) that outlines the services and accommodations to which they are legally entitled under the IDEA. Policy makers designed the IDEA to expand access and educational rights for students with disabilities and largely achieved their goal of ensuring greater access to schooling and increased provision of services.

Racial and ethnic disproportionality in special education exists. The IDEA of 1997 was the first legislation to specifically address ethnic disproportionality, but by the

reauthorization of IDEA in 2004, the disproportionality of the numbers remained. The government reacted to this fact, and out of these developments came the response to intervention (RTI) approach. The goal of this approach was to lessen the number of disproportionately classified students receiving an IEP. IDEA 2004 also required collection and reporting of disproportionality data at the state and district level. Adding a monetary incentive led to increased analyses of classified special education students, although there was no set way to analyze the data. It also allowed for a larger level of disproportionality that was growing with no end in sight.

Although IDEA 2004 mandated a change, it was still not clear how or why the disproportionality continued. As a result, it then fell directly onto the special education teachers to decide and determine the educationally appropriate placement for these students using either RTI or other methods. Thorius and Maxcy (2010) and Castro-Villarreal et al. (2018) have ascertained that the RTI model has had no effect on disproportionality, primarily due to the cultural and systemic bias in the classroom that start and end with the special education teacher. Teachers' racial perceptions as well as their own biases could have an adverse effect on the whole process, bringing them back to the beginning and forcing the process to end before it even begins. The authors found that while the students in education are becoming increasingly diverse, the teachers and administrators within the same system are not; therefore, the gap and cultural biases continue to grow wider (Castro-Villarreal et.al., 2018).

The NCLB Act was passed in 2001. The intention of the NCLB Act of 2001 (PL. 107-110) was to improve the academic achievement of all students. As a result, students with disabilities are no longer exempt from high stakes achievement tests. The NCLB Act

of 2001 was a U.S. Act of Congress that reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act; it also included a Title I provision applying to disadvantaged students. It supported standards-based education reform based on the premise that setting high standards and establishing measurable goals could improve individual outcomes in education. NCLB required states to develop assessments in basic skills. To receive federal school funding, states had to give these assessments to all students at select grade levels. However, the act did not assert a national achievement standard—each state developed its own standards. NCLB expanded the federal role in public education through further emphasis on annual testing, annual academic progress, report cards, and teacher qualifications, as well as significant changes in funding.

NCLB therefore led to inclusion. Before NCLB, many schools did not measure the progress of students with learning disabilities. These students had been left out of the general education curriculum as well as state tests. The changes following NCLB helped schools shrink the achievement gap.

Larger risk ratios might be present after adjusting for achievement gaps and other potential explanatory factors. These districts might be potential candidates for civil rights monitoring by the U.S. Department of Education, especially if larger-than-expected risk ratios indicating over-representation endured across several years. Doing so would be consistent with the federal regulation's emphasis on disproportionality that is consistent among several readings (Harper, 2017). Determining whether or not the gaps in education can be diminished and allowing for a set of standards and rules are the reasons why many state and federal laws governing special education were passed, as well as the reasons

why inclusion of special education students into the general education curriculum where possible has been the go-to move for many schools.

In late December 2016, the U.S. Department of Education issued some last rules to prompt states to proactively address racial and ethnic disparities in the identification, placement, and discipline of children with disabilities. That same month, they released comprehensive legal guidance describing schools' obligations under federal civil rights and disabilities studies not to discriminate on the basis of race, color, or national origin in the administration of special education.

Is General Education the Answer?

Is inclusion the answer to the question that has been asked for many years? Considering the ideology of IDEA and NCLB, it is clear this is still a question many need more information on in order to answer. This is a debate that has divided the world of education. Some believe that placing students with others at the same level is in the best interest of all. Some believe that including students who are atypical learners in the general classroom is the best option overall (Fitzell, 2018).

General education classes are not always adequate to meet the needs of diverse learners. In their qualitative research study on inclusion, Connor and Ferrios (2007) discussed the readiness of teachers in particular. They referred to this as the “claimed Paradoxes” in special education (pp. 63–70). As one article they researched stated, a member of the public noted, “It is absurd to plan inclusion of students with significant disabilities in overcrowded classrooms where the teacher has received no more than a crash course in special education” (p. 15).

In a recent study on special education, Fitzell (2018) investigated the merits of co-teaching using a qualitative research survey given to both special education and general education teachers with varying years of experience and found that most students achieve more in a general classroom with an excellent teaching environment. However, credible researchers have not yet validated the trend towards tracking students in leveled classes based on test scores and ability over time. The research on tracking and leveling is about as inconclusive and controversial as the research on homework (Fitzell, 2018).

In his qualitative study on inclusion practices, Saslow (1999) explained that he found inclusion to be a difficult field to navigate, stating, “This is not an education plan but a space plan” (p. 3). Thus, simply allowing students to be present and visible is not the same as promoting interaction or integration. Anything short of full and meaningful participation—which will require fundamental changes in general education—violates the principles of inclusion. In the United States, special education students are included in general education classrooms in greater numbers than ever before, driven by federal policy that requires teaching students in the LRE that is appropriate for them.

Gilmour (2018) referenced that overall, what is known about inclusion is still quite limited in the context of such a widespread practice. Students with disabilities appear to have better outcomes when educated in inclusive settings, yet studies of the association between setting and outcomes do not account for important differences between the students with disabilities placed in inclusive classrooms and those who are taught in special-education settings (Gilmour, 2018).

In particular, this research study highlights the importance of evaluating inclusion from an ecological perspective. Instead of focusing narrowly on the effects of inclusion

and on outcomes for students with disabilities (SWDs), an ecological perspective allows researchers to acknowledge that inclusion influences students with disabilities, their peers without disabilities, and general-education teachers, and to focus on the interactions between and among these three groups.

Previously mentioned policies and practices have been focused on increasingly veering toward the use of inclusion. However, these policies—and the associated research on their effects—have not really focused on the influence of these learning environments upon a student’s performance. With inclusion as the preeminent model in special education, it is vital that researchers also focus on how these students influence the experiences of their peers and their teachers in order to make schools effective for all children.

Importance of Including Special Education Students in the School Community

Education plays a significant role in equipping people with the knowledge and skills needed to perform different duties in society. Through education, people learn to understand the complexities of various aspects of life and ways to influence their existence. However, the provision of education in a school setting in particular enables learners to interact and learn from each other’s actions and behaviors. According to Rossa (2017), “man’s life is primarily a social life, with a lack of adequate socialization, increasing the likelihood of creating a handicap” (p. 213). As such, socialization equips people with the skills needed to address their differences and improve how they behave and undertake different duties. The same is true of special education students when included in the school community. The practice provides an opportunity for them to build relationships with other students and learn how they can better interact and support each

other in the school environment. Similarly, Zvoleyko et al. (2016) used the modeling method to create of a model of special conditions that determine the structure of an inclusive educational environment that was conducive to the socialization of students with disabilities. They stated that an inclusive educational environment promotes the socialization of disabled children. The environment facilitates social integration, which results in social adaptation of a child with special needs. Social adaptation enables people to fit into society and improves the functioning of the disabled body parts. Therefore, including special education children in the school community provides them an environment conducive for social adaptation through which they can improve their performance.

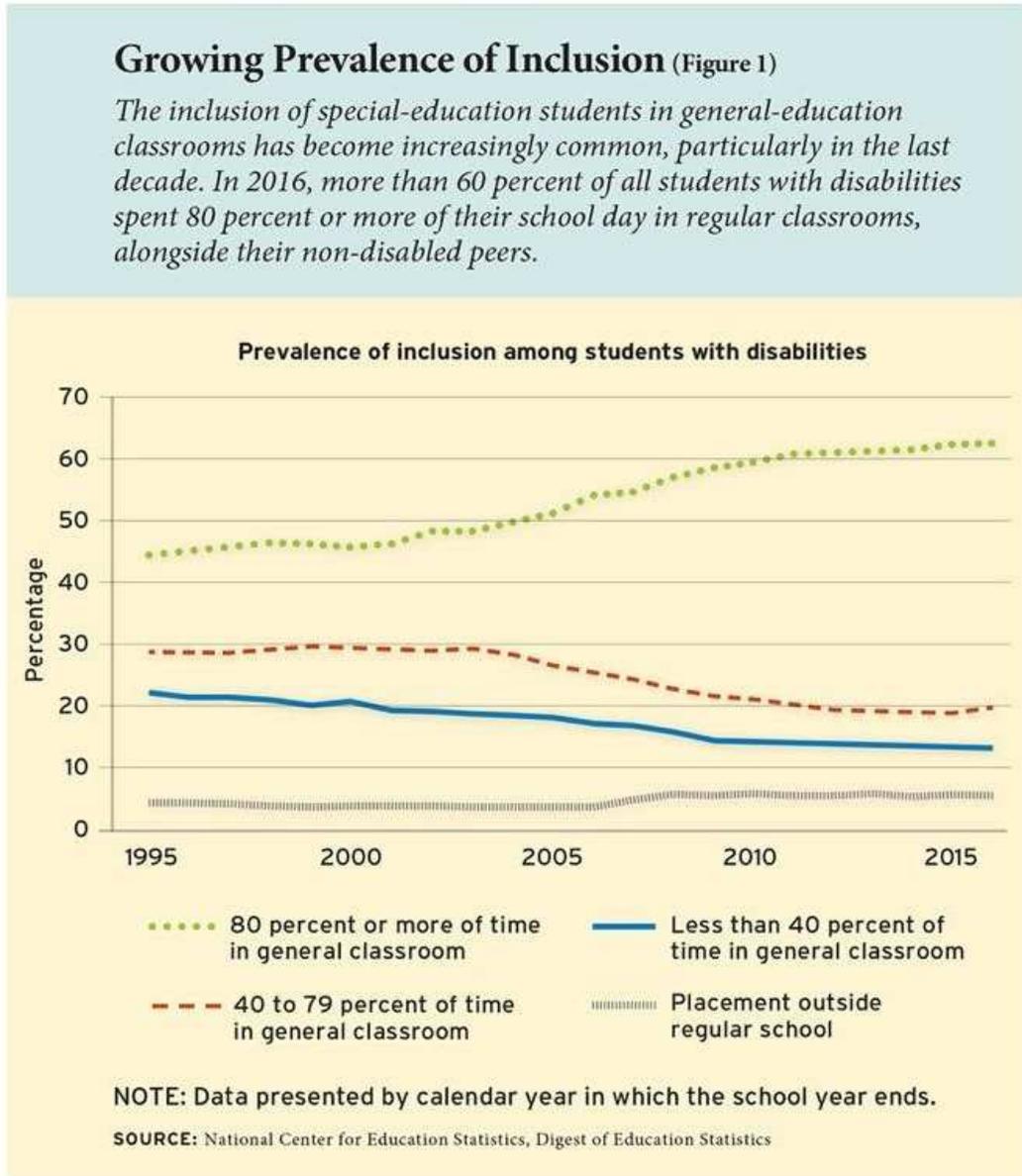
The inclusion of special education students in the school community enables them to be in a natural environment. According to Lawrence (2018), placing special needs children with mainstream children provides a context similar to that of the society where special needs people interact with their peers. Being in the school community creates opportunities for special needs students to prepare for life after school, when they will spend most of their time with non-disabled people. The students can prepare themselves for later life through the challenges that they face in the environment, including academic competition with the other children (Lawrence, 2018). The expectations that teachers in traditional classrooms set are often higher than those set in special schools. Teachers encourage the students with special needs to improve their academic excellence by comparing their performance to that of their mainstream peers. As such, children put more effort into their studies and get prepared for life after school. Similarly, Villegas (2019), reviewed evidence from more than 280 studies conducted in 25 countries on the

subject of inclusion. He determined that educational settings where children with disabilities are educated alongside their nondisabled peers can have many benefits for the cognitive and social development of all children.

Villegas (2019) argued that students who spend most of their time with their nondisabled peers have a high probability of attending school or joining a community group. The children are also more likely to demonstrate independence and self-esteem as compared to children learning in special schools. Therefore, including special needs students in a school community improves their academic and social excellence due to the school's natural environment.

Figure 4

Growing Prevalence of Inclusion



Disproportionate Representation in Education

The basic premise of disproportionate representation is that all other things being similar, educators should identify students from different groups for special education services in similar proportions (Hosp, 2007). Furthermore, when these markers of identity

occur simultaneously, there is an increased likelihood that such children will be labeled as disabled. Since the early 1970s, the U.S. Office of Civil Rights has reported a persistent over-representation of minority children in categories requiring specialized clinical judgment (Fierros & Conroy, 2002). As Hernandez (1999) stated: “most special education students are classified as ‘learning disabled’ or ‘emotionally handicapped.’” Fierros and Conroy (2002) contend that teachers often apply such labels loosely, particularly if the teachers want to rid themselves of disruptive students. Prior research indicates that there are significant disparities between special education referral and placement rates for European Americans and Asian Americans compared with African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans (Fierros & Conroy, 2002). In 2015, only three percent of Black and Hispanic 12th-grade students with disabilities achieved proficiency in reading, while practically none achieved proficiency in math (Harper, 2017). As compared to European Americans, African American students remain three times as likely to be labeled mentally retarded, twice as likely to be labeled emotionally disturbed, and almost one and a half times as likely to be labeled learning disabled (Parrish, 2002).

Disproportionality Research

To date, a number of studies have confirmed the problem of minority disproportionality in special education. However, no researchers have investigated whether the collection of data regarding disproportionality in special education and the related consequences as outlined in federal education policies have had the intended quantifiable impact on minority disproportionality—if any impact at all. Historically, educators have disproportionately identified minority students as requiring special education services (Friend, 2005). This disproportionality is symptomatic of biased

referral procedures and is evidence of inequity in public education (Anderson, 2018). The IDEA addressed this issue for the first time in 1997, and formally defined consequences for school districts that demonstrate evidence of minority disproportionality as a result of inappropriate special education referrals (Steggerert, 2017). In late December 2016, the U.S. Department of Education issued final rules to prompt states to proactively address racial and ethnic disparities in the identification, placement, and discipline of children with disabilities. That same month, they released comprehensive legal guidance describing schools' obligations under federal civil rights and disabilities studies not to discriminate on the basis of race, color, or national origin in the administration of special education (Harper, 2017). As stated in the IDEA, students with disabilities must receive a free and appropriate public education in the LRE. The LRE is the setting that is closest to a general education classroom but that still meets the academic, physical, and health needs of the student with a disability. Different from LRE, the idea of "full inclusion" asserts that all students with special needs be fully integrated into general education classrooms.

There is great confusion, however, among teachers, administrators, and community members as to how to determine the LRE (Gallardo, 2015). There is also disagreement over whether LRE and full inclusion are inherently the same concept. Some interpret the LRE to mean full inclusion. According to Heward's (2013) Continuum of Services, the general education classroom has the least number of restrictions for students with disabilities (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

Heward's Model of Least Restrictive Environment

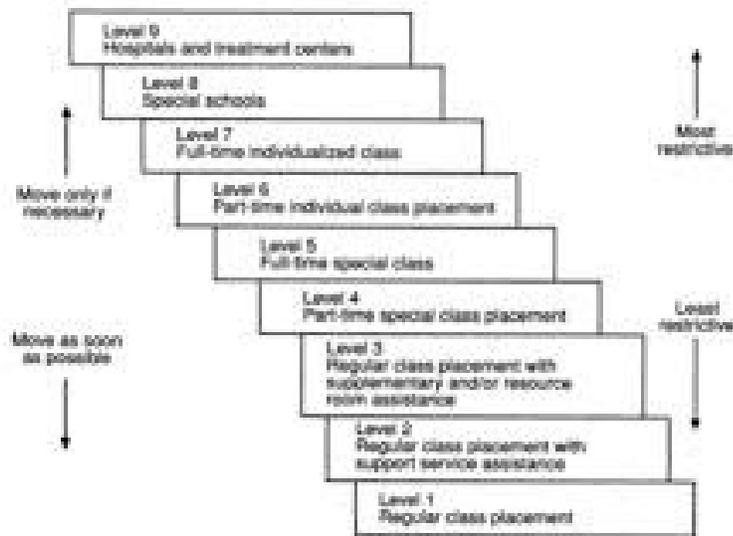


Figure 18.1 The continuum of placements for providing the least restrictive environment.
Reprinted, by permission, from J. Waisick, 1995. *Adapted Physical Education and Sport: Strategies* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics), 21.

There are arguments on both sides of the LRE and full inclusion debate. Debate sparks from Heward's (2013) assertion that, "LRE states that students with disabilities are educated in the closest thing to the general education classroom as possible, for some students that is an inclusive classroom, for others it's not." Educators are currently debating whether full inclusion is the best thing for students with disabilities and if LRE can co-exist with full inclusion classrooms. Within this debate, disproportionality begins to appear. The rush to get the students into placements that will comply with LRE leads to the mislabeling of students, especially students of color (Gallardo, 2015). Thus, teachers use the special education program as a way to keep the peace by removing or adding students who might disrupt the status quo of the general education classroom.

Disproportionality in Special Education

Roughly 6.4 million public school students in the United States receive special education services annually, at an estimated cost of nearly \$40 billion (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Special education provides a vehicle for accommodations and, in many cases, treatment for students with learning disabilities.

Racial disparity in special education is growing, and the issue is more complex than researchers previously thought. Researchers from Michigan State University have recently examined how often Black and Hispanic students are identified as needing special education compared to White students, and have developed new insights on disproportionality and racial gaps (Bleak et al., 2019; Hutchinson, 2018; Imberman, 2019; Martin, 2014). Imberman (2019) investigated the racial disparity in special education. The study was a qualitative analysis of the growing racial gaps in special education of Hispanic and African American students in Florida. He analyzed birth and education records for all 869,000 children born in Florida between 1992 and 2002.

Students in the United States receive special education services if their disabilities adversely affect their educational performance. Academic achievement is often the most materially relevant factor for assessing whether students with disabilities should receive special education services. Researchers have described academic achievement as “the key variable in special education eligibility for most students” (Harper, Imberman, et al.). Because the risk ratios are unadjusted, they do not account for other explanatory factors that may help explain the observed racial and ethnic disparities in special education.

There is a method that state and federal auditors evaluating for significant disproportionality in special education based on race or ethnicity could use. This is to

adjust the district's Black- and Hispanic-White risk ratios for the district's Black- and Hispanic-White achievement gaps as well as other explanatory factors. Doing so would provide a more methodologically and a substantively justifiable method for identifying U.S. school districts where significant disproportionality in special education based on race or ethnicity—and not other factors—may be occurring (Imberman, 2019).

Most notably, Imberman (2019) concluded that “when it comes to special education demographics, people generally believe that minority students are put into special ed programs more frequently than White students, and if you look just at the raw numbers, that’s generally true...But this doesn’t consider background factors, particularly health, which can determine a lot about a child. When looking at numbers and data more closely, what many think about this racial disproportionality gets turned on its head” (p. 3).

The research findings published by the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) (2015) revealed that educators place Black and Hispanic students into special education programs more often in predominantly White schools. In contrast, educators are much less likely to identify them as needing special education in schools that are mostly minority, where students of the same race surround them. For example, a Black fourth grade student attending a school that was more than 90% minority was six percentage points less likely to be placed in a special education program as compared to a similar White student. At the same time, a minority student attending a mostly White school is three percentage points more likely to be identified as requiring special education than a similar White student.

To help educators, school communities, and education officials understand the challenges prompting these initiatives, here are five critical facts about racial and ethnic disparities in special education: “In general, students of color are disproportionately overrepresented among children with disabilities: Black students are 40% more likely, and American Indian students are 70% more likely, to be identified as having disabilities than are their peers.”

The existence of disproportionate identification rates in special education by race had been a concern long before the 1997 amendments to the IDEA first required states to address disproportionality. Earlier studies consistently showed that Black students in particular were often identified with disabilities at higher rates than White students (Chinn & Hughes, 1987; Coutinho & Oswald, 2000; Dunn, 1968; National Research Council, 1982). More recent work has shown that this story becomes more complex when economic factors are also considered. Studies using aggregate data typically find evidence of overrepresentation conditional on basic observable characteristics, while estimates based on individual survey data imply conditional underrepresentation (Hibel et al., 2010; Morgan et al., 2012, 2013, 2015, 2017; Oswald et al., 1999; Shifrer et al., 2011; Skiba et al., 2005; Sullivan, 2011).

Two primary concerns drive resultant research and reform that some students—particularly those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds—may receive unnecessary, ineffective, and stigmatizing special education services, or, to a lesser extent, that students are denied needed services appropriate to their disabilities and unique educational needs (Artiles, 1998; Bollmer et al., 2007; Morgan et al., 2015). The effects of change efforts are questionable, so ongoing policy and practice to reduce

disparities may be bolstered by enhanced understanding of this complicated phenomenon, particularly the factors that drive disproportionality (Albrecht et al., 2012). Considering these points, it is clear that the presence of low socioeconomic students in special education programs indicates that even within the subset of special education students, socioeconomic status is indeed a factor of the students' classification in some cases.

What Effect Do Teachers Have?

Martin (2014) used the aversive racism theory to examine whether the level of implicit racial bias among teachers influences the disproportionality of African American children referred to special education. Using a factorial survey design, Martin surveyed 307 teachers in kindergarten through sixth grade classrooms in the Iowa City Community School District. Only 21 teachers fulfilled the requirements of the full survey. Due to the presence of a state university, this district is situated in a highly liberal, educated area. There are 19 elementary schools in the district with approximately 316 general education classroom teachers. The survey was based on five questions centered on the special education referral process, demographics, and both implicit and explicit bias measurements. The included factors were ones that are most likely to influence a teacher's decision to refer a student to special education. Martin's (2014) findings suggest that although there is some connection between implicit racial bias and referrals to special education, they are not due to race. However, the research study findings do indicate that teachers require more in depth training on the inner workings of the special education and RTI process, as well as implicit bias.

Morgan and Farkas (2016) explored the idea that students who are White or those whose first language is English were more likely to have a disability or receive special

education services than students who are part of a perceived racial, ethnic, or language minority. Their research was specifically related to five disabilities: learning disability, speech or language impairments, emotional or behavioral disorders, intellectual disabilities, and other health impairment. They focused on children in kindergarten through the end of middle school, choosing students from all different parts of the country. As their variables, they considered factors that those involved with the special education referral process generally agree are predictive of a larger issue. They included academic or behavioral struggles in school, gender, and race.

Morgan and Farkas (2016) found that the disparities were very large. For example, children who were Black were 64% less likely to be determined to have emotional or behavioral disorders than otherwise similar children who were White. These racial and ethnic disparities in disability identification could be a result of societal inequity, in which minority children are not being provided the additional support and services to which they may be legally entitled. The author's analysis also indicated that White children were more likely than their racial, ethnic, or language minority peers across a large number of disability conditions ranging from autism to behavioral or intellectual disorders (Morgan & Farkas, 2016).

While the disparities are real, and the numbers do not lie, educators need a better way to decide if the students are receiving given special education services because they need it or because of other factors. While special education identification rates vary by state and across different racial and ethnic groups, policies could be created and implemented to address the disparity in the social lives of all these students.

Health Data

Looking into the overall health of the student helps researchers to understand the biases or limitations that these students are facing (Brantlinger, 2006; Martin, 2014). Many past researchers have linked students' special education needs with a school's racial demographics. This connection reveals that special education rates are not necessarily about a student's race—but rather about how an individual student's race compares to the school's racial makeup (Imberman, 2019). The findings suggest that schools are more likely to incorrectly determine a student to have disabilities when he or she is racially different from the student body as a whole. Imberman (2019) said:

Policies related to disproportionality in special education, such as the Individuals with Disabilities and Education Act, may need to be reexamined so that students who need special education services are getting them. Overall, we need a better understanding of how we can overcome these disproportionalities for students. In order to tackle bigger issues like income inequality and wealth later in life, we need to understand what students are going through early on, particularly in education systems.

In 2015, only three percent of Black and Hispanic 12th-grade students with disabilities achieved proficiency in reading, while practically none achieved proficiency in math. Imberman (2019) found that this growing disparity was due to the medical diagnoses of the students. Prior special education researchers did not examine health data—this is critical information because it could reveal traits well before a child goes to school indicating that they will need special education (Imberman, 2019). Imberman explained that, “Birth records show details about a child's weight and any congenital

abnormalities or birth complications, like if the baby needed ventilation or suffered from fetal alcohol syndrome.” Furthermore, “Newborn health issues oftentimes lead to a child needing special Ed services later on. With this data, we generated a prediction of a special education needs for healthy White students that we used as our baseline when comparing Black and Hispanic students” (Imberman, 2015).

Factors That Influence Special Education Placement: Type of Disability and Early Intervention and Access to Services

Elder et al. (2019) conducted a qualitative analysis and that decided to focus on another potential early driver of racial gaps in adulthood—special education identification. They examined the identification gaps across racial groups using a rich set of health and economic endowments, and focusing on how the gaps varied in relation to the racial composition of schools. The overrepresentation of particular demographics varies depending on the type of disability. Disparities are particularly prevalent for so-called high-incidence disabilities, including specific learning disabilities and intellectual disabilities. Black students are twice as likely to be identified as having emotional disturbance and intellectual disabilities as their peers. American Indian students are twice as likely to be identified as having specific learning disabilities, and four times as likely to be identified as having developmental delays. Research does not support the conclusion that race and ethnic disproportionality in special education is due to differences in socioeconomic status between groups. Therefore, efforts to reduce disparity should support more widespread screening for developmental delays among young children and should help educators identify disabilities early and appropriately to address student needs. One study found that four year old Black children were also

disproportionately underrepresented in early childhood special education and early intervention programs.

As an example of this, Elder and Lubotsky (2009) and Elder (2010) have shown that a substantial number of ADHD diagnoses are driven by a child's age relative to their peers in the same grade and school. Elder and Lubotsky focused on the role of a school's racial make-up. Previous researchers have shown that schools with high percentages of Black students are characterized by low achievement among minority students (e.g., Hanushek et al., 2009), while Bohrnstedt et al. (2015) show evidence of positive links between segregation and achievement gaps. However, there has been no complete analysis of how segregation across schools relates to racial gaps in special education identification. Apart from the potential role of resource differences, if the determination of special education identification is a function of an individual's health relative to their peers, and if minorities have relatively poor health endowments, segregation could lead to an underrepresentation of minorities in schools that mostly contain minority students and overrepresentation in majority White schools. Many children of color with disabilities experience a segregated education system.

According to data collected in Florida in 2014, children of color with disabilities—including 17% of Black students and 21% of Asian students—were placed in the regular classroom for less than 40% of the school day on average (Elder et al., 2019). By comparison, 11% of White and American Indian or Alaskan Native children with disabilities were similarly placed. In a single year, one in five Black, American Indian, and multiracial boys with disabilities were suspended from school. These estimates suggest that in schools that are mostly populated with minority students, the

minority students are underrepresented in special education relative to their underlying incidence of disability. If this is indeed the case, their long-term educational outcomes could suffer. Notably, Hanushek et al. (2002) found significant positive effects on mathematics achievement for students in special education. Ballis (2018) similarly found that marginal students who are denied special education services are less likely to complete high school and enroll in college.

IDEA Provisions Intended to Address Racial and Ethnic Disparities are Underused

According to the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Government Accountability Office, each year, three percent or less of all school districts have significant disproportionality within their special education programs (Harper, 2017). In 2013, 75% of the identified school districts were located in seven states. That same year, 22 states did not identify any districts with significant disproportionality. While there is no consensus definition of significant disproportionality—as the term refers to an IDEA legal standard that states individually decide upon—the U.S. Department of Education published preliminary data identifying extensive racial and ethnic disparities in every state in the union (Imberman, 2019). Under the new final rule from the U.S. Department of Education, all states will be required to follow a standard approach to define and identify significant disproportionality in school districts. Greater flexibility to implement comprehensive, coordinated early intervening services (CEIS) may help school districts address special education disparities and improve academic outcomes for children of color with disabilities.

Historically, school districts with significant disproportionality were prohibited from using comprehensive CEIS to address the needs of preschool children or children

with disabilities. Such restrictions prevented schools from using comprehensive CEIS for training IEP teams to build better behavioral supports into students' IEPs, even to address placement or discipline disparities. Such restrictions also prevented teachers' efforts to identify and serve preschool children in order to prevent future disparities in disability identification. Under the new final rule, school districts may implement comprehensive CEIS in a manner that addresses identified racial and ethnic disparities, which may include activities that support students with disabilities and preschool children (Harper, 2017).

Yet, because of historical and ongoing racial segregation, students of color are more likely to be exposed to the risk factors that contribute to disabilities, including those resulting in academic difficulties. Examples include a greater likelihood of being exposed to lead, low birth weight, environmental pollutants, and living in low income and unsafe neighborhoods. Currently, among fourth graders in the United States, students who are Black or Hispanic are about twice as likely to display below average basic levels of reading achievement as students who are White. Academic troubles are often evident by school entry. To assess for possible racial or ethnic bias in disability identification, federal regulations increasingly require U.S. school districts to monitor for significant disproportionality in special education.

Teachers and the Implicit Biases That Color Their Judgment

Hutchinson (2018) and his research highlights the great divide between the background of teachers—including where and how they grew up—and the population of the students that they are likely to teach. Teachers tend to have a preconceived vision of their students, and therefore are not equipped to connect with the students they are

assigned to teach. As a result of the implicit biases that teachers come into the field with, as well as the fact that most teachers or teacher candidates were average or high performing students (meaning they did well in school, and therefore assume that all students are like them), they unintentionally create a disproportion of the students in their classes. Because they are drawing on their own past experiences as students, they may expect more from their future students, or even fail fully understand their students. As a result, they may make rash judgments that can affect their students well into adulthood.

According to Hutchinson (2018), this is how teachers can unknowingly develop biases that they do not even realize they are bringing into their classroom and their teaching practice. In a practical educational sense, these teachers are likely to be unconsciously biased in the assessment of certain groups of students—not because of what they know or do not know, but because of their own background and personal experiences (Hutchinson, 2018). This increases the likelihood that a student whose behavior does not align with the teacher’s perceptions of various cultures will get inappropriately swept into special education classes. Hutchinson (2018) suggested that in several cases, students will take tests or other assessments that are not culturally appropriate to them, which leads to them scoring in a lower percentile than their peers. Hutchinson called this “The Minority Effect;” as a result, these children are characterized as special education students in error. On top of these issues, there is the emotional effect that the characterization as a special education student can have on the individual, which could lead to long-term problems. Together these facts show that there is indeed a disproportionate representation of children of color in special education, especially students on the borderline.

Castro-Villarreal et al. (2018) investigated data drawn from various studies covering things like implicit biases of teachers (Martin, 2014). In considering the barriers to meeting the needs of culturally diverse learners and successful strategies for all kinds of learners, they determined that the teacher is the main advocate for a student's success.

Following the changes mandated with IDEA 2004, it fell directly onto the special education teachers to determine the educationally appropriate placement for these students using either RTI or other methods. However, it seems that the RTI model has had no effect on disproportionality, primarily due to the cultural and systemic bias in the classroom that start and end with the special education teacher (Castro-Villarreal et al., 2015; Thorius & Maxcy, 2017). That teacher's racial perceptions as well as their own biases could have an adverse effect on the process altogether. The authors found that while the students are becoming increasingly diverse, the teachers and administrators within the same systems are not; therefore, the biases and cultural gap continue to grow wider.

Martin (2014) surveyed 307 teachers in grades kindergarten through sixth grade in the Iowa City Community School District. Only 21 teachers fulfilled the requirements of the full survey. Due to the presence of a state university, this district is situated in a highly liberal, educated area. There are 19 elementary schools in the district with approximately 316 general education classroom teachers. The survey was based on five questions centering on the special education referral process, demographics, and both implicit and explicit bias measurements. The study centered on the factors most likely to influence a teacher's decision to refer a student to special education.

Martin (2014) suggested that although there is some connection between implicit racial bias and referrals to special education, they are not due to race. All the participants were either White or Hispanic in origin, and only two of the 21 had any sort of special education experience, which may have skewed the findings. However, the research study findings do indicate that teachers must receive more in depth training on the inner workings of the special education and RTI processes, as well as implicit bias (Martin, 2014). In addition, the results of the study did not support the hypothesis posed by the author, which was that the teachers were generally from White middle-class backgrounds that did not match the culturally diverse students they were in charge of.

Fletcher (2014) conducted a similar study in order to examine implicit biases among multidisciplinary team members when it came to the referral of students into special education. Fletcher specifically aimed to determine if disproportionality existed when referring African American students. The researcher conducted one-on-one interviews with the staff of an elementary school in South Carolina that accommodates students from grades pre-kindergarten to fifth grade. The staff at the school is predominantly White, while the students at the school are mostly African American. The themes that were explored in the study were the academic and behavioral factors of the students, whether race or ethnicity played a role in the decisions to refer students to a special education program, any academic or intellectual delays of the students, and the students' level of motivation.

Fletcher (2014) found that when the parents of the referred students (as well as the students themselves) did not conform to the teachings of the predominately White staff, the innate implicit biases and deficit thinking of the team members became evident.

There is a need to ensure culturally responsive teaching that allows for the staff to better meet the needs of the community that they are teaching. The participants in the study also tended to judge the students based on their perceptions of their own White middle-class upbringing. The participants also seemed to attribute students' academic delays and behavioral problems to their parents, backgrounds, and the challenges they faced outside of school, instead of recognizing their own part in the process.

Gap in the Research

Research has shown that federal policies have been established to ensure that children referred to special education receive appropriate help throughout educational process (Bleak et al., 2019; Castro-Villarreal et al., 2015; Hutchinson, 2018; Martin, 2014). However, most studies examining the ways that special education students are disproportionately represented do not look directly at the teacher's implicit biases and deficit thinking in the processes but mostly focus on the ways to correct the system as a whole in order to improve student achievement (Beurkens, 2016; García-Carrión et al., 2018). If teachers can better understand their own point of view, perceptions, and ideals as far as their students are concerned, perhaps they will be able to develop tools to help stop the misplacement of students into special education settings that do not benefit their educational goals. The current study will add to the present body of research by looking at the classification and referral process in order to investigate special education and general education teachers' perceptions of special education students within the confines of race disproportionality.

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

This chapter includes an explanation of the methodology and procedures for the data collection and analysis for this case study. The study was a qualitative, singular case study with the purpose of examining the perceptions and implicit biases of special education teachers in a suburban New York school district regarding race disproportionality, specifically after the classification process (Merriam, 1998). The researcher designed a singular case study in order to identify research “that is based on the view that reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds” (Merriam, 1998, p. 6). The researcher collected the qualitative data by conducting individual and group interviews with both general and special education teachers, as well as analyzing the federal, state, and district regulations pertaining to special education classification. This chapter contains the details of the qualitative study along with the methods and procedures of data collection, coding, and analysis. The data collection and subsequent analysis will provide the basis for the findings and conclusions that will be outlined in Chapter 5.

Methods and Procedures

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study.

1. How do the implicit biases and perceptions of special education teachers influence their classification and treatment of students?
2. What levels of race disproportionality exist in special education?
3. To what extent does the culture of a school community help to affect levels of disproportionality in schools?

Table 1*Research Question Analysis*

Research Question	Research That Drove the Questions	Interview/Focus Group Questions
1. How do the implicit biases and perceptions of special education and general education teachers influence the classification and treatment of special education students?	Fletcher, 2014	Do I have beliefs about their home lives or community that prevent me from seeing their academic potential?
2. What levels of race disproportionality exist in special education?	Hutchinson, 2018	Do I truly believe that all students, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic background, are capable of being academically successful?
3. To what extent does the culture of a school community help to affect levels of disproportionality in schools?	Weick et al., 2005	How confident are you that adults at your school can have honest conversations with each other about race?

Why a Qualitative Study?

The researcher chose a qualitative study in order to develop a unique depth of understanding that is difficult to gain from a closed question survey. Within a qualitative study, respondents are able to freely disclose their experiences, thoughts, and feelings without constraint. This can open a whole new avenue of research. The researcher also chose to perform a singular case study. According to Yin (2003), it is better to proceed with a single case study when the researcher wants to study a person or a group of people. Also, researchers can question old theoretical relationships and explore new ones when using a single case study. Merriam (1998) stated that a qualitative case study is “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a process, or a social unit” (p. xiii). This seemed like a perfect fit for the study of a school.

Setting

The researcher chose to conduct this singular case study within a specific school district in order to analyze the implicit biases and perceptions of special education and general education teachers as they pertained to race disproportionality within the classification and referral process. Factors such as demographics, socioeconomic statistics, and location within suburban New York all contributed to the researcher’s choice of district. Theoretical sampling is a well-known method in singular case studies that allows researchers to seek additional data based on concepts developed from initial data analysis. This method involves following where the data leads in order to expand and refine an evolving theory during the analytical process (Ligita et.al., 2019).

The setting that the researcher chose was Bay Front School District (pseudonym). Bay Front School District is located in the suburbs of New York. As shown in Table 2, in the 2019–2020 school year, Bay Front School District had a total student population of 12,351 students (6,266 males and 6,085 females). The ethnic makeup of Bay Front School District is 18% Hispanic/Latino, 70% White, 3% Black/African American, 6% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 3% multiracial (NYSED Data Site, 2020). The student population also includes 28% who are economically disadvantaged, 18% that are classified as SWDs, 3% that are classified as ELLs, 1% that are homeless, and 1% that are in foster care (NYSED Data Site, 2020). The community that the school district is located within has a median household income of \$80,341 and a per capita household income of \$33,830 (U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts, 2020). The average expenditure per pupil in the district is \$13,837 for general education students and \$38,295 for special education students (NYSED Data Site, 2020). Among high school seniors, the district has an overall graduation rate of 87% (NYSED Data Site, 2020). The teacher turnover rate in the district is 3%, with a 16% turnover rate for teachers with five or less years of experience (NYSED Data Site, 2020). The researcher received approval to conduct this study within the school district through written permission from the superintendent's office (see Appendix I).

Table 2*2019–2020 Enrollment Data Bay Front School District*

Ethnicity and Other Classifications	Number of Students	Percentage
American Indian or Alaska Native	27	0%
Black or African American	418	3%
Hispanic or Latino	2,176	18%
Asian	757	3%
White	8,650	70%
Multiracial	323	3%
Total	12,351	100%
English Language Learners	347	3%
Students with Disabilities	2,231	18%
Economically Disadvantaged	3,520	28%
Homeless	121	1%
Foster Children	16	1%

Note. Statistics compiled from NYSED Data Site (2020).

Participants

The participants for this study included 12 elementary and middle school teachers and one administrator. All worked for a suburban New York public school district that has a disproportionality in their special education placements. All participants were licensed special education or general education teachers who possessed between one and 29 years of teaching experience (see Table 3). The researcher used purposeful and intentional sampling to select the suburban New York public school district and the participants. This singular case study included two focus groups, one including elementary school teachers, and the other including middle school teachers. Previous relevant research has yielded mixed results and few studies have examined a key aspect

of such reforms: teachers' sensemaking of data (Coburn & Turner, 2011, 2012; Marsh, 2012). Sensemaking is critical to consider in light of implications related to the effectiveness of data-use policies as well as the possible impacts on some student groups (such as students in special education). The researcher constructed the categories of elementary and middle school teachers in order to develop a comprehensive overview of special education teachers' experiences and reflections.

Table 3

Description of Participants

Participant	Years of Experience	Tenure Status	Subject Area
Focus Group #1			
Frances	29 Years	Tenured	Special Education
Elizabeth	17 Years	Tenured	Special Education
Anthony	15 Years	Tenured	General Education
Melissa	14 Years	Tenured	General Education
Kayla	9 Years	Tenured	General Education
Rich	8 Years	Tenured	Special Education
Focus Group #2			
Halie	6 Years	Tenured	General Education
Khloe	6 Years	Tenured	General Education
Mary	5 Years	Tenured	Special Education
Anne	4 Years	Untenured	Special Education
Darren	3 Years	Untenured	Special Education
Victoria	3 Years	Untenured	General Education
Administrator			
Clark	11 Years		Administrator

This case study also included six individual teacher-participant interviews, three elementary level general education teachers, three middle school general education

teachers, and one administrator-participant interview. These categories were essential since the two different groups of teachers had different experiences with the special education referral process. Within this case study, the researcher used deliberate sampling that allows for a variation on certain characteristics as a way to capture the diversity of the sample (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The researcher hoped to gather the greatest variation of different perspectives from both special education and general education teachers at both the elementary and middle school levels.

The sample of volunteer participants represented different experiences in terms of years of experience, tenure status, years taught, and grades taught (see Table 3). The initial recruitment of volunteer participants took place via e-mail to the departments; the informed consent and recruitment fliers were also included (see Appendix A and Appendix B). All participants in the study took part in focus groups and/or individual interviews. Following the conclusion of the focus group with the six elementary teachers and the six middle school teachers, the researcher selected three participants from each group to participate in a follow-up, one-on-one interview. An administrator also participated in a one-on-one interview. The interviews allowed the researcher to develop a greater understanding of the themes that emerged out of the initial rounds of coding and data analysis.

Data Collection Procedures

Focus Groups

Two teacher-participant focus groups, one of elementary school teachers and one of middle school teachers, were facilitated to special education and general education teacher-participants in a suburban New York public school district. Focus group

discussions are common in conservation research, unlike some of the other relatively lesser-known techniques (Ochieng et al., 2018). The researcher conducted the focus groups using an interview protocol to guide the conversation (Appendix C). Focus group discussions are generally a “cost-effective” and “promising alternative” in participatory research (Morgan, 1996). To help identify the trends in the process, the researcher replicated the focus group interviews with six individuals in each of the two focus groups.

The researcher conducted the focus group discussions electronically during the 2021–2022 academic year. The first focus group consisted of six elementary school teachers and the second focus group consisted of six middle school teachers. After establishing the codes, categories, and patterns, the researcher reviewed the responses to see how well the data clarified the research questions (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). By studying the two focus groups of teachers based on the level or grades they taught, the researcher was able to analyze the trends across and between the focus groups in order to examine the impact the grade(s) the teacher taught had on the referral process of special education students. The focus group interviews also allowed for the flexibility to explore unanticipated issues that participants may have mentioned in the initial conversations. Finally, the focus group interviews allowed the researcher to assess the teacher’s perceptions of the special education referral process that causes the disproportionality in the first place.

Interviews

The researcher conducted six individual teacher-participant interviews and one individual administrator-participant interview. In order to garner a more in-depth

understanding of the elementary and middle school teachers' perceptions of special education students, the researcher also conducted teacher-participant interviews with three individuals from each of the two focus groups (see Appendix D). The researchers also conducted one individual administrator-participant interview to ascertain a more in-depth perspective into an administrator's role in the classification of special education students, and to understand the impact that has on the education of the students (see Appendix D). Individual interviews were ideal for this study, as they help give the researcher and other "qualitative researchers work toward confirmability by being forthcoming about their potential biases and by discussing the possible inadequacies of the study itself" (Shenton, 2004). The interviews allowed for a greater understanding of teachers' perceptions towards special education students.

The researcher followed a semi-structured interview protocol that included a few major questions, sub-questions, and follow-up questions to gain further insight and in-depth responses. Because semi-structured interviews combine features from both structured and unstructured interviews, it draws some advantages from both. For interviewers, the constructed part of semi-structured interview gives them a general overview of the interviewees. It helps them draw an objective comparison from the interviewees, which is helpful. Semi-structured interviewing, according to Bernard (1988), is best used when the researcher only has chance to interview someone or when several interviewers will be collecting data. Having interview participants from two different focus groups allowed the researcher in the current study to analyze the various teachers' perceptions towards special education students.

Content Analysis

The researcher also conducted a content analysis related to the implementation of all special education laws and practices under IDEA and NCLB. A content analysis helped to provide the needed background and context to the study. Deductive content analysis is common in cases where the researcher wishes to retest existing data in a new context (Catanzaro, 1988). The content analysis provided the researcher a method for analyzing and interpreting the documentation related to the research topic. The researcher analyzed documents from the state and federal regulations pertaining to special education as well as district rules and regulations that pertained to special education. This analysis helped the researcher to determine the perceptions of the educators as they related to the classification of special education students. Documents from the referral process as well as departmental meetings were also analyzed to examine the various biases and level of experience of the participants in the study. In general, a content analysis allows the research to avoid interrupting ongoing events and to determine where the prominent themes lie after collecting the data (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). By conducting a content analysis of the federal and state regulations of special education and the supporting documentation, the researcher was able to evaluate the processes that the educators go through as they refer and place special education students. The analysis of the professional development as well as department meetings allowed the researcher to analyze the experiences of the educators in the referral process.

Trustworthiness of the Design

Triangulation involves the use of multiple sources of data to substantiate claims (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1995). The researcher used triangulation within the data analysis

portion of this study in order to ensure trustworthiness. The multiple sources of qualitative data utilized to support the findings and conclusions include two focus group sessions, six teacher-participant interviews, one administrator-participant interview, and a content analysis of the New York State and federal special education laws, the district policies, and teacher feedback.

Within this study, member checking involved giving each participant a copy of the focus group interview data so they could review the data. The researcher completed this step after the conclusion of each focus group and individual interview. This was done to make sure that each participant had the ability to review what they said, add more information if they wanted to, and to edit what they said (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Research Ethics

After receiving approval from the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), the researcher sent letters of consent—along with copies of this research proposal—to the superintendent of schools. After receiving consent from the superintendent of schools, the researcher notified the teachers of the study and the opportunity to participate. Letters of consent were distributed to willing teacher-participants at that time. Participants were aware that they would be able to review what they wrote and could request that any or all of their interviews (as part of the focus groups or one-on-one) not be used. During the collection of the qualitative data throughout the focus groups and individual interviews, the researcher referred to the teachers and administrators using pseudonyms in order to maintain confidentiality. The collected data was stored securely with password protection on the researcher's computer.

Data Analysis

The researcher coded all of qualitative data collected through the focus groups, individual interviews, and the content analysis following the model presented by Saldana (2013). First, the researcher transcribed the data from the focus groups and individual interviews. Next, the researcher analyzed the data and used the computer program Dedoose to house the data. All data including transcripts and documents were uploaded to Dedoose for coding. A code is often a word or shortened phrase that represents a “summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (Saldana, 2013, p. 3). Coding is the crucial link between data collection and the evaluation of the meaning (Saldana, 2013).

The data analysis took place over various rounds of coding. The first round involved an initial descriptive coding using attribution coding that logged the essential information about the data and participants’ demographic characteristics (Saldana, 2013). The second round consisted of pattern coding, which is a way of grouping summaries into a smaller number of sets, themes, or constructs to look for themes and identify connections related to the teachers’ perceptions of the special education students in their schools. The third round involved code weaving, which is the integration of key words and phrases into a narrative in order to see how they connect to the research questions (Saldana, 2013). Some main themes arose from the analysis of the collected data. They included: (1) special education teaching and methodology; (2) collaboration and communication; and, (3) professional development and resources. Working with these themes allowed the researcher to draw multiple conclusions and then present the findings

surrounding general education and special education teachers' perceptions of special education students within their district.

Researcher Role

A researcher's professional role naturally has an influence on a study. The current researcher's professional role is to serve in the capacity as a facilitator, manager, and responder for the follow-through and adherence to special education laws and regulations. As a special education teacher, the researcher is responsible for serving special education and general education students and ensuring that the school is following all district and federal regulation in regard to special education. Understanding teachers' perceptions towards special education students would help this researcher better determine the issues that are present as well as establish ways to prevent further disproportionality.

While conducting this qualitative research study, it was important for the researcher to identify possible researcher and participant biases that could impact the trustworthiness of the results (Creswell, 2013). To avoid potential confirmation bias (which occurs when the researcher interprets the data to support their hypothesis), the researcher considered the data obtained as a whole, analyzed it with a clear and unbiased mindset, and evaluated the impressions and responses to ensure that any pre-existing assumptions did not influence the data or analysis (Creswell, 2013). To avoid any potential leading questions or any wording bias, the researcher kept the questions simple and carefully avoided words that could introduce bias (Creswell, 2013). Furthermore, to avoid any potential acquiescence bias (which occurs when the participant chooses to agree with the researcher), the researcher made sure to present open-ended questions to

prevent the participant from simply agreeing or disagreeing and to encourage them to provide a truthful and honest answer (Creswell, 2013).

CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to determine general education and special education teachers' perceptions of race disproportionality and implicit biases related to the classification of special education students. This study involved two focus groups of teacher participants, six individual interviews with teacher participants, one individual interview with an administrator participant, as well as a content analysis of documents pertaining to the classification of special education students within a suburban school district. This chapter provides analysis of the collected data according to themes that emerged as related to the research questions. This chapter also ends with a discussion of the findings according to the research questions of the study.

Three themes arose from the analysis of the data collected from the study. The first theme to emerge related to the special education teaching and methodology. This first theme comprised three sub-themes: special education classroom skills, the impact of classifications, and the impact on student learning and motivation. The second theme that emerged was collaboration. Within the second theme, the three sub-themes included teacher collaboration, the disconnect between the department and the district, and the New York State and district rollout of the federal regulations regarding special education. The third theme to emerge related to professional development concerns. The third theme comprised two sub-themes: professional development received and additional professional development wanted (see Table 4).

Table 4

Emerging Themes and Sub-Themes

Theme	Sub-Theme 1	Sub-Theme 2	Sub-Theme 3
Special Education Teaching and Methodology	Special Education	Impact of Classifications	Impact on Student
	Classroom Skills		Learning and Motivation
Collaboration	Teacher Collaboration	Disconnect Between the Teachers and District	New York State and District Rollout of Special Education Rules and Regulations
Professional Development Concerns	Professional Development Received	Additional Professional Development Opportunities	

Theme 1: Special Education Teaching and Methodology

A comprehensive theme that emerged during the analysis of collected data was special education teaching and methodology. Each of the participants shared their views on the classification of special education students and the impact that the classification process has had on their teaching and methodology in the special education classroom. Within the theme of special education teaching and methodology, three sub-themes presented themselves from the collected data: special education classroom skills, the impact of classifications, and the impact the classification process has on student learning

and motivation. Together, these three sub-themes directly relate to teachers' perceptions towards the New York State rules for special education classification and the impact the classification of a special education student has had on their teaching and methodology in the special education or general education classroom.

Special Education Classroom Skills

The first sub-theme to present itself regarding special education teaching and methodology was the difficult balance between following the rules regarding special education while also teaching necessary skills. During the two focus groups and the individual interviews, the researcher asked the participants about their views on the special education classification policies within their district and how the classification of special education students within their classrooms impacts their instructional practices. Most participants viewed the special education classification system and their own classrooms as independent of each other, as opposed to allowing the classification process to impact their teaching process.

The experienced teachers shared concerns that as a result of the classification process, they felt they had less time in the classroom to teach literacy skills. Halie (an experienced special education teacher) expressed frustration with the special education classification system by stating: "It is less focused on teaching, and more focused on how to help the student through the classification process." She expressed the sadness she felt having to shelve her teaching skills.

Khloe (an experienced general education teacher) agreed and spoke about the changing role of the general education teacher within the special education process, saying, "And also our roles. I think are changing from general education teacher to

special education teacher. And it's not necessarily a degree everyone holds or wants to hold, so it's frustrating." Halie spoke about the impact that the special education classification process has on the teachers' responsibilities: "An emphasis now on inclusivity, scaffolding, and the students' ability to learn takes over their ability to actually access the material being taught to them." Rich (an experienced special education teacher) expressed extreme annoyance on the topic of losing valuable teaching time in the classroom: "I spend significant time trying to make sure that all the needed documents needed for classification are completed, rather than actually teaching much needed content." He added, "And reducing the content to make room for the process has reduced the opportunities to be more intellectual." Mary echoed the concerns related to losing time to teach content while focusing solely on getting students to fit in amongst their peers, stating, "They're making the learning take a back seat to the process."

Most less experienced teachers also expressed a concern regarding the loss of time in the classroom to cover necessary material. Kayla (a less experienced special education teacher) shared her observations regarding the impact she has seen and said, "I think that there's fear within not just my classroom, but in general over losing time teaching the curriculum." Melissa (a less experienced general education teacher) expressed the struggle she has seen regarding the balance between teaching and the paperwork involved in the classification process:

I think that there are a lot of good and bad things to it also, and in content, and not to have this seem selfish, but I really love teaching, and in this process of classifying students, that teachers are in limbo where we don't really know how

much we're supposed to teach, and how much time we can spend of the classification process.

Halie (a less experienced teacher) added that when focusing on teaching, "It's very easy to fall behind in teaching content, and even easier to fall behind in helping acclimate a student in the classification process and trying to do them simultaneously can be extremely frustrating." On the other hand, Melissa saw the value in the time spent on the classification process, "I like how they prioritize the comfort and placement of the student; I think it's vital for their success both in the classroom and in life." Kayla echoed that sentiment and could see the positive placement of these classified students, "I think they are more eager to learn the material that you are teaching, which allows them to be successful." Mary also had a positive view of the classification process, "I like the shift to ensuring that our special education students are in the proper setting to help them learn in the way that is best for them."

Clark, the administrator, had observed a positive impact to student learning within the classrooms, but worried that more the experienced teachers were concerned about what the classification process would do to the flow of their classrooms. Clark stated:

I think overall that the classification process is working and contributing to the overall success of the students' learning and their engagement in the learning process. However, I do feel that it may be at the expense of the other students in the class.

He continued by expressing some of the challenges he sees as an administrator, saying that "some of the challenges that I faced is getting some of the veteran teachers to see the importance of teaching all students."

During the content analysis of the district's special education classification process materials, the researcher found that there has been a real push throughout the district to classify special education students correctly. The professional development that the teachers had received throughout the prior few years were heavily driven towards the idea of a "community" of teachers working together to classify special education students. Throughout inquiry meetings and department meetings over the previous 18 months, the theme that emerged was that the special education and general education departments should work in conjunction with each other rather than as two separate entities.

In analyzing the regulations of IDEA and the districts' special education classification process, it became clear that the classification process needs to be done thoughtfully for the benefit of the students and needs to involve the input of all the stakeholders involved. The districts documents specifically state that, "The decision about which classification to pick is made at the student's IEP meeting. The IEP team (including the parent) will discuss the options and choose the classification that best fits the child's situation. Even when a child could fit into two (or more) boxes, a team cannot 'dual classify'—but the IEP program must still address all the identified needs of the child." The analysis of the collected data—including the focus group interviews, individual interviews, and content analysis—revealed that special education teachers have focused more on the paperwork involved with the classification process versus the teaching of content material. However, general education teachers thought that the focus on the mainstreaming of students throughout the classification process negatively impacted their ability to cover all content for all students.

Impact of Assessments

The second sub-theme to emerge from the collected data regarding special education teaching and methodology was the impact of the classification process. During the focus groups and individual interviews, the researcher asked the participants about their views on the classification process and how policies put in place impacted their classroom management and instructional practices. Most teachers shared that the classification process felt daunting; the work involved in following the procedures correctly as well as the work needed to keep everyone on the same page impacted their instructional practices by forcing them to focus more on small group instruction instead of whole class instruction. All of the experienced teachers, the majority of the less experienced teachers, and the administrator all expressed concern regarding the format of the classification process and the way that the assessments have impacted the instruction within the various classrooms.

There was consensus amongst the experienced teachers—they did not feel the assessments during the classification process were an effective practice for the students in terms of preparing them to be successful academically. To help, they tailor-made instruction to prepare the students to perform well. This also included a focus on the use of the correct assessments and more detailed instruction. Anthony began the conversation:

They created this process and the assessment that is, we're talking about kids again that have less than the attention span, but we've made it a longer exam and more difficult process, and the necessary skills are not being tested on anything we've taught them, except for the skills necessary to succeed.

Mary echoed his displeasure with the process and the inability to effectively combine the content and the process:

They are not doing a good job of combining the process and the content. They're not doing a good job of making it fair for the students to demonstrate their skills because they may not be alert to the content that they are being taught and they also cannot prove that they have retained any knowledge of the content since content is omitted on the assessments. They need to do something to make this better.

Melissa agreed that the assessment process is not an accurate measure of what the students need to learn, but rather focuses more on the students' acclimation process into the LRE: "Not a proponent. I feel like it's an assessment that sets the students up for disappointment. It's meant to trick the kids on very random vague facts instead of an overview of the content."

Melissa went on to add that her current teaching practices did not necessarily align with the expectations related to the assessment, saying, "I believe there is a large disconnect in terms of the skills with the style of teaching, creates a problem helping the students be successful." She also discussed the struggle that the classification process creates for the students: "It's traumatizing for them, and I feel like the process itself makes their educational journey difficult." Khloe expressed that she was frustrated by the process because, "the overall assessment of the student is left out of the process." The experienced teachers discussed the changes they made to their instruction in order to better suit the needs of all students in light of the assessment process. Darren discussed some of the changes he had to make:

I have changed my teaching, and eliminated certain elements of lessons, so I can spend more time on the basic skills that the classified students in my classes have their needs met. I include more entry points, like visuals and different types of texts to keep the learners engaged. I want the students to feel successful, and I fear that the process may do more harm to their abilities than good.

Victoria focused on the need to prepare the students for the classification assessment and process as well as integration into their classrooms:

The classification process has changed the fact that I feel like I can do less whole group instruction because we must spend time in small groups, or specially designed one on one instruction to meet the needs of all the learners. Which places more on the shoulders of the teachers and allows for less student-to-student interaction.

Halie agreed that building students' independence in learning was important: "Now it seems that we need to maintain a focus of tailor-making the curriculum for all the students and their various needs pertaining to their specially designed instruction."

Frances also added that she needs more time to focus on basic skills in the classroom, saying, "Generally so much time that must be devoted to spending on reading, writing, and working on the skills. It's just so hard. It's hard to get there." All of the experienced teachers expressed concern regarding the classification process, particularly the length of time it takes and the number of students that are in need of the placements. Most experienced teachers expressed that their daily instructional practices in the classroom have changed, including the needed one-on-one instruction.

Most of the less experienced teachers did not feel that the assessments were an effective measure of what the students learned throughout the year. They also felt that there was a large difference between the assessments that measure students' academic success and what the classification process assessments quantify as success. Victoria expressed concerns that necessary skills are being pushed aside: "The district decides what we are going to do with the classification process, but overlooks the other skills needed to be successful in life." She went on to explain that this caused an issue for teachers and the overall skill development of their students, saying, "It makes it very difficult for us as teachers to know where we are supposed to focus our instruction." Anthony also focused on the lack of life skills instruction: "It was mentioned in the past that life skills were essential to the success of a student's journey. Then that sort of begs the question of what is essential for students to know?" Elizabeth expressed concern regarding the length of the assessment process and its impact on the students:

I think that the assessment process is very, very long, and I think that it takes away from the success of the students to force these difficult classification process, and while the process itself is necessary, I think the length of the test and the amount the kids must do is not effective in their journey overall.

Anne also shared her views on the length of the process and the difficulty the students have maintaining focus for the length of time that is needed to complete the entire classification process: "I think it's kind of strange that the process of classifying a student is to make their academic life successful and yet they are putting the students through a difficult and consuming process." Because of this ideal, most inexperienced teachers felt that there was a severe disconnect between the expectations of the

classification process and the results of the assessments themselves. Melissa began the discussion by saying, “So it’s almost laughable that such a disconnect between the classroom teachers’ expectations and what is expected from the students according to the districts’ classification process is so different.” Mary also discussed how she is trying to prepare her students to endure this experience: “I do agree that there is a huge disconnect between what is going on in the teachers’ classroom and what the district believes is needed to help the students succeed academically, in an academically appropriate setting.”

Rich spoke on the same topic and discussed the perceived disconnect between the style of instruction in his classroom and the way that students are evaluated:

I’ve been thinking a whole lot about this issue lately, and with the expectations of classroom instruction and the way that the classification and accompanying exams are structured, it seems almost comical that we are pushing so hard to help students achieve by testing them further, when testing is one of the stressors on these students.

Anne (a teacher with only three years of experience) agreed and saw the disconnect as well: “Our in the classroom expectations do not match the format and established expectations of the classification assessment process.” Most of the experienced teachers also expressed concern with the assessment—specifically the length of it and the number of documents required to end the classification process. On the contrary, most of the less experienced teachers focused more on the disconnect between the instruction style and the assessment style.

Clark (the administrator) shared some concerns with both experienced and less experienced teachers, including the length of time spent on assessments within the classification process: “I also feel that the classification process is daunting and even a bit pushy towards the idea of the students being successful, but does not take into account the toll it takes on them.” He also added that there is a push to quickly classify the students into certain classes where they will be better suited: “I feel that the students are sometimes pushed into situations that will suit them academically but then cause a disruption to the other aspects of their school lives.” Clark also observed that, “The importance placed on the classification process and exams has caused the teachers to tailor their instruction to help the students to be successful on them, at any cost.” Clark, all of the experienced teachers, and most of the less experienced teachers all shared concern regarding both the pressure they felt the classification process has placed on the teachers themselves, as well as the ways the process has disrupted classroom instruction.

During the content analysis of the district’s classification policies and the regulations according to IDEA, the collected data showed a significant change in the priorities related to the classification of students. The assessments that the students must take have changed dramatically over the past few years. They are now longer, more complex, and more taxing on the students as well as the teachers. The students often did not receive an explanation of the rigor of the assessments, which would directly affect their successful completion of them. The teachers were too often unaware of the details as well, which seemed like a disconnect. In analyzing the collected data—including focus group interviews, individual interviews, and the content analysis—the researcher highlighted the ways that the special education teachers and the general education

teachers dislike tailoring their instruction towards the format of the assessments despite its perceived importance in the high stake's world of classifications.

Student Learning and Motivation

The third sub-theme that emerged from the collected data regarding special education teaching and methodology was the impact on student learning and motivation. During both the focus groups and individual interviews, the researcher asked the participants about the impact that the special education classification process had upon student learning and their instructional practices. Most of the experienced teachers spoke about the lack of student motivation in the classroom resulting from the expectations that the classification process placed on the students. Most of the less experienced teachers focused more on attempting to create engaging lessons for their students in order to help them succeed and presenting the content and necessary skills to help them thrive.

Most of the experienced teachers were quick to share their frustration and how they felt disheartened by the perceived lack of motivation that their students showed because of the increased number of necessary skills included on the classification assessments. Anthony shared his annoyance with the assessments as well, saying, "I have to juggle the content and skills, the student's abilities, and also keeping the students engaged and entertained in the classroom." Victoria agreed and also touched on the lack of motivation amongst the students in her classroom:

I think that's something that I struggle with is the motivation when they walk in, that thing to engage them quickly. I think some of my ability to do that has been lost, because of then emphasis on their success.

Mary also shared her concerns about how the new focus on assessing students throughout the classification process affected the student motivation in her classroom: “I feel as though I have lost my ability to make the lessons fun and entertaining like I used to.” She also stated, “All the pressure of the assessments and the understanding and analyzing of the classification process has taken over my teaching rather than doing fun and engaging tasks or projects that may make them more motivated and engaged learners.”

Anne agreed with those statements and shared her concerns regarding student motivation in her classroom, asking, “How could I possibly get them to be engaged in my lessons and motivate them to do something?” She also commented on how she does not see the students benefitting from all of the changes in the assessments and the classification process itself: “I think that if anything they are learning to cope with the changes, instead of benefitting from them.” In terms of the changes to their instruction, Melissa stated that she is “trying to ensure that every lesson is more rigorous and planned out so that the students can experience the rigor of the assessments daily, and then therefore are aware of what to expect.”

Mary agreed that she has had to make changes in her instructional practices to help prepare her students for the adjusted assessments: “I have always tried to steer clear from giving difficult assessments often, and now I feel as though I have to do what is expected of me, rather than what is best for the students.” William also discussed all the planning he must do to prepare for his class, commenting that, “creating assessments and trying to determine how to prepare to students for their delivery sometimes makes my instruction boring.” Most of the experienced teachers also expressed concern in the lack

of motivation and decrease in active student participation in their classrooms resulting from them tailoring their instructional practices to help better prepare the students for the assessments.

Many of the less experienced teachers focused mostly on trying to be creative and design lessons to engage the students and support student collaboration while also introducing the rigor needed to help the students be successful on the assessments. All of the less experienced teachers shared that they have not necessarily felt a shift in their instructional practices related to preparing the students for the assessments and the classification process because these are the only systems they have ever known. Kayla shared that the assessments and classification process is “definitely attempting to have things be more student-centered, and more hands on for students, even though they are also increasing rigor at the same time.” Elizabeth agreed while also discussing her instructional practices, saying, “I really haven’t seen very much of a change. I think as a new teacher, and the way that the creative side of lesson planning was taught to me in college, coupled with the district’s regulations, I am a product of my preparation program.” Darren discussed how he engages his students in his classroom:

What I personally try to do is a lot of group work. I think it really helps the students to engage more in the lessons. If the students can work together successfully as the real world is geared more in this direction. Grouping them in different ways, where they see different peers also helps motivation.

Melissa agreed and shared how she bases instruction in her classroom: “So in my mind, a lot of the learning in my classroom is based on group work, so having the students work together in small groups helps them to complete the rigorous assessments

and assignments.” Kayla continued this topic and expressed how she has not seen a big change in her instructional practices:

I came right from college. So, this way is all that I have known as far as how I teach, and I do not think that the rigor is necessarily a bad thing, but I can see how the changes would be difficult for the students, as well as the older teachers.

Khloe agreed and shared, “But for me there really wasn’t a shift of any kind because teaching this way is all that I have ever known.” Anne also agreed and discussed how she views the teaching of skills in her classroom:

I’m not entirely sure how the classroom instruction and assessments has changed based on the policies of the district or IDEA. I feel as though the instruction has always been rigorous, and I’m not sure how these changed standards or upgraded policies or anything like that, or how much it makes teaching different or changes the way that we teach, because I feel like teachers have always emphasized the skills needed to succeed according to these policies.

All of the less experienced teachers expressed that because the new process is all they have ever known, they have had to significantly change their instructional practices within their various classrooms. Most of the less experienced teachers also felt positively about the rigorous policies, as felt they helped the students to be more successful after their educational experience ends.

Through analyzing the content from the district’s meetings on the classification process, the researcher found that the district put a significant emphasis on student-centered protocols by modeling them for teachers and administrators. This was done in order to ensure that the teachers implemented the new procedures to help engage the

students with more thought-provoking ideas. These procedures stemmed in part from IDEA regulations, district policy, and pushback from parents. Clark discussed the instructional expectations within the district:

In my opinion, our district has always been an avid supporter of students, and their success in and out of the classroom. But there has also been a push lately to make changes, and these changes can sometimes change the education process for the students as well.

Student academic success and their feelings of belonging are the baseline for the policies that have been in place, as well as the happiness of the students, their parents, and the evolution of a teacher's practices. The policies are centered around ensuring that the students are able to develop a sense of belonging and feel successful in their academic pursuits. Similarly, the focus of instruction within the various classrooms is on allowing the student to succeed, which depends upon finding the most appropriate setting for that development to take place. The analysis of the collected data—including the focus group interviews, individual interviews, and content analysis—made it clear that the most experienced teachers discovered a negative impact on their student's motivation and learning in their classrooms, while some less experienced teachers and the administrator focused more on finding a balance between teaching the necessary skills and helping students succeed academically in class.

Theme 2: Collaboration

The second theme that emerged during the analysis of collected data was collaboration. Each of the participants shared their views on the impact that the special education classification protocol has had on their instruction. Within the theme of

collaboration, three sub-themes also emerged from the collected data: teacher collaboration; the apparent disconnect between the district and various schools; and the district rollout of the special education assessment and classification protocols. Together, these three sub-themes encompass teachers' perceptions of the impact that special education classification protocols and policies have had on collaboration and communication.

Teacher Collaboration

The first sub-theme related to collaboration in general was the need for the collaboration of teachers the regard to the district's policies of classifying special education students. During both of the focus groups and during individual interviews, the researcher asked the participants about their views on the policies and how their teaching has changed because of these classifications. All participants felt that it was important for teaches to collaborate, help each other with planning, and support one another through the implementation of the policies.

There was agreement among the experienced teachers that teacher collaboration was essential for the success of the classification policies as well as the success of the students. When a student is being assessed and classified, Melissa stated that the teachers all work collaboratively to decide the best placement of the student:

As a group, we decided that we were going to do what was best for the students, and work together instead of letting our different views derail the student's success. We all decided together that we wanted what was best for the student, and that meant that we needed to put what was best for us, and what was easiest, on the backburner and work together.

Halie felt similarly about the importance of teacher collaboration within the school and even the district and shared that, “The teachers in my school, the veteran teachers and the newer teachers are collaborating frequently, to help tackle the new policies and be willing to share ideas, both good and bad.” She also thought that the effectiveness of this collaboration has been crucial to the development of her fellow teachers: “I think that being able to work collaboratively to attack these new protocols as a team has been great for me personally, and it is a nice surprise considering I have worked in districts before where that was not the case.” Anne also felt positively about the collaborative nature of the school she works in: “I feel very supported and collaborative, and I feel like I can approach any of my fellow teachers and ask questions like, ‘Am I doing the right things?’ and they will do what they can to help me.”

Khloe stressed the importance of the collaboration of teachers, saying “It is completely beneficial to collaborate with other teachers to help each other to meet the goals of the new protocols and the assessments.” All of the less experienced teachers stressed the importance of the collaboration between teachers for support throughout the planning and implementation of the new procedures and assessments.

The content analysis of the data related to the district’s meeting agendas and professional development showed a significant push towards teacher collaboration, including helping each other throughout the process and then using what they have learned and sharing their successes in order to correct any mistakes where needed. Some takeaways from the analysis of the documents include the creation of a plan on how the classification process can work to benefit all involved, time built into teacher schedules to work collaboratively, and explanations as to how the new assessments and protocols tie

in with the expectations of IDEA. Clark (the administrator) shared his thoughts about the collaborative efforts of the teachers: “I feel that it is of paramount importance for the teachers to have the time they need to collaborate on these new parameters, to ensure the success of their work with their students as well as each other.” He went on to share how he himself has worked through professional challenges with the help of his peers:

One of the major tasks I have tried to accomplish is how to allow the collaborative process to happen somewhat organically to benefit the teachers who work under me. Whether it was with the scheduling, or the planning of meetings, or the professional development time that needs to be provided for the teachers, I have shared with them that we learn best from each other.

The interview with the administrator and the content analysis highlighted the importance of teacher collaboration. The analysis of the collected data—including the focus group interviews, individual interviews, and content analysis—highlighted the ways that the special education and general education teachers as well as the administrators have created a culture of collaboration in order to conquer the rigorous task of preparing students for the classification process.

Disconnect Between the Teachers and the District

The second sub-theme that emerged from the collected data regarding collaboration was the perceived disconnection that exists between the teachers’ and the district’s classroom expectations. Participants from both the focus groups and individual interviews spoke on their views of the district’s special education classification procedures, their ties to IDEA, and how their opinions on the instruction of these students

have changed. All the participants shared that there was a disconnect between the support they have received from the district and the district's special education classification.

The experienced teachers agreed that there was a disconnect between the district's introduction of the protocols and the subsequent support that they received from the district. Many of the experienced teachers felt that the administrators outside of the school level did not see the shifts that were happening, nor the effect that those shifts had upon the teachers.

Throughout the conversations, it also became clear that the less experienced teachers felt a larger disconnect between the rollout of the classification process by the individual schools and the pressure they felt from the district to maintain their usual instructional practices. Mary said, "I think that in my particular building, there is not as much of a disconnect, and that collaboration is key to the instruction of these students." She continued to discuss the disconnect between the expectations of the teachers and the district, saying:

I understand the importance of the teachers leaving their personal opinions to the side and implementing the procedures and assessments, but the teachers are the ones that are instructing daily, and their practice is what is often being disrupted by these policies. And, as an untenured teacher, it's hard to know what decisions to make.

Anthony also shared his frustration surrounding the difficulties he faces by trying to meet all the expectations on him:

When we are told to work collaboratively, then I think is helpful to us. But, when we are left to try and figure it all out alone, then mistakes are bound to be made,

and that is when mistakes are made, because we are relying on our own opinions and biases, and the students are the ones that are the most affected, and that is a challenge for our instruction daily.

Kayla added to the discussion by outlining the lack of support teachers have received outside of their individual schools: “Sometimes they aren’t even sure what the protocols are, or what students need from the schools. It’s also been a challenge in that we have had a few different building leader changes in the past few years.” Anne added to the discussion and spoke on the professional development support that all new teachers within the district receive:

We receive district-wide professional development, but usually it is not helpful or enlightening to our practices in any way. They are meetings that are not based on what we are dealing with in our classrooms, and not even realistic or even helpful.

Melissa offered her opinion and added:

Okay, so when I think about the way that my district focuses so heavily on data, and how even the little things matter greatly, and how the number of referrals and our classifications of those students who were referred is shown to us in nearly every single district-wide meeting, it makes me question the professional development that we are receiving. When you are analyzing the data the way you are, it would make more sense to give us professional development on ways to help that process, not how to use technology or something else that has no impact on what we need to do.

Melissa also discussed the challenges she faces in the classroom as a result of these differing expectations:

Our district puts a very big emphasis on numbers, and data, and how the data can be analyzed and learned from, and they expect the teachers to meet all the goals that are established for them. However, sometimes their wants are a bit extraordinary, and hard to attain. And, that pressure does play a role in the teacher's development and the classroom instruction. Finding a balance is the real struggle.

All of the less experienced teachers shared their growing frustration—their level of frustration with the disconnect between the teachers and the district about the expectations that are placed on them from outside their actual school buildings far exceeded that of the experienced teachers.

Within the content analysis of the district meeting agendas and professional development across the prior year and a half, the collected data exposed the importance that the district placed on the classification process and the ways that the teachers had to curtail their instruction to meet the goals of the classification protocols. These various instructional interruptions were discussed during professional development sessions, and their expectations were clearly geared towards the data. Rich focused on the struggle for the teachers:

I believe that teachers have been tasked with deciding which policies and procedures are to be followed, and which are required to be let go of. There are the regulations of IDEA and NCLB, the district's directives, the family input, and the rubrics that they are measured against based on their instructional practices to formulate their teacher rating, and all of it can be overwhelming. And teachers have expressed their concern over the juggling of all these facets at the same time.

In analyzing the collected data—including focus group interviews, individual interviews, and the content analysis—the researcher found that the teachers perceived a disconnect between the district’s expectations of them and the allegiance they feel to the students that they serve.

New York State and District Rollout of Special Education Rules and Regulations

The third sub-theme under the topic of collaboration and communication was New York State’s rollout of the new special education rules and regulations. During both the focus groups and individual interviews, the researcher asked the participants about their views of the special education policies regarding the classification of students, and how their instructional practices have changed because of the new regulations within their individual classrooms. Most participants appeared to be frustrated and voiced concern over the policies. Participants in both groups discussed the lack of resources that the state provided to them regarding the policies they handed down.

Most of the experienced teachers expressed frustration over the way the state handled the rollout of the policies. They highlighted a lack of accompanying documentation to help them to understand the new policies. Frances began the discussion by pinpointing the amount of time and dedication needed to conduct these classifications with fidelity, saying, “The state needs to revise their practices. They need a different method, and a more understandable journey through the classification process.” Rich agreed that there was confusion associated with the policies, and stated that New York State needs to clearly define what they want the teachers and districts to do in line with both IDEA and NCLB:

Regarding the policies and procedures, they need to give teachers a pathway to follow with examples of all the possible outcomes in the appropriate time frames. That way, teachers can plan for the possibilities and different scenarios that could take place within the classification assessments.

Frances echoed the same concerns regarding the policies:

I believe that if New York State gave us an exemplar of the rules and stages to the classification of special education students it would benefit help us. Having examples of where the placement assessments can lead with options that are easily enacted by teachers it would take some of the pressure and stress from the whole process.

Elizabeth shared her own frustration on the lack of documentation that the state provided: “The state could give some samples as to the way that the proper classes and procedures could be completed to ensure that all students are in the appropriate settings to help them achieve their academic goals.” Most experienced teachers homed in on the lack of documentation and assessment exemplars that have been released by the state. They also shared frustration in not being able to properly plan their lessons to meet the needs of all their students.

Most of the less experienced teachers also expressed frustration amid the processes of classifying students into appropriate settings. Frances focused on the lack of guidance provided to help aid the teachers with their difficult work:

One frustration is the fact that there is not a set of exemplars to help the teachers. There should be something that takes the pressure off the teachers and allows them to complete the process with ease. There are so many factors that come into

play when making decisions on a student's future, and to eliminate the biases of the teachers, there should be a larger set of guidance documents. Having something to guide them would be appreciated by us all.

Anthony touched on the information needed to make decisions on assessments and classifications, and how it slows down his ability to plan:

It would be best for the teachers and the students if there were clearer documents that helped the teachers to make important decisions on the futures of their students. This would allow us to more effectively plan on how to match the student outcomes with teacher expectations to satisfy the protocols.

Halie shared the concern about the lack of direction provided for the teachers who are completing the work daily, saying "I think it would be nice if there was someone within the state tried to remember the students they are serving and the teachers who are doing the work needed to help the students." Anne shared her frustration with the ever-changing procedures and policies:

Then there is the idea that the state did not provide much guidance to begin with, and then is constantly shifting their ideas to suit the whims of different administrations. It just always seems like if they came to the teachers for guidance there would be. More tenable solution.

Most of the less experienced teachers also focused on the lack of documentation and policy guidance rolled out by the state. They expressed how the policies and paperwork involved in the process severely hindered their ability to plan and develop instructional practices to help the students develop and maintain necessary skills.

During the content analysis of IDEA and NCLB regulations, and the policies delivered from New York State as well as the district, the collected data provided support to most of the teachers' perceptions towards the New York State policies on special education classifications. While there was accompanying documentation that originally came out with the release of IDEA and NCLB, the more recent changes have had no accompanying documentation. Clark discussed the lack of documents that New York State has provided to teachers:

Teachers do not have the things that they need, like documents that will help them to be able to classify students in the appropriate settings, in a painless manner.

The state needs to get better at helping the students who are assessed according to their standards be more successful.

The state also failed to provide sufficient information . The policies state, "that districts should plan how they will continue to meet the requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and should be informed by the most recent guidance." The educator's guide for the policies according to the U.S. Department of Education contained limited information to help teachers. Clark discussed the lack of guidance to support teachers:

The problem with the classification parameters goes back to the support of the teachers. There is a lack of guidance, which results in the teachers working to create effective instruction while also having to spend extra time looking for answers and patterns, and guidance as to how to provide help to the students who need it.

Clark continued to talk about the guidance provided to the district from the state and compared it to the regulations of IDEA and NCLB:

There are many comparisons between the guidance provided by New York State and the district's protocols that govern, which I think is part of the problem for many of the teachers and has left a bad taste in their mouths. I think overall the state just needs to listen more to the teachers, and what they need to be successful.

An analysis of the district meeting agendas and professional development agendas for the last 18 months showed that the schools were kept informed of all the guidance and the changes to the policies as they were released. The analysis of the collected data—including focus group interviews, individual interviews, and content analysis—revealed that the special education and general education teachers as well as the administrator all perceived the rollout of the policies pertaining to the classification of special education students and accompanying assessments to be a hinderance to their ability to effectively plan and implement the curriculum. They ultimately felt that this a negative effect to the students they were serving.

Theme 3: Professional Development

A third theme that presented itself during the analysis of collected data was professional development. All of the participants shared their views on the professional development support they received regarding the classification of special education students. Within the theme of professional development and resources, two sub-themes emerged from the collected data: professional development received and additional professional development wanted. Together, these two sub-themes encompass the

teachers' perceptions towards the professional development and resources available related to the classification of special education students.

Professional Development Received

The first sub-theme drawn from the collected data regarding professional development and resources was the professional development received by the participants regarding the policies and procedures for classifying special education students as well as the related assessments. The researcher asked participants across both focus groups and individual interviewed about their views on the professional development and resources that they have received and looked for in order to help them to make unbiased classifications of special education students. Most participants saw a disconnect between the professional development and resources they received from the district and the type of professional development that they felt would be beneficial.

Most of the experienced teachers shared the professional development support that they received regarding the classification of special education students generally did not go beyond the district level. It was broad-based and did not often align with their expectations. It focused on technology and guidelines, and had very little to do with the factors that they felt would help, like looking into their own biases and perceptions. This led some of the teachers to seek out professional development on their own time. Anne stated, "We are told what is expected of us, but very little help with the things that we feel are important are offered." Rich added, "My administrators provided me with professional development, but often they were broad-based on basic skills." Kayla mentioned the resources provided to her by the district: "All the materials given to us by the district are helpful, but they are very basic in how they help us meet our goals."

Mary spoke about outside professional development: “We have been seeking additional outside professional development and collaborating with fellow teachers. I attended a professional development opportunity that spoke briefly about the ways that teachers can keep their personal biases out of the classifications they make.” Melissa added,

What is interesting is I found that the information that was given to me from our professional development sessions was not enough to make me feel at ease, which is why I searched out additional professional development on my own time.

Darren also discussed looking for additional professional development: “I am taking a class right now on how to leave your individual opinions behind when teaching students.”

Mary said:

I am lucky that my administration puts such a priority on participating in professional development, so I do not have to seek out ways to help myself improve my professional craft, it’s been a priority by my principal to help prepare us.

Most of the experienced teachers felt that the professional development they received from the district helped prepare them to classify students.

Most of the less experienced teachers shared that most of the professional development they received on overcoming their personal opinions and biases came from the district and included a focus on culturally sensitive instruction, classifying special education students, and LRE. Some less experienced teachers searched for more outside professional development. Elizabeth started the conversation:

I do think that we are lucky to have an administration that prioritizes professional development. There is an awareness of the needs of the staff, and a real purpose to deliver it. Because that is not the case for some of our colleagues across the district.

Anne added: “It has been good to be in a school where the staff of teachers is actively trying to help themselves meet the expectations of the classification process.”

Frances agreed and was keen on professional development related to special education classification: “To get help with understanding the process we are asked to meet quarterly and express our concerns about how to classify students with fidelity.”

Elizabeth also added, “Most professional development sessions are started with a modeling of the topic, and then we are asked to re-enact that process as practice, and not centered on us reading and consuming data from documents.” Anthony shared some information on the various professional development opportunities he has tried to expose himself to, saying, “I have looked for different professional development opportunities on a variety of topics.” Mary talked about the professional development that she has attended:

I have been attending professional development with the other teachers in my school. We have had several sessions on culturally responsive education, and implicit biases in a few different sessions. We have also spent time within our school working together to set goals for our students and how we can help them achieve them.

Most of the less experienced teachers felt that the professional development and resources they received from the district helped to prepare them to classify special education students.

During the content analysis of the district meeting agendas and professional development across the prior 18 months, the collected data showed that the district provided a lot of professional development on the topic of culturally responsive education. The district had several professional developers come and work with the schools on conference days to help them determine how to properly classify students. All the district's meeting agendas from the prior 18 months included discussions on professional development geared towards getting the entire staff on the same page when talking about students and their classifications. The content analysis also highlighted that the professional development was positioned to help the teachers, regardless of their experience with the process. Clark talked about the professional development the district offered him:

We also attended several professional development sessions on how to support the teachers in their classifications of the students in their classes. There were sessions on ways to ensure that the classification amounts matched the referral numbers, and these seemed to contradict the sessions that the teachers were attending, it made it seem more like there were expectations that the district was trying to meet.

Clark also mentioned how his job has changed as a result of the new classification process protocols:

My job has changed greatly, and it is providing more professional development, providing clearer direction of the updates coming from the state as well as constantly communicating and creating a collaborative culture within our school.

The content analysis exposed that there was adequate professional development within the district to help prepare the teachers as well as the administrators to classify special education students with fidelity and without involving their own personal biases. However, the analysis of the collected data—including focus group interviews, individual interviews, and a content analysis—revealed that special education teachers, general education teachers, and an administrator felt there was no alignment between the professional development and resources offered within the district for classifying special education students properly as compared to the professional development and resources that the state offered.

Additional Professional Development Opportunities

The second sub-theme that emerged from the collected data regarding professional development was additional professional development opportunities wanted by the participants to help with the classification process of special education students. The researcher asked participants within both focus groups and the individual interviews about their views on additional professional development that they may want in order to help them better perform their jobs. Most of the participants saw a large difference in the professional development that the district offered and the professional development that outside organizations provided.

Most of the experienced teachers discussed additional professional development opportunities they would want, focusing on what the building, district, and state could do

to help them classify special education students in an environment that is free of personal assumptions, biases, or judgements. Anne discussed wanting more time for collaboration:

If we are going to sit in these professional development sessions, then at least we should be able to bounce our ideas or findings off of our fellow teachers, with all the information thrown at us, and all the decisions that we are forced to make on a daily basis, knowing that we could share our opinions, our ideas, or even our fears in a learning community of our peers would be great.

Frances shared that she feels that the district needs to be, “more aware of what we actually have to do.” Elizabeth added, “I would like to be validated for the difficulties that we face.” Most experienced teachers admitted to feeling that the district could do more to help prepare the teachers for the challenges they will face when having to classify special education students.

Most of the less experienced teachers discussed additional professional development opportunities that they would like to see, particularly some with a real focus on how to help the teachers succeed in this ever-changing process. Mary discussed her experience at the meetings that newer teachers are expected to attend, saying, “I think there could be more done than what they are currently doing. It seemed like a waste of a valuable few hours to me, hours I could have used to better my practice.” Rich added,

They could have taken that time to talk to us about how to create quality relationships with our colleagues, with the parents of the students, even the administration, making sure to help us to be more collaborative. Even ways to ask for help with a struggling student.

Khloe agreed:

I think that our meeting time could be used more efficiently. They are often on broad topics that are never really inter-connected. It's a way to get all the new teachers in the same room, but not a big help with the idea of sharing experiences, which are often quite different.

Halie added:

I think that we would benefit from more professional development that focuses on the current realities of teaching. There is so much that I feel unprepared for, so much I do not yet know or understand. Factor in all the different learners in the school, from a variety of different backgrounds and you are perpetuating the existence of a teacher's personal bias.

Victoria spoke out about the idea of creating common periods where teachers can meet:

If we focused on allowing teachers who teach the same grade or subject to have periods where they can share ideas, discuss trends, and collaboratively plan together, there would be a group of people trying to accomplish the same things together.

Elizabeth also introduced the idea of establishing times for the members of the assessment teams to meet and discuss the students who are ready to be classified: "If the special education and general education teachers were able to sit and discuss students, classroom strategies, and plans to help students, it would be very helpful."

Clark was also in favor of the idea of introducing teacher collaboration periods:

I would do my best to create chunks of time where teachers can work together. I think teacher to teacher collaboration is the best idea because they are

experiencing similar issues. The problem is consistently building that time into a schedule.

Clark spoke further on the things he would like to provide to his teachers in the future:

One idea I had going forward is that I would like have meetings where parents and teachers could meet regularly to discuss ways to help the students. There simply isn't enough time to make the parents an active participant in the discussions about their child. It is usually only when a decision on placement has been made that the parents became involved in the process, and I would like to change that.

Most of the less experienced teachers expressed that the district could provide more professional development to help the teachers with their daily requirements. The analysis of the collected data—including focus group interviews, individual interviews, and content analysis—revealed that special education teachers, general education teachers, and the administrator wanted more professional development, more time to collaborate, and more time to share ideas in a meaningful way.

Conclusion

The first research question in this study centered on how the implicit biases and perceptions of special education and general education teachers influenced the classification and treatment of special education students. In analyzing the data, the researcher found that the classification process underwent a change from both New York State and the district which frustrated the teachers. As a result of this conscience shift, the teachers went through multicultural sensitivity training under the guise of fixing the perceived issues in the classification process. However, most of the teachers felt that this

professional development was not as helpful as it could have been and wasted instructional time. Many of the teachers also felt that the classification process and the accompanying assessments put additional pressure on both the students and themselves. A common theme emerged that showed that students were losing basic classroom skills as a result of these procedures. The participants also agreed that the district's policies and professional development opportunities were helpful, but that there was also a disconnect between the professional development that the schools they worked in provided and the various types of professional development that they sought out for themselves.

The second research question in this study centered on the levels of race disproportionality that exist in special education. In analyzing the data, the researcher found that while the teachers did indeed possess personal biases regarding various cultures, they all sought out opportunities through either professional development or collaboration with other teachers to ensure that their personal biases did not affect the classification process. The teachers also perceived a change in the ways that the district was handling the importance of classifying special education students. They felt that the accompanying documentation they received on the topic was lacking and failed to provide concrete guidelines to follow. A common theme emerged related to the fact that the teachers' classroom instruction practices changed significantly due to the changes that the state and district were implementing. The teachers also felt that as a result of the professional development, there was a disconnect between what they needed versus what the state or district provided.

The third research question in this study focused on the extent to which the culture of a school community helped to affect levels of disproportionality in schools. In

analyzing the data, the researcher found that the teachers' and the administrators' perception towards the classification process were in line with the goals of the schools that they worked in. The teachers and the administrator felt that the communication and the collaboration of the teachers within their departments or schools helped ensure that racial disproportionality was not a factor in the classification of special education students they were working with. The administrator was very forward thinking in his desire to get the teachers to collaborate and support each other through the challenges of the classification process. The teachers and the administrator agreed that teacher collaboration is essential.

CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION

This study was a singular case study of special education and general education teachers in a suburban New York school district. This study explored teachers' perceptions and implicit biases regarding racial disproportionality within the special education classification process. Three research questions guided this study. The first question asked about the ways that the implicit biases and perceptions of special education and general education teachers can influence the classification and treatment of special education students. The second question inquired as to what levels of race disproportionality exist in special education. The third question examined the extent to which the culture of a school community helps to affect levels of disproportionality in schools.

The data that the researcher analyzed for this study included focus groups, one-on-one interviews, a content analysis of IDEA and NCLB regulations, district protocols regarding classifications, district meeting agendas, and professional development session documents. Analysis of the collected data revealed three key issues that the groups of experienced and less-experienced teachers, the administrator, and a content analysis all touched on. First, the classification process of special education students seemed to negatively impact teachers' perception of teaching and methodology. This is because they had to shift from the traditional classification methods outlined in both IDEA and NCLB to a new culturally responsive method in which they must attempt to leave their biases and the perceptions out of the process. Second, a disconnect in communication between teachers, administrators, New York State, and the district has caused teachers to become disengaged and frustrated with the implementation of the policies associated with the

classification of special education students. As a result, they have had to carve out professional development opportunities themselves and work collaboratively with their colleagues to meet the demands of their jobs. This chapter will include further discussions of the findings from the collected and analyzed data, including an exploration of each of the three research questions and connections between the findings and the existing literature that was reviewed in Chapter 2.

Theoretical Framework Revisited

Luttenberg et al. (2013) argued that sensemaking is an interaction between teachers' perceptions of the situational demands and their personal frames of reference. This was key to the current study because the teachers' perceptions of their roles and responsibilities within the classification process of special education students did not align with the actual processes that they needed to perform. The teachers felt that they needed greater support from their organization. The disconnect stemmed from the organization failing to make sense of the processes required to meet the needs of the teachers. The school system as a whole needs to make a greater effort to provide teachers with professional development that can aid their sensemaking abilities.

Interpretation of the Findings

Research Question #1

The first research question in this study investigated how the implicit biases and perceptions of special education and general education teachers influence the classification and treatment of special education students. In analyzing the data, the researcher found that the classification of special education students resulted in fundamental shifts in the teaching and methodology within the teachers' classrooms. The

results also revealed a disconnect amongst the professional development, resources, and supports that the buildings, district, and New York State offered. Coburn (2001, 2005) focused especially on how teachers' networks or contacts shape their reactions to policy stimuli. The way that teachers view the teaching and methodology outlined within these policy changes will determine the success of the classification process in general.

The participants expressed their anger and frustration that the classification process—along with the withholding of personal biases—resulted in several factors that have had a negative factor on their teaching. The analysis of the data collected from the focus groups and interviews revealed two consequences in particular. The first consequence was the fact that the teachers felt a loss of valuable instruction time. The second consequence was that the teachers felt that the classification process started to drive their instruction. Teachers across both focus groups and the individual interviews focused on the fact that they lost teaching time as a result of the classification process and that this was a detriment to both the teachers and the students. Most of the teachers also expressed frustration because the lost instructional time would have included introducing basic skills necessary to a student's development and success. Teachers who wish to transform public education and policy with regards to equity and to close the racial/ethnic achievement gap must first understand how past their own past experiences impact sensemaking of racial inequities present within their schools and districts. "As the organizational sensemaking process is shaped by the sensemaking efforts of the organization's members, strategic change is possible only if the stakeholders understand and accept that is, make sense—of the new cognitive orientations of the organization" (Gioia et al., 1994).

The classification of special education students has impacted special education and general education teachers' perceptions of racial disproportionality. This is in part because current professional development opportunities are increasingly geared towards more culturally diverse opportunities to avoid personal biases becoming an impediment to teachers' instructional practices. Thorius and Maxcy (2010) and Castro-Villarreal et al. (2018) have ascertained that the RTI model has had no effect on disproportionality, primarily due to the cultural and systemic biases in the classroom that start and end with the special education teacher. The authors found that because students are becoming increasingly diverse and the teachers and administrators within the same systems are not, the gap and cultural biases continue to grow wider (Castro-Villarreal et.al., 2018). Participants in the current study shared that they perceived a shift in the policies that reduced their ability to understand and make sense of the way that the organizations they worked within made decisions. Sensemaking refers to a conceptual awareness of a complex social process through which individuals interpret their personal thoughts in order to orient themselves within their world (Weick, 1995).

Teachers across both groups were also keenly aware of risk factors (such as personal biases the teachers might have) that could impact the classification process. Achievement gaps could develop because of the risk factor. It has been reported that larger risk ratios might be expected after adjusting for achievement gaps and other potential explanatory factors. These districts might be potential candidates for civil rights monitoring by the U.S. Department of Education, especially if larger-than-expected risk ratios indicating over representation persist across several years. Doing so would be consistent with the emphasis on disproportionality within federal regulations (Harper,

2017). The teachers discussed the disconnect that they felt within the district and their schools regarding the amount of time they had to collaborate with their colleagues. Teachers spoke of the cultural sensitivity training they went through that they felt aligned with the desired learning outcomes within the district. In order to effectively implement educational reform, an investment in professional capital—through which teachers receive high-quality continuous professional development—is needed (Hargraves & Fullan, 2012).

Research Question #2

The second research question in this study centered on the levels of race disproportionality that exist in special education. In analyzing the data, the researcher found that there were indeed differences between the perceptions and implicit biases of special education and general education teachers' regarding the classification of special education students. However, teachers across experience, tenure status, and preparation level shared their perceptions surrounding a disconnect between the professional development they received from the schools and the professional development they received from their district. Historically, minority students have been disproportionately identified as requiring special education services (Friend, 2005). The disproportionate identification rates in special education by race was a concern long before the 1997 amendments to the IDEA that first required states to address disproportionality. Earlier studies consistently showed that Black students in particular were often identified as having disabilities at higher rates than White students (Chinn & Hughes, 1987; Coutinho & Oswald, 2000; Dunn, 1968; National Research Council, 1982).

Teachers across experience, tenure status, and preparation level also all had different frustration levels regarding the classification of special education students. The experienced teachers shared that they were frustrated with the classification process of special education students because of the difficulty they have had with special education rules in the past. Existing literature that states that the implicit biases of teachers are also a frustrating element of the process supports this. Castro-Villarreal et al. (2018) explored data drawn from various studies covering things like implicit biases of teachers (Martin, 2014). In considering the barriers to meeting the needs of culturally diverse learners and successful strategies for reaching all kinds of learners, it is clear that the teacher is the main proponent for a student's success. The less experienced teachers were much more open to the fact that a teacher's personal biases impact the classification of special education students because culturally responsive education training has been prevalent since they started teaching. They also mentioned that their instruction methods and styles have not changed much with the new policies. Existing research literature supports the idea that with due diligence, federal policy has been established to ensure that children referred to special education receive appropriate help throughout their educational process (Bleak et al., 2019; Castro-Villarreal et al., 2015; Hutchinson, 2018; Martin, 2014). The experienced teachers mostly focused on how the changes highlight the ways that special education students are disproportionately represented and focus on the ways to correct the system to improve student achievement but do not directly address the teacher's implicit biases and deficit thinking in the processes (Beurkens, 2016; García-Carrión et al., 2018).

Teachers across experience, tenure status, and preparation level shared their disappointment with the classification process of special education students. Teachers focused on the impact that they can have on the students they must classify, and what their own opinions can do to change the process. Both the experienced teachers and the less experienced teachers focused on the amount of time they spent planning lessons. Teachers were also frustrated by the limited amount of information available regarding racial disproportionality within the classification process and how the professional development that they received did not help fill in the gaps. Most studies examining the ways that special education students are disproportionately represented do not directly consider the teachers' implicit biases and deficit thinking in the processes but mostly focus on the ways to correct the system as a whole in order to improve student achievement (Beurkens, 2016; García-Carrión et al., 2018). The existing research literature investigating teachers' points of view, perceptions, and ideals regarding their students supports these findings. Perhaps teachers can develop tools to help stop the misplacement of students into special education settings that do not benefit their educational goals.

Teachers across age, experience, and tenure status also focused on the disconnect between the teacher training they receive in the teacher preparation programs and the professional development they receive from their building, district, or even New York State. Teachers within both groups discussed the preparatory classes they take to be a teacher, and how they do not always adequately prepare them to teach students—especially special education students who they have never dealt with in the past. Both groups also expressed their frustration with the lack of connectivity between their

preparation programs and the supports that were available to them from the district. The participants also spoke on the disconnect between the realities of the job and their education. Some even expressed how they felt that the administrators in their building and their district did not understand the difficulty they were experiencing with classifying special education students. Participants expressed the desire for more time to collaborate with their colleagues or focus on planning as opposed to going through professional development related to technology uses or new academic programs that have a large learning curve and need to be implemented across several sessions. This finding is supported by the existing research literature that states that the administrators should first work to ensure that the teachers receive adequate and professional training, support, and time in order to ensure they are able to enhance the quality education and maintenance of the students with disabilities (Mader, 2017). Also, in the case of the teachers and the entire school personnel, they are equipped with the skills and strategies needed to provide appropriate support and instruction to the special students, and the ability to provide distinguished instruction to fit each student's unique style of learning (Anderson, 2018).

Research Question #3

The third research question in the study examined the extent to which the culture of a school community affects the levels of disproportionality within the school. Taking into account the opinions of the one administrator participant, the content analysis of documentation from IDEA and NCLB, the meeting agendas from the district, and the professional development documentation, the researcher was able form a baseline from which to compare with the perceptions of the twelve special education and general education teachers in this study. In analyzing the data, the researcher found that the

administrators and teachers felt there was a greater need for collaboration among teachers; they wanted more time to work together to plan, create lessons, help each other meet deadlines, and make important decisions about the classification of special education students. In the case of the teachers and the entire school personnel, they are equipped with skills and strategies that help them provide special support and instruction to the special students, and also have the ability to provide distinguished instruction driven towards every student's unique style of learning (Anderson, 2018).

Teachers from both groups as well as the administrator believed that the inclusivity of all students was the district's paramount goal regarding the classification process of special education students. The culture of inclusivity drives the classification process, and that makes it very difficult to plan and implement all necessary assessments. The teachers and the administrator agreed that the process would be improved if they received more guidance on the level of inclusivity desired and had more time to focus on finding the correct setting to ensure they can provide high quality instruction. Special education students should be able to access the same resources for learning as other students and should be encouraged to interact socially with other students. According to Walsh (2017), inclusion of special students in the school community is a requirement that the U.S. government established under the IDEA.

Teachers within both groups and the administrator felt that there was a struggle between teaching content and basic skills in the classroom. Teachers expressed that the curriculum did not allow them ample time to teach both the content and the skills. Teachers also felt at odds with the expectations to create and deliver instruction while preparing students for an inclusive education. The district has a philosophy of promoting

inclusivity, where all students are in a setting within which they can be successful. The administrator also shared that the district was increasingly pushing the theme of inclusivity. While it is what is best for the students, it could cause challenges for the teachers in the classroom when they must decide between delivering content-rich material or balancing the expectations for their instruction developed by the district, all while allowing the students to be successful. This is supported by the research literature that states that inclusion education affects various groups, including the students themselves, parents, administrators, and teachers. Walsh (2017) goes on to state that many learning institutions—especially the newly established ones—have shown significant improvement in terms of embracing inclusion education and thus have started integrating the special students in the regular academic curricula and programs full-time.

Teachers in both groups as well as the administrator spoke about the importance of teacher collaboration, including planning time during which they can support their colleagues through the challenges of classifying special education students. The teachers highlighted all the time that they had gained to meet with teachers, plan lessons, and complete necessary paperwork involved in the classification process. The inclusion of the teachers in a learning community can help them develop an environment of inclusion for the students that suit their learning needs and styles. Mader (2017) stated that on-the-job training is necessary to enhance the teachers' individual skills necessary to support the achievement of all students' needs—especially for teachers that might have received their professional training years ago or who did not receive any special education training at all. This is supported by the current research literature that states that one way in which the students thrive is through facing challenges within the school environment, including

academic competition with the other children (Lawrence, 2018). The administrator also added that he would have like to increase the planning and preparation time for his teachers to ensure that the school's culture and vision are in line with the student's needs.

Relationship Between Findings and Prior Research

Special Education Teaching and Methodology

The first finding from this study was that the classification of special education students and the push towards a more culturally responsive education has highlighted the severe changes resulting from the passage of educational policies and laws like IDEA and NCLB. Furthermore, these changes have impacted teachers' perceptions and personal biases towards the existence of racial disproportionality within special education classifications. This finding aligned with the existing research by showing that there is a direct correlation between the classification process and the personal feelings and biases of the teachers that are responsible for classifying these students. Historically, minority students have been disproportionately identified as requiring special education services (Friend, 2005). Many of the teachers felt that the referral process was to blame for the biases of the teachers being brought to the center of the debate, as it is these biases that create a disproportionality. This disproportionality is symptomatic of biased referral procedures and is evidence of inequity in public education (Anderson, 2018). This study also aligned with current research literature that suggests that the implicit biases of teachers could create a disproportionate representation within special education classes based on race or other factors. In late December 2016, the U.S. Department of Education issued final rules to prompt states to proactively address racial and ethnic disparities in the identification, placement, and discipline of children with disabilities. That same

month, they released comprehensive legal guidance describing schools' obligations not to discriminate on the basis of race, color, or national origin in the administration of special education (Harper, 2017). The teachers in this study were therefore not opposed to the push for culturally responsive education, but rather wished the new policies and regulations provided them more help with the classification process instead of placing a spotlight on them and their practices.

Some believe that placing students with others at their level is in the best interest of all. Contrarily, some believe that including students who are atypical learners in the general classroom is the best option overall (Fitzell, 2018). Past researchers have concluded that general education classes are not always adequate to meet the needs of diverse learners. In his qualitative study on inclusion practices, Saslow (1999) explained that he found inclusion to be a difficult field to navigate. This study supports the existing research literature that suggests that students with disabilities have better outcomes when educated in inclusive settings. However, studies centering on the association between setting and outcomes do not account for important differences between the students with disabilities placed in inclusive classrooms and those who are taught in special education settings (Gilmour, 2018).

Collaboration and Communication

The second finding from this study was a disconnection in the communication between teachers, administrators, the district, and New York State's federal rules and regulations. This disconnect has been a catalyst for the teachers' frustrations and has therefore forced them to rely on collaboration with their colleagues for the much-needed assistance and support regarding the classification of special education students. Teachers

within both focus groups felt that they had been failed by the system because they received insufficient guidance or resources to help them to complete the steps required to classify special education students. The fact that the teachers feel that it is difficult to properly classify special education students and that the administrator feels that there are learning difficulties their students have that they are unable to help combat without working collaboratively with their colleagues aligns with the current existing research literature. The provision of education in a school setting enables learners to interact and learn from each other's actions and behaviors.

The teachers also noted that they felt that the district and the school they work in should acknowledge that just like students, teachers work well collaboratively, and often learn best from one another. The teachers expressed that the professional development they received within their buildings—including resources and supports from their administrators and colleagues—all involved positive interactions. This was not the case for the assistance they received while attempting to understand the regulations associated with IDEA, NCLB and New York State. They also shared that through collaboration, they were most effectively able to complete all the aspects of their jobs. This finding is supported by the current educational research that states that one way in which the students achieve is through overcoming challenges that they face in the environment, including academic competition with the other children (Lawrence, 2018). There are also several reasons why collaboration works best for the benefit of all the stakeholders. Prior researchers have supported this by stating that fostering the collaborative process among special educators, general educators, and related service personnel requires recognizing

and understanding several key influences to the process, including a positive attitude (Wiggins & Damore, 2009).

Due to the communication breakdown between the district, building administrators, and the teachers, the participants revealed how much they relied on the collaboration with their colleagues for additional support. Teachers within both groups shared how collaboration with their colleagues was completely essential for the success of the classification of special education students. Teachers shared that they would use the collaborative time with their colleagues to complete assessment paperwork, create lessons to benefit all learners, and analyze student data. This finding is supported by current research literature that states that professional collaboration is a beneficial tool for helping teachers and other professionals serve students with disabilities and is the best practice in special education (Barnes & Turner, 2001; Brownell et al., 2006; Cross et al., 2004; Kurjan, 2000; Pena & Quinn, 2003; Ritzman et al., 2006). This study supports the existing research literature that states that because of the disconnect in communication between teachers, administrators, and the district, teachers feel frustrated with the classification of special education students.

Professional Development and Resources

The third major finding from this study was that teachers' perceptions and implicit biases can impact the classification of special education students. The teachers voiced a need for increased opportunities for collaboration with one another within an array of professional development sessions. Teachers in both groups echoed the idea that collaboration is the main lifeline they feel would help them complete the tasks. The teachers also felt that although professional development opportunities were beneficial,

they were not as helpful as collaboration with colleagues. They explained that the district did not always offer the professional development they needed, so teachers had to obtain it on their own. This acknowledgement is supported by the current research literature which suggests that when professionals from various disciplines work together and collaborate, students with special needs see increased long-term success (Banotai, 2006; as cited in Bauer et al., 2012).

The results of this study support the existing research literature that shows that teachers feel that the creation of collaborative networks is essential, especially for those working with the classification of special education students. Coburn (2001, 2005) focused on how teachers' networks or contacts shape their reactions to policy stimuli. In education, ongoing sensemaking tends to be related to developing rich and thorough interpretations of a single initiative, often interpretations that originate from important actors in the school's or district's environment (Coburn, 2001; Spillane et al., 2002a).

Through IDEA and NCLB, policy makers have attempted to transform the teaching and methodology associated with the classification of special education students. This transformation aligns with what Weick (1993, 1995) would refer to as an intense crisis situation. Under these policies, the aim is that all students receive a free and appropriate education, including those who fall under the umbrella of special education. The first U.S. federal legislative mandate for students with disabilities began in 1975 with the passage of P.L. 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (Weintraub & Kovshi, 2004). For the first time, American schools were required to provide a free and appropriate public education to children with special needs (Driesbach et al., 2001). In addition to the legal mandates of P.L. 94-142, Cootes (2007) noted that the best practice

expectation underscored the need for collaboration while Wientraub and Kovshi (2004) noted that P.L. 94-142 required special educators and related service providers to work together in the implementation of each American student's IEP.

Limitations of the Study

The small sample size of a qualitative singular case study can limit the validity of the researcher's findings. The absence of systematic procedures for case study research is something that Yin (2009) sees as the greatest concern due to a relative absence of methodological guidelines. On the other hand, like single experiments, single case studies are generalizable to theoretical propositions rather than to populations (Yin, 2018).

Another limitation of this study is the fact that the researcher chose the sample of participants through purposeful and deliberate sampling. All of the participants worked within the same district. However, the researcher does not work in the chosen district, so as the facilitator of the focus groups and the individual interviews, the researcher had no personal bias or influence on the participant's responses. Even so, the participants were all made aware that there would be no penalties or disciplinary action taken as a reaction to their responses or their willingness to participate in the study.

A third limitation to this study was that all the focus groups and interviews took place virtually because of the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the researcher trusts that the responses would have been the same if the interviews were conducted in person.

Implications for Future Research

Future studies that explore the topic of teachers' perceptions and implicit biases of racial disproportionality within special education classifications could repeat both the

methodology and protocols from this study with teachers and administrators in different districts and settings to add to the body of research on the topic. As the findings of this study were limited to special education and general education teachers' perceptions, it would be beneficial for a future researcher to investigate different elements of the special education classification process from the perceptions of different stakeholders in the classification process. If the results of the current study were considered alongside additional research from various stakeholders' points of view, there would be a fuller picture of the classification process overall.

Another possibility for future research would be to expand the methodology of this study to include a survey to quantitatively measure the special education and general education teachers' perceptions and implicit biases of racial disproportionality within special education classifications. Furthermore, a researcher could use of a mixed methods study to further expand the sample of teachers, test the validity of the research, and try to expand upon it.

One last suggestion is to attain more information about the teachers themselves. This type of study could include an investigation about where their biases and personal opinions could have originated, such as their own upbringing or even their college preparation classes. Since most teachers felt as though they did not hold any personal beliefs or implicit biases, looking into their own upbringing as well as their education throughout childhood and as an adult could shed an interesting light onto their beliefs.

Implications for Future Practice

The NCLB Act of 2001 was a U.S. Act of Congress that reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act; it included Title I provision applying to

disadvantaged students. It supported standards-based education reform based on the premise that setting high standards and establishing measurable goals could improve individual outcomes in education. The enactment of this policy (as well as IDEA before it) started a trend of educational reform that was meant to lead to inclusive education for all. Due to the policies in place and the classification process of special education students, teachers have experienced frustration that could impact the proper classifications of these students and affect the teachers' instructional practices. The present study highlighted three themes associated with teachers' perceptions and implicit biases surrounding racial disproportionality within special education classifications. These themes are special education teaching and methodology, collaboration and communication, and professional development and resources. Table 4 includes suggestions on ways that each stakeholder group could make improvements regarding the classification of special education students without bias.

Table 5

Suggestions for Improvement in Classifications of Special Education Students

Stakeholders	Suggestions
School District	<p>Introduce and implement high quality professional development.</p> <p>Create a culture that fosters collaboration and communication of goals and policies.</p> <p>Focus more on student learning rather than data driven assessments.</p>
School Buildings	<p>Provide high quality professional developments that meets the teacher's needs.</p> <p>Create weekly/monthly common planning and collaboration time for teachers.</p> <p>Include the teachers and other stakeholders in the process of selecting professional development.</p> <p>Work with teachers and staff to create professional learning goals for themselves.</p>
Teachers	<p>Attend professional development opportunities and collaborate with colleagues on what was learned in these sessions.</p> <p>Collaborate with fellow teachers and other key members of the school community to create professional learning communities.</p> <p>Create a safe and comfortable learning environment for students within the classroom where they are included and part of the school community.</p>

The first theme that the findings of this study highlighted is special education teaching and methodology. First, the teachers who participated in the study all agreed that the instructional practice of teachers throughout the classification process is of paramount importance. When the district reviews the data on classifications, they need to consider

the values and beliefs of all the teachers, service providers, and stakeholders if they are considering plans to change the process. Gabel et al. (2004) recognized the growing emphasis on collaboration as an important strategy for educators asked to take on a wider range of responsibilities. Districts could establish collaborative environments by seeking out professional development that the teachers themselves choose and find helpful to them and their instructional practices.

Secondly, the teacher participants expressed a lack of resources to help them make decisions regarding classifications and placement of special education students. The teachers themselves are resources, and as such administrators should ask them what they need to help change the methods and procedures surrounding the classification system. The concept of having professionals from various disciplines working together and collaborating has been tied to the long-term success of students with special needs (Banotai, 2006; as cited in Bauer et al., 2012). Third, the teachers reported that they felt the district needs to take a more hands on approach to the provision of their professional development needs. They need to provide training and professional development that will help them align their instructional practices with the standards outlined in the policies and laws that govern special education. It would also be beneficial if the teacher preparation programs at colleges and universities were more aligned to the current standards and included more instruction on the policies and realities of the classification process. Not only do fully qualified special education teachers improve outcomes for students with disabilities, but research has shown that fully prepared special education teachers are more likely to remain in the field of education as compared to teachers prepared through fast-track routes (Feng & Sass, 2013; Miller et al., 1999).

The findings of this study exposed a second major theme: collaboration and communication. The teachers in this study relied greatly on collaboration with their colleagues for support and planning. The district needs to work to foster teacher collaboration and create its organization around it. Professional collaboration is a beneficial tool for helping teachers and other professionals serve students with disabilities and has been deemed as the best practice in special education (Barnes & Turner, 2001; Brownell et al., 2006; Cross et al., 2004; Kurjan, 2000; Pena & Quinn, 2003; Ritzman et al., 2006). Some things districts could add to benefit teachers are: (1) common preparation or planning periods for teachers; (2) district-wide planning time to allow all the special education teachers time to collaborate on the district's goals regarding special education classifications.

Additionally, teachers expressed a perceived disconnect between the supports they received and those they felt would benefit them. Therefore, all stakeholders need to be involved in the process of planning professional development sessions and activities. According to Carpenter et al. (1998), the way that team members interact with each other makes a difference in terms of the approach employed. The overall approach of the multidisciplinary model presumes that only those trained in the specific field are capable of assessing and serving the child in need of their expertise (Kritikos et al., 2012). Lastly, the teacher participants expressed their frustration with the way that the district singled out teachers for their personal opinions and biases that could impede the classification of special education students. Making assumptions about teachers instead of listening to their needs and providing professional development and collaboration opportunities that could help them complete their work is a costly mistake for all stakeholders.

The findings of this study exposed a third theme of professional development. The participants shared that most of the professional development they received was not beneficial for establishing a successful school culture that promotes effective teacher collaboration and opens the lines of communication between the schools and the district. Together the culture of a building, high quality professional development, and the level of collaboration create a culture of learning that benefits all the stakeholders involved. “To assure the collective store of knowledge, skill, and perspectives is tapped, every team member, including staff, students, and family members, assumes the role of teacher, learner, and implementer” (Rainforth & England, 1997, p. 91). For this to occur, teams needed to establish parity, mutual trust, and respect as well as open communication between all parties (Downing & Baily, 1990; Prelock et al., 1995). Rainforth and England (1997) noted that before collaboration can be successfully implemented, the process requires prospective team members to exchange knowledge and insight into each other’s professional storehouse of expertise. Using that perceived expertise will help special education teachers and general education teachers work collaboratively with their colleagues. Ritzman et al. (2006) stated that a key principle to effective collaboration was having “professionals within a school combine their expertise to create a multitude of options for students with special needs” (p. 221). Educational leaders need to work to create a culture where collaboration and communication are the foundation of a successful school that provides the highest quality professional development to its teachers.

The aforementioned implications for future practice bring forth several challenges for educational leaders, school districts, and educational organizations, such as: (1)

locating and financing high quality professional development for the teachers and other support staff; (2) obtaining the support of all the stakeholders within the district, including parents, administrators, and the board of education; (3) cooperation from the various unions in relegating time throughout the school year for professional development opportunities; (4) attempting to reduce the amount of personal opinions and biases to enter into the classification process of special education students through the reduction of stigma and negative attitudes towards the inclusion of special students; and, (5) the revision of teacher preparation programs in order to better equip future teachers to meet the ever-changing world of educational policies and environments. These challenges create many difficulties that educational leaders must combat in order to change the world of education. To efficiently select high quality professional development, leaders could allow teachers to be part of the selection process. Additionally, the professional development could relate to topics that will help give teachers the tools they need to ensure that they can meet the needs of their students without wasting valuable time. To emphasize that the classification of special education students should involve a collaborative effort of all stakeholders, the district can consider changing policies to limit the members of the classification committees. To gain the backing of all stakeholders, the district will also need to establish a collaborative environment that allows all members of the school community to have a voice in the process and feel as though all their opinions are valid and appreciated.

Conclusion

The findings in this study revealed that teachers' perceptions and implicit biases of racial disproportionality are present within special education classifications. As

suggested in the recommendations for future practice, these findings showcase a need for educational leaders to foster the development of a culture that is based on the principles of collaboration, communication, and professional development. The current teaching and education environment contains many individuals who have personal beliefs and biases, but who answered a call to educate in an environment of unsteady and constantly changing policies despite the frustration and stress levels that this causes. There has been a shift away from prior legislation and an attempt to change the world of special education from the outside. This shift has caused the providers of special education to become frustrated with the process, forcing them to rely on colleagues, become more collaborative, and seek out additional professional development that can reinforce the skills they need. The research literature on teachers' perceptions and implicit biases of racial disproportionality within special education classifications is currently quite limited. The existing literature on the special education classification process does not address teacher perceptions or implicit biases, but instead focuses on inclusion or an evaluation of teachers. Of the research studies that do look at certain elements of teachers' perceptions of special education classifications, most only consider the perceptions of the general education teachers. The addition of special education teachers' perceptions towards the classification process addresses the gap in the existing research literature.

Final Thoughts

Performing this study was very enlightening to this researcher. Speaking with fellow education professionals revealed relevant concerns and frustrations that a large majority of teachers in this age of education share. It exposed a commonality between both the leaders in education and the teachers themselves. The interview process exposed

the major themes of professional development and the need for collaboration. This discovery allowed the researcher to then reflect on the quality of these factors in their own instructional practices.

The research process has been valuable to the researcher in that it allowed for exposure to knowledge that may not have been otherwise imparted. It established a relationship between the organizations that make the policies and procedures for teachers to follow and the practical implementation of these policies that is effectively a broken relationship that is in desperate need of repair. The hope is that this study and others like it will be able to start a conversation that can begin to mend that broken relationship.

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APPENDIX A: LETTER OF CONSENT (SUPERINTENDENT)



Christopher J. Pelletieri
Sachem Union Free School District
51 School Street
Lake Ronkonkoma, New York, 11779

Dear Mr. Pelletieri,

I am currently a Doctoral student at St. John's University in Queens, New York. I am writing to request your support in conducting a research study that I believe will have an impact on Special Education classifications. As a special education teacher in an elementary school, it is my goal to ensure that every student who is classified is done so appropriately and without any biases. The current body of work indicates that there are biases present among the special education and general education teachers who are making decisions about the classification of students they serve. A gap in the research exists when examining current placements and the principle of racial disproportionality.

I will be investigating teacher's perceptions and implicit biases that exist among the teachers making classification decisions.

I am reaching out to you to request permission to conduct focus groups and individual interviews of elementary and middle school special education and general education teachers during the 2021-2022 academic school year. If permission is granted, you will be provided with a copy of the invitation to participate in the research study, which will be sent, electronically, to the special education and general education teachers in your school district. During the collection of the qualitative data during the focus groups and individual interviews, teachers will be given a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality. The results of this study will be shared with the Superintendent of Schools.

Copies of both the focus group questions and individual interview questions are attached if you would like to preview them.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this request. If you would like to grant permission, please email the approval to debra.daly16@stjohns.edu. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at (631)747-3419. Or my faculty sponsor, Dr. Anthony Annunziato, at (631)561-8619. For questions about rights of research participants, you may contact the University's Human Subjects Review Board, St. John's University, (718)990-2000. The results of this study will inform educational leadership of the relationship between teacher's perceptions and implicit biases toward special education classifications.

Respectfully,

Debra J. Daly

APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT (FOCUS GROUP)



Invitation and Consent to Participate in a Research Study (Focus Group)

Dear Participant:

You are being invited to participate in a research study to investigate special education and general education teacher's perception and implicit biases towards special education student classifications. This study will help to better inform educational leadership on the classifications of special education students and racial disproportionality.

I will be conducting this study as part of my doctoral dissertation for St. John's University, Department of Administration and Educational Leadership.

This portion of the research study will consist of a focus group lasting from 30-60 minutes. Audio recordings of the focus groups will be made so that the data can be transcribed and analyzed. You may review the audio recordings and request that all or any portion of the recordings be destroyed, that includes your participation. Pseudonyms will be used during transcription for all proper names to maintain confidentiality and anonymity.

All consent forms will be kept separate from the transcription data to ensure that the names and identities of all participants will not be known or linked to any information provided. Participation in this study is voluntary and at any point during the study you have the right to end your participation. All responses and feedback will be confidential and anonymous throughout the entire research study. This study has been approved by the Superintendent of Schools and the Institutional Review Board of St. John's University.

If you have any questions or concerns, please email me at debra.daly16@stjohns.edu, or call (631)747-3419. You may contact my faculty advisor, Dr. Anthony Annunziato at (631)561-8619. For questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University's Human Subjects Review Board, St. John's University, (718)990-2000.

Thank you! I truly appreciate your time and participation in this study!

Respectfully,

Debra J. Daly

Agreement to Participate

Yes, I agree to participate in the study described above.

Participant's Signature

Date

Researcher's Signature

Date

APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT (INTERVIEWS)



Invitation and Consent to Participate in a Research Study (Interviews)

Dear Participant:

You are being invited to participate in a research study to investigate teacher's perceptions and implicit biases regarding the classification of special education students and racial disproportionality. This study will help to better inform educational leadership on the classification process of special education students.

I will be conducting this study as part of my doctoral dissertation for St. John's University, Department of Administration and Instructional Leadership.

This portion of the research study will consist of individual phone interviews lasting from 30-60 minutes. Audio recordings of the phone interviews will be made so that the data can be transcribed and analyzed. You may review the audio recordings and request that all or any portion of the recordings be destroyed. All audio recordings and transcriptions of phone interviews will be kept secured on password protected drive and will be destroyed at the conclusion of the study. Pseudonyms will be used during transcriptions for all proper names to maintain confidentiality and anonymity.

All consent forms will be kept separate from the transcription data to ensure that the names and identities of all participants will not be known or linked to any information provided. Participation in this study is voluntary and at any point during the study you have the right to end your participation.

All responses and feedback will be confidential and anonymous throughout the entire research study. This study has been approved by the Superintendent of Schools and the Institutional Review Board of St. John's University.

If you have any questions or concerns, please email me at debra.daly16@stjohns.edu, or call (631)747-3419. You may contact my Faculty advisor, Dr. Anthony Annunniato at (631)561-8619. For any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University's Human Subjects Review Board, St. John's University, (718)990-2000.

Thank you! I truly appreciate your time and participation in this study.

Respectfully,
Debra J. Daly

Agreement to Participate

Yes, I agree to participate in the study described above.

Participant's Signature

Date

Researcher's Signature

Date

APPENDIX D: FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Focus Group Protocol

Opening: Thank you for taking the time to participate in this focus group concerning the classification of special education students. Your participation in this focus group supports my research study on how teachers' perceptions impact the classification process the goal of this focus group is to discuss how implementation of policies regarding special education classifications have impacted your perceptions of racial disproportionality within special education classifications. Before we begin, is there anyone who does not want to participate in the focus group? If any of you decide at any point during the focus group that you would no longer like to participate, please let me know.

Overview:

During the focus group I am going to ask a few questions. After each question is asked, I will ask that each participant share their ideas in discussion with myself and the other group members. The entire focus group session will be captured in an audio recording to allow for an accurate account of what takes place. The only people who will know what is said are those of us involved with this focus group session. The discussion and transcripts from the focus group are completely confidential. When the results of the focus group are shared none of your names will be included. Does anyone have any questions before we begin?

Focus Group Questions:

1. What do you know about IDEA and NCLB?
2. How do you feel about the changes to special education classifications?
 1. Instructional changes?
 2. Content changes?
 3. New pressures?
3. How did your instructional day change with the classifications?
4. What type of support have you received from department in classifying special education students?
 1. How has the district supported your daily instruction?
 2. What type of professional development have been provided?
 3. What type of resources have been provided?
5. What type of support have you received from your administrative team?
 1. Colleagues?
 2. Principal?
 3. District Office?
6. Are there additional supports you would want to receive from your administrative team?
7. How do you feel about any personal biases you may have?
8. What else should I know about these changes? What could have been done differently? The same?

Closing:

Thank you for taking the time to share your thoughts about the implementation of special education policies. Your feedback will no doubt help support my research study as well as our ability to support special education students, their inclusion in the general education classroom and beyond?

APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL (TEACHER)

Interview Protocol

Opening:

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview concerning teachers' perceptions and implicit biases of racial disproportionality within special education classifications. Your participation in this interview supports my research study on how teachers' perceptions impact the classification process. The goal of this interview is to discuss how the classification of special education students have impacted your perceptions of your personal biases. If any of you decide at any point during the interview that you would no longer like to participate, please let me know.

Overview:

During the interview I am going to ask a few questions. The entire interview session will be captured in an audio recording to allow for an accurate account of what takes place. The only people who will know what is said are those of us involved during the interview. The discussion and transcript from the interview are completely confidential. When the results of the interview are shared your names will not be included. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Interview Questions:

1. What grade level do you teach?
 1. How long have you been teaching?
 2. How long have you been teaching this grade level?
2. What are your views of IDEA and NCLB?
3. What are your views of the new assessments?
4. Can you give me an example or examples of significant changes in your professional life as it relates to the classification process?
 - a. What impact, if any, has the policies had on your teaching methods in the classroom?
 - b. How have you adapted to teaching special education students?
5. How has the implementation of classification rules impacted your instructional practices?
6. What professional development opportunities have you sought out? Was it helpful?
 1. Have you collaborated with your colleagues? How? Why?
 2. What difficulties or challenges?
 3. What do you need to overcome or make the challenges easier?

Closing:

Thank you for taking the time to share your thoughts about the personal biases of teachers affecting the classification of special education students. Your feedback will no doubt help support my research study as well as our ability to support teachers with the demands of the classification process.

APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL (ADMINISTRATOR)

Interview Protocol

Opening:

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview concerning teacher perceptions and implicit biases of racial disproportionality within special education classifications. Your participation in this interview supports my research study on how teachers' perceptions impact the special education classification process. The goal of this interview is to discuss how policies and teacher's personal biases can affect the classification process. If any of you decide at any point during the interview that you would no longer like to participate, please let me know.

Overview:

During the interview I am going to ask a few questions. The entire interview session will be captured in an audio recording to allow for an accurate account of what takes place. The only people who will know what is said are those of us in the interview. The discussion and transcripts from the focus group is completely confidential. When the results of the interview are shared your names will not be included. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Interview Questions:

1. How long have you been the administrator overseeing Special education? a. Were you a special education teacher?
 2. What are your views of the classification of special education students?
 3. What are your views of IDEA and NCLB?
 4. Can you give me an example or examples of significant changes in the teachers' professional life as it relates to special education?
 1. What is the most important change you have made on your curriculum?
 2. Do you think the classification of special education students has helped improve students' learning? Why or why not?
 5. What are some examples of things you have done to help the teachers with the change process?
 6. What are some examples of challenges you had to face in the special education classification process?
 1. What supports do you need to provide teachers to overcome or make the challenges easier?
 7. How has your job changed?
 1. Recommendations for State?
 2. What would you do the same/differently?

Closing:

Thank you for taking the time to share your thoughts about teachers' perceptions and implicit biases within the classification of special education students. Your feedback will no doubt help support my research study as well as our ability to support special education teachers implementing mandated curriculum changes.

APPENDIX G: INTERVIEW QUESTION BANK

1. Have you ever mumbled, under your breath, “Oh, goodness, here comes Chris” as a response to an “active” student who frequently disrupts the flow of class?
2. Have you attached certain identifiers to this particular student based on your perception of the “ideal” student?
3. Have you considered where your understanding of the ideal student was conceived?
4. Is it founded in privilege, a dominant narrative and/or white supremacist thinking?
5. Have you reflected on having built expectations for certain students, whether they are
6. White or of color, male or female, able-bodied or with disabilities?
7. How are you thinking about your students?
8. Where do I see implicit biases playing out in our school?
9. What fear or apprehension do I have about addressing this issue?
10. How can I be an ally to colleagues, students, and families who experience bias in our school?
11. “Do you begin with strengths and interests, then use those as starting points?
12. Or do you focus first on the deficits?”
13. Do I truly believe that all students, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic background, are capable of being academically successful?
14. Do I have beliefs about their home lives or community that prevent me from seeing their academic potential?
15. Do I treat students how I want my own children to be treated by their teacher?
16. How often do school leaders encourage you to teach about people from different races, ethnicities, or cultures?
17. How often do you think about what colleagues of different races, ethnicities, or cultures experience?
18. How confident are you that adults at your school can have honest conversations with each other about race?
19. At your school, how often are you encouraged to think more deeply about race-related topics?
20. How comfortable are you discussing race-related topics with your colleagues?

21. How often do adults at your school have important conversations about race, even when they might be uncomfortable?
22. When there are major news events related to race, how often do adults at your school talk about them with each other?
23. How well does your school help staff speak out against racism?
24. How often are students given opportunities to learn about people from different races, ethnicities, or cultures?
25. How often do you think about what students of different races, ethnicities, or cultures experience?
26. How confident are you that adults at your school can have honest conversations with students about race?
27. At your school, how often are students encouraged to think more deeply about race-related topics?
28. How comfortable are you discussing race-related topics with your students?
29. How often do students at your school have important conversations about race, even when they might be uncomfortable?
30. When there are major news events related to race, how often do adults at your school talk about them with students?
31. How well does your school help students speak out against racism?
32. How easy do you find interacting with students at your school who are from a different cultural background than your own?
33. How comfortable would you be incorporating new material about people from different backgrounds into your curriculum?
34. How knowledgeable are you regarding where to find resources for working with students who have unique learning needs?
35. If students from different backgrounds struggled to get along in your class, how comfortable would you be intervening?
36. How easy would it be for you to teach a class with groups of students from very different religions from each other?
37. In response to events that might be occurring in the world, how comfortable would you be having conversations about race with your students?

38. How easily do you think you could make a particularly overweight student feel like a part of class?
39. How comfortable would you be having a student who could not communicate well with anyone in class because their home language was unique?
40. When a sensitive issue of diversity arises in class, how easily can you think of strategies to address the situation?
41. At your school, how valuable are the equity-focused professional development opportunities?
42. When it comes to promoting culturally responsive practices, how helpful are your colleagues' ideas for improving your practice?
43. How often do professional development opportunities help you explore new ways to promote equity in your practice?
44. Overall, how effective has your school administration been in helping you advance student equity?

APPENDIX H: CONTENT ANALYSIS PROTOCOL

Document Analysis Protocol - *adapted from O'Leary (2014).*

1. Gather
 1. IDEA legislation documents
 2. NCLB legislation documents
 3. New York State special education policies and protocols
 4. New York State Education Department Special Education Assessment Website
 5. Department Meeting Agendas (September 2020-March 2022)
 6. Professional Development Documents (August 2020-March 2022)
2. Develop an organization and management scheme.
 - a. Upload to Dedoose to store and manage all data
3. Make copies of the originals for annotation.
4. Assess authenticity of documents.
5. Explore document's agenda and biases.
6. Explore background information
7. Ask questions about document
 1. Who produced it?
 2. Why?
 3. When?
 4. Type of data?
8. Explore content
9. Data Analysis through multiple rounds of coding
 - i. Attribute coding
 - ii. Pattern coding
 - iii. Code Weaving

APPENDIX I: IRB APPROVAL



Federal Wide Assurance: FWA00009066

Feb 22, 2022 7:40:16 PM EST

PI: Debra Daly
CO-PI: Anthony Annunziato
The School of Education, Ed Admin & Instruc Leadership

Re: Expedited Review - Initial - **IRB-FY2022-234** *Teacher Perceptions of Special Education and Race Disproportionality Within Special Education Classifications*

Dear Debra Daly:

The St John's University Institutional Review Board has rendered the decision below for *Teacher Perceptions of Special Education and Race Disproportionality Within Special Education Classifications*. The approval is effective from February 22, 2022 through February 21, 2023.

Decision: Approved

PLEASE NOTE: If you have collected any data prior to this approval date, the data must be discarded.

Selected Category: 7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Sincerely,

Raymond DiGiuseppe, PhD, ABPP
Chair, Institutional Review Board
Professor of Psychology

Marie Nitopi, Ed.D.
IRB Coordinator

APPENDIX J: SUPERINTENDENT APPROVAL

February 28, 2022

Attn: St. Johns Institutional Review Board

I have reviewed Debra Daly's approved IRB research protocol, including any letters of consent or assent, titled "*Teacher Perceptions of Special Education and Race Disproportionality Within Special Education Classifications.*" I understand what she is asking of the individuals and grant her permission to conduct her study within [REDACTED]. I have the authority to do so.

If I have any further questions about this research study, I understand that Debra Daly can be reached at ([REDACTED] or via e-mail at [REDACTED]. I also understand that if I have any questions regarding this IRB approval or the rights of research participants, I can contact Raymond DiGiuseppe, Ph.D., Chair, St. John's Institutional Review Board, at ([REDACTED] or via e-mail at [REDACTED].

[REDACTED]

Superintendent of Schools

VITA

Name: *Debra J. Daly*

Date Graduated: *May 2004*

Baccalaureate Degree: *Bachelor of Science, C.W Post
University
Greenvale, New York
Major: Criminal Justice*

Date Graduated: *May, 2006*

Master's Degree: *Master of Science, C.W. Post
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Major: Special Education, General
Education, Grades 1-6*

Date Graduated: *August, 2016*

Other Degrees or Certificates: *Certificate of Advanced Studies in
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Building Leader, School District
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