TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF DISPROPORTIONALITY OF MINORITIES IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

by

Kristy Henry Park

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

Liberty University

October 2010

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Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA
October, 2010

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Abstract

Kristy Henry Park. TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF DISPROPORTIONALITY OF MINORITIES IN SPECIAL EDUCATION. (Under the direction of Dr. Gail Collins) School of Education, October, 2010.

The intent of this study was to determine if special education teachers had certain perceptions regarding the disproportionate amount of minorities in special education classes. I examined special education teachers' awareness of the disproportionality, their causal theories, and the effectiveness of Response to Intervention (RTI) to regulate disproportionality. I implemented three different data collection methods to measure the teachers' perceptions: an initial face-to-face interview session, a written survey, and additional interview questioning. Participants in the study included 11 special education teachers from three middle schools in Northern Georgia. Ten of the 11 teachers admitted awareness of the problem of disproportionality, reporting causes based on problems with teacher training and student home environment, including socioeconomic status. Six of the 11 teachers thought RTI would help regulate the rates of students of minority races placed in special education due to increased interventions and a lengthier timeline involved before special education placement. Limitations of this study include the lack of diversity of the participants in this study, and the hesitations many people experience when asked to converse openly on the topic of race, where often perceptions expressed are not always the ones perceived. Findings from a study such as this one can heighten awareness on the subject of disproportionate amounts of students from overrepresented minority races in special education. Suggestions for further research are also included.

Dedication

I dedicate this research study to the memory of Dr. Jill Jones. I feel blessed to have known her. She was the closest thing I ever met to a direct link to God; He must have needed her more in Heaven than we needed her here on Earth.

And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. 1 John 4:16

Acknowledgments

A heartfelt thank you to the following people for their feedback, support, love, understanding, and guidance in this huge milestone in my life: my husband, Brent, my daughter, Miya, and all of our family- I love them all dearly and appreciate them more than they will ever know; my chair, Dr. Collins, with the quickest return email skills on the planet, she has been supportive and professional beyond expectations or hopes; my dissertation committee- Dr. Vinson and Dr. Keafer- for flexible support, honest feedback, and kind encouragement; Dr. Spaulding for her thorough consulting expertise and interest; Lindy, the library guru; all 11 eager and considerate participants in my study; and almighty God, with whom all things are possible.

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List of Abbreviations

Curriculum-based assessment (CBA)

Emotional & Behavioral Disorder (EBD)

English Language Learners (ELL)

Free and Appropriate Education (FAPE)

Full-time equivalent (FTE)

Georgia Department of Education (GADOE)

Georgia Performance Standards (GPS)

Individual Education Plan (IEP)

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

Intellectual Disability (ID)

Intelligence Quotient (IQ)

Least restrictive environment (LRE)

Local education agency (LEA)

Mild Intellectual Disability (MID)

Moderate Intellectual Disability (MOD)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

Orthopedic Impairment (OI)

Other Health Impairment (OHI)

Professional Learning Units (PLUs)

Pyramid of Interventions (POI)

Quality Basic Education (QBE)

Response to Intervention (RTI)

Socio-economic status (SES)

Specific Learning Disability (SLD)

Student Support Team (SST)

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

Chapter One: Introduction

For the last 30 years the field of education has acknowledged a disproportionate number of minority students served in special education (Arnold & Lassmann, 2003; Connor & Boskin, 2001; Coutinho, Oswald, & Best, 2002; De Valenzuela, Copeland, Qi, & Park, 2006; Delgado & Scott, 2006; Dyson & Gallannaugh, 2008; Edwards, 2006; Ferri & Connor, 2005; Gravois & Rosenfield, 2006; Herrera, 1998; Macmillan, Gresham, Lopez, & Bocian, 1996; Salend & Garrick Duhaney, 2005; Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Simmons, Feggins-Azziz, & Chung 2005; Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Gallini, Simmons, & Feggins-Azziz, 2006). Gravios and Rosenfield (2006) define disproportionality as the "representation of a particular group of students at a rate different than that found in the general population" (p.42). A disproportionate rate occurs when minorities are unevenly identified in a particular disability category, and the rate is not proportional to the rate of minorities in the population in question. Even though this applies to groups overrepresented as well as underrepresented, the greatest concentration on this topic remains to be the overrepresentation of minorities in special education (Dyson & Gallannaugh, 2008; Gravios & Rosenfield, 2006; Salend & Garrick Duhaney, 2005).

Background

A major issue involved with disproportionate representation of racial groups in certain categories of special education is that disproportionate rates are more frequently documented in the subjective or judgmental categories of disabilities (Arnold & Lassmann, 2003; Delgado & Scott, 2006; Skiba et al., 2005). The subjective categories,

where professionals base eligibility determination on their judgment, observation, and inference, include Emotional and Behavioral Disability (EBD), Mild Intellectual Disabilities (MID), and Specific Learning Disability (SLD). The more non-judgmental or biologically-based categories that have actual organic causes, include blind, deaf, and Orthopedically Impaired (OI) and are noticeably less common in special education (Arnold & Lassman, 2003; Skiba et al., 2005).

The question of what causes the phenomenon of overrepresentation of minorities in special education is still unanswered. Theoretical explanations vary: biases in testing and eligibility processes (Connor & Boskin, 2001; Delgado & Scott, 2006; Edwards, 2006; Ferri & Connor, 2005; Gravios & Rosenfield, 2006; Macmillan et al., 1996; Parette, 2005), biological and intellectual differences (Amante, 1975; Gallagher, 2008; Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; Jolly, 2008; MacEachern, 2006; Rogers, 1996; Sternberg, 2008), socioeconomic status (SES) (Coutinho, Oswald, & Best, 2002; Roberts, 1975; Skiba et al., 2005; Skiba et al., 2006), and educational and social inequalities (De Valenzuela et al., 2006; Dyson & Gallannaugh, 2008). Although there is much speculation as to what is the root of this problem, there is not a single theory that is the ultimate elucidation.

Problem Statement

As an educator in a public school setting, I have seen students of minority races overrepresented in special education my entire career. I conducted this study to establish if other teachers were aware of the alarming rates of minorities who are not successful in school, and to add to the current research by questioning the RTI movement as a possible solution to unequal rates of identification as special needs.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of special education teachers in one North Georgia geographical area regarding the disproportionate rates of minorities in special education and their perceptions of how the Response to Intervention process works to alleviate this problem. This research study sought to answer the following questions:

1. Are teachers aware of the disproportionate rates of minorities in special education?
2. What are the reasons for the disproportionate rates of minorities in special education?
3. What are teachers' perceptions of the Response to Intervention process as it relates to regulating disproportionate rates of minorities in special education?

Significance

Researchers have examined the importance of the issue of disproportionate representation of minority students in special education, evidenced in the literature, for over 30 years without solution (Arnold & Lassmann, 2003; Connor & Boskin, 2001; Coutinho, Oswald, & Best, 2002). In 1968, Lloyd Dunn completed a study of teachers with one-third of them teaching students labeled as Intellectually Disabled. He found 60 to 80% of those students were from poor or diverse cultural backgrounds (Connor & Boskin, 2001). From this discovery, several litigations erupted. Two of the most famous court cases are Diana v. CA BOE (1970) and Larry P. v. Wilson Riles (1972, 1979, 1984, and 1986). These and other cases fighting against discriminatory practices in special education led to PL 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, later

reauthorized as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1975, a grand legislative effort to ensure equal education of children with disabilities and guard against placement based on cultural, linguistic, or economic status (Achilles, McLaughlin, & Croninger, 2007; Ferri & Connor, 2005).

This current research extended prior research in this area by not only examining the theories behind disproportionate rates of minorities in special education but also exploring the perceptions of special education teachers in regards to these unbalanced rates and their perceptions of how the Response to Intervention process works to alleviate this problem. The current research examined whether teachers' perceptions offer insight into the disproportionality and the interventions schools take to avoid this problem.

In 1975, the Federal Government enacted The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This law was created to ensure that children with disabilities receive special services in school, and it governed states and public agencies in providing these students with interventions - including special education services and/or any further related services. In 1997 and again in 2004 the law was amended declaring schools must implement calculations of students based on their race or ethnicity. IDEA mandates that the director of special services for a system regulate these calculations for disparities in race and ethnicity as they relate to referral and eligibility of students, identification of disability, placement and setting of these students, and disciplinary actions such as suspensions and expulsions (Achilles, McLaughlin, & Croninger, 2007). In compliance with IDEA, the Georgia Department of Education (GADOE) requires school systems to collect and examine these data to determine if the schools demonstrate significant disproportionality. According to the GADOE (2009), each state that receives assistance

under IDEA must provide data, based on race and ethnicity. The state must report if disproportionate rates are occurring with respect to: "The identification of children as children with disabilities in accordance with a particular impairment [§ 602(3)]; the placement in particular educational setting of such children; and the incidence, duration and type of disciplinary actions, including suspensions and expulsions" [§ 618(d) (1)], (GADOE, 2009).

The results of this research, based on the perceptions of teachers in the field, can further enhance the awareness of others concerning issues of disproportionality. Consequently, the findings of this study should be influential in shaping further staff development and personal growth of educators. Most importantly, findings from a study such as this will ultimately benefit students of minority races with and without special needs.

Findings from this study refer to the North Georgia area and cannot always be generalized to other areas because of differences in population statistics; however, the findings can be useful in future determination of how referrals to special education are accomplished. Additionally, this study should stimulate research that extends the knowledge base in special education and how important it is to be aware of special education's purposes and goals in an ever-increasingly diverse society.

Organization of the Study

This dissertation is comprised of five chapters. Chapter One introduces the problem of disproportionality, the purpose of the study, and the research questions. Assumptions determine the significance of the study, and the organization of the study precedes the definition of terms.

Chapter Two introduces the problem of overrepresentation of minority students in special education along with a review of current litigation and legislation relating to students in special education. Also included are current theories behind the cause of overrepresentation, including bias in the eligibility process, physiological differences, lower socioeconomic status, and inequalities in education and life. This chapter delineates school district policies and practices regarding intervention methods, which frame the development of this study. Provided is a full explanation of Response to Intervention (RTI). Finally, there is an introduction to the tools used to measure disproportionate rates: the composition index, odds ratio and risk index. Overall, this chapter provides a thorough review of the current literature, including previous studies documenting disproportionality.

Chapter Three outlines my qualitative study from a phenomenological research design approach. This chapter includes a description of the population in the participating schools, the county, and the state. Three schools and 11 special education teachers are included in the sample. For the purposes of this study, each special education teacher who consented to participate took part in a face-to-face interview (Appendix B), completed a written survey (Appendix C), and participated in additional email interviews as needed. The teachers expressed perceptions of the RTI program and current legislation affecting their special education students. Utilizing the review of literature, Chapter Three begins with the methodology for data collection followed by the procedures for data organization and analyses. This chapter details the steps involved in gathering, collecting, analyzing, and interpreting the data.

Chapter Four contains analyses and findings from the research and a reiteration of the research questions along with the corresponding findings. The three research questions provide insight into the problem of disproportionality from the perspective of the educators. More specifically, the teachers reported their knowledge of disproportionate rates, theories of cultural differences in the classroom, their perceptions of the RTI process in relation to overrepresentation of minorities in special education and in their own schools.

Chapter Five provides limitations of the study, as well as information regarding the credibility and dependability of the study. Addressed are ethical issues and further implications regarding how the findings from the study add to the research in the field of special education. Provided are recommendations for research, practice, and policy.

Definitions

To assist the reader, definitions and abbreviations to clarify some of the technical words used in this dissertation follow. Each definition is a direct quote from the Georgia Department of Education (2009), unless otherwise specified.

Accommodation - Changes in instruction that enable children to demonstrate their abilities in the classroom or assessment/test setting. Accommodations are designed to provide equity, not advantage, for children with disabilities. Accommodations include assistive technology as well as alterations to presentation, response, scheduling, or settings. When used appropriately, they reduce or even eliminate the effects of a child's disability but do not reduce or lower the standards or expectations for content.

Curriculum-based assessment (CBA) – An informal assessment in which the procedures directly assess student performance in targeted content or basic skills in order to make decisions about how to better address a student's instructional needs.

Disability -Having mental retardation [Intellectual Disability], a hearing impairment (including deafness), a speech or language impairment, a visual impairment (including blindness), a serious emotional disturbance (referred to in this part as emotional disturbance), an orthopedic impairment, autism, traumatic brain injury, other health impairment, a specific learning disability, or deaf-blindness and who needs special education and related services. If it is determined, through an appropriate evaluation, that a child has one of the above disabilities identified but only needs a related service and not special education, the child is not a child with a disability. If the related service required by the child is considered special education rather than a related service, the child would be determined to be a child with a disability. A child with a disability aged three through nine (or any subset of that age range, including ages three through five) experiencing developmental delays, may include a child who is experiencing developmental delays, as defined by the State and as measured by appropriate diagnostic instruments and procedures, in one or more of the following areas: physical development, cognitive development, communication development, social or emotional development, or adaptive development; and who, by reason thereof, needs special education and related service.

Disproportionate representation –When the percentage of students of a particular ethnicity/race is either overrepresented or underrepresented in special education as compared to the school's population. The Georgia Department of Education defines significant disproportionality as having an *N* size of 20 or greater and a weighted risk

ratio of 4.0 and above for the identification, placement, and/or discipline of students with disabilities (further explained in Chapter Two).

Eligibility team -A group of qualified professionals and the parent of the child, which determines whether the child is a child with a disability and determines the educational needs of the child.

Emotional & Behavioral Disorder (EBD) – An emotional disorder characterized by excesses, deficits or disturbances of behavior. The child's difficulty is emotionally based and cannot be adequately explained by intellectual, cultural, sensory general health factors, or other additional exclusionary factors.

Evaluation -Procedures used to determine whether a child has a disability and the nature and extent of the special education and related services that the child needs.

Full-time equivalent (FTE) – A method of reporting that refers to the state funding mechanism based on the student enrollment and the educational services local school systems provide for the students. The Quality Basic Education (QBE) Act requires local school systems to report student enrollment in terms of Full-time equivalent (FTE) students. State funding for the operation of instructional programs are generated from FTE data reported by local school systems.

Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) -Special education and related services that -

(a) Are provided at public expense, under public supervision and direction, and without charge;

(b) Meet the standards of the State, including the requirements of this part;

(c) Include an appropriate preschool, elementary school, or secondary school education in the State involved; and

(d) Are provided in conformity with an individualized education program (IEP) that meets the requirements IDEA 2004.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) -A law ensuring services to children with disabilities throughout the nation; it governs how states and public agencies provide early intervention, special education and related services to more than 6.5 million eligible infants, toddlers, children and youth with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

Individualized Education Program (IEP) –A written statement for a child with a disability that is developed, reviewed, and revised in accordance with IDEA 2004.

Intellectually Disabled (ID) -Students have intellectual functioning that is well below average and limitations in adaptive (everyday living) behavior such as maturity, independence, responsibility, and school performance compared with other students their age.

Interventions – Targeted instruction that is based on student needs. Interventions supplement the general education curriculum. Interventions are a systematic compilation of well-researched or evidence-based specific instructional strategies and techniques.

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) –The setting where children with disabilities are educated, to the maximum extent appropriate, with children who are not disabled, with the use of supplemental aids and services.

Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) –A government agency that supervises the provision of instruction or educational services to members of the community. People

may also use the term "school district" to refer to a local education agency. Classically, local education agencies include several schools, including grammar, middle, and high schools, along with education support programs such as independent study programs. In remote areas, there may only be one school under the purview of a local education agency.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) -Legislation designed to help create high-performing schools based on accountability provisions that build upon rigorous academic content and achievement standards, and assessments based on those standards. NCLB expresses the ambitious, long-term goal of proficiency in reading and mathematics for all students by the 2013-14 school year, and delineates specific steps that States, local educational agencies (LEAs), and schools must take to reach that goal.

Pyramid of Interventions (POI) – A conceptual framework developed by GADOE that will enable all students in Georgia to continue to make great gains in school. The pyramid is a graphic organizer that illustrates layers of instructional efforts provided to students according to their individual needs.

Orthopedic Impairment (OI) -Refers to students whose severe orthopedic impairments have an effect on their educational progress to the degree that special education is required. Impairment may include congenital conditions; deformity or absence of limbs, diseases such as polio, cerebral palsy, and amputations. These students may use wheelchairs or other assistive equipment and may need a lift bus. Their physical disability does not indicate an intellectual impairment, and many of these students are served primarily in the regular classroom. However, the nature of their disability may require significant transportation adaptations, addressed in the IEP meeting. It is

important for drivers to receive information and training necessary to ensure the safe transportation of these students and their equipment.

Response to Intervention (RTI) - A practice of academic and behavioral interventions designed to provide early, effective assistance to underperforming students. Research-based interventions are implemented and frequent progress monitoring is conducted to assess student response and progress. When students do not make progress, increasingly more intense interventions are introduced.

Special Education – Specially designed instruction, at no cost to the parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability, including instruction conducted in the classroom, in the home, in hospitals and institutions, and in other settings

Specific Learning Disability (SLD) –A term used to describe a disorder in one or more of the basic processes involved in understanding and using spoken or written language. It may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations. It does not refer to students with a general intellectual disability. Students in this category have average or above average intelligence, but have a serious academic deficiency not consistent with their measured ability. Some common characteristics may include difficulty with retrieval and transfer of information, letter reversals and transpositions, difficulty knowing left from right, distractibility, and poor self-esteem.

Student Support Team (SST) - A multi-disciplinary team that utilizes a problem-solving process to investigate the educational needs of students who are experiencing academic and/or social/behavioral difficulties. SST, which is required in every Georgia

public school, uses a data-driven process to plan individualized supports and interventions and the method of assessing their effectiveness.

Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

Salend and Garrick Duhaney (2005) stated that disproportionality is "the extent to which students with particular characteristics . . . race, ethnicity, language background, SES, gender, age, etcetera are placed in a specific type of education program" (p. 213). Special education referral and placement of students of minority races at disproportionate rates has been a complex problem in education for years.

Background

This chapter reviews the history of special education specifically in regards to placement of minorities, including the legal ramifications and a proposed solution known as the Response to Intervention (RTI) process. The review expounds on theory and research related to disproportionate representation: cultural bias as it relates to problems in the referral process, physiological differences among races, poverty or socioeconomic status, and educational or social inequalities in America. This chapter presents current, relevant studies on this topic, including an explanation of identification and measurement of disproportionality from state-mandated data collection requirements.

Description of Conceptual Framework

Existing research affirms a significant amount of overrepresentation of minority students labeled and served under the subjective categories in special education (Arnold & Lassmann, 2003; Delgado & Scott, 2006; Skiba et al., 2005). A subjective category is one in which the process of determining eligibility requires a certain amount of judgment or personal opinion on the part of the professional involved in labeling a student and on the part of those involved in the eligibility process. According to recent studies,

categories such as Emotional & Behavioral Disorders (EBD) and Intellectual Disabilities (ID) are the most common labels for students of minority races when placed in special education and are subjective in nature. In 2003, 40% of students currently labeled Mildly Intellectually Disabled (MID) or Moderately Intellectually Disabled (MOD) were of African American decent (Arnold & Lassman, 2003). Categories such as these require a more subjective, professional judgment for placement and are high-incidence due to the frequency of the use of the label (Conway, 2006; Delgado & Scott, 2006; Diniz, 1999; Harris-Murri, King, & Rostenberg, 2006; Krezmien, Leone, & Achilles, 2006).

Because researchers have addressed and studied the overrepresentation of minorities in special education for so many years, there is an abundance of research surrounding this topic. Studies have examined the causes for disproportionate rates as well as ways to correct the uneven numbers. Much of the research surrounds the legal issues that have arisen due to public reaction to such uneven, unexplainable rates of minorities in special education. This chapter discusses the legal ramifications, government legislation, causal theories, and educational movements in response to continuing disproportionate rates of minorities in need of special education services.

Legal ramifications.

As a major contributor in the field of education, Lloyd M. Dunn created and published multiple tools that measure intelligence and academic achievement in education -*The Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, The Peabody Language Development Program, and The Peabody Individual Achievement Test*- as well as published multiple textbooks, research reports, articles, and curriculum guides (Osgood, 2005). However, researchers credit him most for his effort involving the equal education of all students. He

once stated, “If I had my way, the field would get rid of the term ‘special education.’ There should be no dichotomy between general and special education” (Council for Exceptional Children [CEC], 2006, para. 3). Concerned with educational equity and highly influenced by the civil rights movement, Dunn wrote a profound article in 1968 entitled “Special Education for the Mildly Retarded-Is Much of it Justifiable?” Dunn coined the term “mainstreaming” and helped introduce this concept into public schools. Mainstreaming is the idea that all children should learn in a general education environment whether the student has special needs or not. Educators refer to mainstreaming now as the inclusion setting. His proposal brought about a rude awakening for many educators in this field, as they had to differentiate instruction for various learners, as well as manage classroom behavior of students with more diverse and complicated needs.

Dunn’s article in 1968 dealt with issues of ethics as well as equality in both special and general education. He concluded that reliance on self-contained classes for students with intellectual disabilities was just not effective or best practice (Osgood, 2005). Dunn declared his apprehension and distress about the segregation involved in most programs at the time. He documented research and court decisions that were prime demonstrations of the negative effects of separating children in educational settings based on ability and social skills. Dunn compared the results of segregation of minorities with its effect on children with disabilities, particularly making note of the multitudes of “minority children” that “had been erroneously identified as disabled and then shoveled off to segregated, euphemistically labeled ‘special education’ settings, which courts would likely deem as inherently racist, unequal, and unacceptable” (Dunn, 1968, p. 16).

He described the special education setting as unconstitutional for the same reasons that segregation by race was unconstitutional. By homogenously tracking students, the programs were discriminatory, opportunities were unequal, and academics were inferior. Dunn predicted a materialization of additional court cases after exposure of the current practices because of previous lack of acknowledgement of the blatant segregation of minority children in special education programs. He stated this was simply a method of moving disadvantaged children from one segregated setting to another. His prediction of responsive litigation was certainly accurate, as mentioned in the following section.

Government legislation.

In his summary, Dunn (1968) stated that a surplus of minority or disadvantaged children were erroneously identified as intellectually disabled or emotionally disturbed on the basis of inadequate or inappropriate eligibility procedures. Dunn estimated 60 to 80% of the students identified at this time were from impoverished backgrounds, which brought about some very severe civil rights issues. As a result, litigation and legislation as it pertained to special education changed dramatically and eventually led to the passage of PL 94-142, the Education for Handicapped Children Act, later renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1975 (Connor & Boskin, 2001; Osgood, 2005).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

Two of the most famous court cases proceeding Dunn's enlightening prediction were Diana v. State Board of Education (1970) and Larry P. v. Wilson Riles (1971). These cases took place in California because of disproportionate rates of minorities enrolled in the Educable Mentally Retarded program, later renamed Intellectually

Disabled (ID). In both cases, the ruling for the plaintiffs brought about remarkable changes in the identification process of students with ID. These and other cases against discriminatory practices in special education led to Public Law, PL 94-142, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1975, in the form of "provisions ensuring due process, parental involvement, nondiscriminatory assessment, and placement into the least restrictive environment (LRE)" (MacMillan, Hendrick, & Watkins, 1988, p.427). IDEA is "a law ensuring services to children with disabilities throughout the nation. It governs how states and public agencies provide early intervention, special education, and related services to more than 6.5 million eligible infants, toddlers, children and youth with disabilities" (U.S. Department of Education (USDOE), 2009). This act also pledges a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). It guarantees children special education and related services that meet the standards of the state and conform to an individualized education program (IEP) under the requirements of IDEA 2004, the updated version of IDEA of 1975. IDEA is a grand legislative effort to ensure equal education of children with disabilities and guard against placement based on cultural, linguistic, or economic status.

No Child Left Behind.

In January of 2002, under the administration of President George W. Bush, Congress enacted the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. As a bi-partisan coalition, NCLB ambitiously declared all children must reach proficiency in reading and mathematics by the end of the 2013-2014 school year, to be measured by the specific steps delineated to states, LEAs, and systems (USDOE, 2009). As Federal legislation, NCLB requires state schools to teach students a set of standards outlined by grade level,

commonly referred to as standards-based instruction, with the intention of creating high-performing schools. NCLB supports the theory that setting high standards with attainable, measurable goals will improve individual outcomes in education. This design supports accountability based on rigorous standards-based content, high achievement standards, and assessments based on those standards (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Stecker, 2010). NCLB demands that to receive federal funding for schools each state must develop and utilize basic skills tests given to all students in certain grades (Dawoody, 2008). The standards are set by each state and require all students to reach at least the same minimum expectation, if not exceed that expectation, to reach proficiency. By setting common expectations for all students, the goal is to narrow the gaps in educational performance by class and race. Schools are required to focus more on academic achievement of the typically under-served groups of children, such as low-income students, students with disabilities, and minority students. Previously, state-measured accountability systems reported average school performance, which allowed schools to have high performance rates even if they had large achievement gaps between affluent and disadvantaged students (USDOE, 2008).

In contrast to IDEA, it is the opinion of some educators that NCLB actually increases the need for special services of lower performing students (Au, 2005; Cortiella, 2010; Dawoody, 2008; Karp, 2003; Miner, 2004). Under the pressure to meet expectations of proficiency, more students need accommodations in their academics to reach their goals. After NCLB legislation passed, special education labels of every kind began appearing in excess, especially learning disabilities (Cortiella, 2010). For years, eligibility for special education based on a SLD had been determined by a significant

discrepancy in scores between aptitude and achievement testing (Brown-Chidney, 2007; Fuchs, Fuchs, & Stecker, 2010; Kavale, Spaulding, & Beam, 2008; McKenzie, 2009; Murawski & Hughes, 2009; Ofiesh, 2006; Richards, Pavri, Golex, Canges, & Murphy, 2007; Werts, Lambert, & Carpenter, 2009). In 2004, IDEA allowed states to use an alternative method for identifying students with SLDs [§ 300.309 (a)(2)(i)], in which learning disabilities labels emanate through a process of steps instead of through an aptitude-achievement discrepancy model [§ 300.307(a)(i)] (Ofiesh, 2006). The re-authorization was in reaction to the increase of special education labels and for prevention of another influx of special education referrals just for students to qualify as proficient by 2014. The re-authorization led to a wider implementation in Georgia of a Response to Intervention (RTI) model (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Stecker, 2010; Werts, Lambert, & Carpenter, 2009; Zirkel & Thomas, 2010). Previously, a student was recognized and referred for testing by a teacher or student support team (SST) (also known as mainstream assistance team or student study team). Having an SST at all public schools in the state of Georgia was mandated as a result of the Ollie Marshall v. State of Georgia Board of Education (1984) court case [SBOE rule 160-4-2-.32] that arose due to concerns over the disproportionate placement of African-American students in special education (GADOE, 2006).

For eligibility in special education with a learning disability, a student must have a significant point difference in scores between intelligence and specific ability. Each state sets the point discrepancy and it varies (Brown-Chidney, 2007; Fuchs, Fuchs, & Stecker, 2010; McKenzie, 2009; Murawski & Hughes, 2009; Ofiesh, 2006; Richards, Pavri, Golex, Canges, & Murphy, 2007; Werts, Lambert, & Carpenter, 2009). In Georgia,

the discrepancy between aptitude and achievement had to be at least 20 points different. However, many schools in Georgia today no longer utilize the discrepancy point system, and SSTs have been replaced by the tiered system of intervention called RTI (Bender & Shores, 2007).

Response to Intervention.

For the purposes of this study, the *response* portion is the act of replying or responding to a student's needs, and the *intervention* portion is the steps taken to mediate between a student and his education to produce a successful result. The RTI process is an "assessment-intervention model" using objective methods to examine "cause-effect relationship(s) between academic or behavioral intervention and the student's response to the intervention" (Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2005, p.2). In the aptitude-achievement discrepancy model, a student was classified with a learning disability if there was a considerable disparity between the expected student response to instruction and his or her actual response. State policies on this discrepancy vary greatly, sometimes even within districts. Some states accept the discrepancy based on a developmental delay of half a student's grade level or one standard deviation under the average grade level achievement to determine qualification for SLD (Werts, Lambert, & Carpenter, 2009). RTI is also designed to identify at-risk students early so that necessary interventions can be implemented before a child becomes so far behind that they cannot recover to grade level expectations, often deemed the "waiting-to-fail" approach in education (Brown-Chidsey, 2007; Harris-Murri, King, & Rostenberg, 2006; Kashi, 2008; Ofiesh, 2006; Richards et al., 2007). Instead of schools utilizing a reactive approach to student failure, RTI seeks to be more proactive and preventative in nature. According to the CEC (2007),

implementation of RTI should aid in the recognition of disabilities based on data from responsiveness to scientifically based interventions as part of the all-inclusive assessments required for identifying disabilities, thus removing the guesswork out of assessment and intervention implementation of students that struggle in school.

In Georgia, RTI is referred to as the Pyramid of Interventions or POI and is commonly used as an alternate method of determining if a student qualifies for special education services for an SLD. Before POI implementation in Georgia, a 20-point discrepancy was required between the student's aptitude level and the score on an achievement test for certain areas: math computation or reasoning, reading decoding or comprehension, written expression, oral expression, etc. (Bender & Shores, 2007). Methods of increasing student success by means of differentiated instruction are not new. Teachers have used methods of instruction that target student progress at regular intervals for years, but the RTI approach takes these instructional and assessment practices and integrates them into an objective data-based system (Kashi, 2008; Murawski & Hughes, 2009). In this process, schools screen all students initially, and then those students requiring additional practice are offered targeted interventions. This method is supposed to be more scientific and structured than past models, allowing for data from students to drive need (Barnett, Daly, Jones, & Lentz, 2004; Kashi, 2008). No longer do students have to wait to fail to get the extra assistance they need to succeed. The process should be systematic, with stern guidelines regarding assessment, instruction, and even timelines for each step of the process. Multiple models of the RTI framework exist in current literature: a three-tiered model, a four-tiered model, and the individual problem-solving model (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2009; Fuchs, Fuchs, & Stecker, 2010; Murawski & Hughes,

2009). Figure 1 shows the popular three-tiered approach as an inverted pyramid, utilizing a top-down progression. The National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) and the Council of Administrators of Special Education (CASE) recognize this method (Bender & Shores, 2007; Murawski & Hughes, 2009).

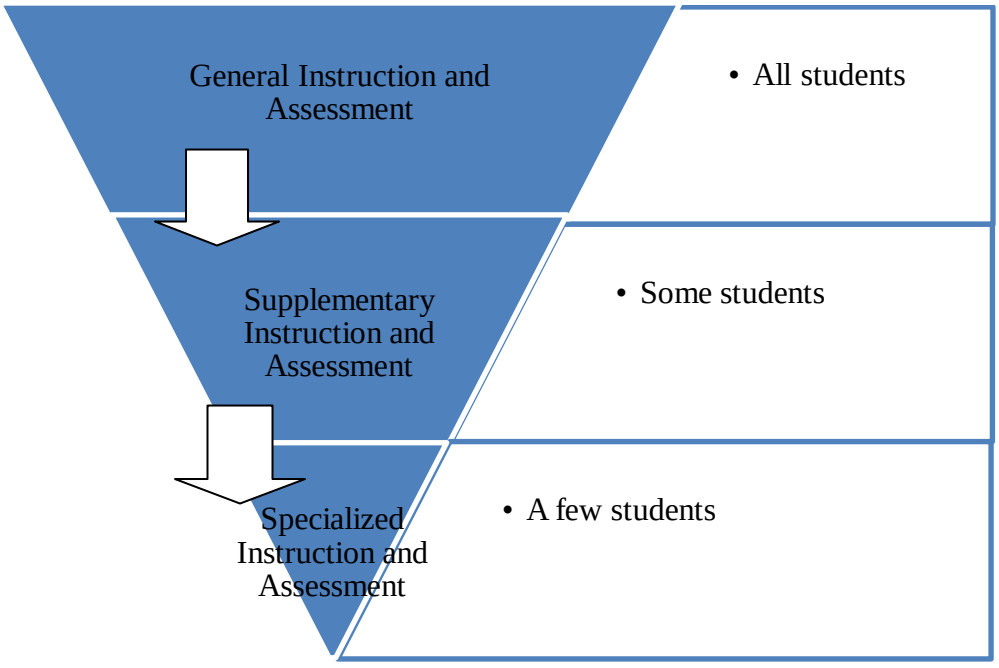

Figure 1. Three-tiered RTI model. This figure depicts the progression when students move further into the RTI process as necessary (Brown-Chidney & Steege, 2007).

Although all models are extremely similar and overlap in most cases, this research refers to the method that the state of Georgia utilizes (Figure 2), the bottom-up approach known as the Pyramid of Interventions (POI). This model utilizes a four-tiered approach.

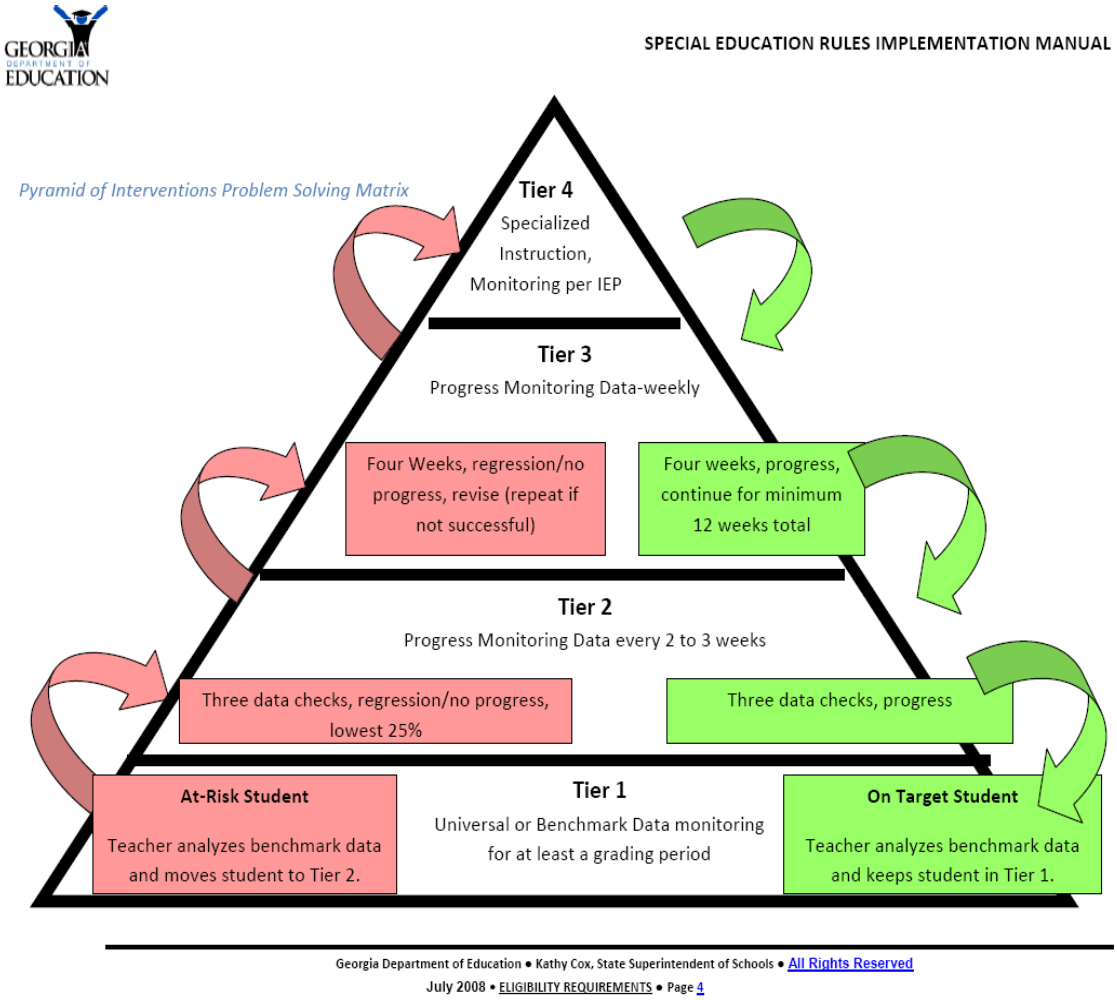

Figure 2. Georgia Pyramid of Interventions (POI). This figure depicts the progression students follow in the RTI process in the State of Georgia (GADOE, 2004).

The first tier of POI is general instruction with a universal core program; all students begin in this level and about 80% remain. RTI Tier 1 is very similar across the nation. Schools provide students with scientifically based instruction of state-mandated standards, for this study this refers to the Georgia Performance Standards (GPS), in a general education classroom. Schools monitor progress of all students at regular intervals by a collective screening method that incorporates progress monitoring and information

for decision-making about instruction level and intervention needs. The assessment is usually curriculum-based. Until a student shows evidence of weakness at grade level standards, all students remain in Tier 1. Interventions at this level do exist but are minimal (Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2005; CEC, 2007; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2009; Harris-Murri, King, & Rostenberg, 2006; Richards et al., 2007). Once a student requires more assistance to be successful, such as more than an occasional second attempt on an assignment to consistently pass the standards, the student is referred to Tier 2.

At the secondary tier, RTI varies more by location. In Georgia's POI Tier 2 the instruction remains scientifically based from the Georgia Performance Standards (GPS) in a general education classroom, but intervention is more intensive. Examples of interventions at this level might include small group tutoring, guided notes and study guides, or extended time to finish assignments. At this level a greater frequency of progress monitoring is necessary to determine if current interventions are successful. Often the assisting teacher is a reading specialist, a Title I teacher, a special education teacher, or trained paraprofessional. At this point in the POI process, the defined lines between general education and special education become more gray and undefined. If a student fails to respond positively for at least three, three-week intervals at Tier 2, a referral to Tier 3 is implemented (Bender & Shores, 2007; GADOE, 2009).

Up to this point, students continue to receive scientifically based instruction from the GPS in a general education classroom with increasingly intensive interventions. At this level, a student might be receiving individualized tutoring, extra time on all assignments, small group instruction and testing, and shortened assignments as some of the possible interventions. Tier 3 is the earliest point a POI team, consisting of all of the

student's teachers and the student's parent or guardians, considers referral of a student for a battery of tests to determine a disability requiring special needs. Based on the POI process, multiple interventions have been attempted and found unsuccessful by this point. If after at least 12 weeks in Tier 3 with more advanced and individualized interventions a student is still not experiencing success with Georgia's standards, the POI team would refer the student for testing, often occurring in the form of Intelligence Quotient (IQ) tools, academic achievement assessments, and behavior scales to determine if placement in the next tier is necessary (Connor & Boskin, 2001). By now the POI team comprised of teachers and parents have met on multiple occasions and data has been collected extensively on the interventions implemented, results from standards-based assessment, meeting minutes regarding student strengths and weaknesses, and teacher observations. At this point the student is still on Tier 3 until eligibility for special services is determined. This lengthy process attempts to delay premature referral to placement in a special education program.

Eligibility in Georgia is determined by the POI team, including the parents, and the school psychologist that administered the battery of tests as part of the evaluation process used to support the POI data. After careful review of the data gathered by the POI committee and further examination of the results of the testing, a school psychologist will evaluate a student for eligibility for special education services and under what category that student qualifies. In the past, as mentioned earlier, a student would qualify for SLD in Georgia if there is a 20 point (or greater) discrepancy in their levels of ability and in a specific subgroup, such as reading comprehension. Now, however, for a student to be

eligible for SLD the psychologist looks for a pattern of strengths and/or weaknesses in cognition and/or academics within the test results as well as in the additional POI data.

In Georgia, a student is only categorized as being on Tier 4 if he/she qualifies for special education (or gifted or ELL) services. Tier 4 offers the most intensive accommodations and modifications necessary to meet the needs of a student with a disability. After a student is tested, the POI committee meets to agree on eligibility and placement in special education based on the results from the school psychologist. If the student qualifies as a student with special needs, the team will draft an Individual Education Plan (or Program) (IEP) to meet that child's individual needs to be successful in school (CEC, 2007; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2009; GADOE, 2008; GADOE, 2009; Richards et al., 2007). The IEP is specifically formulated for that student, addressing goals the student should work towards and accommodations to help the student reach these goals. If the student does not meet eligibility requirements, the student will remain in Tier 3 (CEC, 2007).

The POI or RTI process aims to eliminate bias in the referral process by using data-driven interventions; however, there continues to be skepticism regarding the actual procedures and implementation of RTI (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Stecker, 2010; Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2010; Kavale, Kaufman, Bachmeier, & LeFever, 2008; Kavale & Spaulding, 2008; Kavale, Spaulding, & Beam, 2009; McKenzie, 2009; Richards et al., 2007; Werts, Lambert, & Carpenter, 2009). Some of the concerns include the lack of consensus across the board for the procedural steps; there is no definite instruction in place that tells schools what to do and when. To be truly effective, RTI requires schools to shift "normal" instruction and literally change the roles of the general education and special

education teachers. This change requires intensive training and additional work from everyone involved. The general education teacher needs to look closer at the individual and develop strategies and skills to reach all levels of learners. The special education teacher should expect to have multiple roles: a collaborative consultant to the general education teachers, someone able to implement tier three interventions as well as individualized interventions for students in special education, plus an assistant in the development and implementation of validated progress monitoring techniques. All types of educators need to gain proficiency in data-based decision-making. All of these roles will require additional training for effective results (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Stecker, 2010; Richards et al., 2007; Werts, Lambert, & Carpenter, 2009).

Two major complaints from some critics of RTI are most of the research revolves around the area of reading, and most of the research involves students at the elementary school level (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2010; Kavale, Kaufman, Bachmeier, & LeFever, 2008; Kavale & Spaulding, 2008; Kavale, Spaulding, & Beam, 2009; Richards et al., 2007; Werts, Lambert, & Carpenter, 2009). Fuchs, Fuchs, and Compton (2010) report that, "many researchers avoid middle and high schools entirely because of the scheduling problems and compliance issues often encountered when working with adolescents" (p. 22). In fact, little information exists about middle schools, high schools, math, content, or behavior in relation to the effects of RTI (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2010).

In a study conducted in 2009, Werts, Lambert, and Carpenter surveyed several Special Education Directors regarding their opinions of RTI. The results from the surveys proved a lack of agreement in what RTI even looks like. The directors reported varying procedures in implementation, including the amount of time, the use of discrepancy data

in conjunction with the RTI data, and the selection of the assessments used. Their opinions varied greatly which means that the results of RTI would vary across schools as well. Due to lack of conformity in the process, many critics would say the use of RTI is premature and has too much ambiguity to be truly effective (Richards, et al., 2007). Even with the implementation of RTI, bias in qualification for special education can still occur in the eligibility process. Sometimes it occurs as early as the pre-referral or referral stage of this process for a number of reasons detailed in the next section (Connor & Boskin, 2001; Delgado & Scott, 2006; Edwards, 2006; Ferri & Connor, 2005; Gravios & Rosenfield, 2006; Macmillan et al., 1996; Parette, 2005).

Causal theories of disproportionality.

Theories behind the overrepresentation of minorities in special education vary on a continuum from bias in the referral process and subjective professional practices to physical deficits of minority children, socioeconomic disadvantages, educational inequalities, and sociopolitical factors such as school violence and disciplinary actions (Coutinho, Oswald, & Best, 2002). A study conducted by Coutinho and Oswald (2000) suggested two specific hypotheses for disproportionate rates: cultural bias in education and sociodemographic factors including innate deficits of minorities due to these factors. Although this has been a topic for several decades, no one theory offers a solution to what is still a troubling phenomenon.

Bias in eligibility process.

A popular and feasible explanation for disproportionate rates of minorities in special education is bias and misinterpretation in the eligibility process (Connor & Boskin, 2001; Delgado & Scott, 2006; Edwards, 2006; Ferri & Connor, 2005; Gravios &

Rosenfield, 2006; Macmillan et al., 1996; Parette, 2005). Arnold and Lassman (2003) defined the eligibility process as a multidisciplinary procedure in which a group of educators collaborates to settle on an appropriate label for a student. Special education students actually go through several steps before they might be eligible for special services, as described previously in the RTI process. Bias in this process could occur when a student reaches the final Tier of RTI (if a school refers that student for testing) in the form of the instruments utilized. Alternatively, bias can occur when interpretation of ethnic and cultural dissimilarities are inappropriately labeled as disabilities (Oswald, Coutinho, & Best, 2002). One example of this is cultural loading, "emphasizing a single culture's perspective" (Connor & Boskin, 2001, p. 25), where a test based on culture's viewpoint lacks cultural sensitivity. This cultural loading results in inaccurate results of intelligence and comprehension. Frequently these instruments neglect to account for inexperience of a student not afforded as many opportunities as another student. In conjunction with these issues, many times these tools do not account for minorities in their normative samples (Connor & Boskin, 2001). Edwards (2006) states selection of an inappropriate IQ tool is detrimental to valid results. Mean IQ differences for ethnic groups must be considered when using norm-referenced tests. "To limit disproportionality resulting from mean IQ differences, test users need to know which IQ test best represents and reliably reflects minority group scores" (p. 247).

After a student is tested and determined to qualify underneath one of Georgia's disability programs, a committee determines placement. This can also be a biased process, as placement into a specific category can be a subjective process. If a student has taken a culturally or ethnically biased test, likely their scores are invalid. If a team

referred a student based on bias from a teacher, they are likely to receive a biased label. Due to professional judgment of many categories, bias in the eligibility process can occur on multiple occasions (Arnold & Lassmann, 2003; Delgado & Scott, 2006; Skiba et al., 2005).

Teachers might also have an unconscious bias against specific ethnic groups (Arnold & Lassman, 2003). This means, for example, a second language learner could be mistaken for a student with learning disabilities simply because the linguistic differences between cultures. Referral to more invasive interventions could occur due to culture or ethnicity issues instead of cognitive or physical needs. Educators' lack of knowledge of the second language or ethnicity can result in a higher incidence of associating bilingualism with disability. There is "a resultant inclination on the part of the educators to associate bilingualism with disability" (Connor & Boskin, 2001, p.23). Even after ten years, this continues to be a theory of some researchers (De Valenzuela, Copeland, Qi, & Park, 2006; McCray & Garcia, 2002; Parette, 2005; Salend, 2005).

Finally, many schools are not equipped with personnel that have adequate training in the RTI process (Murawski & Hughes, 2009). Because each level of the RTI process requires more individualized interventions, teachers involved in implementing interventions without proper training might do so incorrectly, also causing a bias in results (CEC, 2007).

Physiological differences.

Correlation between race and intelligence has been a controversial topic for many years. In 1916, Lewis Terman began a longitudinal study entitled *Genetic Studies of Genius,* for suppressing certain rumors of gifted children. The same year in his text *The*

Uses of Intelligence Tests, he made several accusations in regards to the relationship between intelligence, race, and class or social standing. Terman later predicted that once creation of a tool to measure IQ occurred, there would be significant racial differences in general intelligence (in 1968 as cited in Jolly, 2008). After Terman's publication of the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scales, his initial data analysis revealed "the racial stock most prolific of gifted children are those from northern and western Europe and the Jewish…the least prolific are the Mediterranean races, the Mexicans, and the Negroes" (Terman, 1924, p. 363).

Later, Arthur Jensen (1972) and Herrnstein and Murray (1994) examined the amount of research dedicated to the relationship between poor standardized test performance and ethnicity. These authors drew many conclusions regarding genetic predisposition to low intelligence and poor academic performance; however, other professionals in the field criticized them for flawed methodology and lack of consideration of cultural and environmental variables (MacEachern, 2006; Rogers, 1996).

Other theorists have speculated that higher rates of minorities in special education are neurological differences that occur between the races (Amante, 1975; Coutinho, Oswald, & Best, 2002). According to these theorists, Central Nervous System (CNS) pathology such as visual-motor malfunction, auditory-perceptual handicaps, and psycholinguistic disabilities is more likely to occur among minority races. These same theorists believe minorities are more likely to experience the neurological problems directly related to academic achievement issues and a higher rate of referral to special education. In support of this theory, Coutinho, Oswald, & Best (2002) contended that minorities are more susceptible to disabilities because of sociodemographics leading to

less success in school. The term sociodemographics refers to sociological aspects of an area in combination with the demographics of that area. The sociological aspects would be the society and its interactions, and the demographics would be the characteristics of the population in a particular area. Sociodemographical factors could include poverty and inadequate prenatal care, which in turn could support the theory that neurological deficits occur in compromised economic statuses, but does not support the theory that this is strictly a race issue. If SES is an issue, it supports the next theory that lower SES causes disproportionality of minorities needing special services to be successful academically.

Socioeconomic disadvantages.

Further complicating the fact that minorities are overrepresented in special education is the debate over the relationship that socioeconomic status (SES) plays. Some researchers maintain the cause of disproportionate rates stems from poverty and students living in constant need (Coutinho & Oswald, 2000; Coutinho & Oswald, 2001; Coutinho, Oswald, & Best, 2002; Kaufman & Smith, 1999). African Americans are four times more likely to live in poverty, and Hispanics are three times more likely than the Caucasian race (National Research Council [NRC], 2002).

For years, researchers have reported a correlation between socioeconomic status and academic struggles. Moreover, children living in poverty are more likely to live in a community and attend a fiscally challenged school (Coutinho & Oswald, 2000; Coutinho & Oswald, 2001; Coutinho, Oswald, & Best, 2002; De Valenzuela et al., 2006; Kaufman & Smith, 1999; NRC, 2002). Without proper resources, schools in poverty-stricken areas often make the "needs improvement" list based on results from academic standing. The National Research Council (2002) reported three main reasons for the overrepresentation

of minorities in special education: insufficient amounts of highly qualified teachers, class size above 20 (especially in early grades), and inadequate school funding. Each one of these factors directly relates to the economic status of the area. The less funding a school has the greater the number of students in the student- teacher ratio, the less qualified the educators, and the greater the chances the students do not receive equal opportunities of learning (De Valenzuela et al., 2006).

Educators have recently tried to understand better the values of broad cultural groups, but information is sparse regarding the culture of disproportionality within specific ethnic groups, where perceptions about disproportionality may be different. Definitions of disproportionately rated categories come from middle-class developmental norms reflecting Western views of disproportionality. In the words of Phil Parette (2005), "such interpretations are arbitrary" (p.21). Despite the ever-changing diversity in today's schools, historically schools have expected families to simply adapt to the expectations of the typical Caucasian American culture, or else qualify as having special needs.

Educational and social inequalities.

Teachers define equity in education as offerings of equal opportunities and outcomes (De Valenzuela et al., 2006). This equity includes opportunity to participate in educational experiences and academic growth from that experience. One theory offering an explanation of disproportionality is that of inequality in the educational setting. If students are not provided access to resources and educational settings, then it makes sense theses students are disproportionately academically prepared. Specifically, a student that is afforded more opportunities in relation to education will outperform a

student not afforded such opportunities (Dyson & Gallannaugh, 2008; De Valenzuela et al., 2006).

This theory produces a proverbial conundrum of which came first. Arguably, students who do not have access to a computer at home, an educated parent to help them with their homework, or expendable funds at home for increased school resources will not do as well as the student who does have these resources. These same students do not have exposure to a variety of experiences from home either. A student from a home with more financial stability goes on vacation and learns by doing, where a student at a home on a budget never sees the ocean in person. If this student also happens to be a student of minority race, does referral for special education occur because of the lack of resources and experiences or because of an actual learning disability? This final theory brings the previous theories together and highlights the obvious: Based on current literature, there is not one theory that offers the ultimate elucidation to the problem of disproportionality.

Disproportionate representation and special education.

Numerous studies examine the disproportionality of certain races in special education and support a culmination of theories to explain racial disparity in special education. As a prominent researcher in the special education field, Russell J. Skiba completed several investigations that proved to be relevant in relation to my study. In particular, Skiba, Simmons, Ritter, Kohler, Henderson, and Wu (2006) examined the multiple factors involved in disproportionality in special education. In this study, 64 educators were interviewed. The educators consisted of four groups: teachers, school psychologists, special education administrators, and school administrators. The researchers used four broad themes for guidance in their interview process: educator

perception of problematic demographics, diversity attitudes and perceptions, available resources, and help for students that have difficulties in school. The study enlisted 10 interviewers trained in qualitative interviewing strategies to conduct the interviews with each educator.

After the first interviews were complete, a research team coded and examined the data. The interview responses revealed five emergent themes with which the four groups seemed to have similar perspectives. These themes included perceptions of the issues surrounding sociodemographic factors, aspects of general education, the eligibility process of special education, issues regarding school resources, and perceptions of diversity and overrepresentation of minorities in special education. The following sections describe each theme from this study in more detail.

Sociodemographic factors.

Educators expressed issues with low socioeconomic status and poverty that affects children and their education. Specifically mentioned was the insufficient preparation of some students at the time of entry. The students might have street skills but enter without even knowing the alphabet. In addition, success in school can be contingent on varying norms of violence in different communities, at times leading to reactions such as aggression. Students may have learned from home that fighting is the way to solve problems. Finally, poverty and high transience rate correlate; both also link to difficulty in continuity in academics and social skills (Coutinho, Oswald, & Best, 2002; Skiba et al., 2006).

General education factors.

The on-going dilemma is the vast majority of White, middle-class teachers; this

affects the values and expectations applied in the classroom causing cultural misconceptions when certain behaviors do not translate across cultures. To some educators these behaviors are problems. Other factors in the general education classroom include greater difference in student to teacher ratio and large class size, causing academic and behavioral problems with some students needing attention that is more individual. Finally, accountability standards have become so stringent that teachers and parents have increased referral rates in the event that the student cannot meet standards. As a special education student the hard pass rule does not apply because administration can recommend placement of these students in the next grade. The hard pass rule refers to the requirement in most schools that students pass a determined number of subjects to be able to move on to the next grade. Typically, this requirement is all of the subjects offered except one, such as three out of four or four out of five subjects (De Valenzuela et al., 2006; Kaufman & Smith, 1999; NRC, 2002; Skiba et al., 2006).

Special education process.

Most of the educators agreed that the process has become more thorough. Years before when special education was more of a dumping ground, referral rates were higher and schools utilized less strict policies. Now the process involves looking at the whole child and not just a test score. On the other hand, others feel the process is now too difficult, even time-consuming, so complete avoidance of the referral process is common (Arnold & Lassman, 2003; Connor & Boskin, 2001; Delgado & Scott, 2006; Edwards, 2006; Ferri & Connor, 2005; Gravios & Rosenfield, 2006; Macmillan et al., 1996; Parette, 2005; Skiba et al., 2006).

Available and needed resources.

Skiba et al. (2006)'s study stated there are not enough resources, mainly due to state funding. Due to lack of resources, specifically regarding classroom management techniques, the behavior problems often result in office referrals. Due to the common need for movement in African American students, the authors explained overrepresentation by simply a cultural difference in what is acceptable.

Perspectives on minority disproportionality and diversity.

Considered the most interesting category, this one was the least likely to get responses out of the educators as there is always some reticence when asked to discuss perceptions of race as it relates to educational gains. The educators seemed uncomfortable and denied that there was disproportionality in the race of their special education students (De Valenzuela et al., 2006; Skiba et al., 2006).

The implications in this study (Skiba et al., 2006) made pointed and thought-provoking statements. The authors reported the factors involved in disproportionality continue to be interspersed and complex, meaning there is not one reason that can explain the situation. In addition, Skiba et al. (2006) stated reducing referrals to special education just to lower rates of disproportionality requires accommodations available in the general education classroom must increase to meet student needs. Finally, inability to face the facts of disproportionality (denial that there is a racial disparity in education) will not help the situation and might even exacerbate it.

Another study completed by Skiba in the same year specifically analyzed African American placement in special education, with alarming results (Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Gallini, Simmons, & Feggins-Azziz, 2006). When considering only race,

African Americans were significantly more likely to be identified than any other race (three times as likely MI, twice as likely to be MO, and twice as likely to be EBD). Poverty also proved to be a factor when considered independent of race. The children that experience low SES when compared to students in a wealthier school area were twice as likely labeled MI, MO, or EBD.

In 2005, Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Simmons, Feggins-Azziz, and Chung examined the relationship between disproportionality in special education and poverty. This study inspected data over one year at a district level from 295 schools in a Midwestern state. The researchers analyzed records from the schools that included information on race, disability, SES, local resources, and academic and social outcomes of the students. The group ran regression analyses on the data to determine correlations. The results indicated that poverty and racial disparity were only weakly and inconsistently correlated. The study concluded that where poverty signified disability identification, it also happened to amplify disproportionate rates of minorities. Skiba et al. (2005) acknowledged a common thread in research as the assumption that disadvantages linked to lower SES are related to the disproportionate rates of minorities in special education. Nevertheless, the researchers also stated four important assumptions that related lower SES and disproportionality:

- Students of minority races are disproportionately also poor and therefore more likely to experience the stressors associated with poverty.
- Students are less developmentally ready for school due to poverty, which causes less academic and behavioral success.

- Low-achieving or behaviorally challenged students are more likely to be referred to special education.
- Low SES is certainly a contributing factor to increase likelihood of special education referral and placement for minorities.

The above statements still do not implicitly indicate that low SES the primary cause of disproportionate rates of minorities in special education (Skiba et al., 2005).

Disproportionate representation and RTI.

Although the information is limited, there have been a few studies specifically related to the RTI process and its relationship to disproportionality in special education. In one such study, Gettinger and Stoiber (2007) examined RTI for early literacy development in low-income students (which are also commonly disproportionately minority students too). The concept behind this study was that if the educators taught students good literacy skills earlier in life, they would have a greater chance to excel in school in multiple areas and referral for special education placement in their school careers occurs less often. The researchers utilized a program entitled the Exemplary Model of Early Reading Growth and Excellence, or EMERGE, that combined research-based classroom practices, multi-tiered interventions, increased meaningful professional development, and consistent monitoring of progress. The desired result was acquisition of early literacy competency in preparation for later success in school (2007).

Gettinger and Stoiber's (2007) study outlined the four main components mentioned above that are detrimental to RTI success. EMERGE incorporated the following components:

- Scientifically based early literacy curriculum, instruction, and activities with increasing levels of intensity across a three tiered intervention hierarchy;
- Screening, monthly progress monitoring, and outcome assessment to guide instructional decision-making and identify children who require a more intensive focus on early literacy skills;
- High-quality, literacy-rich classroom environments; and
- On-going professional development combined with literacy coaching and collaborative planning (Gettinger & Stoiber, 2007, p.200).

The researchers found there to be significant benefits to utilizing the EMERGE technique for development of early literacy skills with a desired result of lowering the rates of students referred to special education that are also of minority race and low income status. The students in the EMERGE group were initially tested in September and then re-evaluated in May of the same year. These scores were compared to a control group of students with similar income and race characteristics but they were not included in the EMERGE process. Multiple analyses of covariance were run between the two groups. On each measure, the experimental group's scores surpassed the scores of the control group with effect sizes ranging from .13 to .45 (Gettinger & Stoiber, 2007).

Harris-Murri, King, and Rostenberg (2006) examined the use of a culturally responsive RTI approach in lessening the number of minorities represented in the category of EBD in special education. The group set out to address and aid in remedying the disproportionate numbers through discussion and awareness as well as development of a culturally sensitive approach of RTI. The study discussed the importance of "consideration of culturally responsive instruction, discipline, and interventions within all

stages of the RTI decision making model" (Harris-Murri, King, & Rostenberg 2006, p. 781). Without this concern there will continue to be issues with misinterpretation of behavior of students from various backgrounds, sometimes misconstrued as aberrant or inappropriate behavior warranting referral for evaluation. The conclusion of the article maintains the importance of early interventions for students that struggle, while focusing on a culturally responsive pedagogy resulting is lower rates of referrals of students of minority races and ethnicities.

Determination of disproportionate representation.

The representation of students by ethnicity or race in special education is disproportionate when the percentage of students is either overrepresented or underrepresented in as compared to the school's population. The Georgia Department of Education website (2009) identifies "significant disproportionality as having an *N* size of 20 or greater and a weighted risk ratio of 4.0 and above for the identification, placement, and/or discipline of students with disabilities." Gravois and Rosenfield (2006) reported three different ways to calculate disproportionality among races: risk index, risk ratio (as mentioned above), and composition index.

The formula for finding the risk index is the number of students of a given race served within a certain category divided by the total number of students in the school of that race. For example, if a school has 10 African American students labeled as having EBD and there are 100 African Americans in the entire school then to determine the risk index the formula is 10 divided by 100. This gives the risk index of 0.10, or 10% of the African American students are categorized as having EBD.

The formula for finding the risk ratio is the risk index of a certain race (in the above example it is 10) divided by the risk index of another. When examining race, the risk index for White students is often used as a comparative index since White is typically the majority race. For an example, if the risk index for White students is five. The odds ratio is 10 divided by five, which equals two. This means African American students are twice as likely to have the label of EBD as White students in the population of the example. Ratios greater than one indicate a greater risk of classification in a certain category such as EBD.

The composition index formula is the number of students in a race within a category (10 African Americans labeled EBD) divided by the total number of students within that category (for example, all the students in the population that are also labeled EBD is 30). To find this number in the example, divide 10 by 30, and the composition index is 0.33. This translates to mean that in the example 33% of all students labeled EBD are African American, meaning 63% of students labeled EBD were another race. This is most meaningful when compared to the actual population of the school. If the actual African American population of the school in question were majority then this would not be an unfathomable number. However, if the African American population were minority in the school, the above composition index would be astounding and frightful for the district, as it would certainly be a disproportionate representation of that population.

In Georgia, when systems experience significant disproportionality the State requires completion of a series of tasks:

1. A thorough review of relevant policies, practices, and procedures,

2. A use of fifteen percent of Federal IDEA monies for early intervention of students that struggle academically, and
3. A public report of necessary revisions to the system's policies, practices, and procedures.

The school would then report these revisions to the state. If the state reviews the data and determines the misrepresentation results from inappropriate identification practices then the district is in noncompliance. The district has one year to rectify the problem and submit their action steps in a Georgia Comprehensive LEA Improvement Plan (CLIP). If noncompliance is not corrected the state may take sanctions against the school (GADOE, 2009).

Summary

This study recognized the present research and applied it in light of the current perceptions of educators regarding ethnicity and special education eligibility in the state of Georgia. In addition, I wanted to investigate possible connections between perceptions of RTI and disproportionality of race in special education. As mentioned, past researchers have examined the problem of disproportionality, offered theories as to why this phenomenon occurs, and some have even ventured solutions. However, because the current research does not elaborate on the effects of RTI on disproportionality, I hoped to increase information in this area with this study.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Special education in the Georgia Public Schools is "specially designed instruction, at no cost to the parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability, including instruction conducted in the classroom, in the home, in hospitals and institutions, and in other settings" (GADOE, 2009). Specifically, special education is a collection of services provided for students that need extra assistance in school. This need could be due to some disability that interferes with their ability to learn. Typically, students with high incidence disabilities, or those most commonly diagnosed, learn in a general education setting, but these classes contain a co-teaching or paraprofessional-supported class. High incidence disabilities include Emotional Behavioral Disabilities (EBD), Mild Intellectual Disabilities (MID), and Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) (Arnold & Lassman, 2003; Conway, 2006; Delgado & Scott, 2006; Diniz, 1999; Krezmien, Leone, & Achilles, 2006). Often the students served in special education come from low-income homes, many are of minority ethnic background, and their environment is rarely ideal, such as a high transient rate, parents who are commonly uneducated, single parent homes, or abusive situations (Arnold & Lassmann, 2003).

This study examined teacher perceptions of the disproportionate rate of minorities in special education in one northern county in Georgia. The official source of student demographic information for this research is the Georgia Department of Education's Student Record. GADOE disaggregates data based on race/ethnicity as follows:

African American – A person having origins in any of the black racial groups of Africa and not of Hispanic origin.

Asian – A person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam.

American Indian - A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Central, North or South America who maintains cultural identification through tribal affiliation or community recognitions.

Hispanic – A person of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race.

Pacific Islander - A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, or other Pacific Islands.

Two or more races – A person having origins in more than one race/ethnicity subgroup other than Hispanic.

White – A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, North Africa, or the Middle East and who has no Hispanic origin (GADOE, 2009). For the purposes of this study, instead of using the term Caucasian, people of this origin are referred to as White because this is the term used on the GADOE website and in all referenced data.

In this study, I explored awareness of disproportionality by examining teacher perceptions of minorities and the disproportionate rates of minorities in special education. I also examined teacher perceptions of the current RTI process and the effects in relation to special education placement. The main purpose of the study was to establish teacher

perceptions of this phenomenon, how that relates to the actual amount of disproportionate rates, and the perceptions of RTI as it applies to reduction of overrepresentation of minorities in special education.

Research Questions

In this study, I investigated the following research questions:

1. Are teachers aware of the disproportionate rates of minorities in special education?
2. What are the reasons for the disproportionate rates of minorities in special education?
3. What are teachers' perceptions of the Response to Intervention process as it relates to regulating disproportionate rates of minorities in special education?

Research Design

I implemented a qualitative phenomenological approach to examine teachers' perceptions of disproportionate amounts of minorities in special education. By definition:

> Qualitative research is multi-method in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials – case study, personal experience, introspective, life story, interview, observational, historical, interactional and visual texts – that describe routine and

problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 2).

The purpose of phenomenological studies is to illustrate and explain an experience (or phenomena) by examining the perceptions of the people involved in the experience (McCaslin & Scott, 2003). In my study, the phenomenon was the overrepresentation of minorities served in special education. The perceptions of the participants that I measured were of their level of awareness, theories of the cause, and thoughts of RTI as a solution to overrepresentation. I evaluated the perceptions of the participants of this study by multiple interviews and surveys. This approach allowed for "human experience in social and cultural context conveying the perspectives of the people who are negotiating these experiences" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1994, p.14).

Participants

The participants of the study were 11 special education teachers from three middle schools in the Northeast Georgia area (Table 1). Seven of the teachers involved in the study were female and four of the teachers were male. All of the participants were White except for one of the male teachers who was Hispanic. I preferred a greater diversity of race among the participants, but due to the demographics of the area and the involved schools, this was not possible. I chose the participants by first enlisting the department head of each school, and then I asked them to choose two more willing participants from their school. After gathering all the data from the initial nine participants, I added two more participants based on a need for additional data. Ten of the special education teachers were inclusion teachers; these teachers worked with a general

education teacher in a co-teaching setting in the general education classroom. The eleventh teacher taught in a self-contained setting where the special education students remained all day due to an intellectual disability.

Table 1

Characteristics of Special Education Teacher Participants

Teacher Characteristics	Number of Teachers
Gender	
Female	7
Male	4
Race/ ethnicity	
Hispanic	1
White	10
Highest Degree	
Bachelors	2
Masters	6
Specialist	1
Higher	2
Hours of RTI Training	
No training	2
1-5	8
6-10	1
Years of Teaching Experience	
1-5	2
6-10	3
11-15	2
16-20	2
>20	2
Years in Special Education Position	
1-5	2
6-10	3
11-15	2
16-20	2
>20	2

The schools involved in the study were all within a 30-mile radius of each other in northern Georgia and for confidentiality existed in the fictitious county of Plains. Each

school housed students in grades 6th through 8th grade. All three schools had been implementing POI for two full school years when this study took place. Table 2 compares the three schools' demographics by race and by race in special education.

The first middle school, Eastern Plains Middle, had approximately 473 students; 82% were White students, with 18% minority: African-American (5%), Hispanic (5%), Asian or Pacific Islander (1%), Two or more races (5%), and American Indian (<1%). The overall socioeconomic status of the school, based on the number of free and reduced lunches, was 50% economically disadvantaged, which qualified the school for Title I funding under Georgia state law. Eastern Plains Middle School had 15% of the students with disabilities served in special education, and 1% English Language Learners (ELL) (GADOE, 2009).

The second middle school, Johnson Middle, (6th through 8th grade) had approximately 656 students; 80% were White students, with 20% minority: African-American (10%), Hispanic (6%), Asian or Pacific Islander (2%), and Two or more races (1%). The overall socioeconomic status of the school, based on the number of free and reduced lunches, was 30% economically disadvantaged, which qualified the school for Title I funding under Georgia state law. Johnson Middle School had 9% of the students with disabilities served in special education, and 1% ELL (GADOE, 2009).

The third middle school, Western Plains Middle, had approximately 861 students; 80% were White students, with 20% minority: African-American (3%), Hispanic (10%), Asian or Pacific Islander (4%), Two or more races (3%), and American Indian (<1%). The overall socioeconomic status of the school, based on the number of free and reduced lunches, was 34% percent economically disadvantaged, which qualified the school for

Title I funding under Georgia state law. Western Plains Middle School had 15% of the students with disabilities served in special education, and 3% ELL (GADOE, 2009).

Table 2

Student Statistics in Middle School in Each Participating School

Eastern Plains Middle School

Race/Ethnicity	Total Students	%	Special Education Students	%
African-American	24	5	5	7
American Indian	3	<1	0	0
Asian/ Pacific Islander	7	1	0	0
Hispanic	26	5	7	10
Two or more races	26	5	3	4
White	387	82	57	79
Total	473	100	72	100

Johnson Middle School

Race/Ethnicity	Total Students	%	Special Education Students	%
African-American	67	10	11	19
American Indian	0	0	0	0
Asian/ Pacific Islander	14	2	2	3
Hispanic	41	6	9	16
Two or more races	8	1	0	0
White	526	80	36	62
Total	656	100	58	100

Western Plains Middle School

Race/Ethnicity	Total Students	%	Special Education Students	%
African-American	28	3	7	6
American Indian	3	<1	0	0
Asian/ Pacific Islander	33	4	4	3
Hispanic	88	10	10	8
Two or more races	23	3	7	5
White	686	80	104	78
Total	861	100	132	100

The demographics of Plains County at the time of the study were about the same as the rates of the schools (see Table 3). The county's residents were 84% White, 8%

African American, 5% Hispanic, 1% Asian, less than 1% American Indian or Pacific Islander, and 2% Two or more races, formerly referred to as Mixed Race. The percentage of people below the poverty level was 12%, according to the 2008 U.S. Census Bureau. Plains County had 15% of the students with disabilities served in special education, and 3% ELL (GADOE, 2009).

Georgia's demographics (see also Table 3) were different from the schools' or the county's demographics. They were 58% White, 30% African American, 8% Hispanic, 2% Asian, less than 1% American Indian or Pacific Islander, and 2% Two or more races. The overall socioeconomic status of the state, also based on the 2008 U.S. Census report, was 15% economically below the poverty level. The State of Georgia had 11% of the students with disabilities served in special education, and 6% ELL at the middle school level (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008).

Table 3

Student Statistics in Middle School in Plains County and the State of Georgia

Plains County Middle Schools

Race/Ethnicity	Total Students	%	Special Education Students	%
African-American	76	5	14	5
American Indian	6	<1	*	*
Asian	52	3	*	*
Hispanic	158	10	20	8
Pacific Islander	2	<1	0	0
Two or more races	49	3	10	4
White	1282	79	192	81
Total	1617	100	236	100

Georgia

Race/Ethnicity	Total Students	%	Special Education Students	%
African-American	140,975	38	17,291	41
American Indian	954	<1	107	<1
Asian	11,890	3	525	1
Hispanic	39,404	11	3,924	9
Pacific Islander	376	<1	24	<1
Two or more races	10,249	3	1,028	2
White	167,899	45	19,147	46
Total	371,747	100	42,046	100

Note. The GADOE requires its Data Collections Division to conduct a Full-Time Equivalent Student Count (FTE), which reports the numbers of all full-time students, including Students with Disabilities. For confidentiality and statistical reliability reasons, the annual report of the Divisions for Special Education Services and Supports does not report on student groups with fewer than 10 students.

Confidentiality

I informed the participants that their information would be confidential and not discussed with their school administration. I am the only one that will ever know the identity of the participants. To maintain confidentiality of the responses of the participants, I assigned each person a number. Each survey and interview response sheet contained that person's number and not their name. I am the only person who had access to this number. In this study, I refer to the teachers by their assigned participant number instead of by their actual names for the purposes of confidentiality.

Even though there were multiple raters who examined the data, I am also the only one to know personal data of each person, such as age and race. The raters were only given participant information organized by their assigned number. All data were stored in a spreadsheet on a password-protected flash drive and kept in my possession at all times. The particular school identities as well as the participant identities remain anonymous.

Procedures

The study began with an application to the Institutional Review Board of my university to conduct a research study. I submitted an expedited application outlining my study. After I received approval, I began the study with an initial invitation to the special education department heads of each of the three schools to participate in an investigation that would add to the research in the area of special education. I invited these participants by either email or direct verbal communication. I also asked the department heads to choose two additional participants that I could email and ask to participate. At this point, I requested diversity in age, experience, and race of the participants, if possible. Once chosen, I gave each participant a consent form to review, and I asked for a convenient appointment time to begin the interview process. All participants agreed to the terms of the consent form. I kept confidential a signed copy of the consent form and I gave a copy to the participants for their records (Appendix A).

Instruments

I implemented three different methods in this study to attempt to gain insight into the teachers' perceptions: an initial face-to-face interview session (Appendix B), a written survey (Appendix C), and additional interview questioning that varied by participant based on their responses to the other two instruments. After the use of open-ended questions in face-to-face interviews of the teachers, I administered the survey to assess teacher perception regarding students of minority races, students with disabilities, disproportionality of minorities in special education, and the newly implemented RTI process that pre-empts numerous special education referrals. Once I compared the data from the first two sources, I emailed additional sets of individualized questions to each

participant until the answers became redundant and there seemed to be no more relevant questions to ask. I did not disclose the purpose of the study to each participant until after the initial face-to-face interview and survey was completed.

All of the instruments in my study measured a similar construct of misrepresentation of minorities in special education; however, each instrument used a slightly different method to examine this construct. The initial interview, conducted first, used guiding questions that encouraged open-ended responses. The survey used a Likert scale with numerical values to determine on what part of the spectrum the participant stood. Finally, I conducted the additional interviews through email. Throughout the study, I utilized a peer group of doctoral students and an additional professional in the field to help analyze the responses for common themes and recurring perceptions among the teachers. I have discussed each instrument in more detail in the following sections to delineate the specifics of administration and procedure, so that another researcher can replicate this study in the future.

Initial interview.

I created the interview questions included in the initial face-to-face interview, utilizing my research questions and common themes from the current literature on this topic as guidance. To ensure credibility of the initial interview questions by determining the questions adhered to the topic, three professionals in the field of special education analyzed the questions for me. The professionals included a school psychologist, a professor of special education at a local university, and a special education teacher with over fifteen years experience in education.

The initial interview consisted of open-ended sets of questions that examined the following: teacher awareness of disproportionate rates, teacher perceptions or opinions of these rates, teacher perception of the students in the categories of special education and minority ethnicity in general, and perceptions of the RTI process proceeding referral for special education services. The purpose of the initial interview was to meet the participants, establish rapport, and set the tone for further questioning into a rather sensitive subject in education. I used the questions in the initial interview more as guidance in an informal conversation than as direct questions in a formal interview. The initial interview requested that the participants answer each question with their personal opinions. The open-ended style of questioning allowed for more original, thoughtful responses from the special education teachers. With permission, I tape-recorded the initial interviews for ease of transcription later. I conducted the initial interviews at the location of each school, in a private room with no else in the room. Individual interviewing is more time-consuming but also encourages more honesty in responses due to the privacy and confidentiality of the setting. Teachers answered completely, while I recorded and wrote the responses.

Originally the initial interviews were scheduled to take about 20 minutes; the time range of each interview actually took about 45 minutes or longer. Because these interviews established rapport, the teachers were encouraged to talk openly and share their experiences. After the teachers answered all the questions, I asked them to review the notes taken of their written responses for accuracy. After I transcribed these tape-recorded sessions, I gave the participants a second opportunity to review the entire interview in typed form sent via email. I asked the participants to reply with any

questions regarding discrepancy in their responses and the transcription; however, there were no questions.

Survey.

After the initial interview, I asked each teacher to complete a survey. A previously created survey (The Gresham Survey, 2005) was adapted and used in this study in a form that I tailored to the specifics of this study. The creator, Dr. Doran Gresham of George Washington University, established the content validity of the original survey previously by utilizing a panel method. A panel of experts in the field of education examined the survey questions and commented on their significance. The panel was comprised of 10 professionals: two general education teachers, one principal, five professors of education, and two professors of special education at The George Washington University in Washington, D.C. Dr. Gresham addressed questions or comments, and he revised the survey until it was deemed valid by the expert panel. The reliability of the survey was tested using a pilot school. Chronbach's Alpha was used to establish the reliability coefficient based on the responses from the pilot test. The reliability coefficient was .9392 and meant all of the questions on the survey were basically geared toward the understanding of one main concept, disproportionality (Gresham, 2005).

To ensure credibility of the survey used in this study, I asked the same three professionals in the field of education who examined the initial interview questions to also evaluate the revised survey and determine if it adequately assessed teacher perceptions of students with disabilities and minorities. I addressed questions and comments, and then I revised the survey until the professionals deemed it credible as

well. The adaptations involved changes to the wording so that it addressed all minorities of both sexes and not just African American boys, as in the Gresham study. I also removed certain questions that were not as relevant to my particular study. In addition, I added three questions to the survey portion that addressed the RTI process before referral to special education and 13 open-ended questions at the end for an opportunity to respond in more detail. As mentioned, the written questions were very similar to questions asked in the initial interview, to validate the consistency of responses across tests and to see if participants would be more honest in their opinions if they could respond in complete anonymity.

The 20-question survey used a five-point Likert scale. The survey asked the participants "To what extent do you agree that the following factors may contribute to overrepresentation of minorities in special education?" and to designate their responses as follows: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Undecided, Agree, or Strongly Agree. Following the 20 questions were 13 additional questions that I added for a qualitative aspect. These questions included information such as years of experience, education level, additional opinions or perspectives of their school's special education process, the referral process, and RTI. Although similar in nature to some of the initial interview questions, the purpose of the written open-ended survey questions was to cross-validate and confirm information given in the initial interview process. These questions also allowed the participants an opportunity to reply honestly on certain subjects they might have been hesitant to be open about in the initial interview, such as race and school policies. As mentioned earlier in the review of literature, reticence to speak openly about race, specifically as it relates to success in the educational setting, is a common problem with

studies such as this one. I employed multiple opportunities for the participants to speak openly about their perceptions of this sensitive subject, to encourage honest responses.

Additional interviews.

I compiled and compared the data from the initial interviews and from the written surveys. There was some discrepancy in response from several participants, which required further questioning for clarification. For example, one participant responded, "Disagree" to the survey question "Low diversity in the teacher population (less minorities that teach)" when asked if this contributed to the overrepresentation of minorities in special education. Because this particular school had less than 2% of minorities that were in a teaching position, I needed clarification to understand this response. I devised a list of questions for each participant that addressed other inconsistencies I observed. I emailed each participant their list and asked them to respond via email or schedule a time for me to come back to their school for an interview. All 11 participants responded to their individual questions via email.

Once I received the email responses, I again compiled and analyzed the data in search of more questions arising out of the new responses. By this point in the study, my questioning became very direct and pointed, breaking down any discrepancies in responses. Once I analyzed the data, some of the responses to certain survey questions remained unclear to me. For clarification purposes, I sent another email to each participant with detailed explanation of four of the questions I thought were ambiguous and could result in multiple interpretations. With the explanation, I asked the participants to re-reply to these questions in the same manner as they did previously: Strongly Agree, Agree, Undecided, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree. With the detailed explanation, there

were a total of four changed answers, two from one participant, and two from individuals. Desiring further details in some of the responses, I created additional individual questions for the participants and sent them via email. This type of interviewing continued until the questioning in this area was exhausted and all discrepancies in responses were resolved.

One area that required further investigation had to do with POI training. I contacted each participate one final time to determine the following: I wanted to know if each person had participated in POI training and if so, how many hours of training they had received. I also investigated who trained the participants, where the trainer had received training and their level of training (refer to Table 1 for hours of training by participant).

Data Analysis

To establish rigor and trustworthiness of the methodology of my study, I followed multiple recommendations of some well-documented qualitative researchers in the collecting of my data (Britten, Jones, Murphy, & Stacy, 1995; Elder & Miller, 1995; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mays & Pope, 1995; Patton, 2001). The qualitative techniques I utilized fall into the following four criteria necessary for a reputable qualitative research study: dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability.

Dependability.

Attainment of dependability of a qualitative research study occurs by thorough descriptions of data collection and analysis to the point where that another researcher can follow the procedures resulting in similar findings as the original study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Trochim, 2000). To address dependability in my study, I utilized an audit trail to help me document each step in the research process. An audit trail is documentation of

the steps taken when gathering and analyzing data (Britten, Jones, Murphy, & Stacy, 1995; Elder & Miller, 1995; Mays & Pope, 1995; Patton, 2001). Lincoln and Guba (1985) listed multiple means of creating a thorough audit trail. The following are some of their suggestions:

- The collection of raw data including all raw data, written field notes, unobtrusive measures (documents);
- The reduction of data such as condensed and unitized information;
- The reconstruction and synthesis of data by structured categories that use themes, definitions, and relationships, findings and conclusions, and summary that includes connections made to existing literatures, integration of concepts, causal relationships, and researcher interpretations; and
- Process notes such as the procedural steps involved in the method of the study (p.319).

This last recommendation includes any procedures or strategies implemented as well as notes regarding the trustworthiness of the study (anything relating to credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability).

My audit trail consisted of tape-recorded initial interviews, transcribed notes, survey responses, additional interview questions and responses, plus any personal notes throughout the process. I documented each step involved in my collection of data, my analysis of these data, and in my findings from the data. I detailed each of these steps so that another researcher could duplicate my study and should result in similar findings.

Credibility.

In a qualitative study, credibility refers to the integrity of the study from the perspective of the participants involved. This means the results are believable, or credible. Because the function of phenomenological qualitative research is to interpret phenomena from the viewpoint of the participants, they are the judges of credibility of the findings (Mays & Pope, 1995; Trochim, 2000). I ensured credibility in my study by implementing member checking, deception, and triangulation of data, detailed in the following sections. Researchers have documented all three methods as ways to establish rigor and determine credibility of a research study that does not rely on statistics to interpret findings (Britten, Jones, Murphy, & Stacy, 1995; Elder & Miller, 1995; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mays & Pope, 1995; Patton, 2001).

Member checking.

Member checking is the verification of data by members of the group in which the data were gathered. In this study, I gave the participants two opportunities to check their statements in the initial interview: I showed them my hand-written notes, and I transcribed the tape-recorded notes so the participants could verify the notes as correct and reflective of their true perceptions. I also repeated this step during the additional questioning that occurred via email. After re-reading their own responses in the emails, some of the participants volunteered additional information. I discovered the more I interacted with the participants, the more comfortable they seemed to be with me. The comfort level of the participants was important in this study because trust had to be established to encourage honest responses regarding race and special education. The member checking helped establish rapport by giving the participants ownership of their

responses and making them part of the research process. This entire progression also led to more questions and more confirmation of perceptions from the participants.

Deception.

Because some of the questions asked for personal information regarding the subject's perceptions of minorities and special education students, I used deception in the initial interviews to increase the possibility of honest responses. The concept of deception is an omission of the true reason behind the study to aid in candid responses to the topic, which help improve the internal validity of the study (Shuttleworth, 2009). Initially, I only exposed the topic of the research as an inquiry into the special education students at the middle school level. I did not fully debrief each teacher on the topic of the study until he/she had completed the initial interview and survey. During this debriefing, I informed the teacher the true nature of the study. I gave each teacher an option to withdraw his/her data once the debriefing occurred so that participation remained voluntary; however, all participants agreed to remain part of the study.

Triangulation.

Triangulation is the process of using three (or more) techniques of data analyses to crosscheck results (Patton, 2001). I utilized the method of triangulation to gather and analyze data in the form of face-to-face interviews, surveys, additional interviews via email, and a peer group for data analysis purposes. These methods measured a very similar construct of perception of ethnicity and special education placement, but in slightly dissimilar manners. By using more than three data analysis techniques, I increased the credibility of the tools and the dependability of the responses significantly. Researchers can be more confident in the outcomes if the multiple analyses lead to the

same result. To enhance further the triangulation of the collection of data, another professional in the field of special education and I analyzed the responses from the surveys and the initial interviews. We compared common themes collaboratively and then I discussed these themes in the group meetings I conducted. formed with two other doctoral candidate colleagues. The peer group supported me in objective compilation and analysis of the data collected.

Transferability.

From a qualitative perspective, transferability is the extent in which the findings are transferable to other contexts or settings (Patton, 2001; Trochim, 2000). This means transferability will primarily be the responsibility of the person generalizing the results to other settings, not the researcher. However, thorough details of the context of the research as well as the essential assumptions behind the study can enhance transferability. The person transferring the findings to another setting should determine if the transfer makes sense. I attempted to maintain equitable transferability by describing each step of my collection of data as well as the methods I used to analyze and code these data for generalization and application across settings. Although the demographics of the location of my study might hinder generalization of some of my findings across settings, the findings can still be helpful to some degree in the field of education regardless of the demographics of the location. This means the recommendations listed in Chapter Five can still be useful in many middle schools across the country.

Confirmability.

Qualitative research defines confirmability as the extent to which the findings can be corroborated by others (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2001). To accomplish

confirmability a researcher should thoroughly detail all procedures utilized in checking and rechecking the data throughout the length of the study. Additionally beneficial is enlisting another researcher to contrast the researcher's interpretation of the findings. To assist in confirmability in my study, I documented in-depth each step, each person's response, and my own personal opinions. I presented all of this material to a seasoned professional in the field of special education. This additional researcher helped me avoid pre-conceived ideas of how I sorted the data; this way, I objectively created categories based strictly on the findings and not based on research I read on this topic. I also benefited from the assistance of my peer group for their opinions and perspectives. The role of the peer group was to provide a devil's advocate perspective and help me avoid bias and personal opinion in the reporting of responses.

Organization of Data

I organized the responses from the participants in a series of steps. First, I placed the transcribed notes from the initial interview sessions into a spreadsheet, one page for each participant. Next, I added the survey questions in the spreadsheet by participant number under the initial interview responses and placed a letter or letters beside the survey question according to the response of the participant (SA for Strongly Agree, A for Agree, etc.). I organized the responses up to this point by participants so I could evaluate each person's perspectives of the topic and scrutinize any discrepancies in answers across methods of questioning. For example, someone might voice a positive opinion of their special education program in the initial interview and then express a more negative stance in the written response portion of the survey. I addressed these contrasting answers later in the additional interview questions. After the special education

professional and I organized the data from the initial interviews and surveys to this point, I sent the data via email to the members of a peer group, and I held a meeting via conference telephone call.

Peer group.

For these purposes, I used a peer group, to aid in the compilation and interpretation of my qualitative research data. My peer group consisted of myself and two other doctoral students. One of these members currently serves as a high school graduation coach in the Atlanta area of Georgia and has 12 years experience in education. The other group member serves in an administration position in a Baptist college in Tennessee and has 16 years experience in the field of education.

The purpose of the peer group meetings was to collect additional outlooks in the interpretation of the perceptions of the teachers by collectively discussing the information gathered with the colleagues in the group. Along with assistance in compiling data objectively, utilizing additional professionals in the field of education procured multiple views and lessened my subjectivity. The peer group allowed in-depth, interactive dialogue, further validated the common themes, and thus created triangulation of the data. This afforded me a greater understanding of the teachers' perspective, beliefs, attitudes, and experiences from viewpoints other than my own.

I asked the peer group to analyze the data I emailed and to give their views on the teachers' perceptions as described in the survey and the initial interview responses. This type of group discussion has been supported by numerous researchers for advantages such as encouraging open interactions among group members and the leader, as well as

encouraging open opinions and viewpoints (Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996). Morgan (1988) outlined the purpose of the group as problem identification, planning, implementation, and assessment. I recorded and transcribed the conversations of the peer group to enable me to go back and review the data numerous times. The recording of conversations in this study was very important. This method of collecting data allows a researcher to recall conversations later, transcribe responses word-for-word, and helps when utilizing member checking of responses.

Graphic organizers.

After the first meeting of the peer group, it became evident that the responses from both tools did not always match. This discrepancy may have occurred because there may have been too much deception or too many dishonest answers in the interview process due to the sensitivity of the subject, or misunderstanding of the wording in the questions. To analyze the inconsistency of the results, I repeated the organization process by creating graphic organizers (Appendix D) for each participant in the study. A graphic organizer is a way to define or explain a concept by utilizing visual pictures of information (Patton, 2001). Also known as a concept map or a mind map, the graphic organizer allowed cross-referencing of the data from the participants' responses of the interviews and the surveys in an organized fashion. This organization of data technique permitted me to examine the results from the first two instrumentation tools in one document and helped me to formulate the necessary additional questions for the follow-up interviews. Once I created the graphic organizers for each participant, I analyzed the answers that did not match for each participant; I made a list of new questions for clarification for each person, and emailed a request for a second interview. I gave the

participants the option of a second face-to-face interview, or, for convenience, they could respond to the questions directly through email.

At this point, a second peer group meeting took place. Although the members of the group did not have the actual graphic organizers, I was able to email the data from the spreadsheet. The group formulated additional questions that I needed to address for each participant based on the discrepancies in responses across instruments. We formulated a list, and I emailed their individual questions. I asked the participants to respond to the email, or if they preferred I would schedule an interview time to re-visit the topic in person. All but one of the participants answered their questions via email. I added the responses to the additional questions from the participants to the individual graphic organizers and the participant spreadsheet for further analysis. I repeated the additional questioning for each teacher until that person answered all questions and all the discrepancies in responses were resolved. At this time, I sent clarification of certain questions of the survey to the participants. If they changed their answers on anything, I made this change on the graphic organizers and the spreadsheet. Including the additional questions and then the clarification email, eight participants only had one additional interview. The other three teachers had two more additional interviews conducted via email. I gathered data in the form of additional questioning in an attempt to exhaust all possible relevant perceptions from the participants regarding their view of disproportionality of minorities in special education and the RTI process.

Color coding.

The peer group met for a third time to discuss the final compilation of data. At this point, we searched the data for commonalities and repetition of words, concepts, and

opinions. Several emergent themes became apparent, and we decided to color-code these recurring themes. Coding of data is a common technique used to aid in reduction of data in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mays & Pope, 1995; Trochim, 2000). With the abundance of data gathered in this study in the form of interview and survey responses, and transcribed notes from the interviews and peer group meetings, I needed a way to sift through all of the information. By coding emergent themes in different colors, visually I was able to determine what might be important to analyze versus what I could discard as unnecessary information.

I made a key for the different themes and their colors (Appendix D). This key specifically detailed the concept, a definition of the concept, and its designated color. Because we had to take other people's perceptions in their words and determine their meaning, the peer group was especially important at this point in my study. Interpretation can be somewhat subjective at times so a group perspective allowed me an opportunity to consider my own personal bias and experience when discussed with my peers. This process also aided in the credibility and dependability of my findings by using multiple people to analyze the data. The peer group also discussed in this final meeting whether the perceptions of the teachers answered the research questions or not. Even though the data were not quantifiable at this point, the group was able to discuss possible answers to the research questions based on the teachers' responses. I matched each question to the emergent themes in which provided relevance, and then I matched the responses from the participants directly to the questions. The goal was to find answers to the research questions based on direct quotes or written responses from the participants. These responses were based on the perceptions of the special education teachers currently

teaching in middle school and involved in the RTI process. I discuss the results of the final meeting and the study in more detail in the next chapter.

Researcher's Role

My role in this study originated from a career choice. About seven years ago I changed jobs and became a middle school special education teacher. Over the years as an educator in a public school setting, I have seen students of minority races overrepresented in special education many times. I was always curious as to the cause and often wondered if others in my field noticed how the demographics of our caseloads appeared to be skewed. It has not been uncommon for me to have 50% of the eight to twelve students on my caseload to be of a minority race. If I had ever taught in a school where minority was the majority race, this might have never occurred to me; however, I have taught in two middle schools in the north Georgia area where the majority population was overwhelmingly White. For most of my students to be African American and Hispanic there is a problem.

Out of passion for my students, as an advocate for their futures, and from extreme curiosity I conducted this study to establish if other teachers were aware of the alarming rates of minorities that are not successful in school. Moreover, I wanted to add to the current research by questioning the RTI movement as a possible solution to unequal rates of identification as special needs. By examining teachers' thoughts and perceptions of disproportionality, this study created awareness and enhanced the current research. The responses to my numerous interviews and from the survey offered enlightenment to my questions of awareness, causality, and RTI as a disproportionality intervention. The next

chapter highlights and summarizes these findings based on relevance to my pondered research questions.

Chapter Four: Findings

A race is minority when there are less people of that race in the population than people of the majority race. In Georgia, the White race is a majority race and all other races are minority races based on numerical statistics, mentioned in Chapter Three. To be representative of the population, the percentage of students placed in special education for additional assistance to be successful in education should match the percentage of people of that race in the population. So if 60% of the population is White then six out of every 10 students placed in special education should be White. This is not always the case, and more often six out of 10 students placed in special education in some categories are African American students. In this study, I examined the phenomenon of disproportionality of races in special education in relation to the population in Georgia by gathering perceptions of special education teachers directly involved in the field of study. My goal was to advance the extensive research in the area of overrepresentation of minorities receiving special education services by providing the perceptions of some special education teachers' regarding the present state of special education after the effects of RTI in regards to the numbers of minorities receiving services. I wanted to update the current data and examine the juxtaposition of disproportionality and RTI. I addressed the following research questions throughout the entire study:

1. Are teachers aware of the disproportionate rates of minorities in special education?

2. What are the reasons for the disproportionate rates of minorities in special education?
3. What are teachers' perceptions of the Response to Intervention process as it relates to regulating disproportionate rates of minorities in special education?

The resulting data gathered and analyzed from the interview and survey responses offered insight into answers for these questions. Emerging from the data gathered were two key components: teacher training and student home environment including socioeconomic issues. I discuss both themes in more detail in this chapter as they relate to the purpose of this study and to the research questions asked.

Research Question One- Are teachers aware of the disproportionate rates of minorities in special education?

First, I wanted to address educator awareness of the phenomenon of disproportionality of minorities placed in special education. Every teacher but one acknowledged awareness of the issue that more minority students are often placed in special education than White students, relative to the population, but several commented that it was not a problem at their school. Table 4 shows the details of the special education populations utilizing the risk index and risk ratio methods in each of the three schools. The risk index is a percentage and the risk ratio is a single number that compares two risk indices. Both methods determine a specific race or ethnic group's risk of placement into special education compared to this same risk for all other students. With a weighted risk ratio of 1.0 being equal representation, categories with risk ratios of less than 1.0 are considered to be underrepresented while those greater than 1.0 are considered to be overrepresented. The GADOE (2009) states categories with risk ratios

of 2.0 to 3.99 are at-risk, and categories with weighted risk ratios of 4.0 and greater are officially disproportionate categories, resulting in state reprimand (Coutinho & Oswald, 2006; GADOE, 2008).

Table 4

Risk Ratio of Disproportionality Comparisons by School

Eastern Plains Middle School

Race/ Ethnicity	Number of Special Education Students	Number of Students in the School	Risk Index	Risk Ratio
African American	5	24	21%	1.4
American Indian	0	3		
Asian/ Pacific Islander	0	7		
Hispanic	7	26	27%	1.8
Two or more races	3	26	11.5%	0.8
White	57	387	15%	
Total	72	473	15%	

Johnson Middle School

Race/ Ethnicity	Number of Special Education Students	Number of Students in the School	Risk Index	Risk Ratio
African American	12	67	18%	3.6
American Indian	0	0	0	
Asian/ Pacific Islander	3	14	21%	4.2
Hispanic	9	41	22%	4.4
Two or more races	1	8	12.5%	2.5
White	27	526	5%	
Total	58	656	9%	

Western Plains Middle School

Race/ Ethnicity	Number of Special Education Students	Number of Students in the School	Risk Index	Risk Ratio
African American	7	28	25%	1.7
American Indian	0	3		
Asian/ Pacific Islander	4	33	12%	0.8
Hispanic	10	88	11%	0.7
Two or more races	7	23	30%	2.0
White	104	686	15%	
Total	132	861	15%	

Note. Each risk index is the number of students by race in special education divided by the number of students of that race in the school. This percentage represents how many students in each race are in special education. The risk ratio is the percentage of each race divided by the percentage of students in the White category. This group of students is used for comparison because it is the majority race in the schools. The single number represents a student's likelihood of placement into special education based on rates (Coutinho & Oswald, 2006).

According to Table 4, disproportionality was not significant enough at either Eastern Plains or Western Plains to require attention from the State, but the risk at Johnson Middle School was remarkably prominent. With a risk ratio of 4.0 or greater, there were two categories that were disproportionate, and two more that were exceedingly at-risk. Hispanic and Asian students at Johnson were four times as likely to be placed in special education as White students, while African American students were over three times as likely and students of Two or More Races were over twice as likely to be placed in special education as their White counterparts.

In response to an additional interview question about the existence of disproportionate rates, Participant 2 said, "I do agree that there are more minority groups in special education as a whole but not specifically here. Our minority groups are very

small so that opinion does not hold in my school." This participant was a teacher in the Eastern Plains School so she was correct in her statement. From the same school, the department head stated, "If there is already a high percentage of minorities in that school it would lend itself that there are a higher number of minorities that are identified as needing services. I would be curious to see if a school system with a low minority population still has a higher percentage of minorities identified." This educator implied that a school with a large number of minorities would have more minority students that qualify for special education, but she was interested to know if this would still be the case in a school with fewer minorities. As in the case of Johnson Middle, disproportionality is still a problem in some schools regardless of the numbers of minorities present. Because it did not occur at her school, this participant was unaware that it was happening right down the road from her school. Participant 9 from Western Plains Middle even denied that disproportionality exists. She stated, "I don't think there is disproportionality in special education as far as race. In the past, there probably was, but more attention is being paid to testing and early intervention, in place of just placing in special education." Although the state consistently monitors minority rates, this statement shows that some teachers are not aware that disproportionality in special education by race still exists.

Table 5 shows the risk ratio rates in the state of Georgia and in the county of Plains. I took these rates directly from the GADOE (2010) website, and showed some significant areas where the state and the county need to pay close attention to how the students are qualifying for special education in those areas. Again, the GADOE does not report numbers less than 10, as represented by an asterisk. This table shows the risks for all disabilities and it breaks the numbers down by certain disabilities as well. I only

included the categories where disproportionality was an issue. As noted in the tables, African Americans have the highest risk ratios in special education eligibilities, specifically in Plains County in the categories of EBD and ID. Even though the state does not consider these rates disproportionate by definition, they are certainly at risk for overrepresentation. These data support that disproportionality is indeed still a risk for students in the county in which I studied, as well as in the state of Georgia. One problem with calculating risk ratios is due to such small numbers and the non-reporting of students under 10, the calculations are not always a reliable method in which states can track disproportionality.

Table 5

Disproportionality Risk Ratios in Georgia and Plains County

All Disabilities	Georgia	Plains County
African American	1.10	1.53
American Indian	1.15	*
Asian	0.45	0.65
Hispanic	0.82	0.64
Two or more races	0.93	0.85
White	1.05	*
Pacific Islander	0.77	0

EBD	Georgia	Plains County
African American	1.53	3.20
American Indian	1.05	*
Asian	0.16	0
Hispanic	0.34	*
Two or more races	1.09	*
White	0.95	*
Pacific Islander	0.66	0

ID	Georgia	Plains County
African American	2.19	2.91
American Indian	1.05	0
Asian	0.40	0
Hispanic	0.62	*
Two or more races	0.55	0.85
White	0.59	*
Pacific Islander	0.79	0

Note. All data was taken from GADOE statistics gathered at Spring 2010 FTE counts.

Research Question Two- What are the reasons for the disproportionate rates of minorities in special education?

This question sought to explain the reasons for disproportionality rates in special education. After careful examination of the responses from the participants, I determined that even though they were not always aware of the risk of disproportionality in other school settings, all but one of the teachers had opinions as to the root of the problem. I divided this section into the responses from the teachers by instrument: initial interview responses, survey responses, and additional interview comments.

Initial interview responses.

Emergent themes from the initial interviews were congruent to existing research into the theories behind disproportionality. These theories include problems with SES, teacher training, and environmental issues.

Socioeconomic status.

As mentioned in Chapter Two, socioeconomics play an important role in education, not only in the life of the students but also in the resources available in the schools. In the initial interviews, I asked the participants for reasons that could explain

higher rates of referrals to special education for minority students. The consensus of over half of the participants in the study was that SES directly affects the level of education a student receives. Participant 8 stated, "Definitely there are problems with referral [to special education] in students with lower SES and minorities, because it is documented." Participant 9 responded "Students are referred for multiple reasons: not-academically-successful is the main reason or for behavioral problems. Lower SES comes in waves and seems to be prevalent now so it causes lower academic success." I asked the teachers specifically about issues with completion of homework because negligence in this area could lead to below-average academic performance and a need for additional interventions for school success. Six of the 11 participants thought that low SES and lack of resources in the home were involved when students failed to complete or turn in homework. Participant 11 reported "First, I would look into why he or she is not doing the homework: Does he have other responsibilities at home? Does she have any support? Currently my students are very low functioning and not economically stable." Participant 8 said, "I see this problem with all students as not a racial problem but one connected with SES." Participant 7 added, "Homework is a problem across the board though, not just with the kids on my caseload. SES might be a commonality but not race." Participant 6 said, "Usually the children that do not do homework are the same ones who have no support at home…it is usually the kids …in the inclusion classes. This coincides with race and special education and low socioeconomic."

Teacher training.

Another prevalent theme acknowledged by six of the 11 participants was disproportionality in special education by race due to issues surrounding teacher training

such as inadequate or simply a lack of opportunities to have appropriate training. The different types of training that would be relevant and possibly help regulate overrepresentation of minorities that need special services could be training in diversity, culture, teaching English Language Learners (ELL), behavior management techniques, and RTI. Participant 8 inadvertently supported the need for more teacher training in a broad sense with the comment that "Teachers tired of the behavior problems might refer students for that reason. Also, if a student can't keep up academically for whatever reason, they might be referred." In both of these examples, adequate training in the area of behavior management or in the area of differentiated instruction might be helpful and avoid an unnecessary referral in some cases. Differentiated instruction is teaching that utilizes multiple methods with a hierarchy of levels of support that meet individualized needs based on student response.

The most common response addressed training needs in the area of RTI, and some of the teachers spoke specifically about how their own lack of training could affect their ability as a teacher. According to Participant 7, "RTI seems to be a strong idea…the problem is the lack of training we receive … this makes it not as successful as it could be." Participant 5 said, "My previous employment had more opportunities for training than my current program. It would be helpful if our program initiated more training opportunities." Participant 2 reported, "RTI is the series of four tiers- I have not had that much involvement and do not have much training in the process." Participant 11 referred to inadequate interventions in school said, "It could be lack of training on the teacher's part, we should be better about utilizing different learning styles." With more knowledge in this area, successful RTI practice could easily have an impact on the number of special

education referrals that take place each year. Without adequate training though, RTI will never be as successful as it could be.

Environment.

The final theme that emerged as significant after careful scrutiny of all the responses in the initial interviews was the prevalence of issues surrounding students' environments. Of the three themes, this one resulted in the most thorough responses. Participant 6 was especially opinionated in this area and stated,

> Students that stand out in the classroom as needing extra stuff end up being referred- 'stuff' being emotionally they need more, socially, academically and/or all of the above. My students [those in special education] usually are less mature, less organized, and just less 'with it' for whatever reason. They tend to stand out socially and developmentally which reflects in their academics.

Her statement reflects issues that parents typically addressed in most homes. In their own environments, students should learn social skills or cues, and they should progress developmentally and academically with the guidance of their caregivers. More often, in today's society, students attend school lacking in these areas when their environments are unstable. Students who struggle commonly experience single parent homes, guardians other than their birth parents, poverty levels causing low income housing with notoriously dangerous environments, exposure to crime, drugs, and sex at an early age, and more often a lack of supervision and guidance (reference).

In support of the home environment as a causal theory for disproportionality, Participant 9 stated, "I have noticed that our Hispanic students seem to struggle more with work sent home and this is likely to not having support at home if the parents do not

speak English." While Participant 11 reported "For EBD I think kids are genetically predisposed and then their environment will make or break them. Nature definitely plays a role." Participant 8 stated "If a student does not have resources at home they fall further behind a student that does have resources, such as parent help, parent positive attitudes, and parents with education." Participant 7 supported the importance of the role of the parent in the home by acknowledging that "There are a lot of factors in parenting styles- for example their attitudes towards education, their interaction with their kids, and what the parent values. Children are not old enough to prioritize yet, they are too immature so they look to their parents to decide what is important and what is not." If school is not a priority at home then it transfers to the children that education is not important period. Participant 7 continued by summarizing the importance of the home environment. "Parenting styles and home life cause special education need. Exposure at home makes a difference (good and bad and lack of exposure are all factors). If a student reads a lot or is read to it makes a difference in how they do later in school."

Survey responses.

Table 6 represents the percentages of responses from the participants, grouped into three columns: Strongly Agree or Agree, Undecided, and Strongly Disagree or Disagree. Based on the responses from the survey the participants expressed three main causal theories as to why the disproportionality phenomenon occurs: teacher training, inadequate school interventions, and environmental factors. I noted that overlap occurred in all three areas with the responses from the initial interviews, assisting in the dependability of the instruments and the credibility of the responses of the participants.

Table 6

Frequency of Survey Responses

To what extent do you agree that the following factors may contribute to overrepresentation of minorities in special education?	SD/ Disagree	SA/ Agree	Undecided
1. Low diversity in the teacher population (less minorities that teach)	63.6%	27.3%	9.1%
2. Greater diversity of minorities in the general education school population (more minority students in public education settings)	36.4%	54.5%	9.1%
3. Inappropriate or inadequate teacher training in diversity	27.3%	54.5%	18.2%
4. Subjectivity in the eligibility process (including referral, testing, and determination)	27.3%	36.4%	36.4%
5. Certain biases (i.e. racial prejudice) on the part of the educators involved in the referral process	63.6%	27.3%	9.1%
6. Culturally-biased assessment instruments utilized in eligibility process	54.5%	36.4%	9.1%
7. Perception that minority students are typically under-achievers	63.6%	27.3%	9.1%
8. Less opportunities afforded to minority students	81.8%	18.2%	0.0%
9. Language barriers between teachers and students	54.5%	45.5%	0.0%
10. Students' use of culturally different speech patterns or slang	72.7%	27.3%	0.0%
11. The teachers' negative preconceptions about the behavior of minority students	45.5%	36.4%	18.2%
12. Ethnic differences between teachers and students	81.8%	18.2%	0.0%
13. Cultural differences between teachers and students (i.e. heritage, religion, beliefs, traditions, etc.)	63.6%	36.4%	0.0%
14. Being raised by a single parent	45.5%	27.3%	27.3%
15. Being raised by someone other than biological parents (i.e. adopted, extended family such as grandparents, etc)	63.6%	27.3%	9.1%
16. Hereditary factors (i.e. inadequate pre-natal care, biological transmission of mental illness, etc.)	0.0%	27.3%	72.7%

17. Environmental factors (i.e. premature exposure to violence, sex, drugs, etc.)	9.1%	81.8%	9.1%
18. Inadequate school system interventions (poorly regulated referral process, lack of teacher training opportunities, etc.)	27.3%	54.5%	18.2%
19. Response to Intervention process that aids in over-identification	72.7%	0.0%	27.3%
20. Inadequate special education program or staff (includes teachers, paraprofessionals, department heads, and/or directors)	63.6%	0.0%	36.4%

Teacher training.

Fifty-four percent of the participants thought part of the problem of disproportionality was due to "inappropriate or inadequate teacher training in diversity". Teacher training comes in many forms such as professional learning classes, attendance of meetings by contracted educational guest speakers, and additional college courses. Until recently, teachers in the state of Georgia were required to complete a minimum number of hours of continuing education in some form of teacher training. Due to a fall in the economy and a lack of funds to support sending teachers to continuing education courses, the requirement of 10 Professional Learning Units (PLUs) per school year are not currently mandated. Topics of professional learning include specific subjects such as math or science curriculum, behavior management techniques, inclusion and co-teaching strategies, and diversity training. In his initial interview Participant 5 stated, "Ineffective behavior management in the general education class or a lack of skills in this area" could result in students with behaviors that stand out more than others do. In effect, this teacher reported referrals are based on behavior when in actuality the teacher needs more training in the area of behavior management.

Inadequate school interventions.

Fifty-four percent of the participants thought disproportionality was due to "inadequate school system interventions (poorly regulated referral process, lack of teacher training opportunities, etc.)." School interventions encompass the school's early intervention program, the Response to Intervention process including referrals for testing, teacher training, and consistency within a school regarding all of the aforementioned interventions. According to the perceptions of the special education teachers in their survey responses, over half of them thought that inadequacy anywhere within a school's interventions lead to a disproportionate rate of minorities in special education.

Environmental factors.

Similar to the initial interview responses, the most overwhelming response on the survey was the issues of "environmental factors (i.e. premature exposure to violence, sex, drugs, etc.)." Eighty-one percent of the participants thought environment was a factor in disproportionality. As mentioned, environmental factors affecting education can include the economic level of the student, guardianship, inside-the-home influences, outside-the-home influences, opportunities, exposure, prenatal care, guardians' education level, transient rate, and guardians' attitudes or opinions of the importance of education. Poverty has been linked to lower success rates of students based on some of the factors above such as lack of exposure, limited resources, high transient rate or moving around often, inadequate prenatal care causing physical deficits, and less opportunities in general due to lack of funds (Coutinho & Oswald, 2000; Coutinho & Oswald, 2001; Coutinho, Oswald, & Best, 2002; Kaufman & Smith, 1999; NRC, 2002; Roberts, 1975; Skiba et al., 2005; Skiba et al., 2006). As the most significant category for the cause of

disproportionate rates of minorities according to the participants, student home environment remains an enigma when looking to solve this problem for our schools.

Additional interview comments.

The additional interview questions addressed any gaps in participant responses as well as any areas that required clarification for understanding. I emailed the additional questioning until all perceptions from each participant were exhausted and responses became redundant. The additional questioning actually synthesized the findings from the first two methods of data gathering, and this amalgamation produced two main causal theories of issues with teacher training and student environment.

Initially when asked about problems with homework completion, Participant 5 responded "Maybe the home or if there is no one at home? We offer after-school help or during lunch or break to help with kids that do not have help at home. In addition, they can sometimes get help during connections. It is more likely to be a student on my caseload but not necessarily one of a certain race." When I asked him to elaborate more specifically on his answer he wrote, "Really the parents are the key- if they are less educated and can't help children at home those kids struggle. Plus education may not be a priority at home so it [education] is not [a priority] to the kids either." Participant 4 supported this in an additional statement sent via email: "The value of education must be placed at home- the biggest influence on academic achievement comes from home. Therefore, if it is not valued at home then the kids do not value it. For example, we have Hispanic girls that are taught they do not need to be educated so they drop out early to be moms and wives and not educated women. They will be dependent on the males and just have children." This statement supports the theory that we should address cultural

differences, environments make a difference in student academic success, and it even refers back to adequate teacher training. Awareness of such a cultural way of life can enlighten teachers of behaviors that misconstrued as lack of motivation or ability instead of a behavior that is acceptable in the home.

When another participant was asked about causal theories, initially she stated, "When you call the parent it is effective 50% of the time. The parent is usually completely shocked. They say they ask the student and they say, no, no, no." In an additional interview via email, I asked her to elaborate and she wrote, "There is a big gap in parent involvement. At some point, the parent should know the student is not completing homework. The problem with the parents is on both sides [special education versus regular education students] but it [the lack of homework completion] is worse with the special education students." At the same school, Participant 1 initially reported, "We have tried a homework folder too. This is not necessarily a problem with just my students- it depends on the family dynamic." I later asked her to be more specific in this response and she wrote, "Lack of homework is not a race problem, but an individual issue – we don't have a big minority population so they do not stand out- it is family dynamics that determine the problem." After further probing, she explained to me that the family dynamics she referred to were the home environment for the student. She reported that she thought a student's environment could be beneficial or detrimental to a child's success in school.

The responses that supported an answer to my first research question were closely related and often overlapped in theories. All but one teacher acknowledged disproportionality of minorities in special education, and all but the same individual had

at least one theory behind the cause for this overrepresentation. Responses were mostly straightforward and required little interpretation on my part.

Research Question Three- What are teachers' perceptions of the Response to Intervention process as it relates to regulating disproportionate rates of minorities in special education?

I was not able to answer this question as easily as the first set of research questions because RTI is still new to many schools in Georgia. Even with numerous opinions of the RTI process, there was not total agreement on the effectiveness of this intervention process. Multiple teachers responded in favor of RTI for lowering special education rates of minorities, while a few others were either undecided or against the process in general. Because teacher training in this area was a recurrent theme, I organized this section with a segment detailing the POI training for each school and participant, and then in terms of positive versus negative perceptions of RTI as it relates to regulating overrepresentation of minorities in special education.

POI training.

Through the final set of questions given to each participant, I determined that each of the three schools underwent RTI training in 2007 after the Georgia Department of Education held a training session in Atlanta to prepare schools for the movement towards more interventions at the general education level. Nine of the 11 teachers involved in the study had some level of training. The two teachers with no training were new to their schools and had not been trained at the time of the interview process. Initial reports of training from the participants were approximately one to five hours of training on the POI process for eight of the eleven participants. One participant reported over five hours of

training due to additional education classes outside of the school. Only two participants reported no training in the process; one participant recently transferred into the State of Georgia from another state that did not use RTI and the other participant was a first year teacher who just had not been trained when we conducted the study. Even though the participants were forthcoming about their levels of training and experience, I investigated further into the process at each school to determine exactly how the training process worked at each school. The information in this section comes directly from the assistant superintendent of Plains County and from the school counselor of Johnson Middle School, directly involved in the implementation and training of POI for their area.

Both East and West Plains Middle Schools belonged to the same district so their training occurred in the same manner. The district created a POI team comprised of the school psychologist, the assistant superintendent, and several experienced general education teachers in the district. This team was trained at the Georgia meeting previously mentioned then returned to the district to create a process with training materials for all of the schools. They wrote the manual for the entire school system, which included both of the middle schools mentioned, and were in charge of training the staff at each school. A meeting was held during pre-planning to explain the district's process and explain the implementation. Each of the four participants from this school who reported having been trained received approximately one to two hours of initial training two years prior to this study. The participants reported this process is repeated each year during pre-planning so by the time of the study, each of the four trained participants had received an additional two to four hours of training. No one reported over five hours of training though. The two participants who reported no training in RTI

at all were both from this district and because the district's policy in this area is to train all new employees, both have likely been trained at least once since this study occurred.

The specific number of hours of training varied and can be found in Table 1 in Chapter Three. In addition to their training, each week the teachers met by grade level in something they call "Kid Talks" to discuss their students who struggle or are already in the POI. This type of meeting is not considered training per se but is additional time spent discussing interventions and tiers. This additional time could be included in preparation and implementation time spent on POI, which could be considered part of the training process in that it allows teachers to collaborate on effective techniques relative to POI. New teachers in Plains County are trained during pre-planning by the district's Intervention Specialist.

Johnson Middle School is in a different district from the other two schools but had a very similar process. The five teachers from Johnson received training in which the school psychologist, the school counselor, and the school Assistant Principal directed training sessions during grade level meetings for every teacher in the building. The school psychologist was trained at the RTI meeting in Atlanta, and then returned to the district to train the administration and school counselors.

At Johnson Middle, several trainings were held during grade level meetings to discuss implementation. Each of the five participants from this school had approximately an hour to two hours of training at this time two years ago. As mentioned, one of the participants reported additional training in the form of education classes at a local university, in which the participant approximated total hours to be around ten. The school has not had any additional training since the initial roll-out of the process at their school;

however this school has a similar process as the other schools in which the grade levels meet on a weekly basis for POI meetings. The teachers use this time to meet and then discuss effective techniques in the POI process. As mentioned, this collaborative effort might be considered additional training in the area of POI because the teachers do work together to clearly define everyone's role and effective interventions for each student.

Because the State only recommends certain aspects of the process, such as the four tiers or levels, each school that utilizes POI in Georgia has a certain amount of freedom in implementation. There are no state-created forms, required assessments, exact timelines, or intervention requirements at each level. The State only suggests interventions, assessments, and timelines. In fact, the process is still somewhat ambiguous. Without consistent, set guidelines from the GADOE, POI likely looks very different across the State. As mentioned in Chapter Two, a lack of consensus and guidelines will make this process less effective because no one will know exactly what POI is supposed to look like. Comparisons of success rates will be extremely difficult to make and cannot objectively be evaluated because the process is not be consistent. For continued research in this area, the State needs to mandate certain POI forms for each tier, set timelines for each level, and set interventions as well. Finally, a single method for assessment should be required in all schools that participate in POI so results are comparable across systems. If a student already in POI transfers from one district to another, the schools should be able to look at the child's POI file and assessment scores and know immediately at what level that student needs interventions to be successful in school.

Positive perceptions.

In support of RTI as a method to assist struggling students in the classroom, Participant 1 stated, “RTI is good because we were too quick to refer students to special education… so now this is a lengthy process. There used to be nothing for students in the gray area. RTI is a good thing. We were too quick to say a kid needs help so we would test them and then if they did not qualify then we just let them go. Now they get help in the POI.” Participant 9 responded in agreement with “RTI is good because it catches them [struggling students] early and isn't a path to special education." Here, Participant 9 directly addressed how RTI should help students in need but not necessarily lead directly to a label or placement into special education. Participant 2 wrote in an additional email response, when asked if she thought RTI would help with disproportionality “Yes, I do believe that RTI is a great measure to put in place to limit the referrals. I have personally seen students overcome learning issues with proper techniques in place that keeps them from being referred.” This further expounds on the theory that special education has been too plentiful until recently when teachers started other options for students who struggled but could do the work with small amounts of additional assistance, often referred to as scaffolding. Similar to the actual horizontal ladders needed in some construction jobs, scaffolds come in different levels and meet specific needs of the contractor. In the classroom, students find themselves in situations where they just cannot quite reach the level in which they are striving, but with sufficient scaffolds, they can reach the material perfectly. This supports Vygotsky’s social development theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) which is the distance between a student’s ability to perform a task under adult guidance and the student’s ability to solve the problem independently.

According to Vygotsky (1978), learning occurred in this zone. RTI is meant to offer just such support. The consensus of my participants was that all students need this type of support depending on their developmental level. Instead of needing the extreme assistance of level four of POI, special education, many students can succeed with just slight interventions on a level two or level three of POI. Participant 5 wrote "I think the POI is a good idea because it means not a lot of kids will be pushed into special education. Now they must wait awhile, unless they have a dire need…POI was created because kids used to be placed in special education when now they can just be helped and maybe not placed." Participant 6 agreed and stated, "My school uses the state's POI of four tiers. This process is effective although sometimes the time line is lengthy. This is probably a good idea so that the staff does not jump into a special education label when simpler interventions might be effective over time." Participant 4 added, "The time line-true behavior change takes a while so we need to take our time to see if interventions work. Two weeks is not enough time to see if a student has made the new behavior a habit." In other words, he thought the timeline was justified and necessary to establish if administered interventions were effective or not.

Negative perceptions.

On the other end of the spectrum, the timeline previously mentioned was just too much of an issue with some of the participants. In fact, five of the 11 participants thought that the lengthy timeline of the POI process was a significant downfall of the process. Participant 1 stated mixed emotions: "RTI is good because we were too quick to refer students to special education so now this is a lengthy process, sometimes too lengthy." Participant 3 said, "We use the pyramids of intervention. We also meet each week to

review if progress has been made in classroom using the new interventions. It seems to take too long to get students the help they need to succeed." Participant 6 said, "It is frustrating when you have a child that obviously would benefit from special education, but they have to go through the process anyway." Participant 8 stated, "The only complaint is that POI is sometimes not fast enough but I think it came about because too many students were being referred for special education."

Participant 4 added to valid concerns of POI when he stated, "We use the pyramids to intervention process- it is always a good thing to have the parents come in so often. It [POI] could be better but it could be a lot worse- how do you truly evaluate it?", and Participant 7 added, "Teachers need menus of structured intervention with support personnel showing them how.... takes dedicated leadership, faculty to buy into something like RTI to become effective. ...Good idea, but it is all in implementation...too many teachers try to skate by. This leads to RTI being futile and increasing disproportionality." Both participants were referring to teachers' ability to use POI correctly, knowing the procedural aspects of the process. If improperly trained teachers are not aware of available, useful interventions then the process is essentially worthless.

Another issue with RTI was how different it is from what has already been tried, and what is currently being used at the special education level. Participant 1 expressed in an additional interview email "RTI should provide the struggling learner with the best possible intervention strategies that are feasible in a regular classroom setting, and if teachers are following best practice strategies, many struggling learners can be served in that setting without being identified. We need to find what works for the student and

apply this. Again, what can special education offer that is different needs to be a question addressed."

Summary

Even though there were positive and negative perceptions of the RTI process, all of the participants agreed that any steps schools could take to help struggling students would be beneficial. Moreover, all of the teachers mentioned that the least restrictively we teach the students, the better. In other words, we should only give students the smallest amount of accommodations needed to succeed in school. Also known as a student's Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), this is the basic premise behind RTI and is the goal of the process. The teachers' perceptions expressed optimism in the area of lessening excessive referrals by using a somewhat lengthy process that only offers students the precise amount of help that they need. RTI is supposed to slow the process of referral down, and the consensus from the participants was that some of this will help with the overrepresentation of minorities.

Something to consider though, as expressed by Participant 6 remains in the exact reasoning behind the phenomenon of disproportionality. Participant 6 stated that,

> ultimately the problem lies within the race- I think as racism goes down [lessens]- and surely it will although it will always exist in some fashion- then we will see more minorities do better. There will be more opportunities to excel in life and this will pass down to the kids. This is a slow process. A lot of what we see in education as far as minorities not testing as high is due to history, segregation, lack of exposure and resources and all because of slavery and racism from a long time ago. This continues to show its ugly head even today. The repercussions are

still showing up. As we evolve into a diverse nation, I hope that the repercussions will lessen.

Participant 6's statement supports the assertion that teachers need to be trained in diversity and learn to accept different ways of learning and interacting. Diversity in the United States results in varying cultures. Educators will need to be aware of their own prejudices and be more accepting of differences among children, not just with race but with ability as well.

Chapter Five: Discussion, Summary, and Implications

The intent of this phenomenological study was to determine if special education teachers had certain perceptions regarding the disproportionate amount of minorities in special education classes. I examined the teachers' awareness of the disproportionality, their theories of why this happens, and how they thought RTI would affect these rates. I found that most teachers were aware of the problem of disproportionality. The teachers thought it occurred because of problems with teacher training and student home environment, including SES. I also found that most teachers thought RTI would help regulate the rates of students of minority races placed in special education because of the number of interventions implemented before special education placement and because of the lengthy timeline involved.

The importance of teacher training in regards to special education and the RTI process was the crux of the findings. At some point, every participant mentioned the importance of properly training educators. Many of the participants thought there was a direct relationship between disproportionate rates of minorities staffed into special education each school year and inadequate training of educators. Researchers document multiple issues associated with training teachers to work in schools in which they do not share the same "socio-cultural" or ethnic backgrounds and experiences as their students (McCray & Garcia, 2002). When adding a disability to the equation the issues increase. McCray and Garcia (2002) define socio-cultural factors to be how a family responds to a disability, expectations of normalcy and ability, child-rearing traditions, and linguistic

characteristics. So even though disproportionality was not an issue at two of the three schools that participated in the study, based on research the low rate of diversity in the staff heavily impacts how teachers interact with their students and parents.

Another aspect of training mentioned is the difficulty of properly implementing RTI without it. RTI is a multi-faceted intervention plan that requires educators to differentiate on so many levels in the classroom. As mentioned in Chapter Two, for full effectiveness RTI requires schools to shift "normal" instruction for diversified roles that require intensive training and additional work from everyone involved. All types of educators need to gain proficiency in data-based decision-making, and these roles will require additional training for effective results (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Stecker, 2010; Richards et al., 2007; Werts, Lambert, & Carpenter, 2009). Many of the participants mentioned they had little training on RTI but were expected to be using this method currently in their own schools.

Limitations

Limitations of a research study are the issues that limit the study from being perfectly accurate and without flaw. In other words, a limitation is a weakness in the study, either in method or in resource. A major limitation in this particular topic is honesty. Because race and special education are both sensitive topics in today's society, the teachers were less likely to be truly honest regarding their perspectives, even though I kept the teacher responses confidential throughout the study to encourage responses of true perceptions. When teachers had significantly different answers in my presence during the interview process from their survey responses, it was obvious they were not as comfortable and their answers were not as honest. I addressed this discrepancy in the

form of the additional interview questions via email, but hesitation to admit true perceptions of race continued to be a limitation through the entire process. Participants did not want to seem racist or unfair.

Another limitation of this study was lack of diversity in participants due to the large majority of teachers in the schools that participated being White. The perceptions of a racially diverse group of special education teachers might have been beneficial, not only in more diverse and varied experience but also possibly in honesty of responses. A diverse perspective in any research situation should always be desired if a researcher wants responses representative of the population.

In conjunction with the lack of diversity in participants, there was also a lack of diversity in the schools examined in this study. Because of the demographics of the county, the schools experience a low rate of students from minority races. The lack of diversity in the population could limit the experiences of some of the participants. Without any experience in the topic of disproportionality, some of the participants were not able to expand on their thoughts and opinions of the subject beyond their current experience.

Dependability, Credibility, and Transferability

To establish rigor and trustworthiness of the methodology of my study, I implemented several qualitative techniques to address the quantitative concepts of validity and reliability. I addressed the validity, referred to as credibility and transferability, by implementing member checking, deception, and triangulation of data. Moreover, I attempted to maintain equitable transferability by describing each step of my collection of data as well as the methods I used to analyze and code these data for

generalization and application across settings. To assist in reliability in my study, referred to as dependability, I utilized an audit trail to help me document each step in the research process. Then I documented in-depth these steps of my procedures so another person could recreate this study.

This study utilized the method of triangulation to gather and analyze data: The use of interviews, surveys, and the peer group tested for the validity of the responses from the participants. These methods measured a very similar construct of perception of ethnicity and special education placement, but in slightly dissimilar manners. By using more than three data collecting techniques, the validity of the tools and the reliability of the responses increased significantly. The use of a peer group for objective compilation and analysis of the data collected supported me in organizing data. This collection technique allowed me to delve deeper into possible meaning behind comments from participants in an open and flexible format. The survey used a Likert scale to determine on what part of the spectrum the participant stands, while the initial interview used open-ended responses and the additional interviews conducted through email. The peer group analyzed the responses for common themes and recurring perceptions among the teachers. All of the instruments were somewhat different, but I divided each instrument into concepts within the construct so that when coding the responses, I noticed discrepancies in some responses. The survey also incorporated a series of questions within the scale to test for inaccurate or dishonest answers.

Ethics

There were no issues of physical or emotional harm. I asked each participant to sign a consent form, informing the participant of the broad topic of study, the instruments

implemented, and the confidentiality of the study. Participation was voluntary, and there was no risk of danger. Once the participants completed the initial interview and the survey, I informed the participants of the entire topic of study. At this point, the participant had the option to decline participation and I would have eliminated their feedback from the study. I used deception in this study specifically to encourage honest answers. Once the participants were aware of the topic, they may have been less likely to provide honest answers about race and special education. I provided full disclosure of the entire study to each participant individually so there were not feelings of deception in the end.

Implications

Results obtained from this study can heighten awareness among educators as to their possible bias in regards to special education and minority students. Often people are completely unaware of their own biases and how they affect situations around them. This research might enlighten many to their inner perceptions and in turn, make a difference in the future of such perceptions. The results of this research will provide critical information to the field of special education services so that compliance to laws is adhered. In addition, knowledge of perceptions of teachers in the field can further enhance the awareness of others in regard to the disproportionality issues. Consequently, data generated from this study can also be instrumental in affecting personal and professional growth of staff and ultimately, outcomes for students with special needs.

Recommendations for Further Research

A replication of this study in a different demographic is recommended to address if findings would be similar with different dynamics. A study similar to this one with

more diversity, not only in population, but in participants would be valuable. Additionally beneficial would be a replication study in which general education teacher perceptions were included in the data. This study only included the perceptions of the special education teachers of the three schools, as these are usually the educators who are most involved with students that struggle academically and need intervention in regular instruction. Because RTI is truly a general education initiative, general education teachers should also be included in the sample, as these teachers would also have valuable perceptions to share.

Findings from this study relate to the North Georgia area, so this cannot necessarily generalize them to other areas because of differences in population statistics; however, the findings can be useful in future determination of how referrals to special education are accomplished. The findings may influence how the procedures involved in special education are accomplished. Innovative initiatives may be generated to stimulate additional research that will further the knowledge base in special education and cultural considerations. The findings should essentially emphasize how important it is to be aware of special education's purposes and goals in an ever-increasingly diverse society.

Researchers should continue to study this topic, with an ultimate goal of eradicating differences between demographics in the population and demographics of students in special education. Through awareness and preventative measures such as RTI, the disproportionate rates should continue to be regulated. Persistent work in the area of teacher training and RTI implementation can provide heighted awareness and provide methods that are more effective for students as individuals. The results of this research, based on the perceptions of teachers in the field, can also further enhance the awareness

of others in regards to issues of disproportionality. Consequently, the findings of this study should be influential in shaping further staff development and personal growth of educators. Most importantly, findings from a study such as this should benefit students of minority races with and without special needs. Inability to face the facts of disproportionality, denial that there is a racial disparity in education will not help the situation and might even exacerbate it. Additionally, this study should stimulate research that extends the knowledge base in special education and how important it is to be aware of special education's purposes and goals in an ever-increasingly diverse society.

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Appendix A

Kristy Henry Park
Liberty University
Department of Education

Consent Form

You are invited to be in a research study of Students in Special Education. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a special education teacher. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study. This study is being conducted by Kristy Park, Doctoral student at Liberty University.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to examine teachers' perceptions of students in special education and the eligibility process.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to do the following things:

Participate in a 20-minute interview process and provide honest responses to a 30-question survey. Additional questions may be asked via email.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:

Risks in this study are minimal. The only risks involved in this study are some of your responses are thought-provoking and require honest perception of students with special needs and the process involved in eligibility. Your responses will be completely confidential. Your information will not be shared with your schools and the identity of yourself and your school will remain anonymous. The remainder of risk involved is no more than what one would expect in everyday life.

The benefits to participation are: further research in the field of special education and the opportunity to participate and contribute in this area.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report we might publish, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject or their school system. Research records will be stored securely and only researchers will have access to the records. Responses to your interview questions and surveys will only be

read by the researcher and inter-raters needed to validate the data. Accurate names will not be used, only fictitious ones.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the Liberty University or with your employment at your school system. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time with out affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is Kristy Park. Her dissertation chair is Gail Collins. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact them at Jefferson Middle School, (706) 367-2882, or Liberty University, (423)667-4855, glcollins2@liberty.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, Dr. Fernando Garzon, Chair, 1971 University Blvd, Suite 2400, Lynchburg, VA 24502 or email at fgarzon@liberty.edu.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature:_____ Date: _____

Signature of Investigator:_____ Date: _____

Appendix B

Interview Questions

1. What is your current position, level of experience, degree of education? Have you always taught at this level and in special education?
2. Describe your current caseload in terms of the number of students, gender, ethnicity, and disability. Are there any common themes among your students this year? Have you noticed these common threads before this year?
3. Describe your school's current Response to Intervention Process (the process leading up to a referral to the special education program in your school). Do you perceive this process as effective? What are your opinions on the Response to Intervention movement? Why do you think it was implemented in the schools? Do you sense it has something to do with No Child Left Behind?
4. A student in your class repeatedly forgets his homework. You have tried negative consequences such as break detention and failing homework grades. What would be your next step in solving this problem? Is this a problem that you have experienced before? What did you do? Is this more likely to happen with your students in special education classes? Is this more likely to happen with your students that are of minority race, such as African-American or Hispanic?
5. What are your views of the special education program at your school? Do you feel it is successful? Can you describe in detail the way your school implements the least restrictive environment policy?

6. What is your opinion of how students become eligible for special education? Do you think there is one theory behind a student's struggle to achieve academically? Most people contend there are multiple reasons a student struggles academically- what do you think are the top three reasons for the need for special education?

Appendix C

The Park-Gresham Survey (Adapted from The Gresham Survey, 2005) **Directions: There continues to be a recorded amount of disproportionate rates of minorities placed in special education each year in some schools. The following statements relate to your perceptions of various situations in the classroom.** **Please respond by marking an X in the appropriate box under the response that best reflects your views. To what extent do you agree that the following factors may contribute to overrepresentation of minorities in special education?**	STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	UNDECIDED	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE
1. Low diversity in the teacher population (less minorities that teach)					
2. Greater diversity of minorities in the general education school population (more minority students in public education settings)					
3. Inappropriate or inadequate teacher training in diversity					
4. Subjectivity in the eligibility process (including referral, testing, and determination)					
5. Certain biases (i.e. racial prejudice) on the part of the educators involved in the referral process					
6. Culturally-biased assessment instruments utilized in eligibility process					
7. Perception that minority students are typically under-achievers					
8. Less opportunities afforded to minority students					
9. Language barriers between teachers and students					
10. Students' use of culturally different speech patterns or slang					
11. The teachers' negative preconceptions about the behavior of minority students					
12. Ethnic differences between teachers and students					
13. Cultural differences between teachers and students (i.e. heritage, religion, beliefs, traditions, etc.)					
14. Being raised by a single parent					
15. Being raised by someone other than biological parents (i.e. adopted, extended family such as grandparents, etc)					
16. Hereditary factors (i.e. inadequate pre-natal care, biological transmission of mental illness, etc.)					
17. Environmental factors (i.e. premature exposure to violence, sex, drugs, etc.)					
18. Inadequate school system interventions (poorly regulated referral process, lack of teacher training opportunities, etc.)					
19. Response to Intervention process that aids in over-identification					
20. Inadequate special education program or staff (includes teachers, paraprofessionals, department heads, and/or directors)					

Please take a moment to answer the following questions about you.

1. What is your gender?

2. What is your ethnicity?

3. What is the highest degree you have earned and in what field?

4. Do you currently hold a teaching certificate in the state of Georgia for special edu

5. What grade do you teach?

6. How many years have you taught special education?

7. Have you received any special training in multicultural and/or culturally sensitive teaching? If so, explain.

8. Have you received training on how to refer students for special education services explain.

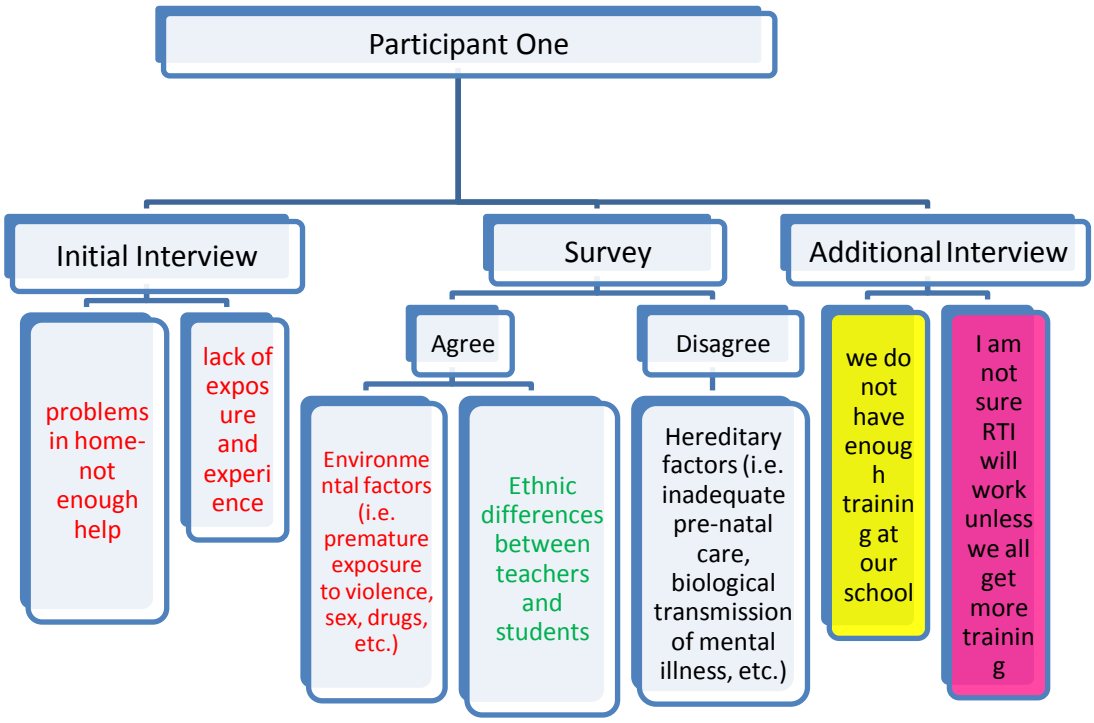
9. Have you received training on how to identify students for certain disabilities (i.e. ADD, EBD, or SLD)? If so, explain.

10. Are you aware of an ongoing issue involving disproportionate rates of mino special education? What is your opinion of this phenomenon?

11. What is your opinion of the RTI process? Do you feel it is helpful in regulating r students found eligible for special education services?

12. Do you think RTI will help regulate rates of minorities found eligible for special education and lower overrepresentation of certain races in certain eligibility categori

Appendix D



Key

SES- Red

Teacher training- Yellow

Bias- Green

RTI favorable- Blue

RTI Unfavorable- Pink