AFRICAN AMERICAN ADMINISTRATORS UTILIZING RESPONSE TO

INTERVENTION FOR IDENTIFICATION OF AFRICAN

AMERICAN MALES IN SPECIAL EDUCATION:

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Barbara Jean Batts

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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APPROVED BY:

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of African American administrators in public schools with their use of Response to Intervention (RTI) when identifying African American males in special education. In order to arrive at the crux of the matter, the central research question was, How do African American public-school administrators describe their experiences in using RTI in the identification of African American males in special education? This study attempted to discover the perceptions of African American administrators in the sub-questions of: (1) How do African American administrators describe the connection of misidentification and disproportionality of African American males in special education?; (2) How do African American administrators describe the barriers that interfere with the misidentification of African American males in special education? Moreover, (3) How do African American administrators perceive the treatment and education of African American males in public education? The theoretical framework of critical race theory by Parker and Lynn guided the study. The study enlisted the experiences of 10 African American administrators of elementary, middle or high schools in the public school system. Interviews, as well as online focus groups and journaling (with prompts), were conducted with each identified participant. Extensive data analysis took place through the Moustakas method with a modification provided by Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen and strategies employed by Huberman, Miles and Wolcott. The analysis resulted in the identification of four prominent themes, (a) leadership, (b) resources, (c) inequity, and (d) the actual implementation of RTI. The findings of this study indicate that the education of the African American male in not equitable with other ethnic groups due to leadership and resource issues.

Keywords: disproportionality, Response to Intervention, critical race theory

Copyright Page

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this work to my parents, Mary and Ken Wiest, and Bishop Albert Andrew Belton. These individuals have instilled in me a passion for education along with the knowledge that God will always be by my side as long as I trust and believe. They have been with me through the struggles that I encountered in this process and the accomplishments that were met, even though they seemed to be small. They have taken my belief in God to higher heights and have assisted me in establishing myself as the true, faithful Christian that I am today. Words cannot express the gratitude and love that I have for them.

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell

in the house of the LORD forever.

-Psalm 23

Acknowledgments

I would like to first and foremost acknowledge my Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. He is my strength and my rock and without him, this dissertation would not have been possible. He constantly reminded me that "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13, KJV).

I would like to acknowledge my family. My husband, Pierre, who supported me through keeping watch over our grandson, making meals, and praying for me when I was occupied with the dissertation process. My son, Pierre, who is a fantastic uncle and would take his nephews out to play or to the mall so I could finish that last paragraph. My daughter, Keira, who kept telling me "You can do it, mom". My daughter, Camille, and son, Patrick, for being the driving force behind the content in this dissertation.

I would also like to acknowledge my teaching buddies; Sarah, Tammy, Jessica, Laura, Faith, Rob, and Lennis. They stood by me and encouraged me during all the rough days, weeks, and months that I experienced. They took care of my class when I could not be there, and they pushed me with love to accomplish my dream.

I would like to acknowledge Melissa and Deb. The phone calls and texting were all worth it. Without them, I would not be at this point. My colleagues and friends may have given me a difficult time and firmly told me to get moving but it was all done with love and caring.

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List of Abbreviations

Critical Legal Studies (CLS)

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Curriculum Based Measurement (CBM)

Emotionally Disturbed (ED)

Free and Appropriate Education (FAPE)

Individual Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

Intellectually Disabled (ID)

Learning Disabled (LD)

Mental Retardation (MR)

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)

Response to Intervention (RTI)

Specific Learning Disability (SLD)

Socio-Economic Status (SES)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Decades have passed since the inception of the United States Civil War, yet the oppression of minorities continues to be evident in many areas of society (Fuller & Shaw, 2011). In the arena of education, oppression is evident through the large percentage of minorities that have been identified or misidentified for special education; most often in the categories of intellectually disabled (ID), emotionally disturbed (ED) and specific learning disability (SLD) (Talbott, Fleming, Karabatsos & Dobria, 2011). This misidentification exists in rural, suburban and urban school districts.

In 2004, the special education law titled, Individual Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), reauthorized with the inclusion of the Response to Intervention (RTI) framework. This framework originated to identify and offer services to struggling students before failure by removing any barriers that might prevent them from learning appropriately, monitoring their progress, and delivering quality classroom instruction (Bell, Hilsmier & Finn, 2011). RTI also emerged as special education proponents expressed concerns about the definition and process for diagnosing learning disabilities (Thorius, Maxcy, Macey and Cox, 2014).

Ultimately, the basis for RTI was the framework would provide opportunities for high quality and rigorous instruction for all students and early, data-driven based intervention for struggling students to decrease the overrepresentation of students of color in special education. Regardless of the intention of RTI, the review of literature provides evidence that RTI lacks a plethora of research-based interventions and assessment options. The RTI framework demonstrates confusion when attempting the process of diagnosing a disability, provides a vague definition and lack of specific measures and criteria for implementation. The RTI framework

also offers no direction for rigorous and extensive professional development for all educators (Bineham, Shelby, Pazey and Yates, 2014).

This chapter will offer a background of the problem through a historical, social, and theoretical lens. Included in these lenses will be the socio-demographic, general education, and resource inequity factors and their influence on why this study was conducted. Components pertinent to the study, such as the problem, purpose, and its significance are explained in detail. The reader will also be able to encompass the significance of this study as it relates to me. Key words and definitions will be included to offer clarity to the reader.

Background

Historical Background

The history of public education is defined by its presence in the legal system. In 1647, the General Court of the Massachusetts Bay Colony decreed every 50 families should establish an elementary school. In 1779, Thomas Jefferson established a two-track educational system. In 1817, a petition was presented to the Boston Town Meeting to establish free public schools. The history of African American education also found its place in the legal system. By the 1930s, there were laws, in most southern states, forbidding the teaching of reading to slaves. Despite these laws, five percent of slaves became literate no matter the consequences administered.

Between 1865 and 1877, African Americans attempted to infiltrate public education in the south for the first time. After the Civil War, African Americans made alliances with white Republicans to ensure free public education. In the end, white children benefitted more than the African American children did.

The years beginning with 1877 and ending with 1900, found whites regaining political control of the South and embarking upon laying the foundation for legal segregation. In 1896,

the U.S. Supreme Court of Louisiana ruled, in the Plessy vs. Ferguson case, there could be separate but equal railroad cars for blacks and whites. This ruling led to the government recognizing segregation as legal in conjunction with southern states passing laws requiring racial segregation in public schools.

The landmark case of Brown v. Board of Education., 347 U.S. 483 (1954) led to the elimination of legally enforced school segregation. Although, in 1957, a federal court ordered the integration of Little Rock, Arkansas public schools. The Governor was opposed to this order. He sent the National Guard to physically prevent nine African American students from enrolling at an all-white high school. President Eisenhower intervened, as he could not let a state governor utilize military power to defy orders of the U.S. federal government. In 1974, the Supreme Court, made up of Richard Nixon's appointees, ruled that schools continue segregation across school districts. However, new educational policies and practices the school districts had adopted have led to a subtler form of segregation and racial discrimination (Fuller & Shaw, 2011; Noguera, Pierce & Ahram, 2015).

One of the issues that has evolved is the over identification of minorities in special education. This issue has been a problem in education since the late 1960s. The greatest over representation of minorities in special education are the African American students (Togut, 2011). In the 1980s, African American students represented 38% of students enrolled in classes for the intellectually disabled. The students represented 16% of the total school population (Togut, 2011). According to the 2017 National Center for Education Statistics report, African American students make up 20% of all students enrolled in special education. Of the 20%, there are 37.3% receiving services for the category of a specific learning disability, 14.8% with speech impairments, 13.8% for other health impairment, 9.2% for intellectual disability, and 7.1% for

the emotional disturbance category (NCES, 2017). Three overarching factors significantly

contribute to the over identification of minorities in special education: socio-demographic,

general education, and resource inequity (Togut, 2011).

   Socio-Demographic Factor. Federal guidelines for students identified with a learning

disability are based upon a medical model of diagnosis but disproportionality identification of

certain sociodemographic groups suggest that the diagnoses may be operationalized through a

social or functional perspective (Cruz, Rodl, 2018; Maki, Burns & Sullivan, 2016; Morgan,

Farkas, Hillemeier, Mattison, Maczuga, Li & Cook, 2015; Shifrer, Muller, & Callahan, 2011;

Villarreal, Villarreal & Sullivan, 2016). The socio-demographic groups noted include

racial/ethnic minorities, English Language Learners, and students of low socioeconomic status

(SES). As socio-demographic groups are identified, the factors that are considered when placing

them in these groups is their neighborhood and housing stability, the home environment, family

health care, and geographic location (Togut, 2011). Therefore, socio-demographic

disproportionality raises concerns about the validity and reliability of the label, learning disabled,

and it does raise the concern that placement in special education may function as a tool of

discrimination (Shifrer et al., 2011). The socio-demographic variables of race, free/reduced-price

lunch status, and family structure are stated to be common and predictive and therefore

contribute to patterns of disproportionality that are observed and experienced in education today.

Research has shown that when the variables of race and free/reduced lunch status are compared

in conjunction with each other, they are found to compromise human development. This

reasoning suggests that the victim is to blame for not being successful; being identified for

special education, despite racism being present in the educational system (Voulgarides, Fergus &

Thorius, 2017).

General Education Factor. The factor of general education influencing the over identification and disproportionality of minorities is based upon African American socio-demographic groups attending racially isolated and low performing schools, enrolling in lower track courses, and attending schools with weaker academic standards and expectations (Togut, 2011). Included within the general education factors that result in disproportionality in special education, is cultural mismatch (Dever, Raines, Dowdy & Hostutler, 2016). A cultural mismatch is the differences between two or more groups of people regarding expectations and behavior. As there is an over identification of African American males in special education, the cultural mismatch theory states that there are expectations for the students' behaviors from his family and himself and there are expectations from his teacher and administrators. The mismatch occurs when the child is of one ethnicity and the teacher and administrator are of another ethnicity. What occurs is a differing of the expectations based on culture. In a study conducted in 2011, teachers and administrators explained disproportionality on a cultural deficit. A study conducted in 1983 provided data that 97% of the time, teachers explained their referrals for special education based on students and their family situations (Dever et al., 2016). When an in-depth observation of other general education factors that lead to disproportionality is conducted, results reveal that there is a lack of evidence-based instruction and intervention practices for children of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. It also reveals that there is an overreliance on biased assessments. The combination of these general education factors contributes to disproportionality with minorities in special education (Villarreal, Villarreal & Sullivan, 2016).

Resource Inequity Factor. In conjunction with lower performing schools, there is resource inequity. Historically, the poor, lower performing schools finds themselves with resources that differ from the wealthier, higher performing schools. In general, there is less

money for the lower performing school. Therefore, the students that attend these lower performing schools do not have access to interventions and programs to assist them with any issues of non-learning. The constant divide among lower and higher performing schools eventually leads to the proposition of school choice. School choice exacerbates the issue of resource inequity as higher performing schools conduct advanced placement courses instead of courses required by law for graduation, build and maintain state of the art science laboratories rather than searching among dilapidated classrooms for a space to investigate science, and obtain highly qualified teachers as opposed to teachers just exiting college (Noguera, Pierce, Ahram, 2015). In 2017, Kohli, Pizarro and Nevarez studied the "New Racism" of K-12 schools and discovered resource inequities of curriculum, teacher competency and physical resources of learning for students of color. These consistent resource inequities suggest a racism in schools that has a psychological impact on students of Color. This racism will lead to a holistic model of counseling which entails the process of taking the entire person and their life experiences into consideration for treatment purposes. Treatment in a holistic model could include hypnotherapy and guided imagery. The holistic model of counseling is utilizing various techniques that are suited for a particular client (Kohli, Pizarro & Nevarez, 2017).

Identifying Learning Disabilities

There are many assumptions as to why disproportionality has occurred. Some believe that there are subjective definitions as to what constitutes a learning disability (LD) (Shifrer et al., 2011). Since a learning disability is based upon a medical model, the overlapping symptoms as well as the inconsistent criteria of cultural, linguistic and gender differences, there may be a misinterpretation as to whether the student has LD (Shifrer et al., 2011). Another reason for disproportionality may be the way students are referred, assessed, and diagnosed. Education

defines referring as the way students are identified with having a problem with learning or behavior. Assessing is the aspect of education that tests the child to determine their level of learning and diagnosing refers to the outcome of the assessment that issues a label being given to a student based upon the characteristics and level of intelligence that they demonstrate. Before the onset of RTI, there were three models to refer, assess, and diagnose in special education. These models were the ability-achievement discrepancy, low-achievement, and intra-individual discrepancy models (Shifrer et al., 2011). The ability-achievement discrepancy model served as the primary model for identifying students with an LD label since the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1977. The premise associated with this model is that students who exhibit underachievement discrepant from their cognitive ability embody characteristics associated with the definition of LD (Maki, Burns & Sullivan, 2016). In the low achievement model, a team would deem a child LD if the child does not adequately achieve for their age or does not meet the approved grade-level standards when provided rigorous learning experiences and scientific-based instruction (Pennsylvania Special Education Regulations, 2008). The last model, the intra-individual model suggests that a child is identified as LD if they exhibit strengths in some areas, such as math and reading, along with weaknesses or deficits in others (math and reading). If a student were to show strength or weakness across the content areas, the student is considered an underachiever (Shifrer et al., 2011). Since these three models of identification for special education presented their own challenges, IDEA 2004 stated that school districts could no longer be required to solely identify a significant discrepancy between ability and achievement as part of an evaluation for specific learning disabilities (Maier et al., 2016). State Departments of Education and school districts would now have to identify alternative methods to utilize in conjunction with the ability-achievement model or instead of the latter

model to identify students with LD. IDEA gave school districts the option of including any

Response to Intervention data on a student as part of the assessment for specific LD (Maier et al.,

2016).

Response to Intervention was to be an approach with which to assist in the reduction of

the misidentification of children in special education (Thorius, Maxcy, Macey & Cox, 2014).

Teachers and administrators anticipated that RTI would produce a different future for all students

but especially those from minority backgrounds (Artiles, Bal, King Thorius, 2010). RTI then

sought to provide some sort of social justice for students of color. Implementation procedures

related to RTI boast that they would fulfill the social justice premises for minorities. The

implementation practices are (a) implementing a generally effective treatment, (b) measuring

students' response to that treatment, and (c) applying a responsiveness criterion in which

students are identified as LD if their score falls below the acceptable criterion. While RTI shows

promise in seeking social justice for those students who are marginalized, there are factors of

RTI that fall short of winning the social justice race. Under the RTI method, students are

provided interventions as soon as teachers or parents observe an academic difficulty (Maier et

al., 2016). If the child makes progress with these interventions, they are continued for as long as

needed. If the child does not make progress with the interventions, IDEA states this indicates an

LD. Those who embrace the framework of RTI believe that students get the assistance they need

much faster and rarely need special education services (Maier et al., 2016). For RTI to exhibit

this positive side, it has to be implemented with fidelity (Bineham, Shelby, Pazey & Yates, 2014,

Maier et al., 2016, Thorius et al., 2012, Villareal, Villarreal & Sullivan, 2016).

Social Background

Togut (2011) shared that there appears to be a correlation between the discriminatory treatment of African American children through school discipline and the overrepresentation of minorities in special education. African American students along with other minorities and those of a lower socioeconomic status receive school discipline that may not be racially motivated but the discipline itself leads to racial separation in school and in society. Although racial discrimination cannot be proved, there exists a form of systemic bias in school suspension and expulsion (Togut, 2011).

If the bias is present in the school discipline of minorities, it can be observed to flow over into other areas in both school and society, especially special education (Togut, 2011). Disproportionality in special education can lead to more than just the over identification of African American males or minorities in specific special education categories. A study conducted in 2013 looked at the externalizing behaviors among African American children and the incidences of being identified for a behavior disorder (Bean, 2013). In this 2013 study, externalizing behaviors were defined as hyperactivity, aggression and oppositional defiance (Bean, 2013). The hypothesis that led this study was a cultural mismatch hypothesis that stated that white, middle-class teachers would rate African American students as having a perceived behavior disorder based upon the lack of understanding and difference in cultures (Bean, 2013). The study employed mothers and teachers of their children as the participants. They were asked to rate the children's externalizing behaviors. For this study, the results showed the teachers and mothers had similar ratings of the children's behaviors. While this does not negate the mismatch hypothesis, it does provide hope that teachers who are not of the same ethnicity as their students will perceive children's behaviors the same as the parents (Bean, 2013).

Theoretical Background

Critical race theory (CRT) emerged from the foundation of Critical legal theory (CLT), formulated in the 1970s by law school professors who were frustrated and impatient with civil rights activism and justice (Zorn, 2018). CLT discovered that marches, sit-ins, and peaceful demonstrations were unable to provide the answers to segregation, discrimination, and color blindness in the context of race. CLT professed that there needed to be blatant attacks on the norms and structures of "Whiteness" (Zorn, 2018, p. 203).

Critical race theory (CRT) commenced in the 1980s with the premise of extending the CLT's analysis of race into education by explaining achievement gaps between students of color and their white peers. Critical race theory (CRT) will be the theory that was utilized in conjunction with this study. The theory of critical race pays particular attention to how the tenets of racism weave in and out of today's society even though there are laws and policies that blatantly condemn racism (Dixson & Anderson, 2018; Creswell, 2013, p. 31; Howard & Navarro, 2016; Jett, 2012; Parker & Lynn, 2002). Theorists stand fast to the position that racism is normal in society today and is integral to social practices and institutions (Harris, 2012). CRT observes that the United States seemingly has historical and institutional structures along with educational practices that perpetuate racism (Jett, 2012). In turn, racism appears to be the norm in society. There are three tenets pertaining to critical race theory. The first is to present stories about discrimination from the perspective of people of color (Creswell, 2013, Parker & Lynn, 2002). The underlying premise for this tenet is for people of color to share their stories of racism and inequality for them to be respected and valued. To expose these inequities, CRT describes the process as "recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color" (Dixson & Anderson, 2018, p. 123). CRT theorists inherently believe that these shared stories will speak

against the rules and policies that allow racism to thrive in American society (Jett, 2012). This study extracted from the African American administrators their lived experiences with utilizing RTI as a special education identification tool to reduce the disproportionality of African American males in special education. The administrators supplied me with their own definition of race indirectly through the sharing of their lived experiences. This study investigated the experiences of African American administrators regarding RTI and its ability to assist in the misidentification of African American males for special education. While highlighting the experiences of the African American administrators, this study shed a light on how discrimination is embedded in education today.

The second goal of CRT is to argue for the eradication of racial subjugation while also recognizing that race is a social construct (Parker & Lynn, 2002)). This goal states that race is not a fixed term but fluid and shaped by political pressures and individual lived experiences. The third goal of critical race theory addresses gender, class and any other inequities that are experienced by individuals (Creswell, 2013; Parker & Lynn, 2002). An example of this tenet can be observed through legislation and policies of civil rights and affirmative action. Jett (2012) describes this example through the lens of white women particularly how they have been prominent beneficiaries of affirmative action and legislation pertaining to civil rights. In essence, Caucasians will promote and accept policies that are beneficial to people of color when and if they can also assist Caucasians to advance themselves (Jett, 2012).

This study utilized the theoretical framework of critical race theory through a social justice lens. Critical race theory is explicit in defining that any CRT research must always be motivated by a social justice agenda (Howard and Navarro, 2016). When there exists some form of discrimination or inequity, the lens of social justice may seem to be the way to rectify it.

Critical race theory is applicable to this study as it provided the guidelines to exposing any form of social injustice as it pertains to RTI implementation and African American males and any possible injustices of racism embedded in education.

Situation to Self

I have been part of education for 21 years in varying capacities. I entered the scene teaching later in life so that I could be a stay-at-home mother. After my children commenced with school, I taught for five years in a mid-size urban school district in Pennsylvania. Upon receiving my master's degree and principal's certification, I was ready to move to the next level. I applied for and obtained an instructional coach position in a larger urban school district. From there, I moved to the position of a curriculum coordinator for the same district and then became a principal.

After entering the doctoral program at Liberty University, I decided to step back and become a Title 1 reading teacher. I currently hold the position of a sixth-grade teacher in a mid to large middle school in an urban school district. Throughout all my years of employment and a variety of educational positions, I have seen and experienced education as it ought not to be. I have observed teachers' disrespect and dishonor children daily. I have also observed a district offering a curriculum that is not rigorous or culturally responsive for the children as it was intended for. Ultimately, I have watched numerous students referred and identified for special education before there were any interventions implemented to produce achievement. Most, if not all, of these indiscretions occurred with minority children, specifically African American males. I am married to an African American man and our union of 33 years produced four children, two boys and two girls. All four of them identified for special education. The oldest child identified as gifted but in Pennsylvania; gifted education is not considered a part of special education.

Therefore, individual districts in Pennsylvania must determine how gifted children will receive services. Ultimately, my son never received services. My other three children identified with a specific learning disability for math. My second son stayed in public education and rarely received the services he was entitled to receive. It was not until I transferred my girls to a private school that they received an abundance of assistance with their identified disability. My motivation for this study is even though there are African American students who eventually receive special education services in public schools, they do not obtain them in a timely manner, and dothe majority of them do not actually need them. I have observed that African American students, especially males, are identified for special education services when interventions at the core were not extensive or rigorous enough.

In my role as a principal, my observations of this phenomenon manifested in teachers who were fresh out of college with no experiences in urban education or intervening with needy students. I have also observed an abundance of seasoned teachers who lacked the knowledge to intervene effectively with needy students and did not pursue structured professional development on how to intervene efficiently and effectively. My quest for this study is to inquire throughout the country if the utilization of RTI is effective in decreasing the over identification and disproportionality of African American males in special education.

This study incorporated the interpretive framework of social constructivism. Social constructivism can also be seen as interpretivism (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), since I as the researcher, will be interpreting the experiences of the administrators with RTI as a tool to reduce misidentification of African American males in special education. Creswell (2013) states that the goal of research is to rely as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation. He went on to state that constructivist researchers often address the processes of interaction among

individuals and make an interpretation of what they find. I made sense of the meaning that the participants' state in their interviews related to the problem and purpose statement of the research.

Ontological

The ontological beliefs of a constructivist focus on the nature of reality. Constructivism states that multiple realities are built or constructed through lived experiences and interactions with others (Creswell, 2013). As a society, we find out about group experiences and interactions from the relating of these experiences by socializing with others of various groups. In this study, I interviewed 10 African American administrators and gleaned interpretation from their experiences with RTI as a tool to reduce the disproportionality of African American males in special education. I have my own view on this matter but to see the bigger picture, the interviews of these administrators provided a fresh and new perspective on the problem that I have not been involved.

Epistemological

Epistemological beliefs in a constructivist philosophy deal with how reality is known. A constructivist believes that reality is co-constructed between the researcher and the researched. The constructivist also believes that reality is shaped and molded by one's individual experiences (Creswell, 2013). As this study commenced, I interacted with the participants to inquire and investigate their reality with RTI as a tool for reducing African American male special education identification. During the interview process, the information the participants shared with me, allowed me to create and construct a new definition of reality with the stated phenomenon. I possess my own experiences and point of view of the reality of the phenomenon but with the input of others' lived experiences of the phenomenon; I can grow my reality into something

larger.

Axiological

In the constructivist philosophy, the axiological beliefs intertwine with the role of values. The constructivist believes individual values are honored, respected, and negotiated among individuals (Creswell, 2013). Values are as unique as each individual person is. Each person possesses different values from the next. For this study, I honored the experiences and values of the participants throughout the research process. The study was not about what I think and say, it was about the participants' experiences and their values of how they deal with those experiences. During the interview process and the data analysis process, I epoched or bracketed myself out. This means my values and biases would be null and void for this research. It is the thoughts and experiences of others that need to be taken into consideration; I repeatedly kept my thoughts and experiences to myself so as not to tarnish the process and results of the study.

<p style="text-align:center">Problem Statement</p>

In 1954, the Brown v. Board of Education, 347 U.S. 483 (1954) case sought to eliminate legally enforced school segregation, but "it is clear that students of color continue to be denied equal educational opportunities with the institution of schooling" (Fuller & Shaw, 2011, p. 2). African American children represent 16% of the total school population while 38% of that total are enrolled in classes for the intellectually disabled (Togut, 2011). According to the 2017 National Center for Education Statistics, the percentage of African American children across the nation receiving special education services is 18%. This represents 15.5% total enrollment in public schools. Of the 18%, African American students comprise 7.1% of an emotional disturbance identification, 9.2% of an intellectual disability, 13.8% of another health impairment distinction, 37.3% of a specific learning disability label and 14.8% of a speech or language

impairment (NCES, 2017). Research on disproportionality demonstrates that there are concerns about the validity and reliability of the label, learning disabled (Shifrer et al., 2011). Facts of this research indicate that the disproportional identification occurs among groups of children that are already socially and economically disadvantaged; these groups being racial and ethnic minorities, English Language Learners, and students of low socio-economic status (SES). Researchers and educators' question and are concerned about how readily the label of learning disabled is distributed to children. Response to Intervention (RTI) was implemented to exist as a tool to address the issue of disproportionality in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) 2004. This act was enacted to ensure that students with disabilities would have access to a free and appropriate education (FAPE). In order to realize this goal of FAPE, districts and schools must have procedures in place, that if a child was referred for special education, a distinct process would take place so as not to over identify any marginalized child. If those processes were not effective, testing would take place for special education identification. If a child were identified, then that child would receive any services required related to the identified disability so that progress and achievement could take place within the school curriculum (Byrnes, 2012).

The problem is there is an overabundance of African American males misidentified for special education services that eventually lead to disproportionality, in addition to, African American administrators not having a voice with their thoughts and ideas on RTI for African American special education identification. The research reinforced the fact that the majority of educators, offering information as to why this disproportionality exists, are Caucasian (Bell, et al., 2011; Parks, 2011; Swanson et al., 2012). When analyzing the education of African

American boys, there must first be an observation of the perspective of how African American boys are perceived generally in the nation.

There have been numerous incidents of African American boys killed by police and community members. In 2014, two incidents that received newsworthy observation. According to the press and court documents, the defendants in each of the cases noted that they mistook a teenager to be a man as they presumed he was prone to violence, threatening physically and had malevolent intentions (Dumas & Nelson, 2016). Upon further investigation of these cases, it is assumed that African American boyhood is unimaginable. If this is factual then society itself has created an environment where black boys just cannot be (Dumas & Nelson, 2016). Since the 1954 Brown decision in education, there is evidence that public schools are more segregated based upon class and race (Noguera, Pierce & Ahram, 2015). With this said, the African American males in today's education are already starting from behind with the educational world forcing them to keep up. When they cannot keep up with the general population, the students are identified for special education. African American children tend to obtain diagnoses with issues that incorporate internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Linton, 2015). Internalizing behaviors are those behaviors defined as affective, anxiety and somatic. Externalizing behaviors are those defined as hyperactivity, oppositional and conduct behaviors. In turn, these internalizing and eternalizing behaviors become a large percentage of why there is a disproportionality in special education of African American males (Linton, 2015). Research reveals that teachers in public education have referred a majority of African American males for special education due to their externalizing behaviors only, more than any academic or medical concerns that are present (Alegria, M., Lin, J., Green, J., Sampson, A., Gruber, M. & Kessler, R., 2012; Linton, 2015).

To determine the root of the problem of misidentification and disproportionality, there should be conversation with African American administrators regarding their role in accountability in the realm of special education. There is no research giving a voice to the African American administrators on the front lines of disproportionality, misidentification, and special education. This research procured the African American administrators' experiences about RTI in identifying African American males for special education and their ideas for formats that may work more effectively for African American males in public education.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of African American administrators in public schools in their use of Response to Intervention (RTI) when identifying African American males in special education. For the purpose of this study, the African American administrators are those employed in public schools that utilize RTI as a special education identification tool. At this stage in the research, RTI is defined as a framework consisting of three tiers of intervention for a struggling student before they are referred for testing for special education identification. The theory guiding this study is critical race theory (DeCuir-Gunby & Gunby, 2016; Dixson & Anderson, 2018; Jett, 2012; Zorn, 2018). Critical race theory explains how racism is embedded in the American public education system and demonstrates how Response to Intervention serves as one possible answer to reduce African American males of being misidentified and over identified for special education in the areas of intellectual disability, specific learning disability, and emotional disturbance.

Significance of the Study

Empirical research is based on observed and measured phenomena and derives knowledge from actual experience rather than from theory or belief (Cahoy, 2016). The

significance of this study was based on multiple factors. First, this study added to current educational research through the lens of African American administrators. This population has not been interviewed specifically for the stated phenomenon of African American males being disproportionately identified for special education although RTI is a significant factor for that identification. There have been numerous empirical studies conducted regarding RTI and its role in education today when identifying African American males for special education, but not one of them have focused on African American administrators and their view (Bineham et al., 2014, Castro-Villarreal, Villarreal & Sullivan, 2016, Printy & Williams, 2015, Thorius et al., 2014).

Second, this study informed the educational community of the visceral impact of the utilization of RTI when identifying African American males for special education. This community of university professors, educational administrators, general and special education teachers, paraprofessionals, specialists, and parents gained a deeper understanding of the RTI framework and its equity for students (Castro-Villarreal et al., 2016, Maki et al., 2016, Voulgarides, Fergus & Thorius, 2017). This deeper understanding of the RTI framework within the educational community essentially can lead to the community promoting an educational system that will provide equal learning opportunities for all children, especially the African American male.

Third, the practical significance of this study is evident in the fact that it involves the education of children, specifically African American males. Across the United States in education, there are inequities of race, discrimination, educational resources, and policies (Kohli, Pozarro & Nevarez, 2017; Noguera et al., 2015; Voulgarides et al., 2017). RTI is to be a strategy that will address a portion of these inequities. This study offered an alternative viewpoint; that of the African American administrator, to determine if RTI has been helpful in reducing the

disproportionality and misidentification of African American males in special education. It also provided ideas on the strengths and weaknesses of RTI. Lastly, this study offered us a bigger picture of how African American males can be educated much more effectively than they already are.

Research Questions

The following questions are specifically addressed in this research:

RQ1: How do African American public-school administrators describe their experiences with utilizing RTI in the identification of African American males in special education?

This question was chosen as the central research question of this study because of the gaps that were discovered in the investigation of literature. Ninety-five percent of the literature investigated teacher perceptions of the effectiveness of RTI in their schools. The majority of schools were suburban schools. The population of teacher participants were of the Caucasian majority. One specific study did investigate administrators in suburban schools and their importance in leading their team to implement RTI with fidelity (Parks, 2011). There is a lack of diversity in studies of RTI and special education identification. This study addressed the experiences of African American administrators providing them a voice in the over identification of African American males in special education.

RQ2: How do African American administrators describe the ability of the RTI framework to effectively address the misidentification of African American males in special education?

This question has been included in this study to make a determination as to whether RTI has been working the way the IDEA 2004 reauthorization had defined it. A quantitative study

conducted in 2011 revealed there still exists an over identification of minorities in special

education thereby increasing the disproportionality (Bell, Hilsmier & Finn, 2011). This study

focused on the population of African American males as these students are the students most

often over identified for special education (Fuller & Shaw, 2011).

RQ3: How do African American administrators describe the cultural responsiveness

of the RTI framework toward African American males in public education?

As the administrators describe their experiences with RTI, they will more than likely

present components that are strengths and those that are weaknesses. During the data analysis of

the transcripts, those specific strengths and weaknesses came to the forefront of the information.

A study conducted in 2012 revealed instructional practices that seemed to be effective in the

Response to Intervention framework through the lens of the teachers (Swanson, Solis, Ciullo &

McKenna, 2012). This study attempted to reveal what truly is effective or not by way of

instructional practices with the people that observe the teachers, the administrators.

RQ4: How do African American administrators perceive the treatment and education

of African American males in public education?

This study included this question to discover the real thoughts and feelings of African

American administrators regarding the public education of African American males. In 1991,

Jonathan Kozol expressed his thoughts on the inequities that exist in education between white

middle-class and poor African American students. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) suggested

that these inequalities are "a logical and predictable result of a racialized society" in which race

and racism are marginalized and on-going (Dixson & Anderson, 2018; Ladson-Billings & Tate,

1995).

Definitions

1. *Response to Intervention (RTI)* – A framework that is designed to provide early

   identification and preventive intervention to reduce inappropriate referrals to special

   education due to inadequate instruction (Swanson, Solis, Ciullo & McKenna, 2012)

2. *Disproportionality* – A situation that occurs when the percentage of a marginalized

   population identified for special education is larger than the total population of the

   marginalized group in the entire school (Shifrer, Muller & Callahan, 2011)

3. *Critical Race Theory (CRT)* – A theory that is committed to social justice and to ending

   all forms of subordination based on identities such as race, religion, ethnicity, and ability

   (Cappiccie, Chadha Lin & Snyder, 2012)

4. *Intellectually Disabled (ID)* – Significantly sub average general intellectual functioning,

   existing concurrently (at the same time) with deficits in adaptive behavior and manifested

   during the developmental period (IDEA, 2015)

5. *Specific Learning Disability (SLD)* – A disorder in 1 or more of the basic psychological

   processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which

   disorder may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write,

   spell, or do mathematical problems (IDEA, 2015)

6. *Emotional Disturbance (ED)* – A condition exhibiting one or more of the following

   characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a

   child's educational performance: (A) An inability to learn that cannot be explained by

   intellectual, sensory, or health factors (IDEA, 2015).

Summary

Education is one of the most powerful resources available to children all over the world. Extensive research and educational studies have been conducted to meet the needs of all children, no matter what their need or degree of the need. Based on the literature, the problem is identified as the lack of an African American point of view in regard to the implementation of RTI strategies for African American males specifically. This study attempted to share the experiences of African American administrators in their use of RTI in identifying African American males for special education. The administrator voices should enlighten educators and educational leaders to the effectiveness of RTI for the African American male. The research background, problem, purpose, significance, questions, and definitions, which are all important components of the study, are explained for this study.

In Chapter 2, previous research and literature pertaining to the relevance of this study is examined. The chapter will begin with a presentation of the theoretical framework that forms the lens for this study. A historical background of federal guidelines and IDEA are presented along with definitions that are pertinent to this study. The literature will delve into the reasons for special education category discrepancies with the consequences of disproportionality. The origins and definitions associated with RTI along with the benefits and challenges are highlighted. Leadership in education with regard to quality and style is examined. The chapter will also indicate the importance that leadership has on achievement in the school and the model for reform that is proposed to ensure success for all students.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The disproportionality of African American males in special education has been an issue since the 1950s when Brown vs. the Board of Education decreed Jim Crow laws unconstitutional and mandated segregation of public schools. The segregation realized an increase of special education labels and classes (Connor, 2017). The reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) in 2004 prescribed that schools should have specific procedures in place to identify any student who is struggling in the regular education classroom. The goal of education is for all students to learn in the way that they feel most comfortable learning, not necessarily in a special education classroom (IDEA, 2004). School districts across the nation took on this challenge and the Response to Intervention (RTI) initiative was originated.

This chapter will focus on the problem of the disproportionality of minorities in special education, especially the African American male. The chapter will also focus on the theoretical foundation for my research. The chapter will review special education guidelines and present how RTI has become the approach utilized when trying to reduce the disproportionality of minorities identified for special education. The chapter will address leadership in schools regarding RTI and education in general. Varying styles of leadership that lead to student achievement will be discussed along with what type(s) of leadership lead to the most significant increase in achievement. The chapter will conclude with a model for reform for all students to achieve and how the number of students being labeled with a disability can be decreased.

Theoretical Framework

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of African American administrators in public schools in their use of Response to

Intervention (RTI) when identifying African American males in special education. Critical race theory (CRT) will be the theory that will thread itself through this study. The theory will be juxtaposed with a social justice framework. Critical race is the chosen theory for this study since the literature that is examined has presented that the misidentification or misclassification of minorities in special education may be due to a covert form of racism (Shifrer et al., 2011; Togut, 2011).

CRT was created through Critical Legal Studies (CLS); a school of critical theory that emerged in the 1970s. CLS proponents believe that the legal system perpetuates the status quo regarding race, gender, and economics. The legal scholars of CLS feel that the law is manipulative of the status quo and creates a false world of harmony through law. CRT was developed in the mid-1970s out of the work of legal scholars Alan Freeman, Richard Delgado, and Derrick Bell. Derrick Bell is acknowledged as the author of the theory. CRT emerged as a response to the lack of diversity among the faculty a Harvard University and the marginalization of students of color from the law school's curriculum. These men along with other activists and scholars were interested in transforming the injustices that were pervasive because of issues of race, racism, and power in society (Gillborn, 2015; Jett, 2012).

CRT builds from four foundational principles. First, theorists make the argument that racism is normal in American society (Dixson & Anderson, 2018; Howard & Navarro, 2016; Jett, 2012). The theorists believe this argument because the United States has perpetuated racism to such an extent that racism seems "normal" to people all over the United States. The next principle of a critical race theorist is that critical race theory does not follow the traditions of positivist scholarship. CRT speaks against rules and processes that continue to give power to European Americans and allow racism to grow in American society with the hope of

contributing to social justice by breaking down some of the racist barriers. The third principle

states that critical race theory critiques liberalism. Critical race theorists proclaim that the

dominant culture does not fully understand how equality and liberty function. The last principle

of CRT is that Caucasians, especially Caucasian women, have been the major beneficiaries of

affirmative action and civil rights legislation. Critical race theorists offer a critique of whether

the motive behind Caucasian support of legislation and policies were designed to benefit people

of color in the first place (Dixson & Anderson, 2018; Howard & Navarro, 2016; Jett, 2012).

CRT can be a way to "link theory and understanding about race from critical perspectives

to actual practice and action going on in education for activist social justice and change" (Parker

& Lynn, 2002, p. 18). CRT in education "challenges the dominant discourse on race and racism

as they relate to education by examining how educational theory, policy, and practice are used to

subordinate certain racial and ethnic groups" (Parker & Lynn, 2002, p. 122). For this study, CRT

will allow me to examine the discourse of the participants and glean from them how they

perceive and describe how RTI could be a practice that subordinates African American males.

In his book, *The Anatomy of Racial Inequality* (2002), Glenn Loury presents his thoughts

on race as it exists in the United States currently. He has adopted three assumptions about race

that he further investigates in his book, (1) Race is a socially constructed mode of human

categorization. Loury explains that humans feel the need to divide people into subgroups called

"races" based upon the way people look or the markings on their skin. He states there is no

biological reason for the mode of identification except for social convention. (2) The enduring

and pronounced social disadvantage of African Americans is not the result of any unequal innate

human capacities of the "races". Rather, the disadvantage exists because of a social artifact as

Loury explains. He states that the ongoing disadvantage exists as a product of the strange history,

culture, and political economy of the American society. (3) An awareness of the racial "otherness" of blacks is embedded in the social consciousness of the American nation owing to the history of slavery. This ingrained racial stigma inhibits African Americans from realizing their full human potential (Loury, 2002). Utilizing these assumptions of race, the point that is evident is that perceptions of race may be difficult to change in short amounts of time. As this study unfolds, it will be important to perceive and describe the phenomena through the eyes of the African American administrator. Their voices will be heard loud and clear. Creswell (2013) states that a "phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (p. 76).

Related Literature

In the 1954 Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka case, Kenneth Clark, an African American psychologist, shared with the court that racial segregation causes psychological harm to African American children. He utilized African American and Caucasian students in a study to show how African American children thought positively about the white dolls and equated them with goodness. In this case, the lawyers argued that separate, unequal conditions in school led to lowered self-esteem in African American students. The lawyers also wanted the court to understand that the goal of integration was to provide the educational advantages to all African American students that the Caucasian students were already procuring. The court agreed that 'separate but equal' education for students of color was unjust and declared that segregation was wrong and should be eliminated (Fuller & Shaw, 2011). Although this court case declared that segregation was unjust, other means of segregation in the schools were being implemented. For example, African American students began to rapidly find their way into the area of special education thereby creating a disproportionality of students of color in selected special education

categories. This study will examine and identify whether scientifically based instructional

strategies and interventions are being utilized with fidelity and rigor or if African American

males are being identified for special education unnecessarily.

Federal Guidelines and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

In 1997, the prominent special education law was titled: The Individuals with

Disabilities Education Act of 1997. In 2004, the law was reauthorized and became The

Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEIA 2004). This act is

known as IDEIA 2004. IDEIA 2004 was originated so that students with disabilities would be

ensured access to a free and appropriate education (FAPE). The law stated that districts and

schools must have procedures in place so that if a child was referred for special education, that

child would first be identified as a child with a disability and would require special education

and/or related services to be able to progress and achieve in the school setting and stated

curriculum (Byrnes, 2012). In the Findings and Purposes section (section 1400) of IDEIA 2004,

new information was included to inform educators of the current state of education in addition to

information to encourage districts and schools to ensure that they are providing FAPE to

minority children (IDEIA, 2004). The addition reads as such:

> The Federal Government must be responsive to the growing needs of an
> increasingly diverse society. America's ethnic profile is rapidly changing.
> In 2000, 1 of every 3 persons in the United States a member of a minority group
> or was limited English proficient. Minority children comprise an increasing
> percentage of public school students. With such changing demographics,
> recruitment efforts for special education personnel should focus on increasing
> the participation of minorities in the teaching profession in order to provide
> appropriate role models with sufficient knowledge to address the special
> education needs of the students. Many minority children continue to be served
> in special education than would be expected from the percentage of minority
> students in the general school population. African American children are
> identified as having mental retardation and emotional disturbance at rates
> greater than their Caucasian counterparts. In the 1998-1999 school year, African
> American children represented just 14.8 percent of the population aged 6 through

21 but comprised 20.2 percent of all children with disabilities. Studies have found that schools with predominately Caucasian students and teachers have placed disproportionately high numbers of their minority students into special education.
(Wright, 2004, p. 5)

Most recently, RTI has been a significant aspect of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015. The ESSA act will require the RTI will be utilized more intently at the high school levels.

In 2011 the U.S Department of Education Office for Civil Rights revealed that there is an overrepresentation of minorities in special education. The Department of Education Office for Civil Rights reported that African American students are the population that is overrepresented the most. In the 1980s, African American students represented 16% of the total school population but represented 38% of children in classes for the intellectually disabled (ID) (Togut, 2011). The 2015-2016 National Center for Education Statistics report states that African American students make up 20% of all students enrolled in special education. Of the 20%, there are 37.3% receiving services for the category of a specific learning disability, 14.8% in the area of speech impairment, 13.8% for other health impairment, 9.2% for intellectual disability and 7.1% for the emotional disturbance category (NCES, 2017).

Disproportionality Definition and Causes

Disproportionality can be defined as the over-representation and under-representation of a certain group or demographic population in special or gifted education relative to the whole representation of the group in the entire population of the district or school (National Association for Bilingual Education, 2002). When describing disproportionate representation, two terms can be utilized: misidentification and misclassification. Misidentification is defined as inappropriately identifying minority students from racial and ethnic minority groups as students

with disabilities. Misclassification is the inaccurate labeling of students who have been identified for special education services (Togut, 2011; Voulgarides, Fergus & Thorius, 2017).

Federal guidelines have stated that the identification of a student with a learning disability is based upon a medical model of diagnosis (Imms, C., Granlund, M., Wilson, P., Steenbergen, B., Rosenbaum, P. & Gordon, A., 2017; Shifrer, Muller & Callahan, 2011). The disproportionate identification of certain sociodemographic groups across the United States indicates that diagnoses are operationalized through a social or functional perspective. Educators are obviously concerned as this disproportionality is occurring only in groups that are already socially disadvantaged. This disproportionality also raises concerns about how valid and reliable identification labels are and suggests that placement in special education may function as a tool of discrimination (Shifrer et al., 2011; Voulgarides, Fergus & Thorius, 2017).

Researchers have defined that there are multiple factors that continue to shape the problem of disproportionality. These factors include the pervasive impact of poverty on minority children's development, the knowing or unknowing racial bias of educators, inequity that runs along the lines of race and class, inappropriate responses to the pressures of high-stakes testing, and power struggles among parents of students of color and school officials (Fuller & Shaw, 2011; Togut, 2011; Voulgarides, Fergus & Thorius, 2017). In 2001, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) stated that "contrary to the expectations is the finding that the risk for being labeled 'mentally retarded' increases for African Americans attending schools in districts serving mostly middle-class or wealthy White students" (Fuller & Shaw, 2011, p. 18).

Poverty alone cannot account for the high rates of disproportionality of minorities in special education although, poverty can be associated with having a negative impact on the

development of children and their academic achievement (Fuller & Shaw, 2011; Gay, G., 2018). The research team of Losen and Orfield (2002) suggested that poverty should be examined in conjunction with the background of schools and communities to understand disproportionality better. The researchers found that students of color are placed more frequently in emotional disturbance (ED) programs in low-poverty schools and that African American students placed in mental retardation (MMR) classes increases as school poverty levels increase.

In 2013, Sullivan and Bal conducted a study to determine the variables that may impact increased disproportionality among minorities in special education. The researchers conducted the study utilizing variables from both the individual student and the school. They were most concerned with the risk of disability identification within the individual and school variables in a large urban school district. Sullivan and Bal (2013) discovered that racial minority risk varied across seven disability categories, with males and students from low-income backgrounds at highest risk in most disability categories. The study also revealed that school variables were not necessarily significant predictors of a students' risk for identification. The study also revealed that the most consistent predictors of identification across all disability categories were students' gender, race, socioeconomic status, and number of suspensions (Sullivan & Bal, 2013). Considering these findings, disproportionality should make educators examine current school policies and procedures related to instruction and discipline and how they may or may not contribute to student academic difficulties. This examination should also be in conjunction with the treatment within the realm of special education referral and identification. This study will focus on the academic aspect of school policies and procedures and how they may be related to the increased disproportionality in special education for African American males.

Special Education Category Discrepancies and Developmental Differences

In the case of identifiable categories in special education, the research has shown that minorities over represent populations in the Emotionally Disturbed (ED) and Mentally Retarded (MR) or Intellectually Disabled (ID) categories. In the case of a study done by Wiley, Brigham, Kauffman, and Bogan in 2013, they found the following: Child poverty was unrelated or negatively related to minority representation in the Emotional Disturbance category in special education. That is, they found that the higher the poverty rate, the lower the rate of minority representation in ED. This finding was conducive with the national analysis of disproportionality in ED. The authors did find that the disproportionate poverty which is measured by the poverty risk ratio was positively correlated with minority representation in ED. The authors also noted that the levels of conservatism in states were negatively correlated with minority representation in ED. The authors suggested that poverty and students of color not being identified appropriately may be factors in understanding the causes of the disproportionate representation of minority students in ED.

Talbott, Fleming, Karabotsos, & Dobria (2011) shared that race and gender were significant predictors of disability status across all categories in a study they conducted in 2011. Asian students were significantly less likely to be identified for special education in all categories. Therefore, the African American and White boys were significantly more likely to be classified as MR. For the category of ED, Asian and Latino boys and girls were less likely to be identified. However, the interaction between race and gender is taken into consideration, the study revealed that Latino boys had a significantly better chance of being classified as emotionally disturbed as opposed to Latino girls, and African American males were found to be identified more frequently in the category of LD. Since this study utilized two models of

analysis, the second model showed that race, gender, and their interactions did NOT significantly predict student identification with MR, LD or ED once the student was settled within their school and school level variables were considered. School attendance rate was a significant negative predictor for all three categories. For the MR category, school mobility rate was a significant positive predictor as the rate increased, the possibility of being identified as MR increased. In conjunction with this, teacher education and adequate yearly progress were significant negative predictors for MR identification. Meaning, students were less likely to be identified with MR in the schools that employed a greater percentage of teachers who secured a master's degree or higher. The MR identification rate was also less likely in schools that met their adequate yearly progress on standardized assessments. Also being a significant predictor of MR was the size and location of the school. In the ED category, the proportion of students from low-income families was a significant negative predictor but the average teacher salary for the district was a significant positive predictor of ED. For the LD category, district size was a significant predictor. In small districts, the possibility of LD identification increased, but in large districts, the possibility of LD identification decreased. Pupil to certified staff ratio was a negative predictor for LD.

The most significant research conducted was disproportionality in Pre-Kindergarten children by Morrier and Gallagher in 2012. The study indicated that there was disproportionate representation in the pre-school population regarding special education eligibility categories. The most common categories were speech or language impairment and developmental delay. Children from American Indian and Caucasian backgrounds were overrepresented in one of four and two of five states respectively, whereas children from Asian and Hispanic backgrounds may be underrepresented. The developmental delay category showed that Black children would be

overrepresented in two states. The state of residence did not factor into which special education category for which children were found eligible other than the orthopedic impairment category which revealed that Georgia overrepresented both African American and Caucasian children with a risk factor of 3.56 and 3.25 respectively whereas the other states included in the research were exhibiting risk factors of 1.01 to 1.56.

The previously stated areas of research are significant to education today, particularly special education. The research offers an insight into revealing data that can shape and change processes that are enacted in schools regarding instruction and intervention. Leaders in education can glean from this research and ensure that they are overseeing the implementation of scientifically based strategies and instruction along with culturally responsive teaching and facilitating of learning.

Much of the research on disproportionality incorporates socioeconomic data. The data shows that students of color that hail from a low socioeconomic status will likely be identified for special education services (Cruz & Rodl, 2018; NCES, 2017; Voulgarides, Fergus & Thorius, 2017). Despite there being disproportionality in the schools across the United States with students of color, namely African American students, there is conflicting research that reveals that minority children, especially African American children are equal to or exceeding in achievement to their Caucasian counterparts (Delpit, 2012).

In 1956, a French researcher named Marcelle Geber, traveled to Africa, mainly Kenya and Uganda, to study the effects of malnutrition on African infant and child development. Her research was conducted through the United Nations Children's Defense Fund as she incorporated the Gesell tests for intelligence developed at Yale University. She found something quite surprising. Despite the expectation that malnutrition would cause lower rates of infant

development, the developmental rates of the African children were so much higher than the established norm. So much so that they even outperformed their European counterparts twice or three times their age (Delpit, 2012). In her research, she observed infants between six and seven months old playing with a toy. She then walked across the room and placed the toy in a toy box hidden from the child. The African American children would leap up, walk quietly across the room, reach into the toy box and retrieve the toy. Beyond the extraordinary sensory-motor skills of walking and retrieval, the results revealed that "object permanency" was developing or developed in the child's mind. Object permanence or permanency is the understanding that objects do exist even if they cannot be seen, heard, smelled or touched. Piaget made the argument that the idea of object permanence is one of many of an infant's accomplishments or milestones between the ages of eight and twelve months. Without this concept, children would think that objects have no separate or permanent existence. This is important to note as this is the first step in logical processing in children (Delpit, 2013).

In the mid-1960s, William Frankenburg and researcher Joe Dodds found that African American children as young as six months old developed significantly more quickly than the American Caucasian infants. Even though the researchers found that these data were not replicable, they conducted the same research some twenty years later and found that the American Caucasian children performed no tasks better earlier than the African American child in their first year of life. The researchers also noted that even by the age of four, African Americans had an edge in fifteen categories while Caucasians were more proficient in three. The research suggests that even when children suffer from poverty and poor diet, the African American babies matured faster in many areas than their Caucasian counterparts (Delpit, 2013).

In 2006, Phyllis Rippeyoung observed scores of African American and Caucasian infants while comparing them on the Bayley Scale of Infant Development. She looked at the race of the mother and incorporated a number of socioeconomic and demographic controls. She found that African American infants received slightly higher cognitive-skill scores and considerably higher motor-skill scores. (Delpit, 2013).

With this research, there is justification that African American males can be and are just as intelligent as their Caucasian counterparts. This research should be studied to ensure educators continue to make strides in reforming and reducing the disproportionality and the great misidentification of minorities in special education. Just because a student is of color, it does not mean that child cannot learn. Educators in the United States must heed to the edict that all children can learn, they just need to find that path that the student learns best.

Disproportionality Consequences

If misidentification, misclassification and ultimately disproportionality continue, then there are going to be consequences. The issue of disproportionality is pervasive and problematic in education and socially today (Voulgarides, Aylward & Noguera, 2014). There is notation that as long as certain racial and ethnic groups are placed unfairly and denied access to important educational opportunities, disproportionality will be identified as not just an educational problem, but a violation of civil rights (Banks, J., 2015; Voulgarides et al., 2014). For school districts, this translates into consequences from retraining for teachers to alternate allocation of funding to general education.

Since IDEA 2004, the federal government has taken strides in special education law by placing caveats into IDEA legislation to monitor district progress in ensuring that students with disabilities obtain equity (Voulgarides et al., 2014). In the 1997 and 2004 reauthorization of

IDEA, three disproportionality indicators were inserted to track whether districts exceed a numerical amount of minority children in special education (Voulgarides et al., 2014). These three indicators measure and monitor suspensions, classification, and placement of students with disabilities by race. With this tracking in place, the government will monitor districts and if the district surpasses a threshold, there is an indication that disproportionality is present, and a citation is issued to the school district. If a district receives a citation, a formal process takes place in which the district must address the disproportionality by complying with the IDEA requirements. Compliance on behalf of the school district encompasses retraining of teachers and administrators in early intervention strategies, instructional practices, and alternative proactive consequences for behavior. If a district receives a citation for disproportionality, an action plan is required containing a reexamination of current policies and practices and revising them for change to occur. In addition to the changes in the action plan, a district must present their present state and plans to the public. As retraining is required for learning strategies for early intervention of students, a district will also obtain their maximum amount of money for special education but 15% of that funding must be utilized for revamping and training for staff on early intervention (Voulgarides, Fergus, Thorius, 2017).

In 2014, Voulgarides, Aylward and Noguera conducted a study to determine if a district receives a federal citation for disproportionality and how do they mediate the issue over time, and if a district received a citation in a previous year, does it increase the probability that they remain cited or exit citation status in the next year? The findings were surprising in that they revealed that the larger and more bureaucratic school districts mimicked compliance but in actuality were not compliant. Therefore, they remained cited for the following year. The findings also showed that districts with a larger percentage of non-white enrollment, the higher the

probability that the district would remain cited for another year. These results suggest that even federal policy is unable to mediate disparate outcomes and racial disproportionality in special education placement.

Response to Intervention Origin and Definition

RTI originated as a framework of choice when IDEA was reauthorized in 2004. The premise of the reauthorization was that policies and procedures needed to be placed into districts to assist the struggling student before they were identified for special education. State education agencies reacted to the non-negotiable policies and procedures and originated RTI frameworks. RTI is essentially a model that addresses the needs of all students through services which include: high quality instruction, scientific researched-based strategies, tiered intervention aligned with student needs, monitoring of student progress, data-based school improvement, and the use of student data to make educational decisions regarding placement, intervention, curriculum, instructional goals, and instructional methodologies (Fuller & Shaw, 2011).

Each tier of intervention is specific in what should be occurring and how it should be occurring with the struggling student. Tier 1 is characteristic of the implementation of evidence-based core instruction for every student (Swanson, Solis, Ciullo & McKenna, 2012). Key components of this tier include differentiation, teacher modeling, the gradual release of instruction model (I do, we do, you do), small group instruction, guided practice and instruction, and project-based activities to name just a few. Tier 2 is characterized by intervention for a struggling student in Tier 1 to further prevent mathematics and reading difficulties along with progress monitoring to assess the response to treatment. This intervention could be provided by Title 1 reading and math teachers, after-school programs and differentiated small group instruction with teachers other than the core teacher. Tier 2 intervention is implemented with

small groups of students utilizing explicit and systematic instructional procedures. Tier 3 intervention is provided for those students who require even more intense intervention and intensive focused instruction. Groups are even smaller than Tier 2 and instruction is specific to every student need (Swanson et al., 2012).

Ultimately, the main goal of education is that all children learn as Bell, Hilsmier and Finn (2011) stated that exact goal in their research on the impact of RTI on minority and non-minority students. Bell and his associates concurred in their research that early identification of students was and is a priority for RTI in addition to the elimination of labeling students (Bell, et al., 2011). The authors believed there needs to be a step prior to the special education referral. This step occurs when the teacher requests assistance with the student in either the area of academic or behavioral intervention. The teacher requests can be considered a pre-referral intervention process and is an excellent strategy as it prevents referrals from occurring by assisting the teachers and students with the presenting problems in the context of the general education classroom. These interventions provide the support necessary to maintain the student in the general education classroom if possible (Council for Exceptional Children, 2002). The pre-referral process will a) document difficulties the student may be having with instruction or behavior and determine possible reasons for the problem, b) provide and document classroom modifications and/or other strategies, c) assess interventions to ensure that they are appropriate and successful, d) monitor the students' progress for a significant period of time, and e) identify students for whom the learning and/or behavioral difficulty persists in spite of suggested interventions (Council for Exceptional Children, 2002).

Benefits of RTI

As with all new pedagogies, strategies, and textbooks in education, there are benefits and challenges. Response to Intervention offers numerous benefits that will ultimately lead to student achievement. RTI offers early identification of students with academic difficulties (Graves & Mitchell, 2011). To identify this early identification, educational personnel engage in multiple sessions of benchmark testing, diagnostic testing, and progress monitoring with the students. RTI's premise of early identification has proven to be an intended outcome for the model. The impact of RTI has demonstrated an overall reduction is students identified with disabilities thereby garnering viable referrals for special education testing (Castro-Villarreal, Villarreal & Sullivan., 2016). Early identification through RTI involves the expertise of teachers being able to identify a struggling student. In turn, the teacher will accommodate this student through a series of interventions on their level by recommendation of student support teams. This team, along with the teacher, problem-solve an approach for the child that is individualized and differentiated (Villarreal et al., 2016). The time frame for these interventions, at the core level, is usually one month. If at the end of the month the team observes no progress, the child will progress to a more specialized aspect of intervention. Graves and Mitchell (2011) have also stated that RTI offers the protocol of how student issues are presented and engaged with an at risk instead of a deficit model. By giving a standardized process, RTI may also reduce the identification biases that could be present in the special identification process.

In 2014, Thorius, Maxcy, Macey and Cox conducted research that produced an analysis of how RTI was implemented in an urban school setting. They related that RTI was lauded for its high-quality and rigorous instruction for all students in addition to the early intervention that would reduce the number of students of color being identified for special education (Thorius, et

al., 2014). They also recognized that RTI definitely had the potential to address any injustices that may occur with underserved students.

The main precept of RTI in Tier 1 is that there will be high-quality instruction along with intense scrutiny of the data. These elements are important in education as they will ultimately provide instruction that engages students and leads them to academic success. In 2012, Swanson, Solis, Ciullo, and McKenna investigated the perceptions of special education teachers regarding RTI. They found that these teachers lauded RTI because of its early identification of students thereby allowing them to provide targeted intervention quickly. They also found that the teachers embraced the idea of RTI based upon its ability to increase the opportunities to work with colleagues through the problem-solving process and intense data review meetings. The teachers responded in the study with the idea that "RTI really emphasizes that they are not your kids. They are not my kids. They are all of our kids, and we are interventionists for the whole school" (Swanson, et al., 2012, p. 120).

Challenges of RTI

Just as there are benefits with RTI, there are also challenges that arise to take away the essence of what RTI was meant to be. The research of Swanson, Solis, Ciullo, and McKenna in 2012 conducted with special education teachers revealed the challenges of implementing RTI presented in the form of schedules being consistently strained and paperwork being excessive and difficult to finish in one day. In this 2012 study, the special education teachers also indicated that scheduling and coordinating intervention services for the vast majority of students that required it was quite difficult (Swanson, et al., 2012). It came to the point that when students are removed from general education classes for intervention, teachers are complaining because these students are not in class to receive their general instruction and ultimately a grade.

While educators have been excited to observe that the RTI framework and strategy seems to be a fairer indicator of identifying students with learning disabilities as opposed to IQ testing of students of diverse backgrounds, research shows that in empirically based interventions, there are rarely any African American children in the samples (Graves & Mitchell, 2011). Graves and Mitchell found there is a significant gap in intervention research particularly with the adaptations and treatment needed with ethnically diverse students. They also found that in the National Research Council and the American Psychological Association, research studies did not indicate the racial composition of their samples or studies completely obliterated the inclusion of African American participants or at least the identification of them (2011). Thus, there is not much evidence that RTI improves the disproportionality of African Americans. The National Center for Learning Disabilities/RTI Action Network has found that even with RTI intervention taking place, referral and placement rates for special education continued to be somewhat consistent. Another challenge that Graves and Mitchell discovered is that when the discrepancy between IQ and achievement is removed from the special education identification process, there is no longer an intelligence test for special education eligibility which plays an important role as the definition of a learning disability includes a deficit in neurological functioning. Schools that only utilize the RTI model for special education identification cannot determine if there is a deficit in neurological functioning since no assessment of such is being utilized (Graves & Mitchell, 2011).

As administrators, teachers, and staff have offered their input to the challenges of RTI, they have concluded that RTI encounters a plethora of pitfalls. RTI incorporates a lack of research-based interventions and produces a lack of clarity in the process of diagnosing a disability. The framework offers a vague definition of its purpose, provides a lack of rigorous

professional development, and needs a more defined explanation of the development and implementation of the frameworks in addition to offering a lack of defined measures and criteria utilized in implementation (tiering) (Bineham, Shelby, Pazey & Yates, 2014; Linton, 2015; Castro-Villarreal, Villarreal & Sullivan, 2016). The implementation of RTI in any school requires a shift in schedules, staff, and resources. Administrators have expressed their concerns for the actual implementation of an intervention period. In lieu of making significant changes as are needed with RTI implementation, some administrators feel that adding intervention time is rigorous enough to address struggling students when in actuality the core instruction should be targeted for the intense makeover (Printy & Williams, 2015).

Leadership

Understanding leadership in education is pertinent to this proposed study as it will revolve around the experiences of African American administrators with RTI in general and the use of it as a tool for special education identification with African American males. In this section, leadership will be defined and described within the parameters of qualities and styles. Leadership will be examined regarding student achievement and how leaders are the people that begin and continue the charge for equity and fairness for all children.

Leadership Defined

Leadership is the process of persuasion by which a person induces a group of people to pursue thoughts and objectives held by the leader or shared by the leader and followers (Fullan, et. al., 2007). In the United States today, there is a President (nation leader), Pastor (church leader), Principal (school leader), Chief Executive Officer (CEO) (company leader) and Superintendents (school district leaders). These leaders influence many people a day in one way

or another. The aspect that needs to be thought about is if they are effective and are they successful at how their role guides them every day.

Blackaby and Blackaby (2011, p. 34) provided a comprehensive definition of leadership. They state that:

- "Leadership over human beings is exercised when persons with certain motives and purposes mobilize, in conflict with others, resources to arouse, engage or satisfy the motives of the followers"

- "Leadership is influence"

- "A person influencing people to accomplish a purpose"

Blackaby and Blackaby (2011) go on to state that leaders lead people to achieve their goals or goals held by their followers. Leadership happens when you can move people from where they are to where they ought to be. Ultimately, a leader is not a leader if they do not have people who believe in the leader's tenents of leading, their morals and values, and their style of leading. (Blackaby & Blackaby, 2011).

Leadership Qualities

Leadership is ultimately about the ability to influence others (DuFour & Marzano, 2011). When there is a factor of influence on others, that influence could be positive or negative depending upon the leader and the follower. To achieve a climate and culture of success as a leader in an urban school district, the influence that is exerted by the leader should be one of a positive nature. There are many viewpoints on the characteristics or qualities that a great leader should possess but there are only a few overarching main qualities that are expressed that should be embraced by leaders if they wish to be successful. Effective leaders realize that nothing can be accomplished on their own, they must have help. They also realize that the ability to lead is a

skill that not everyone can do. Effective leaders acknowledge that leadership capacity is distributed to all stakeholders in an organization and is accessible to those who wish to make a difference. Kouzes & Posner have defined the habits of exemplary leaders. They indicate that leaders should model the way, being examples for all to see. They say that a leader should inspire a shared vision, not a vision that is just theirs. An exemplary leader should challenge the process, not just settle for mediocre, push the envelope and create new ideas. An exemplary leader enables others to act and ultimately an exemplary leader will encourage the heart (Kouzes & Posner, 2012).

In education, there are many leaders: the superintendent, curriculum coordinators, principals, and teachers. This study will focus on the role of the principal as a leader and the qualities that they may exhibit for success in their schools regarding RTI in identifying African American males for special education. Leaders need to lead change and they do this through a vision. Schwahn and Spady (2011) state that leaders go where others fear to tread. Gardner (2006) has reinforced the notion of effective and successful leaders holding and presenting a vision by stating that leaders think for and see the bigger picture. He states that leaders go beyond the tasks and activities for the day in addition to their vision going above and beyond the present. An effective leader is a person who "catalyzes commitment to and exhibits a vigorous pursuit of a clear and compelling vision, stimulating higher performance standards" (Collins, 2001, p. 20). Essentially, a great leader with a vision is a person that exhibits courage, courage without being anxious, unfocused, and inaccurate, and courage that translates into creativity that translates into action and results (Schwahn and Spady, 2010).

Great leaders also exhibit core values and principles. Depending upon who is talking, the core values and principles that are stated will vary from person to person but will always show a

connection. Collins (2001) states that leaders will "build enduring greatness through a blend of personal humility and professional will" (pg 20). Personal humility and professional will encompass varying character traits that have been defined by Schwahn and Spady (2010); Blackaby & Blackaby, (2011); Fullan, (2007) as integrity, courage, honesty, reflection, commitment, productivity, teamwork, openness, excellence, and risk taking.

There are many leaders who are attempting to secure a following when they should be taking more time and energy to develop their character to lead. Values and principles are the "bottom line" in being an effective and successful leader. Values and principles influence everything that is performed in life; the way a person responds to people, the choices that are made and commitment. Values and principles, when coming from a great and successful leader, are essentially the guide needed for all decisions being made for the greater good of the children in school (Blackaby & Blackaby, 2011).

Leadership Styles

Mary Parker Follett was a woman in a man's world in the 1930s and 1940s. She offers insight to those in leadership positions today, whether they be male or female. She believed that conflict should be utilized to understand problems. Thus, a leader should step back and observe the "bigger picture" and work with others to obtain the vision.

In schools, the goal is to increase student learning so that students can become productive citizens of the 21st century. How that goal is achieved is under the tutelage of the leader, the principal. Principals must feel comfortable in their leadership style to lead others. The goal of leadership in an organization is not dictatorship or fear but buy-in and support. Until buy-in and support manifest within an organization, limited achievement or success will occur (Follett, 1995).

Bird and Wang (2013) define the four chosen styles of leadership as: *democratic-* the leader includes others in making decisions and formulating goals and objectives; *situational-* the leaders applies different patterns of behavior in response to the circumstances at hand being more direct and unilateral in making decisions during emergencies yet being more inclusive of others when time permits; *servant-* the leader is intent mostly with serving the needs of others as opposed to seeking accomplishments for her or himself; and *transformational-* the leader focuses on improvement of organizational achievement through purposeful change rather than just maintaining the status quo. Bird and Wang summarized their findings with a working definition of what authentic leadership should consist of, that is being active rather than passive, believing that accomplishing tasks are just as important as developing followers, reading and empathizing with people who are different from themselves and have situational awareness in their settings and focus on identifying and building on strengths rather than trying to correct or punish weaknesses (Bird & Wang, 2013).

Leadership in education is the antithesis to achievement and success. Based upon the literature, a principal can engage in one of the three broadly defined areas of leadership; transformational, transactional and passive/avoidant. Transformational leadership encompasses the behaviors of; influence on others due to the leader's expressed values and beliefs and the leader's ability to earn respect from staff. In addition, transformational leadership inspires a desire to act beyond self-interest and provides influence upon others due to the leader's personal charisma. A transformational leader can affect the consciousness of a positive group goal and facilitate creative thinking. Finally, the transformational leader possesses an innate ability to customize his or her approach to their followers (Maier et al., 2016).

In contrast to transformational leadership, there is the concept of transactional leadership which is ultimately defined by behaviors that focus on consequences. The first of these behaviors is where the principal will provide rewards to their employees for the desired result. The second exhibited behavior is when the leader will correct the employee's behavior when they are deviating from expectations previously set by the leader (Maier, et al., 2016). This type of leadership will typically provide unsatisfactory evaluations to the employee when they have a less than stellar teaching demonstration instead of offering professional development and guidance to the employee for improvement. It is typically this type of leadership that employees feel anxious and are fearful of experimenting with new ideas in the classroom.

The last type of leadership that is found in education is one of passive/avoidant leadership. This type of leadership also exhibits two types of behaviors. First is the behavior of leading in a passive way. The leader exhibits the same characteristic of offering consequences to staff that veer from the expectations but only after the problems are brought to the leader's attention. The second behavior is laissez-faire or hands-off leadership attitude that allows employees to deal with all problems with no support or intervention until the situation escalates out of control.

Life encounters varying forms of leadership. Lee Cockerell believed that he studied under the ultimate leader and his form of leading. Walt Disney provided an exemplary example of leadership through 1) making sure that everyone matters and they know it, 2) knowing the team, 3) making sure the team knows you, 4) greeting others with sincerity, 5) reaching out to everyone on the team, 6) making yourself available, 7) listening to understand, 8) communicating clearly, directly, and honestly, 9) standing up for the excluded, 10) forgetting

about the chain of command, 11) no micromanaging, 12) designing a culture, and 13) treating

people the way students should be treated (Cockerell, 2008).

Leadership and Achievement

In 2006, Timothy Waters and Robert Marzano, in conjunction with Mid-continent

Research for Education and Learning (McREL), conducted a meta-analysis of research on the

influence of school district leaders and their impact on student performance. In their study, they

found there were four overarching themes related to leadership and student achievement. The

following four themes identified from the study are: 1) District-level leadership matters, 2)

Effective superintendents focus their efforts on creating goal-oriented districts, 3) Superintendent

tenure is positively correlated with student achievement and 4) Defined-autonomy (Waters &

Marzano, 2006).

Former Secretary of Education William Bennett once characterized superintendents as

"blobs". He defined superintendents as those people who work outside of the classroom, soaking

up resources and resisting reforms without contributing to student achievement (Waters &

Marzano, 2006). The research that Marzano and Waters conducted through McREL stated quite

the contrary and made the edict that district leadership does matter. Not only does it matter but

when district-level leaders and principals effectively address specific responsibilities, they can

have a profound and positive impact on student achievement (Waters & Marzano, 2006).

The findings of Marzano and Waters have explicitly provided a recipe for hiring and

maintaining effective superintendents melding into the hiring of principals and assistant

principals. If student achievement is the goal of education, then the superintendent and principal

must be a part of the solution, not the problem. Administration in a district sets the tone and

culture for the entire school district. For example, in North Carolina, student achievement has

increased. The reason for the increase is that administration in the district and school leadership has empowered teachers to take ownership of decision making and planning. This empowerment has led to an increase in the teachers' sense of efficacy which led to an increase in student achievement. Teachers are making decisions about curriculum, resources, and school improvement as a whole. Creating this structure has allowed buy-in with teachers. For this transformation to take place, administrators needed to create the appropriate environment to include providing opportunities for teachers to make decisions, to build trust and rapport and to collaborate with peers (Stegall & Linton, 2012).

"Characterizing instructional leadership as the principal's central role has been a valuable first step in increasing student learning" (Fullan, 2002, p. 17). Leadership is second to strong and effective classroom instruction among all factors that contribute to student achievement and success (Vitaska, 2008; Waters & Marzano, 2006). Leadership at the building level is the role of the principal and has evolved from being a manager to an instructional leader (Vitaska, 2008). As an instructional leader, the principal needs to establish a shared vision and build consensus regarding the issue of school improvement. The principal also needs to create a culture of learning thereby providing strong reasoning why students would want to learn. As an instructional leader, the principal should establish the expectations for continuous and on-going improvement by engaging in staff development thereby becoming an active participant in classroom learning improvement. A strong building instructional leader should also serve as a model in the building with both teachers and students integrating time for coaching teachers to develop their knowledge and skills; thereby being the lead teacher and learner in the building (Fullan, 2002).

School Turnaround Model

The most pressing reform in education today is school turnaround in the lowest performing schools. The term school turnaround emerged from the School Improvement Grants (SIG) and Race to the Top Grant under the tutelage of Former President Barack Obama. Under these grants, a receiving district would choose one of four intervention models to implement in their lowest performing schools. One of these intervention models was school turnaround. These grants foresee the need for fresh and innovative leadership as it directly impacts student achievement. Research is abundant in the information it offers regarding leadership styles. In the Turnaround model, the school principal is replaced by a proven and effective leader who exhibits characteristics and competencies that ensure student success (Hitt, Woodruff, Meyers & Zhu, 2018). These leaders have demonstrated inspiration and motivation with others. They take initiative and persist with focus on the challenges in the school and developing strategies to address said challenges. These leaders elicit intended responses meaning that they take action to affect the actions and thinking of others. A turnaround leader builds capacity through accountability and support in addition to demonstrating a strong commitment to students. These leaders foresee problems and take action by utilizing inquiry to create solutions and solve them (Hitt, et al., 2018).

Model for Reform

As one observes the plethora of research conducted on disproportionality and the possible causes for it, there must be a way or ways to address it in a meaningful and purposeful way. One way that this issue could be addressed is to prepare teachers better for teaching in diverse classrooms (Fuller & Shaw, 2011). "Teacher education programs must address the curricular needs of their pre-service students by ensuring preparation in the areas of diversity and

multicultural education" (Becker, 2004, p. 9). Educators who are a part of referring for or making special education referrals must realize and recognize how their culture differs from that of their diverse student population. When there are differences in culture, there are differences in knowledge, values, and communication. These differences will intensify the likelihood of there being biased information and the unintentional consequences that will follow (Becker, 2004).

There are numerous educator and politicians who also want to interject their thoughts on reducing disproportionality. These thoughts and ideas consist of developing a district-wide vision for the education of all students; forming policymaking bodies that include community members; involving families; recruiting racially and culturally diverse staff; enhancing learning through relevant curriculum; providing teachers that can distinguish the characteristics of a disability from characteristics that reflect cultural differences, knowledge, skills, and experience for instruction of racially diverse students with disabilities, and providing better conceptual understanding of the variables that influence overrepresentation (Togut, 2011).

Harry, Klinger, and Hart (2005) have stated that research findings should shift the focus of blaming minority children and their families for the low achievement and disabilities to placing greater responsibility on schools and school policies that directly affect them. The researchers' 2005 study revealed there are widespread stereotypes about African American families fed to the inner-city school. Lacking first-hand knowledge, teachers listen and believe without investigating for themselves. These perceptions then feed into lowered expectations for both student and family thereby festering into a substandard education. There has been an air of "blaming the victim" when it comes to low achievement and disabilities (McDermott & Varenne, 1995).

One idea that emerged with the reauthorization of IDEA, was the diagnostic model of RTI. Although RTI brought about numerous complaints and criticisms as opposed to the ability-achievement discrepancy, low-achievement, and intra-individual discrepancy models, its intent was to reduce disproportionality. The implementation of the three tiers of RTI could be described as, a) the receipt of research-based instruction for all students, b) observation of all students in response to research-based instruction, and c) individualized intensive interventions and services for students in need (Bradley, Danielson, & Doolittle, 2007).

A study conducted by Bell, Hilsmier, and Finn in 2013 showed the impact of RTI on minority and non-minority special education referrals in a K-5 setting. The results provided the implications for practice and policy in schools. Primarily, the descriptive data from 2010 and 2011 showed that minorities were overrepresented in Tier 2 referrals in third and fourth grades. The data also revealed that Kindergarten and first-grade referrals to Tier 2 was significantly lower than the minority representation in these grades. The study also revealed that there was an overrepresentation of minority referrals from third grade as opposed to non-minority referrals. Overall, the study confirmed that the percentage of minority and non-minority students in special education after the implementation of RTI was significant with the increase of minority children being served in special education thereby leading to disproportionality. Even though the results were negative regarding RTI implementation, the researchers shared the study limitations of RTI training and implementation not being consistent and compromised. When done with consistency and validity, the researchers believe that RTI is "a promising framework that allows educators to focus and differentiate classroom instruction and assessments to provide early intervention for all students" (Bell, Hilsmier, & Finn, 2013, p. 15).

Summary

This chapter offers a background, through the lens of the critical race theory, of the misidentification and ultimately the disproportionality of black males in special education and how Response to Intervention was formulated to be a strategy that assisted in guiding educators to make better choices when considering any student to be identified as a participant in special education. The literature that exists on the utilization of RTI as a special education identification tool for African American males contains information primarily from Caucasian participants. to offer another perspective, this study is planned to hear the experiences of African American administrators with their use of RTI in reducing the disproportionality of African American males in special education. This study will allow the African American leader to be heard exponentially regarding the education of African American males. In Chapter 3, the method and in-depth description of the study design are presented. Along with the required elements of the design described in detail, the chapter will include the research questions, setting, procedures and the methods for data collection and data analysis. In addition to these elements, Chapter 3 will provide a brief description of the participants whose voices will be the essence of the study.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the experiences of African American administrators in public schools in their use of Response to Intervention (RTI) when identifying African American males in special education. The literature indicated a gap in research that revealed that African American administrators have not been able to express their voice with their experiences with RTI in a qualitative study.

This chapter consists of the logistics of the study. A detailed definition of the design and the research questions that guided the study along with clarification of the setting, participants, procedures, and the importance of my role are explained. The methods of data collection, specifically through interviews, a focus group and an online blog is defined. To increase the reliability of the study, data analysis included reading, memoing, and coding (Creswell, 2013). Additionally, this chapter discusses the trustworthiness of the study through the areas of credibility, dependability, confirmability and finally transferability, as well as ethical considerations and the application of information for future studies.

Design

For this study, a qualitative transcendental phenomenological design was utilized to conduct the research. Qualitative research is defined as a situated activity that locates the observer in the world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Qualitative research studies phenomenon in their natural settings. Natural settings are those settings where the participants experience the issue or problem that is being studied, not in a lab away from the issue (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research is conducted when there is an issue or problem to be explored (Creswell, 2013). Parallel research for this topic had only been conducted through the evaluation of

Caucasian teachers. This study offered the voices of African American administrators and their experiences with RTI regarding African American males being over identified for special education.

Phenomenology was utilized as early as 1765 (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology was originally defined as knowledge as it appears to consciousness, the science of describing what one perceives, senses, and knows in one's immediate awareness and experience (Moustakas, 1994). Today, there are different philosophical arguments for phenomenology. In 1990, van Manen stated that phenomenology was the study of the lived experiences of persons, the view that these experiences are conscious ones. Moustakas (1994) stated that phenomenology is the descriptions of the essences of experiences, not explanations or analyses. This study embraced the viewpoint of Moustakas and conducted transcendental phenomenology research.

Transcendental phenomenology focuses more on the descriptions of the experiences of the participants rather than the interpretations of the researcher (Moustakas, 1994). The essence of transcendental phenomenology is to gain the pure, unadulterated viewpoint of the participant rather than what I believe is true. In transcendental phenomenology, Moustakas has targeted Husserl's core concept of epoche (or bracketing), in which I will eliminate any suppositions or bias they may have of a phenomenon and raise knowledge above every possible doubt. Moustakas defined transcendental as "in which everything is perceived freshly; as if for the first time" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34).

The research model of transcendental phenomenology lends itself to be the most optimal model for this research as I was searching for the experiences and explanations of administrators when it comes to implementing RTI in their schools. Their experiences, along with analyzing them through a critical race theory framework allowed me to discover themes of whether RTI

has been effective in reducing disproportionality among African American males being referred and identified for special education.

The research was conducted with current administrators in their natural setting of a public school. Administrators are not on the front line with the implementation of the framework of RTI; however, they have a unique perspective. By observing the implementation process of RTI, they can enact decisions that could reduce the amount of African American males identified for special education.

The problem or issue explored in this study was that of the misidentification and misclassification of African American males in special education categories. Despite the implementation of RTI, research has revealed an over identification of African American males for special education services as compared to their Caucasian peers (Togut, 2011). The voice of African American school administrators is non-existent in the literature. As a result, a more thorough analysis of the phenomenon needs to be conducted. This study strove to understand the experiences of African American administrators in the utilization of RTI as a special education identification tool for African American males in a public school setting. Administrators who participated in this study offered a more complete description of the phenomena with rich language and without the retribution of their school district.

Research Questions

RQ1: How do African American public school administrators describe their experiences' utilizing RTI in the identification of African American males in special education?

RQ2: How do African American administrators describe the ability of the RTI framework to effectively address the misidentification of African American males in special education?

RQ3: How do African American administrators describe the cultural responsiveness of the RTI framework toward African American males in public education?

RQ4: How do African American administrators perceive the treatment and education of African American males in public education?

Setting

The setting for this study took place in two public schools in Pennsylvania. Currently, 11 states mandate RTI for the identification of specific learning disabilities (SLD). States that exclusively utilize RTI as a special education identification tool are Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Idaho, Louisiana, Rhode Island, West Virginia, and Wisconsin. The states that utilize RTI with the option of adding severe discrepancy are Georgia, Illinois, and Maine. States that utilize RTI partially for identification for special education are Delaware (reading and math), New Mexico (Grades K-3), and New York (reading in Grades K-4). The remaining states have chosen to permit their districts to use RTI or severe discrepancy to identify students with an SLD.

This study included school districts represented by administrators from elementary, middle, and high schools that incorporate an RTI framework consistently as a means for assisting the struggling student and have an African American administrator in the role of principal or assistant principal. The sample included two school districts, sampling from elementary, middle, and high for each use of RTI. The study included schools who exclusively utilize RTI as a special education identification tool, utilize RTI as a special education identification tool with the option of adding severe discrepancy, and schools that exclusively utilize severe discrepancy as their tool for special education identification. The schools chosen must have a demographic subgroup of African American children with no percentage of such group being required.

Determination of these specific sites will be a process of investigating each states education department for a listing of specific schools that meet the outlined requirements. For each school, I proceeded to the school webpage and identified whether the principal and/or assistant principal identify as African American. I also verified the existence of an RTI framework. For this study, an effort was made to procure a sampling of schools from each region of the United States to establish a more valid and reliable study. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic originated thereby forcing school districts to close. These closings then led to the denial of my research applications in their districts.

Participants

For this study, purposive sampling was conducted. Purposive sampling in phenomenology is a much narrower range of sampling (Creswell, 2013). For purposive sampling, it is important that all participants have been a part of the phenomenon that is being studied (Creswell, 2013). For this study, all participants were a part of school districts utilizing RTI as a special education identification tool with African American males, whether in conjunction with the discrepancy model or solely as the only tool for identification. In addition to purposive sampling, criterion sampling was also enacted. Two more criteria have been established for this study. First, participants served in the role of the school principal or assistant principal at an elementary, middle, or high school at the time of the study. Second, participants are of the African American race. This study also utilized snowball sampling. Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007) stated that snowball sampling is "the asking of well-situated people to recommend cases to study" (p. 185). As the research continued, I discovered an increasing amount of people to include in the sample. I may also find that the participants recommend the same people. Gall, Gall, & Borg (2007) stated that this type of convergence would make a highly credible sample.

As the initial and subsequent interviews took place, I inquired as to whether the participants knew of anyone else that meets the specific criteria as required in this study. Once identified, I proceeded to invite these individuals to participate.

Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) stated that the intent in qualitative research is not to generalize the information, but to elucidate the specific. Creswell (2013) recommended a research sample minimum of 10 to 15 participants. For this study, all attempts were made to identify and interview 10 participants who met the criteria. As potential participants were identified, I executed an email or letter (Appendix F) inviting them to participate in the study. The invitation included a brief description of the purpose and problem of the study along with the procedure that would be conducted. The letter ended with a statement that indicated I will follow up with a phone call within one week of sending the invitation. At the time of the phone call, I addressed the study and the details, in addition to any possible questions the potential participant may have. As the conversation ended, I once again invited the potential participant to participate in the study. If consent was given, I sent a more detailed description of the study along with documentation for the participant to sign (Appendix E). Once all documents had been returned to me with signatures, interviews commenced after IRB approval.

<p style="text-align:center">Procedures</p>

Before the submission of the initial application for IRB approval, permission was secured from the school districts granting their approval for participation in the study (Appendices G and H). Before the study could physically take place, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was applied for. IRB approval is enacted as a step to protect the participants from a potentially harmful impact or risk if they participate in the study (Creswell, 2103). After IRB approval was given (Appendix D), consent forms were sent to the identified participants. Consent forms

(Appendix E) included information relating to (a) the right of the participants to withdraw from the study if they wish to, (b) the purpose of the study and the procedures that will be utilized for data collection, (c) the protection of the confidentiality of the participants, (d) the known risks, if any, associated with the study, (e) the benefits to accrue to the participants in the study and (f) the signature of the participant and the myself (Creswell, 2013).

Following IRB approval, the next step in this phenomenological research was to recognize and specify the broad philosophical assumptions (Creswell, 2013). This study gained these assumptions from the participants as I bracketed out my own experiences. As potential participants are identified, I sent an email or letter inviting them to participate in the study (Appendix F). The invitation included a brief description of the purpose and problem of the study along with the procedure that were conducted. The letter ended with a statement that indicated I would follow up with a phone call within one week of sending the invitation. At the time of the phone call, I addressed the study and the details, in addition to any possible questions the potential participant may have. As the conversation ends, I once again invited the potential participant to participate in the study. If consent was given, I sent a more detailed description of the study along with documentation for the participant to sign. Once all documents were returned to me with signatures, interviews commenced. Data were collected from the participants through interviews, online focus groups, and an online blog with prepared prompts. The interviews were conducted through an online venue called Zoom. Zoom allowed me to interview each participant through a system parallel to Skype, in addition to a transcription being generated of the interview and sent to me automatically. Zoom meetings offer the security of, securing the interview with end-to-end encryption, requiring the interviewer to be present before the meeting commences, locking a meeting, offering audio signatures, enabling, or disabling a participant to record, and

requiring a password to protect the interview and allowing only individuals with a given e-mail

domain to join. The focus group mimicked an educational strategy named, Chalk Talk. I posted

the focus group questions, one at a time, through group email or an online chat group. I allowed

time for each participant to respond to each question before moving to the next one. Instructions,

detailing how Chalk Talk is conducted was sent to each participant before the first question

being posted. The blog, data collection method took place online. Each participant joined and

followed the blog originated by me and responded to all prompts posted. The participants

responded anonymously by adopting an online persona.

Before the study interviews take place, the research questions were piloted with a small

sample of doctoral educators outside the study. This pilot interview allowed me to ensure clarity

of the questions and their wording. If there were any contentions to any of the questions or

wording of the questions, changes were made and reviewed before formal data collection

commences. As this study is a transcendental phenomenological study, two broad, general

questions were asked of the participants as recommended by Moustakas (1994). These questions

consisted of:

- What have you experienced in terms of utilizing RTI as a means to identify

  African American males for special education?

- What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your

  experiences in utilizing RTI in identifying African American males for special

  education?

These questions focused attention on gathering the data that lead to a

textual and structural description of the experiences thereby providing an understanding of the

common experiences of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). The text obtained from the

interviews and focus groups was transcribed by a paid transcriptionist or by me. As all the data from the interviews, online focus groups, and blog entries was collected, it was read and coded for themes by a commercial coding resourced called NVivo or by me. As the themes were identified, a text was then written to describe the experiences of the participants. The themes also allowed me to describe the setting that influenced how the participants experienced the phenomenon. This is called imaginative variation or structural description (Moustakas, 1994). As these structural descriptions took form, I began to write a composite description that presented the essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

The Researcher's Role

The role of the researcher in this study is multifold. First and foremost, I served as the interviewer of the participants, specifically African American administrators. While the interview was in process, I collected data in the form of scripted notes in addition to two electronic recording devices. After all the data were collected and compiled, a compensated person was obtained to transcribe the interview notes into a more streamlined, organized way. This streamlined organization assisted me in analyzing the data to look for themes. As the themes were formed and made succinct, I was able to then relate the phenomenon holistically for the reader.

In addition to collecting, analyzing, and reporting the data of the research, I epoched or bracketed myself from the data and the interpretation of data. Transcendental phenomenology according to Moustakas (1994) is a focus on the description of the experiences of the participants rather than the interpretations of the researcher. For this study, I was responsible to take special care in bracketing myself from the data and the interpretation thereof as I maintained personal ties with the environment and context of this study. To bracket myself from the research data and

interpretation, I engaged in journaling the thoughts and reflections that arose during the interviews and later with the data analysis. While I have an ingrained relationship with my current district and their current practices, I have no preexisting relationship with the participating sites or participants.

Data Collection

The nature of this study automatically lent itself to collecting data from a distance. For a phenomenological study, the process of collecting information comes primarily from interviews with those who have experienced the stated phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). The second piece of data collection took place through the lens of a focus group consisting of the African American administrators that were initially interviewed. The last piece of data collection took place through the venue of an online blog among the African American administrators who allowed their voices to be a part of the study through the initial interview. Interviews will allow the participants to exert their voice to the education world on a controversial topic. The interviews also allowed me to discover and realize the essence of the phenomenon as stated for the research. The second avenue of data collection was the focus group which will offer the participants a safe venue in which to voice their experiences of dealing with the phenomenon. The focus group was also a place where the participants offered ideas to each other in their unique situations. The focus group offered a way for the identified administrators to come together from various districts and become one cohesive group. The online blog was a place where the African American administrators were able to respond to my constructed prompts with regards to the phenomenon. This type of data collection allowed the administrators to feel that they had a safe place with which to express their feelings and concerns. The blog allowed them to take on an online persona and react just to the prompt with openness.

Interviews. The interview process can be time-consuming when conducting research but it can also prove the most invaluable since the words expressed are the words that are going to be analyzed to determine the essence of the phenomenon being studied. Several authors have compiled necessary steps when conducting an interview but the two most outstanding in qualitative research to date have been Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) and Rubin and Rubin (2012). Kvale and Brinkmanns' (2009) steps demonstrate a linear, logical and sequential process beginning with designing the study and moving to the finality of reporting the study. The Rubin and Rubin (2012) process of interviewing is not so linear and sequential. While the elements remain the same as Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), Rubin and Rubin (2012) allow the researcher to change questions asked, sites chosen and the situations to study. For this study, I conducted interviews from a distance through the use of the telephone or Zoom system. Before the interview, I inquired from each participant as to when the best time to interview would be. The convenience of the interview was all in the hands of the interviewee. When the interview was ready to take place, I informed the interviewee that they were on speakerphone and will be recorded. If the Zoom system was utilized, the interviewee was contacted through an internet code. I informed the interviewee that their interview would be taped and transcribed through the chosen system. While a recording of the interview took place, I also constructed an interview guide whereby the questions are preprinted and there is space for me to write down answers as the interviewee expresses them (Appendix A). The guide was helpful to me in that the answer was able to be seen visually and I was able to extract more information from the interviewee with sub-questions before going to the next arranged question. I interviewed a minimum of 10 African American administrators. In qualitative research, there may be a point in collecting the data that each interviewee will be expressing the same thoughts or feelings to the interview

questions. It is at this point that saturation takes place. In 1967, Glaser & Strauss reported that if a qualitative researcher followed the principles of qualitative research faithfully, the sample size utilized would reach the point of saturation; the point "when the collection of new data does not shed any further light on the issue under investigation" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Each interviewee was interviewed once. This interview served as the foundation upon which the focus group and online blog information was built.

Interview Questions

1. Good day, please describe to me your background in education?

2. Please describe the experiences that led you to become an educator in the first place?

3. Describe your school; population #, grades, teachers, demographics of both students and teachers, staff roles beyond classroom teacher, etc.

4. What is your view of the strengths of special education?

5. What is your view of the weaknesses of special education?

6. How do you define disproportionality?

7. As an administrator, describe the characteristics of the children that you observe being identified for special education the most frequently?

8. What measures does your school have in place to assist struggling students?

9. What is the demographic data breakdown of the referrals of struggling students in your school? In your district?

10. How do you define Response to Intervention (RTI)?

11. How is Response to Intervention integrated into your school? District?

12. As the administrator, what is your role in how Response to Intervention is conducted in your building?

13. What do you observe as the strengths of RTI?

14. What do you observe as the weaknesses of RTI?

15. What connection, if any, do you see between Response to Intervention and disproportionality?

16. Would you care to elaborate on anything that we have talked about or offer any thoughts on how RTI is utilized as a tool for special education identification?

17. Thank you so much for your time and the information that you supplied me with. I will be forming a focus group with all of the participants of this study and would love for you to be a part of it. Please look for an email from me regarding when and how this will be starting. Thank you again!

Question one commenced the interview conversation by allowing the interviewee to become comfortable with me. This question allowed the interviewee to reveal personal background that in turn offered information to me about the experiences that may have shaped the opinions of the interviewee. Question two is considered a follow-up question to the introduction question to expand the depth of background that the interviewee possesses that may inform their opinions one way or the other.

Question three, according to Kvale (1996), is a direct question that will offer the specific demographics of the school environment. This question was important, as the demographic information will allow me to later determine if disproportionality exists in a particular school.

Questions five and six are considered direct questions (Kvale, 1996). These two questions will immediately get the interviewee to express their view of special education and what they offer as what works and what does not. These answers will be important in that I was able to

interpret feelings of frustration within the interviewee or the interviewee offered direct answers that lead to the stated phenomenon.

Questions seven and twelve are questions that lead to a personal definition on the part of the interviewee, but they are being asked to probe (Kvale, 1996) any personal thoughts or feelings the interviewee may have on the topic of disproportionality and Response to Intervention.

Question eight lends itself to being a direct and probing question (Kvale, 1996). It is direct in that there is specific information that is being asked to be given. It is probing though in that it looks to have the interviewee add information to the answer. I looked for thoughts from the interviewee on why they thought certain children are being identified more often in special education.

Questions nine and 10 are considered specifying questions (Kvale, 1996). These questions will extend the answer given in question eight. The crux of this study was to ascertain the experiences of the African American administrator when using RTI to reduce the disproportionality of African American males in special education. Questions nine and 10 will offer some insight as to why African American males are being over identified for special education.

Questions 11, 13, and 14 are direct questions (Kvale, 1996) that will offer facts from the question presented. These facts will be meshed in this study and examined as to some possible root problems of the disproportionality that may exist in each school that is part of the study. Identifying root causes will allow me to present them in the final product along with possible solutions to avoid disproportionality of minorities altogether. Asking only for strengths and weaknesses allowed for an open-endedness that could be interpreted any way by the interviewee.

By not asking the questions in a form of what works and does not work with RTI, I was able to obtain responses with more openness and truthfulness.

Question 15 is an indirect question (Kvale, 1996) that allowed me to determine the interviewee's thoughts on Response to Intervention. This question allowed the administrator to offer their insight into the connection between the RTI framework and the issue of disproportionality. The answers procured from this question offered insight into why or why not the administrator thinks that RTI is the answer in reducing or eliminating misidentification and misclassification of African American males in special education.

Question 16 could be considered a probing question (Kvale,1996) in that it is asking the interviewee to expand on the information already given in the previous questions. Question sixteen could be considered the coup de grace of all the questions because it allowed for the interviewee to add anything they wish to add to any of the conversation held thus far. The information extracted from these questions could be considered the essence of the phenomenon.

Question 17 is not a question but a closing to what many would consider a wonderful and spectacular time spent with someone amazing. Question 20 will allow me to conclude the interview and offer information into the next step of the process.

Focus Groups. This study employed the use of an online focus group for the participants. Focus groups provided an opportunity for me to interact with multiple participants at the same time. Focus groups are especially useful for exploring complex, multi-layered concepts from the perspectives of the participants. The focus group was set up through the use of email or through an online group chat system. I consulted with a technology expert to learn the best possible solution, with anonymity, for this study. The following questions will guide the group discussion (Appendix B):

1. Hello! Please introduce yourselves to each other and inform each other as to your job position?

2. Please share with each other your special education identification process in your school.

3. What similarities or differences do you notice with the descriptions given for the special education identification process?

4. What are your views on the misidentification and misclassification of minority students?

5. What does Response to Intervention look like in your school buildings?

6. How effective do you feel the Response to Intervention framework is in assisting struggling students?

7. Describe the training your staff has had with regard to Response to Intervention.

8. How effective do you feel that Response to Intervention has been with reducing the disproportionality of minorities in special education?

Question one of the focus group questions is an introduction question (Kvale, 1996). This question allowed the focus group participants to introduce themselves to each other and to find a sense of being comfortable with each other before they shared their experiences through a safe venue.

Questions two, five and seven are direct questions (Kvale, 1996) that ask the focus group participants to provide distinct, detailed information related to the stated question. This explicit information offered me a factual basis with which to interpret the essence of the phenomenon.

Questions three, four, six and eight are probing, indirect questions (Kvale, 1996) that allowed the participants to express more than just a specific answer. The questions are

formulated open enough so that the participants could react between each other and react to each other's answers. These reactions allowed me to delve deep into the stated phenomenon and arrive at possible solutions to rectify it.

Online Blog. The third piece of data collection is the online blog. I set up the online blog with the assistance of a technology expert. Through the utilization of the online blog, the participants were able to disguise themselves through an online persona chosen by them. I facilitated this online blog by providing the participants with several, study aligned prompts (Appendix C).

1. What is your definition and perception of critical race theory?
2. What do you see as the connection between critical race theory and RTI?
3. How do you observe the education of African American males when compared to any other ethnic group?
4. What do you view as the overarching problem in public education today?

Question one served as an introductory prompt to ascertain the level of knowledge regarding critical race theory.

Question two was a direct question that determined how the participant perceives that there may be racism present in education today.

Questions three and four will serve as probing questions that offered a more detailed view of the experiences of the participants about the inequity and disproportionality that exists in public education.

The participants were able to answer these prompts with no threat of fear or retaliation as they were anonymous. I gathered the blog entries and analyzed them along with the interviews and focus group answers to arrive at the essence of the study. The blog questions were originated

by me based on the feedback from the interview and focus group questions. I utilized the online blog as a forum to arrive at clarification of interview and focus group questions. The online blog was also utilized as a forum to express thoughts about topics in education that are controversial such as racism through tracking, high stakes testing, culturally responsive curriculum, and differentiated instruction.

Data Analysis

Moustakas (1994) provided a systematic approach to analyzing data. His approach erased the friction between objectivity and subjectivity. Moustakas (1994) presented specific, detailed steps to his approach for analyzing data. His steps move from collecting and analyzing specific statements, funneling these statements then into themes and lastly extracting the essence of the lived experience. In this section, data analysis cannot take place effectively if there is no data organization. From organizing the data, the data was read and notes taken to identify similarities, differences, important information, and surprising statements. The notes taken were a preface to the data description and classification that allowed themes to develop. Once themes were developed, an interpretation of the data took place, which eventually lead to the data being represented in a way that will allow the essence of the study to be defined.

Data Organization

The first step in making sense of qualitative research is making sure there is a plan in place for the sheer magnitude of information that will be forthcoming. Patton (1980) stated:

> The data generated by qualitative methods are voluminous. I have found no way of preparing students for the sheer massive volumes of information with which they will find themselves confronted when data collection has ended. Sitting down to make sense out of pages of interviews and whole files of field notes can be overwhelming. (p. 297)

Data were organized by the site of the school. All information collected was collected manually and placed in file folders into a portable vertical file container that was locked and placed into a storage unit.

Reading and Memoing

In 1980, M. H. Agar suggested to qualitative researchers to read interview transcripts many times. He went on to state that a researcher should immerse themselves into the details and try to obtain a sense of the interview before dividing it into parts. When reading documents more than once, a researcher may be able to find numerous and differing themes or accounts of information each time the interview is read. Gaining these multiple viewpoints of information allows the researcher to offer back thick, rich description of the phenomenon. During the reading of the transcripts, I took notes or made memos in the margins of the transcribed interviews. These notes or memos are the short phrases, ideas or concepts that offer a description of the phenomenon from the interviewee (Creswell, 2013). These phrases, ideas, or key concepts were examined and placed into the initial codes. I analyzed these initial memos and coded them based upon the research questions. Key vocabulary from each of the research questions was notated as headings and the memos that aligned with or pertained to these headings were placed appropriately. The key vocabulary from question one is identification. For question two, I utilized the words, ability, effectively, and misidentification. Question three provided the vocabulary of cultural responsiveness and RTI framework. The last research question's vocabulary that was extracted for coding will be perception, treatment, and education. From these initial codes, common themes began to be revealed. The themes were identified as the same vocabulary as the generalized headings for coding. I prefer that the themes will continue to be defined as vocabulary that is more specific than the coding headings.

Data Description

In the area of data description, I formed formalized codes or categories. Creswell (2013) stated that the formation of the codes is "the heart of qualitative data analysis" (p. 184). Data description is the portion of the study where I developed detailed descriptions, themes and offered an interpretation of the perspectives in the literature. When data description is occurring, I epoched or bracketed out the information so as not to form bias when interpreting. Coding occurred when the text (interviews) was aggregated into small categories. The code information is the participants' experiences and the context of those experiences as they relate to the purpose of the study. A qualitative researcher streamlines data by keeping some text from the interviews and disposing of some (Wolcott, 1994) if it lacks relevance to the purpose of the study. For this study, I read the interviews, originated 25-30 codes manually to begin with, and narrowed them down to five to six codes. In doing so, I had a strong hand in the depth of information presented through the interview process. I examined phrases, ideas, or key concepts and placed them into the initial codes based upon the research questions. Key vocabulary from each of the research questions notated as headings and the memos that aligned with or pertained to these headings were placed appropriately. The key vocabulary from question one is identification. For question two, I utilized the words' ability, effectively, and misidentification. Question three provided the vocabulary of cultural responsiveness and RTI framework. The last research question's vocabulary extracted for coding was perception, treatment, and education.

Data Classification

When a researcher moves from data description to data classification, they are now looking at the text to find categories or themes. As a rule, there should be five to seven themes notated (Creswell, 2013). When looking at the text to extract the information into codes and

themes, Czarniawska (2004) developed a process on how that could be conducted. He stated that the researcher could think of the information in a deconstructive stance, a stance that focuses on issues of desire and power. In deconstructing, attention is placed on exposing a false distinction, examining silences, attending to disruptions and contradictions, focusing on the element that is most peculiar in the text, interpreting metaphors as multiple meanings, analyzing double entendres, and separating group-specific and general sources of bias (Czarniawska, 2004). For this study, I intended to have five to seven themes emerge as the codes are disaggregated. Studying the codes in depth will allow me to develop a common bond or theme as familiar codes are bonded together. In essence, the codes dictate the bigger picture in the delineation of the themes. In this study, I paid particular attention to the silence in the text and the interpretation of metaphors. The attention paid to the silence in the text allowed me to examine what was not said. Particular attention was given to who or what is being excluded or talked about based upon the choice of pronouns. To interpret metaphors, I examined the transcribed text for blatant or hidden multiple meanings. These two specific areas of classification, for this study, exposed the underlying meaning of the disproportionality of black males in special education and the effectiveness of RTI when identifying African American males for special education.

Data Interpretation

Data interpretation happens automatically in qualitative research. Interpretation of the data means to make sense of it and find what the lesson learned is (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Interpretation of the data in qualitative research is going beyond the codes and themes in order to find the larger meaning of the data (Creswell, 2013). For this study, I interpreted the data, bracketing out all bias revealed by me. I observed the data very closely, looking at specific nuances that occurred during the interview. These nuances could consist of silent pauses and

changed body language along with expressive facial movements. I also notated if the participant began to change the subject of question along with, not addressing the question at hand. Special attention focused on any specific similes or metaphors that were expressed in the participants' answer to any question. These nuances, when observed in conjunction with the research questions, offered me a much deeper understanding of the data arriving at ultimately, the bigger picture.

Data Representation

The final aspect of data analysis is how I represented the data. Researchers, at times, represent data in a comparison table (Spradley, 1980) or in a matrix (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The goal of data representation is to provide the reader a text, tabular, or figure form of the data collected. In this study, I represented the data in tabular form based on the information provided by African American administrators from Pennsylvania regarding each of the research questions. The tables formed based on the interview, focus group, and online blog questions as they related to the research questions. The tables contain open codes based on the responses of the participants. The tables include the frequency of the open codes and quote examples from the participants related to the open codes. From these tables, I had the ability to describe and summarize the data readily.

<div align="center">

Trustworthiness

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The focus of phenomenological research is finding what it is like to have a certain experience or experiences. The outcome in phenomenological research is to describe the experience of a phenomenon under study with accuracy (Krefting, 1991). In 1981, Guba proposed a model for assessing the trustworthiness of qualitative data (Krefting, 1991). Guba's model is based upon: (a) truth value, (b) applicability, (c) consistency, and (d) neutrality (Guba,

1981). For a qualitative research design, Lincoln, and Guba (1985) utilized the terms of credibility, dependability, conformability, and transferability. These terms are the "naturalists equivalents" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 300) for internal and external validation, reliability, and objectivity. These latter terms are utilized more in quantitative research as opposed to qualitative. Lincoln and Guba intended for their terms of trustworthiness to be more organic when conducting qualitative research. For this study, I ensured trustworthiness through the research practices of member checking, triangulation, tape recording, and intercoder agreement. Each of these research practices ensured the trustworthiness of this study by engaging additional experts to become involved by examining the transcribed text for accurateness, ensuring that research practices were implemented with fidelity and allowing a second voice to corroborate with me as codes and themes were being developed.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the extent to which the findings accurately describe reality. Credibility depends on the richness of the information gathered and on the analytical abilities of me. This study employed the practice of member checking to achieve credibility. Member checking consists of the researcher obtaining the participants' point of view on the credibility of the findings and interpretations of the study (Ely et al., 1991). Lincoln and Guba (1985) considered member checking "the most critical technique for establishing credibility" (p. 314). For member checking to take place in this study, the transcripts were submitted to the participants for them to ensure that the interview, focus group, and blog questions were consistent. The participants were also able to validate whether the same procedures were utilized throughout all aspects of the study. This study also utilized the technique of triangulation to ensure credibility. Triangulation makes use of multiple and varying sources, methods,

investigators, and theories to provide corroborating evidence (Ely et al., 1991). This study

utilized multiple sources of data through the venue of interviews, focus groups, and an online

blog.

Dependability and Confirmability

To be dependable and be able to have confirmability for this study, I accepted the task of

recording detailed notes while conducting the interviews. For this study to be dependable and

confirmable, I also engaged in tape recording the interviews whether the interview took place

over the phone or in person. I purchased two tape recorders to ensure all information was

recorded with clarity and precision. After taping the interview, a hired transcriptionist transcribed

all conversations of the interview retrieved from the tape recorders. To offer one more layer of

dependability and confirmability, I sought outside assistance with intercoder agreement. The

intercoder agreement allowed another hired qualitative researcher to analyze transcript data to

determine if there was agreement on what was gleaned as far as original codes and themes.

Transferability

Transferability is the ability to transfer the information from the study to other situations

and settings to determine if the findings can be transferred because there are shared

characteristics (Erlandson et al., 1993). It is not up to me to prove that the research study will be

applicable in other settings but to provide evidence that it could be applicable in other settings.

Transferability is synonymous with external validity. If the study consists of thick, rich

description, the reader will be able to make decisions regarding the transferability of the study

information (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The thick, rich description in this study is the detailed

way in which the participants and setting are described. I ensured a detailed description of the

cultural and social connections revealed in the study by offering information about where and

when the interviews occurred so that the reader can obtain a richer and fuller understanding of the research process and setting. The rich and detailed descriptions given will allow the reader to make their own opinion of the transferability of this study.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics are important when conducting any type of research. The difference between being ethical and not ethical is the reliability and validation of the finalized product of the study. For this study, many ethical considerations were considered.

First, as for any study, there needed to be permission to conduct the study. Therefore, I sought university approval through the submission of the Institution Review Board (IRB) application. This application ensured to others that the study indeed took consideration of fair treatment and an ethical demeanor throughout the entire study. Permission was obtained from the school systems and participants once they were identified. I sent out and received back the letters of consent given to the participants. It was through the letter of consent that the participant was fully aware of the purpose of the study and how it would be conducted. The participant at that time had the option of participating or not.

If it were not for the participants, there would be no study. Therefore, the participants were always treated with dignity and respect and given any consideration within reason for the integrity of the study to be maintained. To do this, I did not place any pressure on the participants at any time. In fact, the participants were informed that they did not need to sign the consent form if they were not in agreement with the study. I also ensured that the participants would not be exploited in any way meaning there would be no questions that were leading or presumptuous. I maintained that personal thoughts and ideas were not shared in any way to make the participant uncomfortable with the situation. To maintain impartiality, I avoided agreeing

with the participants by reporting all perspectives whether they were agreed with or not. To keep the participants feeling comfortable with the study, all attempts were made to respect their privacy. I ensured this privacy by utilizing fictitious names and/or aliases. To show appreciation to the participants for participating in this study, I ensured compensation with a gift card to a restaurant of choice.

Beyond the approval process and securing the integrity of the participants, the information presented in a culminating product must be ethical and true. To address the ethical issue of the final product, I was honest and did not falsify or plagiarize any information in any part of the study. There was also no information included about the participants that harmed them in any way. The utilization of composite stories assisted in meeting that goal.

<div align="center">**Summary**</div>

The misidentification and misclassification among African American males in special education is a reality. It is the job of educators and researchers to search for the root of the problem and provide a plausible solution. All children can learn but they should be afforded the absolute best education that they are entitled to and deserve. This chapter has provided the essential components for a study in the utilization of RTI when identifying African American males for special education. The chapter began by offering a description of the study design: transcendental phenomenology. Immediately following, was the central research question for the study followed by the three sub-questions. The setting of schools around the United States were established in the setting along with the specific African American administrators as the participants of the study. Detailed procedures were given for this study so that if needed, it could be conducted again with a possible different population. My role was discussed along with any biases that I bring to the table. Specific guidelines for data collection, analysis and interpretation

were shared. Lastly, the areas of trustworthiness and ethical concerns were addressed to have a

valid and reliable study. The following chapter, Chapter Four, provides a detailed and complete

data analysis about the experiences of African American administrators and the utilization of

RTI as a tool for special education identification with African American males.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of African American administrators in public schools in their use of Response to Intervention (RTI) when identifying African American males in special education. This chapter initially discusses the background and demographic information of the study's 10 participants. After the introduction and description of the sample participants, the results are presented through the study's three research questions as they are aligned to the theoretical framework and central question of the study: How do African American public school administrators describe their experiences utilizing RTI in the identification of African American males for special education? The common themes identified across data points are discussed in the context of the research questions.

The concluding section of this chapter will provide a summary of how the discovered themes illustrate the "essence" of the participant experiences.

Participants

This study incorporated the purposive sampling model. Interviews took place with African American administrators in public schools. These administrators possessed administrative certification and employed as current administrators. Snowball sampling was incorporated due to the limitations that were imposed upon the study from its conception. The participants must have been employed in a school district that utilizes RTI in varying ways to identify students for special education.

The participants of this study lauded from two central Pennsylvania public school districts, John James, and Sam Sully (pseudonyms). The original plan was to collect data from

varying school districts around the country that met the criterion stated in the study. The Corona virus pandemic interfered and caused the original data collection sites to place a halt on the collection by closing schools and turning down the requests for research. Plan B was immediately implemented, and permission was requested from the two school districts described. All participants submitted signed consent forms (see Appendix) before proceeding with data collection. Pseudonyms were applied to the participants and the school district where they are employed.

The first school district, called John James School District for the purpose of this study, is a medium, urban school district with a student population of 6,622. There are 10 schools covering 11.86 square miles in the city. The grade levels serviced in the schools range from Pre-Kindergarten to 12th. There are two high schools, three middle schools and seven elementary schools. The student group identified as Economically Disadvantaged make up 85% of the student population. Special education and English Language Learners follow respectfully with each possessing 16.8% of the student population. Male students compose 51.8% of the population and females compose 48.2%. The student ethnicity composition consists of 53.9% African American, 36.8% Hispanic, 3.8% Caucasian, 2.4% Asian, and 3.2% two or more races. All schools employ RTI (MTSS) with the utilization of the discrepancy model for special education identification.

The second school district, called Sam Sully School District (pseudonym), is a small, suburban public school district that covers 15.27 square miles. The total student population is 2,912. There are four schools total encompassing a high school, middle school, and two elementary schools. These schools comprise Kindergarten through 12th grade. The student ethnicity breakdown in this district is 38.3% African American, 14.3% Hispanic, 23%

Caucasian, 13.4% Asian, and 10.5% two or more races. Gender is close to being equal with 49.7% of the population being male and 50.3% being female. The student groups are distributed among three groups. Economically Disadvantaged composes 59.8% of the population with English Language Learners comprising 5.9% and Special Education being 14.5%. All schools implement RTI with a blended model of both discrepancy model and an intense intervention protocol. This year, one school will utilize the RTI framework solely as the process for identifying students for special education.

Marva

Marva is an Associate Principal at a high school in the John James School District. She has been in this position for 10 months. Marva's reasoning for beginning a career in education is that she knew she always wanted to teach and that she loves to learn. She started college with an interest in sociology but quickly found that obtaining a position in this field required more than just a bachelor's degree. An advisor in college encouraged Marva to pursue a major in secondary social studies education. Marva obtained her Bachelor of Sociology and Social Studies Education and furthered her education by obtaining her Masterof Special Education. Marva has been in the education field for 20 years. Her journey took her from teaching social studies in the classroom for 13 years to becoming a curriculum coordinator, special teacher on assignment for social studies for two years and then to an instructional coach for one year at her high school campus. Marva was fortunate to begin her teaching career in her school district where she went to school. She was there for four years and then "fell" into a teaching position in her current school district, John James School District. A woman at a wedding approached her and informed her that a new school was going to be built in the John James School District and the leader of the school was searching to hire an exemplary staff. Marva went to meet this woman and the rest

is history. Marva has been an administrator for approximately a year and a half. She began as an assistant principal for about six months and then was reassigned to associate principal from August 2020 to the present.

The enrollment in Marva's high school is 1,087. The school is a Title 1 school with the demographic breakdown being, 55% African American, 40% Hispanic, and 5% other races such as, Caucasian, Asian, and Nepalese. There is a large population of English Language Learners along with the school being a very male dominated school. The sophomore class is 60% male. Marva equates this phenomenon to the other district high school being an application school and predominantly female at this point. Marva has indicated that the male domination is a unique dynamic considering most of the leadership in the school is female.

Peggy

Peggy is immersed in her 24th year of education. She began her teaching career in a middle school teaching health and physical education. She began to desire more of a leadership role in her school, so she gained the title of department chair for health and physical education. As time went on, Peggy felt the need to gain classroom experience. She obtained her special education certification co-taught math and ELA. She eventually was able to teach on her own. Peggy continued her schooling by obtaining her master's degree in Educational Leadership. She became an assistant principal in 2005 in the state of Florida. Florida has strict requirements to obtain principal certification but that did not deter Peggy. She pursued it and eventually became a principal. Peggy's career spans many levels. She has been in the elementary, middle, and high school levels in school districts, but she has also held state level leadership positions. Education has always been at the forefront of Peggy's mind. She would play school when she was a little girl. She is the youngest of 10 children, so she had many nieces and nephews with which to play

with. She moved from playing school to obtaining a cheerleading coach position before going to college. Even though she taught people for years in her young life, Peggy went to college to be a physical therapist. This was not too appealing; she thought of her time in sports and pursued a degree in health and physical education.

Peggy is the principal of a middle school in John James School District. She works with two assistant principals, one being a Caucasian female and the other being an African American black male. Her school has approximately 820 scholars in grades 5th through 8th. There are 63 teachers employed in the school with 90% of them being females with 10% being males. In terms of teacher demographics with ethnicity, 98% are Caucasian. The school is a Title 1 school with an SES of 89%. The children ethnicity breaks down into 48% African American, 46% Latino and 3% Asian. The special education population is 16% with the ELL population being 24%.

Kevin

Kevin has been in education since 1993. He began his education career immediately after graduating from college. He began teaching with a 6th grade class in a rural school district. He worked there for six years. He then moved to a large, urban school district and commenced with teaching math. He desired a leadership role during his tenure in this district and he stated that opportunities began to open for him. He also started he accepted a math supervisor role but quickly moved. Kevin moved to a medium, urban school district in the role of Dean of Students at an alternative school. Kevin tenured in his new district for 18 years. During this tenure, he moved from Dean of Students to Assistant Principal and finally to Principal. After a few years, he was furloughed but came back strong in a student development director position. Kevin has

since moved from the medium, urban school district to a small, suburban school district in the role of an assistant principal.

Kevin has reported that his current school district is known as the 15th most diverse school in the country. Demographics have changed significantly over time, moving from primarily a Caucasian population to a primary African American population. Kevin's high school is in the Sam Sully School district. There is a population of approximately 800 students in the high school which consists of 9th through 12th grade. The ethnicity of the students is diverse with there being a predominant African American population followed closely by the Caucasian population. Kevin reports there is a surging Nepali population along with the Hispanic population beginning to rise. The female to male ratio in this high school are close to be even. There are three administrators in the high school, a principal and two assistant principals with the two assistant principals being African American and the principal being Caucasian. The teaching staff consists of two African American teachers with the rest of the teaching staff being Caucasian.

Jennifer

Jennifer is an African American assistant principal in the John James School District. Prior to being in this position, she was the Chief Academic Officer for the same school district for approximately eight years. Jennifer is the assistant principal of a middle school with a population of between 700 to 750 students, in fifth through eighth grade. When the school is fully staffed, there are 70 teachers. There are three administrators, each of them being African American. There are two counselors, an instructional coach, two reading specialists and a math interventionist. The school staff ethnicity is 98% Caucasian. The ethnicity breakdown of the

students is, 75% African American, 20% Latino and 5% other, such as Asian and Native American. Jennifer reports that the international population is rising in the building.

Doug

Doug began his tenure in education in 1990. His position was one of preparing high school students for a career. He assisted them with job interview techniques along with how to dress for job interviews. This was a position he held from 1990 to 1994. He then moved to the John James School District. Doug reports that he was driving through the city of the school district on the way back home in Virginia. He and his wife stopped to fill out job applications. By the time they got home, Doug was offered a job. He informed human resources that he and his wife would come as a team. They both were offered a job and the move was made. Doug began his tenure in the district as a middle school, in school suspension teacher. He went back to school to obtain his principal certification and obtained an assistant principal position.

Doug's current position is an associate principal at the high school in the John James School District. The school has a population of 1,087 students in grades 9th through 12th. The student population is primarily African American, 55%, with the Hispanic population recorded at 45%. There is a small population of Nepalese students. Doug reports that the staff ethnicity population does not match the student ethnicity population. The staff make up is 85% Caucasian and 15% African American. Yet the custodial and coaching staff represent 90% African American and 10% Hispanic populations. The administrative staff, which consists of three administrators, represent the student population with two of the administrators being African American and the other, being Hispanic. Doug states that the teaching staff, the ones that instruct the students every day, are not indicative of the population that enters the doors searching to get an education every day.

Penelope

     Penelope is the acting principal at an elementary school in the John James School District and has been in education for 21 years. She is the assistant principal normally but for the 2020-2021 school year served as acting principal due to the FMLA time and eventually retirement of the principal. Penelope graduated from a Pennsylvania college with a dual degree in Spanish and French, which involved her studying abroad in Salamanca, Spain. She became a Spanish and French teacher for 14 years. She eventually went back to another Pennsylvania university to obtain her master's degree in leadership along with principal certification. Penelope had a natural progression into teaching. Her mother was a teacher for 36 years and acted as a substitute for 15 more before her retirement. Penelope, as a child and young girl, enjoyed assisting her mother with grading papers. She immersed herself in the job her mother was doing, so much so that she enrolled in college. She did not enjoy college though and came home. She became a job trainer, which eventually morphed into her hiring other trainers. Various people would inform her that she was so good at teaching and leading. Penelope took these words to heart and combined them with her skill in Spanish from high school. Finally, the path Penelope was taking felt natural to her.

     Penelope is stationed in an elementary building that encompasses Kindergarten through 4th grade. The school has an enrollment of 609 students, 48% of them being male with 52% of them being female. The school exists as a Title 1 school with 87.4% of the students being economically disadvantaged. There is a 20% English Language Learner population along with a 6% special education population. African American students make up 51% of the population with 31% of the students being Hispanic. There is also a 4% population of Asian and Caucasian students along with a 4% population of students of two races. There are 26 different languages

spoken by the students at this school. Beside Penelope being an African American administrator there are two teachers of the African American ethnicity.

Lawrence

Lawrence has been in education for 23 years. He began teaching in a second grade class. He moved from elementary to middle school teaching 6th, 7th, and 8th grades. Lawrence has been a team leader and a lead teacher. He worked as a director for the public school after-school program. He also has been involved with a nonprofit program for gifted youth called Project Forward Leap. Lawrence is currently a principal in a middle school in the John James School District. Lawrence did not realize that he wanted to be a teacher until enrolled in college. He was very sports minded and played football. His coach was an educator that had moved up in the ranks to college professor. Lawrence talked with him often and expressed that he was just looking for a job. His coach was a mentor to him and expressed to him that he had a lot of energy, just like a teacher. It was from that point that Lawrence realized he wanted to be a teacher.

The middle school that Lawrence is principal of is in the John James School District. It has an enrollment of 749 students in grades 5th through 8th. The school is a Title 1 school with 85% of its student population being poor. Student demographic breakdown into English Language Learners and special education is 12.4 and 28% respectfully. The students that attend are recognized by gender, 55% being males and 45% being female. Of the students attending the school, 64% are African American and 28% are Hispanic. The remaining races represented in the school are 4% Caucasian, 2% Asian, and 2% considered two or more races. The staff of the school is predominantly Caucasian in the teaching arena, but the support staff are predominantly African American.

Janet

Janet is an African American administrator from the Sam Sully School District. She is employed as an assistant principal in the high school. Janet expressed that she felt the desire to be a teacher when she was a young girl attending church with her parents. Her father and mother were officers in the church, so she was always present. When it was time for Vacation Bible School or Sunday school, Janet was either attending or helping the teacher. She always wanted to be a teacher or a nurse. Upon graduating from college with a degree in education, Janet worked in a daycare as a director, a teacher in a local parenting program and then as a teacher/director in an early childhood program. Janet began her career in her first school district employed as a day-to-day substitute in 1997 but moved quickly into a permanent position within the district the following year. Unfortunately, she was furloughed. She returned to that same school district and in 2007 returned to college to obtain her master's degree. She then moved to the high school and became a Dean of Students. She became an assistant principal in 2014 and the interim principal in 2016. In 2018, she came to the Sam Sully district as an assistant principal. The high school is where Janet attended as a young girl.

The high school has a population of approximately 720 students. It is not a Title 1 school but has 54% of its students being economically disadvantaged. English Language Learners compose 6.4% of the student population with special education students being 14.6%. Of the 720 students, 50% are male and 50% are female. There are 43.5% of students being African American followed by Caucasian with 23.6%. The student population also consists of 13.9% Hispanic, 11% Asian, and 7.5% two or more races. Most of the teachers are Caucasian with only two teachers being African American. The administrative staff consist of two African American

people and one Caucasian person. The demographics of the staff are not indicative of the student population.

Jalissa

Jalissa is a career changer and a second-generation educator. Her mother was a reading specialist in a large, urban school district. Jalissa entered the world of education in 2007. She first taught English at a charter school. This school was an Afro-centric school with highly functioning students. In addition to teaching English, she dabbled in American history and African-American history for ninth through 11th grade. From this school, Jalissa moved to an inner-city school deemed one of the 25 most persistently dangerous school in the country. She taught 9th grade English. From this inner-city system, Jalissa moved to the John James School District and began teaching reading for a year and a half. She then became an instructional coach for two buildings in the district and then eased into the assistant principal role at the building she is currently working in. It did not end there, Jalissa moved to central office as a curriculum coordinator for English Language Arts and social studies for one year. She is back at her current building as an assistant principal with her 4th year of tenure in this position. Jalissa knew that she was destined to serve in some capacity for the public. She comes from a very service-oriented family with numerous military personnel and teachers. Jalissa began her career at the state level working for the Department of Public Welfare. She observed many young people coming through the system and she wanted to have a more active role in their lives. That more active role came in the form of teaching in 2007.

Normally, the school that Jalissa is assistant principal at has a population of approximately 550. Due to COVID, the population became about 500 for the 2020-2021 school year. This is a Title 1 school with 98.5% of the students classified as economically

disadvantages. The English Language Learner population makes up 23.5% of the student population with special education representing 6.5%. The population gender is 50% male and 50% female. The students represent various ethnicities; 45% African American, 45% Hispanic, 6% Caucasian, .4% Asian, .2% Native American, and 3.4% of the students representing two or more races. Jalissa is proud to report that the teaching staff is quite diverse. There are teachers that represent Asia, Ecuador, Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. There is also a Jewish teacher, an African American Jewish teacher and a Muslim teacher. Jalissa reports with pride that the school celebrates diversity.

David

David is an assistant principal at a middle school in the John James School District. The middle school has a student population of between 800 and 820 students dispersed in grades five through eight. The school is a Title 1 school with 85% of the students identified as poor. The student population consists of 34% English Language Learners and 18% special education learners. There are 55% male students in the school and 45% female students. Students in the school are from varying ethnicities although 48% identified as African American and 47% are Hispanic. Caucasian students make up 2% of the student population with Asian students representing 1%. The ethnic category of two or more races represents 2.4% of the student population.

David did not begin his career in education, but he knew he was destined to be in education but did not take heed to the signs. He went to college to obtain a degree in social work. He utilized this degree not by traditional means but through the path of becoming a pastor. When David moved from New York to his present living situation, he made the decision to perform day-to-day substitute teaching. He accepted a long-term position for a year and then the school

he was working in closed. While in the long-term position, the principal of the school persuaded David to go back to school and obtain his teaching degree.

Results

The phenomenological study process requires that I describe their personal experience with the research topic prior to analyzing participant data. The Epoche (Appendix I) will explain the personal biases of my experiences with RTI and the treatment of African American males in public education. This explanation serves as the "bracketing" of preconceived notions and biases on behalf of the researcher so that on closer examination, the reader of the study can determine the objectivity of me. As the researcher, I can provide my experiences as an educator and mother that led to my biases with public education. Furthermore, upon close examination of the narrative, I can embrace those biases but place them aside to be clear minded when collecting data.

The results of this phenomenological study were analyzed utilizing triangulation encompassing multiple data points, namely three. Data collection took place by way of interviews, a focus group, and reflection blogs. Examination of the data was through my eyes to determine connections and, with the NVivo software. NVivo allowed me to input data from the transcripts of the interviews, focus group and reflection blogs. The software was able to analyze these data with precision to produce common themes in addition to clear conclusions.

Analyzing the data produced codes. These codes were compiled and notated as classifications of participant responses to questions aligned with the research questions (Table 1). The codes produced reflected the common terms and verbiage as the participants responded to questions posed to them through interviews, a focus group, and a self-reflection blog. These

common codes and their frequency are displayed in Tables 1-12 in relation to the research questions.

The second step of analyzing the data was to examine the raw transcript of all three data points for significant statements associated with the research questions in support of the coding of terms. This analyzation can be observed in Tables (1-12). These significant statements include precise quotes, unique responses, and final summarizations.

To be able to achieve true data saturation and confident triangulation, the data from interviews, focus group, and reflection blog were collected from all 10 participants. Each data point was composed of unique questions aligned with the research questions. For example, the focus group data point addressed four out of four research questions. Table 1 graphically represents the alignment of data point questions to the indicated research questions.

Table 1

Data Points Aligned with Research Questions

Research Questions	Teacher Interviews	Focus Group	Reflection Blog
How do African American public school administrators describe their experiences utilizing RTI in the identification of African American males in special education?	How is Response to Intervention integrated into your school? What is your role in how Response to Intervention is conducted in your building?	How effective do you feel the Response to Intervention framework is in assisting struggling students?	
How do African American administrators describe the ability of the RTI framework to effectively address the misidentification of African American males in special education?	What do you view as the strengths and weaknesses of Response to Intervention?	How effective do you feel that Response to Intervention has been with reducing the disproportionality of minorities in special education?	What do you see as the connection between critical race theory and RTI?
How do African American administrators describe the cultural responsiveness of the RTI framework toward African American males in public education?	What measures does your school have in place to assist struggling students?	Describe the training your staff has had about Response to Intervention?	How do you observe the education of African American males when compared to any other ethnic group?
How do African American administrators perceive the treatment and education of African American males in public education?	What connection, if any, do you see between Response to Intervention and disproportionality?	What are your views on the misidentification and misclassification of minority students in the area of special education?	What do you view as the overarching problem in public education today?

Research Question One

Research question one, "How do African American public school administrators describe their experiences utilizing RTI in the identification of African American males in special education", is the overarching, generalized question that is the heart of this study. This question was addressed as a general question so that the participants did not feel any type of fear when answering. They were free to express any type of answer that they wished to, including as many details as possible and examples that they felt led to offer. This generalized question set the tone to the study, offering an entrance to more detailed research questions. As indicated on Table 1, this research question was addressed through the venues of interviews and the focus group session. Participants were able to share the way that RTI was integrated into their school buildings and what their role was as it was being integrated. The focus group allowed the participants to offer their perception of how they feel the framework of RTI was effective in addressing struggling students.

Table 2 displays the most prevalent codes in addition to the supporting citations that Question 11 of the interview (Appendix A) sought to discover. The question, "How is RTI integrated into your school" offers the participant to fully explain what components and systems are in place to address students who are not on grade level material.

Table 2

Administrative Interviews – Integration of RTI

Codes	Frequency	Percentage	Examples of Codes
Discussing students weekly	8	80%	"Where the breakdown occurs is not true communication between admin. or the RTI team and a team of teachers" (Doug, May 12, 2021).
Providing interventions	4	40%	"We really have parents as partners" (Jalissa, May 26, 2021). " They must be differentiated and have student input" (Doug, May 12, 2021).

The participants responded to the integration of RTI in their buildings with a plethora of responses. In addition to the most prevalent answers in Table 2, the participants also made mention of strategies as having students participate in a whole school advisory period where there was not only social-emotional learning taking place but brief content interventions along with incentives for expected behaviors. Each of the participants have a structure as to how they integrate RTI, including mass customized learning which is reminiscent of personalized learning and mastery before moving on (Kevin, April, 22, 2021). Mentoring became a strategy for one participant where a student who is struggling is assigned a mentor who checks in and out with that student daily. These check in and check-outs consist of the mentor talking with the student about how they feel about school, how they are doing in class, and what may they still be struggling with. The mentor would offer encouragement and a brief lesson of understanding content before the student moves through their day. This strategy has been implemented to show the student that they have an active show of support on a consistent basis.

Table 2 indicates more than 100% of responses to the top two modes of integration of RTI. This phenomenon has occurred as the strategies indicated are strategies that are scientifically based and proven to be productive in education struggling students. The majority

(80%) of the participants indicated that they utilized weekly, bi-weekly, and monthly meetings to discuss struggling students. These teams assemble with the cooperation of content teachers, reading specialists, administration, psychologists, counselors, and parents. The participants have indicated that communication is key, and the team meetings are indicative of that communication being effective. The team will take into consideration each struggling student along with their strengths and weaknesses. Discussion ensues with the presentation of intervention implemented to date and their effectiveness. Next steps are studied as to whether a student will move to monitoring status, continue with more interventions, or become a student who is going to be testing for special education services. The saying, "It takes a village" becomes the mantra of these discussions of the student. The second most prevalent integration of RTI with 40% of the participants responding was providing interventions. This strategy intertwines with discussing students in that as discussion takes place, the team offers suggestions for continued interventions. If they offer the idea of continued interventions, the team will then determine what intervention that would be most beneficial for the success of the student in their area of struggle.

The administrator is the leader of a school building and in doing so procures a role in the implementation of RTI. Question 12 of the interview, "As the administrator, what is your role in how Response to Intervention is conducted in your building", allowed the administrator to divulge the details and specifics of how much influence they have on the systemic implementation of RTI. Table 3 indicates the prevalent responses from the administrators with thought provoking quotes indicated.

Table 3

Administrative Interviews - Role of the Administrator

Codes	Frequency	Percentage	Examples of Codes
Monitor	5	50%	"the heavy" (Jennifer, April 26, 2021) "making sure things are happening" (Doug, May 12, 2021)
Support	5	50%	"my belief is that you support students by supporting teachers" (Marva, January, 29, 2021)
Providing Leadership	4	40%	"having systems in place" (Laurence, May 19, 2021)
Guidance	3	30%	"guiding people to obtain the resources they need to ensure structures are in place" (Peggy, April 16, 2021)
Believing in Students	1	10%	"most of our kids do not belong in Special education, they just need targeted intervention" (Jalissa, May 26, 2021)

While Table 3 indicates the most prevalent responses from the participants to the question, "What is your role in how Response to Intervention is conducted in your building?", the participants provided four additional answers which were each obtained from 1% of the participants. One participant indicated that their role was being able to have a relationship with the children in the school. Having a relationship with the children allows the administrator to be able to ascertain the true needs of the child holistically. Another participant indicated that they must have a belief in RTI. If there is no belief in RTI to provide for the needs of the students, then it will more than likely fail. Another participant felt that it was their role to share the vision of RTI and its meaning to the school and children. An administrator's job is to make sure that all stakeholders are aware of the vision and mission of the district and the school. One last participant indicated that his role was one of a partner. By being a partner, he is a team player and are willing to be involved in all aspects of providing the best education possible for the

children. This question has revealed that administrators are willing and ready to assume all roles to meet the needs of the struggling student.

The focus group was introduced in this study to ascertain, through a more intimate conversation amongst participants, the effectiveness of RTI. Not all participants were able to participate in the focus group mainly due to sickness and personal or professional responsibilities. The first focus group question focused exactly on the effectiveness of RTI. The group had to address "How effective do you feel the Response to Intervention framework is in assisting struggling students?" While this question was asked to the participants in varying ways through the interview and the blog, the participants now had an opportunity to "piggyback" on each other's responses. Table 4 is indicative of their responses.

Table 4

Focus Group – Effectiveness of RTI

Codes	Frequency	Percentage	Examples of Codes
Disproportionality	2	20%	"we have a black male population of 60%, our black males make up 80% of school suspension" (Marva, 1/29/2021) "a student who wants to act out or not hand in work may be struggling with instruction but is looked at as having a lack of participation, this is mostly African American males" (Peggy, 4/16/2021)
Implementation	3	30%	"not seen too much in the high school, you really need a true team approach and consistency which the high school really doesn't have true teams" (Marva, 1/29/2021) "customized learning is a theory that assists struggling students where they are, not where they should be according to standards or curriculum" (Kevin, 4/22/2021) "we put so many supports in place in middle schools that by the time the student gets to ninth grade, the supports are so significant and the students aren't comfortable" (Jennifer, 4/26/2021)

The responses from the participants to the focus group question extended the responses from the interview. The participants saw the focus group questions as being able to provide more

specific examples of their thoughts and feelings of the RTI framework and its effectiveness. During this discussion in the focus group, only four of the attending participants responded. Their responses expressed that RTI, in their situations, have not been effective. Their responses fell into two categories of codes: disproportionality and implementation.

Marva (1/29/2021) was quite specific with her response sharing that even though her school has a 60% population of African American males, 80% of these males are referred for behavioral issues and usually being suspended. RTI is a framework that is meant to provide strategies to students academically but not necessarily behaviorally. Students are receiving the strategies to succeed in class but are failing in succeeding socially. Peggy (4/16/2021) adds on to the conversation that she has found that students who are struggling in class and fail to hand in their assignments are found to be having lack of participation. Most of these students have been identified as African American males. RTI framework specifically states that Tier 1 intervention is through the classroom teacher. The teacher is responsible for doing whatever is necessary for a student to be successful. This type on intervention includes differentiation of the process by which information is presented or the product that a student is to turn in. The teacher is to ascertain the best way in which the student learns and provide instruction and assessment accordingly.

This leads to the rest of the responses from the participants regarding the implementation of RTI. Most often, RTI is seen implemented within the walls of an elementary or middle school setting. Jennifer (4/26/2021) believes that too many supports may have been put into place in the middle school for the struggling student and by the time they enter the high school, they have possessed so many supports that they feel uncomfortable and helpless at the high school level with the lack of supports. This may be as Marva (1/29/2021) has rarely seen RTI implemented

with direction or fidelity in the high school setting. She is aware that RTI is seen as a team implementation and in high school, there is a lack of teams as opposed to departments. Kevin (4/22/2021) seems to have put into place in his high school, an implementation of an intervention that works according to him. He and his school have embraced mass or customized learning. Many have heard of customized learning at the elementary and even the middle levels of schooling but rarely in the high school level. Kevin is commencing conversations with his colleagues regarding this strategy and its effectiveness with their population of struggling students.

Research Question Two

Research question two, "How do African American administrators describe the ability of the RTI framework to effectively address the misidentification of African American males in special education?" was included to ascertain whether the essence of RTI was indeed addressing the struggling African American student effectively. Meaning that the students were receiving a strong Tier 1 core instruction from competent and qualified teachers. If the student displayed signs of a struggle, were they receiving an immediate, differentiated form of instruction and intervention? If the student continued to still struggle, even with intervening, was the student able to participate in targeted, small group intervention? This research question was addressed via the administrator interview, reflection blog, and the focus group as indicated in Table 1. First, the interview addressed the strengths and weaknesses that the administrators observed. Next, the focus group delved into the specifics of RTI and its effectiveness in addressing the disproportionality of African American males identified for special education. Last, the reflection blog moved the administrators from just reporting on how effective RTI is but what their thoughts were on how the framework and its implementation align with critical race theory.

The school administrator ultimately has the final decision-making authority in the happenings of their school building. When a framework, such as RTI, is implemented to assist struggling students, the administrator will be the first one to notice how effectively or not effectively it is functioning. Table 5 shares the responses to the interview question, "What are the strengths and weaknesses of the RTI framework?"

Table 5

Administrator Interview – Strengths and Weaknesses of RTI

Codes	Frequency	Percentage	Examples of Codes
Strength:			
Addressing a need	4	40%	"not a cookie cutter approach, looks at individual student", (David, 5/28/2021) "catch the leak before the pipes burst", (Kevin, 4/22/2021) "before it does damage to a child academically, socially, and behaviorally", (Marva, 1/29/2021)
Support	3	30%	"targeted help", (Doug, 5/12/2021)
Data Driven	1	10%	"not just about the scholar, also about the instruction", (Peggy, 4/16/2021)
Weakness:			
Management	3	30%	"in high school, you see 100+ students; it is hard to manage and monitor each of the interventions", (Marva, 1/29/2021)
Fidelity	3	30%	"being all on the same team and following protocol", (Penelope, 5/14/2021)
Connection	2	20%	"there has to be a connection to Tier 1 instruction, ensuring it is in place and solid", (Peggy, 4/16/2021)
Communication	1	10%	"like a weapon", (Kevin, 4/22/2021)
Growth Mindset of Adults	1	10%	"if there is an inverted triangle, it is not normal", (Jalissa, 5/26/2021)

The administrators have revealed that there is not one strength or weakness of RTI that overshadows the items identified. Seventy percent of the administrators feel that RTI does indeed address a need that a student demonstrates (40%),or supports the student through targeted help

(30%). This demonstrates that the participants identify RTI as a way that students are exponentially the main thought behind the framework of RTI and the strategies that emerge from it as staff are working through the process. The participants shared that RTI is not a "cookie cutter approach" (David, 5/28/2021) nor should it be as it addresses the needs of children, and each child will present with their own individual needs. RTI is a framework for a process that will obtain "targeted help" (Doug, 5/12/2021) before the child is damaged "behaviorally, academically, and socially" (Marva, 1/29/2021). Education tends to dictate that data be obtained to determine that effectiveness or ineffectiveness of a strategy or paradigm. RTI is no different in that aspect as 10% of the administrators stated that it is data driven. The premise of RTI is that "it is not just about the student, it is also about the instruction" that is the foundation of the framework (Peggy, 4/16/2021). There is more than just meeting the needs of students; education must ensure that the students are receiving the best possible instruction throughout their school career. There are strengths and weaknesses, it seems, to everything in education. RTI is no exception. The administrators strongly voiced their strengths regarding RTI, but they also made known the weaknesses that should be overcome for RTI to be more effective and efficient. Sixty percent of the participants expressed that the management and fidelity of RTI are the biggest hurdles to overcome. Forty percent expressed that connection, communication, and the growth mindset of adults are the areas of need that are standing in the way of RTI being effective for students. Management of or the magnitude of management brought forth 30% of the participants' thoughts. The administrators expressed that there are so many students that require interventions in their buildings that is becomes difficult to keep things organized, up to date, and moving smoothly. Marva (1/29/2021) interjected that when there are "100+ students in a high school that requires interventions, it becomes hard to manage and monitor each of those interventions". RTI

requires that interventions be implemented for a certain amount of time, usually 30 days. When there is a large student population that requires some sort of intervention and each of those interventions have commenced at various times, the management of those interventions can be overwhelming. In addition to management, 30% of the participants expressed that the fidelity of implementing RTI is a weakness. This may be because the management becomes difficult with large student populations with interventions but Penelope (5/14/2021) expressed that the weakness exhibits itself when "people all need to be on the same team at the same time". If all stakeholders do not understand the premise behind RTI and their role in the process, fidelity becomes an overarching problem. Fidelity of RTI may have been seen as a weakness with the participants but beyond the fidelity component is the piece that ensures that all stakeholders are well versed with the philosophy of RTI and their role in supporting struggling students. While it may not have been expressed outwardly, part of the fidelity weakness is the training of staff in the framework of RTI primarily, and then being seen as a priority for continuing professional development. Forty percent of the participants shared that connection; communication and a growth mindset for adults are part of the weaknesses of RTI. The connection weakness aligns with fidelity in that if there is not enough buy-in with stakeholders and their belief in the premise of RTI, it will be ineffective. Peggy (4/16/2021) stated it best when she said, "there has to be a connection to Tier 1 instruction, ensuring it is in place and solid". The first station of RTI is Tier 1, classroom instruction. School districts and administrators must ensure that rigorous and scientifically researched based instruction is always occurring in the classroom with the teacher providing a foundation of intervention through differentiation for all students. For the Tier 1 intervention to happen effectively, there must be strong communication of expectations and goals. Kevin (4/22/2021) stated that communication "is like a weapon". It can be if not utilized

effectively and in the correct context. The RTI framework has been a part of conversations that stakeholders feel that blame is placed on them or others. All stakeholders in the RTI framework must take responsibility. All stakeholders should be informed of their responsibilities and then be supported in them through coaching and ongoing professional development. Within the RTI framework, strengths can become weaknesses and weaknesses can become strengths. The one thing to remember though is that all stakeholders need to work together to achieve the same goal, the success of students.

The focus group was able to elicit responses from the participants about their perceptions of the effectiveness of RTI. The next question the participants were asked, "How effective do you feel that Response to Intervention has been with reducing the disproportionality of minorities in special education?" was specifically and strategically placed so the participants could express the abundance or lack of minorities in special education with intervention being overt and pervasive in their school entities. Table 6 reveals their responses.

Table 6

Focus Group – Reducing disproportionality in Special education

Codes	Frequency	Percentage	Examples of Codes
Over Identified	4	40%	"kids are overly identified, being pumped into a system they don't belong" (Doug, 5/12/2021)
			"we are not culturally proficient, 90% of all referrals are directed at African American males" (Penelope, 5/14/2021)
			"there is no equity" (Lawrence, 5/19/2021)
			"we have a much higher percentage of referring one type of demographic that is not indicative of our whole population" (Jalissa, 5/26/2021)

The discussion in the focus group surrounding the question "How effective do you feel that Response to Intervention has been with reducing the disproportionality of minorities in

special education" turned out to be a powerful and telling discussion. Most of the participants that were involved did agree on one thing; there is a definite disproportionality of over identifying minorities for special education. The group also had consensus with the fact that African American males are the demographic group that is most overly identified for special education. The participant's discussion and memorable quotes can lead to the conclusion that they do not believe that RTI is effective in reducing the disproportionality of minorities in special education.

Jalissa (5/26/2021) provides the discussion with the statement "we have a much higher percentage of referring minorities for special education than what our whole school population indicates". All other participants in the group agree with her in some sort of way through their discussion and quotes. Unfortunately, when an urban school contains a large percentage of minority students, the percentage of referrals of these minority students are going to be the norm. The school then needs to look at whether those referrals are of females or males. Doug (5/12/2021) feels that when referrals are made for minority students, they are being put into a system that they do not necessarily belong. He went on to explain that most of the time the referral is not for the correct need of the student. He states that some staff may refer a student for a behavior issue when the student is having academic difficulties. He notes that the child is now in the wrong system for the wrong kind of assistance. When this happens, the administrator questions the cultural proficiency of the staff making the referral or the district expectations. Penelope (5/14/2021) states that 90% of all referrals are of African American males. As an administrator the underlying question is whether the staff member truly knows and understands the student, they are referring for services or not. The bottom line was that "there is no equity" (Lawrence, 5/19/2021). All other participants agreed with Lawrence. As African American

administrators, they observe that minorities are not being treated as other ethnic groups of students.

Research question two is defined through the reflection blog question, "What do you see as the connection between critical race theory and RTI? Table 7 illustrates the responses from the participants.

Table 7

Reflection Blog – Connection between CRT and RTI

Codes	Frequency	Percentage	Examples of Codes
Data Driven	3	30%	"addresses the weak areas and the root cause of concern" (Janet, 5/19/2021)
			"it overwhelms me how many minority students end up in Tier 3" (Kevin, 4/22/2021)
			"connection could be drawn by the over identification of black and brown students always needing supports" (David, 5/29/2021)
Connected	2	20%	"together they can be a powerful tool to help reduce the racial discrimination in evaluative decisions" (Lawrence, 5/19/2021)
			"CRT explains why black and brown students have been marginalized in our education system" (Jalissa, 5/26/2021)
Influence	2	20%	"perceptions of race may influence supports and services" (Marva, 1/29/2021)
			"educated scholars not educators truly know and understand the history of black and brown students in order to see how to best understand them and meet their needs" (Peggy, 4/16/2021)
Opposites	1	10%	"RTI provides support, CRT has a hidden agenda to NOT support equity" (Penelope, 5/14/2021)

The analysis of these data revealed a mixed bag of thoughts and perceptions when it referred to the connection of CRT and RTI. Many of the participants expressed that the connection was in existence quite matter of fact through data, influence, and a generalized connection (70%). The minority of participants expressed that either there was no connection at all or in 10% of the responses, an opposite connection. Penelope (5/14/2021) expressed that her

thought of an opposite connection was that "RTI provides support, CRT has a hidden agenda to NOT support equity". She believes that CRT has created "a greater divide among race in education, more than one thinks" (Penelope, 5/14/2021). Thirty percent of the participants agree that the connection between RTI and CRT was the commonality of being data driven. Janet (5/19/2021) expressed that the connection of RTI and CRT was that "it addresses weak areas and the root cause of concerns". This response indicates a positive connection. In any type of research, data is collected and analyzed. In the case of the connection of CRT and RTI, 20% of the participants agreed that data revealed disturbing information. Kevin (4/22/2021) stated "it overwhelms me how many minority students end up in Tier 3". Tier 3 is the tier in the RTI framework that is the last stop of intervening for a struggling student before identifying the student for special education. David (5/28/2021) responded, "connections could be drawn by the over identification of black and brown students always needing supports". These responses confirm what the literature has revealed across numerous rounds of research. Minority students are being over identified or misidentified for special education. In addition to the connection between CRT and RTI being data-driven, participants (20%) perceived that the connection was also one of influence. Marva (1/29/2021) expressed "perceptions of race may influence supports and services". She often observes staff of another race, other than black or brown, have preconceived notions of the behavior and academics of the struggling minority student. To corroborate, Peggy (4/16/2021) expressed "educated scholars, not educators, truly know and understand the history of black and brown students in order to see how to best understand them and meet their needs". In addition to the areas of being data-driven, influencing, and total opposites of the connection between CRT and RTI, 20% of the participants expressed just a general connection. Lawrence (5/19/2021) shared that "together they can be a powerful tool to

help reduce the racial discrimination in evaluative decision". RTI is based and managed off of evaluative decisions. Decisions about how best to meet the needs of a particular struggling student, if indeed that student is identified as struggling. Jalissa (5/26/2021) shared "CRT explains why black and brown students have been marginalized in our education system". CRT builds from four foundational principles. The first three principles reinforce the perceptions of Jalissa. First, theorists make the argument that racism is normal in American society (Dixson & Anderson, 2018; Howard & Navarro, 2016; Jett, 2012). The theorists believe this argument because the United States has perpetuated racism to such an extent that racism seems "normal" to people all over the United States. The next principle of a critical race theorist is that critical race theory does not follow the traditions of positivist scholarship. CRT speaks against rules and processes that continue to give power to European Americans and allow racism to grow in American society with the hope of contributing to social justice by breaking down some of the racist barriers. The third principle states that critical race theory critiques liberalism. Critical race theorists proclaim that the dominant culture does not fully understand how equality and liberty function.

Research Question Three

Research question three, "How do African American administrators describe the cultural responsiveness of the RTI framework toward African American males in public education"? was introduced in this study as a response to the cultural integration, or lack thereof, of meaningful and purposeful instruction that is inclusive of all students' cultures and backgrounds. Critical race theory has opened a Pandora's box of questioning the legitimacy of curriculum in present day schools. Schools should be aware of all student backgrounds and adjust or create curriculums that are responsive to them. RTI may not be a curriculum, but it should be consistent

with also being culturally responsive to all students. To arrive as to administrators, have an awareness of the cultural framework of the RTI framework, they were interviewed to respond to, "What measures do you have in place in your school for the struggling student"? Their responses are expressed in Table 8.

Table 8

Administrator Interview – Measures implemented for struggling students

Codes	Frequency	Percentage	Examples of Codes
Weekly team Meetings	3	30%	"building assets and reducing risks" (Marva, 1/29/2021)
Check in, Check out	3	30%	"we put safety nets into place" (Janet, 5/19/2021)
Setting goals	2	20%	"Leader in Me, helping kids make better decisions" (Lawrence, 5/19/2021)
Being proactive	2	20%	"before a student can be CASST, a teacher has to redo targeted interventions" (Jalissa, 5/26/2021)
Counseling, Student Assistance	2	20%	"risk review" (Marva, 1/29/2021)
Retraining Staff	1	10%	"tier 1, tier 2, tier 3, we are not doing things well" (Penelope, 5/14/2021)
Flex Period, Student choice	1	10%	"what does a diploma actually represent" (Kevin, 4/22/2021)

The question, "What measures do you have in your school to assist the struggling student", was part of the interview to ascertain whether the school was meeting the needs of students culturally. There were numerous responses but there was not one strategy that all the participants incorporated into their schools universally. The most prevalent responses to the question were weekly team meetings (30%) and Check In, Check Out (30%). Only one of these strategies involves the child directly. Weekly team meetings take place with staff members in order to discuss the students at risk. The main premise is to arrive at strategies or interventions for struggling students that would allow them to be successful in the school setting. Marva

(1/29/2021), states it best when she reported that the weekly team meetings are "building assets and reducing risks". The Check In, Check Out process is one such strategy that would emerge from the weekly team meeting. In this process, the student is assigned to an adult staff member that they may already have a bond or trusting relationship with. The student is responsible for meeting with this adult twice a day to report their feelings and to discuss their academic needs. Janet (5/19/2021) shares that this process is all about "putting those safety nets into place" for the struggling students. The next set of strategies that emerges from the interview were setting goals, being proactive and counseling along with student assistance. Each of these strategies received 20% each of the responses from administrators. Setting goals are completely about making good decisions for the present and ultimately in the future. "Leader in Me, helps kids make better decisions" (Lawrence, 5/19/2021). Leader in Me is an industry resource that instructs students how to make decisions through critical thinking. It also serves as a resource that delves deeply into the thinking process of the student so that the student can emerge as a leader as they learn the skills needed to be a leader in the school setting and in the community and home. To be proactive, there is work enacted that attempts to reach the students before they are identified as struggling. This work can encompass teacher instruction, student instructional resources, and the overall climate and culture of the school. Jalissa (5/26/2021) stated, "before a student can be CASST, the teacher must redo targeted interventions". CASST, in this participants' school, is the final process of identifying a student who is struggling for special education. The school does not go to this step immediately, they are sure to incorporate as many strategies for the struggling student as possible before this step comes to fruition. One of these strategies is the teacher taking responsibility and re-teaching the student with specific, targeted interventions fashioned solely for the student. This involves many hours of work with finding just the right targeted

intervention and the time, usually 30 days, to implement each of the interventions brainstormed. Marva (1/29/2021) expresses that counseling and student assistance is parallel to a "risk review". She envisions this strategy as where a trained adult can ascertain the risk of a student being a full-fledged struggling student, a student who requires some targeted assistance, or a student who will require a brief stint of support to be successful in the school arena and at home. Some may see this strategy as proactive, but it involves so much more of the whole child when circumstances at home are being included. The final set of strategies implemented in schools for the struggling student include retraining of staff and a flex period with student choice. Each of these strategies were expressed 10% of the time in the interviews. At the time of the interview, Penelope (5/14/2021) reported that "tier 1, tier 2, and tier 3, we are not doing things well". This is interpreted, as the strategies that should be incorporated during each tier of RTI are not being implemented in the best interest of the student. The strategies being implemented may not be the strategy that is best for the child that is struggling. It also means that teachers are not providing the instructional strategies that they should to engage every student in the classroom. To address the struggling student at a high school level, the strategy of implementing a flex/student choice period was reported by 10% of the participants. This strategy includes the idea of a student choosing what they will do for a short amount of time each day. To address the needs of the student that is struggling, this flex period incorporates a mandate that the student will involve themselves in a targeted intervention session along with a choice period that enhances the social, emotional, and behavioral aspect of the student. The idea that a student has a choice in their education is allowing the student to take charge of their struggle and correct it their way. Kevin (4/22/2021) stated, "What does a diploma actually represent?" This strategy exposes the student to much more than their struggle with academics or behavior. It addresses the future beyond high

school for the student. It shares strategies on how to be successful beyond the four walls of a school setting. Strategies represent how educators deal with struggling students academically, behaviorally, and culturally.

The focus group question "Describe the training your staff has had with regard to Response to Intervention" was included to affirm if the school personnel in each of the participant's districts were well informed of RTI, and cultural responsiveness and what that knowledge means for the struggling student. The participants responded with varying descriptions. The John James School district administrators shared that their district has gone through an overall with central administration and school personnel within the last two years. The administrators confirmed that prior to 2021, there had not been many professional development sessions conducted by the district that would instill knowledge of RTI or cultural responsiveness. The district does enlist the employment of coaches. These coaches are responsible for assessing the needs of teachers and assisting them with their needs. This could be interpreted as needs in the areas of behavior management, differentiation, small group instruction, and student engagement with rigorous instruction and activities. Within the past year though, 2021, the district has moved into a more comprehensive professional development course that allows for teachers and staff to gain extensive knowledge with numerous topics based on interest and need of the teacher. Those topics have included, data driven instruction and supporting struggling achievers, Collin's writing, stress and trauma training, understanding gangs, teacher language to enhance student engagement, and teaching social competencies. According to the participants and their district professional development plan, there has been no specific training, at the district level, for RTI and cultural responsiveness. Professional

development at the school level though has also gone through a reformation and has taken on the

topics of retraining of RTI and PBIS framework and strategies.

The administrator participants from the Sam Sulley school district have reported that the

focus of teacher training for the current and subsequent three years is centered around social and

emotional learning. The high school has taken the rigorous path of training their staff in

customized learning. The district also is one of less than five in the state that utilizes RTI as the

sole indication of special education identification. This means that instead of testing the student

to determine if there is a gap or discrepancy for special education, they utilize the path of

interventions that the staff and struggling student engage in as the sole indication for special

education. This pathway requires that staff be well informed of various learning strategies to

engage students and have them be successful. The district is providing professional development

to staff based upon this unique pathway they have embraced.

While research question three was included in this study to determine if there is a

response to the cultural integration, or lack thereof, of meaningful and purposeful instruction that

is inclusive of all students' cultures and backgrounds. The reflection blog question, "How do you

observe the education of African American males when compared to any other ethnic group?"

was asked of the participants to ascertain the details of how they perceived the education of

African American males specifically. Their most revealing responses are found in Table 9.

Table 9

Reflection Blog – Education of African American males as opposed to other ethnic groups

Codes	Frequency	Percentage	Examples of Codes
Concerning	4	40%	"there are concerns of equity, support, and negative stereotyping" (Janet, 5/19/2021)
			"appears that submissive African American males do just fine, but strong minded African American males are deemed disrespectful and behavior problems" (Kevin, 4/22/2021)
			"African American males are over represented in school discipline data and underrepresented in honors and AP classes" (Marva, 1/29/2021)
			"there always seems they receive more punitive consequences than their white counterparts" (Doug, 5/12/2021)
Exclusive	2	20%	"not sure where there is intentionality in ensuring they understand that they are capable, can have goals and dreams, and not just see certain ways to get out of their situation" (Peggy, 4/16/2021)
			"African American males are often not academically challenged in the same way that students from other ethnic groups are" (Jalissa, 5/26/2021)
Lack of Knowledge	1	10%	"educators of other races do not know how to build bridges to connect with them" (Penelope, 5/14/2021)

The participants were not shy with their responses to the question "How do you observe the education of African American males when compared to any other ethnic group?" Their specific details encompassing the three codes of, concerning, lack of knowledge, and exclusive are more than revealing. Forty percent of the participants perceived that the education of African American males is concerning. The common thread that flows through their responses was one of "African American males are overrepresented in school discipline but underrepresented in honors and AP classes" (Marva, 1/29/2021). The literature reveals that there is an achievement gap in the education of African American males but that achievement gap could be the result of an opportunity gap (Marva, 1/29/2021). African American males are not offered the opportunity to be involved in various activities in the school setting beside involvement in sports. Part of that

noninvolvement is due to the overrepresentation of African American males in school discipline issues. Kevin (4/22/2021), supported this statement with one of his own perceptions of "it appears that submissive African American males do just fine, but strong minded African American males are deemed disrespectful and behavior problems". The responses also indicated that the participants perceive that the concerns delve deeper into the areas of "equity, support, and negative stereotyping" (Janet, 5/19/2021). Peggy (4/16/2021) observes the education of African American males as exclusive. She has overtly observed that there is not a push for African Americans males to be successful and great in the school setting. She went on to reveal that she observes that they are made to be average or allowed to be just average. Peggy (4/16/2021) sees this as an oxymoron in that "being an average black male has negative connotations and consequences". Jalissa (5/26/2021) corroborated Peggy's perceptions as she adds "many educators have lower expectations of academic performance by African American males". She adds that these educators "perceive African American males to be more aggressive and unruly than students of other ethnic groups and this in turn, makes the students included in this group is not able to identify themselves as scholars but as the stereotypes that society has labeled them as". The final response to this question may be the response that ties all the other responses together. "Educators of other races do not know how to build bridges to connect with African American males" (Penelope, 5/14/2021).

Research Question Four

To gain a deeper understanding of the African American administrator and their perception of the implementation of RTI with African American males, they answered questions that aligned with research question four, "How do African American administrators perceive the treatment and education of African American males in public education"? This question was included to determine if African American males are being treated with respect and being able to

engage and participate in the same activities and interventions that their Caucasian counterparts do. To gain this knowledge from an African American administrator is much different than gaining the information from a Caucasian administrator or teacher as the literature suggests. To obtain a raw perception from the participants research question four, they were asked specifically to identify any connection, if any, they saw between RTI and disproportionality. The codes and examples are displayed in Table 10.

Table 10

Administrator Interview – Connection of RTI and disproportionality

Codes	Frequency	Percentage	Examples of Codes
Mostly black boys	2	20%	"most behaviorally challenged, oftentimes an academic intervention is manifesting as a behavioral intervention" (Jennifer, 4/26/2021)
Tier 3- Special Ed.	2	20%	"does not match the population of the building" (Kevin, 4/22/2021)
Not reading data correctly	2	20%	"if roles are not on the same page, there is an incredible disconnect" (Penelope, 5/14/2021)
Equity	1	10%	"equity is not in the picture, so what is the difference between the two" (Lawrence, 5/19/2021)
No connection	1	10%	"hard to see that teachers have truly done RTI in the way intended" (Peggy, 4/16/2021)
Connection	1	10%	"go hand in hand; if you are not aware of the disproportions, how can help be given" (Janet, 5/19/2021)

The interview question, "What connection, if any, do you see between Response to Intervention and disproportionality", was included to determine and expose the participants' thoughts and feelings of the effectiveness of RTI with African American males. The responses did not disappoint in that 20% of the participants responded with an answer of mostly black boys. Jennifer (4/26/2021) elaborated on this statement with sharing that "black boys are most behaviorally challenged, oftentimes an academic intervention is manifesting as a behavioral intervention". Jennifer distinguished her response with describing those black boys are brought

to an intervention for their disruptive behavior but in reality, these boys are acting out in the classroom because they are experiencing academic difficulty. The intervention that is then provided to the black male indicates that the root cause of them needing intervention is not investigated deeply enough. Tier 3-Special education was a response to the noted question with 20% of the participants responding accordingly. In RTI, there are three tiers that students are placed upon depending upon the level of intervention they are requiring. Tier 1 consists of core teaching in the classroom with the teacher providing any intervention needed for each student, usually through the venue of differentiation and small group instruction. Tier 2 requires the struggling student to be pulled out of instruction for a brief time to obtain targeted intervention from a math or reading specialist, usually in a small group setting. Tier 3 is where the struggling student is provided with specialized, targeted intervention, usually independently. It is at this tier that if the student still struggles with the intervention, they are referred for special education testing. Kevin (4/22/2021) describes tier 3 as students "who do not match the population of the building". Kevin elaborated further by saying that most of tier 3 students are of minority persuasion. In his school, which is a combination of Caucasian and African American students, most of his African American students are the ones who are being identified for special education, even with the framework of RTI being solidly in place. The participants (20%) agreed that not reading data correctly is an indicator of the connection of RTI and disproportionality. During the interview, Penelope (5/14/2021) indicated that, "if roles are not on the same page, there is an incredible disconnect". She clarified this statement with sharing that there are many people involved with making sure a struggling student is able to be successful academically and behaviorally. She stated that all these stakeholders must be on the same page for the student or else the student will not be reaping the whole benefit of the intervening process or could possibly

be engaged in an intervention that is not appropriate for the root cause of the struggle. Penelope emphasized that all stakeholders must engage in conversations continuously to provide the best possible outcome for the student. Lawrence (5/19/2021) believes that there is no equity in the RTI framework and process of intervening for the struggling student. He states, "equity is not in the picture, so what is the difference between the two (RTI and disproportionality)". He does not experience, in his school that students not intervened with equally. He expressed that there are students referred to him for behavior issues but are struggling due to academic issues not addressed in tier 1 with the classroom teacher. He goes on to state that most of the students that are referred for testing are African American males first and then Hispanic males second. He experiences firsthand that students are not being treated with equity when it refers to the intervention, they receive to be successful. This question for the participants brought about mixed feelings on their parts in regard to whether there truly a connection or with regard to RTI and no connection disproportionality is. There happened to be one participant (10%) each that answered connection or no connection. Peggy (4/16/2021) expressed that it is "hard to see that teachers have truly done RTI in the way intended" but Janet (5/19/2021) shared that "they go hand in hand, if you are not aware of the disproportions, how can help be given". These two participants have not had the same experiences with the implementation of the RTI framework and data exposing disproportionality. Peggy's viewpoint is that, if tier 1 instruction is being performed correctly by all teachers, then it would be difficult to find a disproportionality as all students would be getting exactly what they need for their struggles. Janet, on the other hand, is data driven and believes that the disproportions should be exposed for what they are so that the proper interventions and assistance can be provided to the struggling student.

The focus group was the last piece of data collection to occur and in turn produced numerous similar responses that have already been documented. The last question for the focus group was "what are your views on the misidentification and misclassification of minority students in special education"? This question, as one of the culminating questions, permitted the participants to identify their true thoughts of the special education identification process in conjunction with utilizing interventions with students based upon their needs. Table 11 documents their unique and honest responses to the question.

Table 11

Focus Group – Views on Misidentification and Misclassification of Minorities in Special Ed.

Examples
"school to prison pipeline" (Doug, 5/12/2021)
"parents realize they can get an SSI check" (Doug, 5/12/2021)
"people automatically look at the behavior bias" (Penelope, 5/14/2021)
"an overabundance of mislabeled scholars placed in SPED" (David, 5/28/2021)
"people have the wrong mindset that everyone has started equally" (Kevin, 4/22/2021)

The responses that the participants supplied were indicative of strong feelings and perceptions as an African American administrator. There has been an abundance of research completed on the school to prison pipeline which indicates that African American males are a target for this event to occur to them. Doug (5/12/2021) has indicated with this question of misidentification and misclassification of minorities, that the school to prison pipeline commences with the referrals of African American males for behavioral intervention which could in turn lead to the over identification of African American males in special education. Once in special education, the pipeline to prison enlarges for the African American male. The response of Penelope (5/14/2021) indicates that she holds stock in what Doug has indicated. She

perceives that with the African American male, academics is not what educators focus on. Instead, ethnic groups other than African American educators perceive the African American male as a behavioral challenge and takes steps to address the behavior before the academics. While behavior may be an issue with the African American male, it may stem from not being able to understand the academics. This leads to David (5/28/2021) indicating that he sees an overabundance of mislabeled minorities identified and entered the realm of special education. If the student is experiencing a behavior issue due to not understanding the academic portion of his day and people believe that he should be identified or moved to another placement, there is an indication that mislabeling is occurring. The participants made various noticing's, but Doug added that the parent is just searching for the SSI check. In this participant's particular state, if a student is identified for special education, a parent can apply for assistance from the social security administration. This is a normal occurrence in the urban education setting among minority families. Many parents of African American males proceed to request testing for their child so they can apply for this assistance, whether the child needs to be truly identified for services or not. Kevin (4/22/2021) brought the perspective that all students do not begin equally in their life but there are certain educators that believe that they do. In a classroom, there is an average of 20 students. All these students learn in various ways and at different paces. Some educators feel that all their students should be on the same page at the same time and that is not the case. It is when students are struggling with this same page philosophy that educators tend to refer the child for more formal services as they can't keep up in the classroom. The participants were all in agreement that there is not equity for all students, especially minority students.

  To obtain the true "essence" of how the African American participants viewed the education of African American males, they were presented with the question "What do you view

as the overarching problem in public education today?" This question was intended to allow the

participant to share openly their perceptions of public education today, namely for the African

American male. The participants presented their responses through a reflection blog. The

plethora of responses can be observed in Table 12. Even though each participant had their own

viewpoint to express, the responses can be delineated into three main category codes, diversity,

programming, and politics.

Table 12

Reflection Blog – Overarching problems in public education

Codes	Examples of Codes
Diversity	"letting go of how we were raised" (Penelope, 5/14/2021)
Programming	"the lack of diverse representation" (Janet, 5/19/2021) "too many people looking for excuses" (Lawrence, 5/19/2021)
	"ignorance" (Peggy, 4/16/2021)
	"inconsistent use of building discipline policies and academic strategies" (Kevin, 4/22/2021)
	"lack of quality development programs and common consistent professional learning" (Jennifer, 4/26/2021)
Politics	"policy makers and educators in decision making positions" (Jalissa, 5/26/2021)
	"equity of school funding" (Marva, 1/29/2021)
	"adequate funding, outdated facilities, lack of educators, politicians" (David, 5/28/2021)

While the participants were quite vocal about the problems in public education today,

they provided deep insight to these problems as perceived by them individually. Diversity is a

broad term that can encompass quite a bit in education. The participants were specific about how

they perceived these problems of how we were raised and the lack of a diverse representation.

Being raised 20 or more years ago is very different from how children seemed to be raised or

guided in present day. Penelope (5/14/2021) presents that a problem in public education today is

that the lives of the students are not acknowledged, and they are not being provided the

assistance that they demonstrate a need for. On the other hand, Janet (5/19/2021), feels that

African American children need to see people like them. She goes on to clarify that the students

need the diversity in their education so they can relate to them and grow academically and

behaviorally. Programming in public education encompasses the curriculum, facilities,

professional development, just the general management of the district and schools. Kevin

(4/22/2021) views that there is an inconsistent use of discipline policies and academic strategies

that unconsciously hamper the growth of the minority population. To parallel the problem of

academic strategies, Jennifer (4/26/2021) observes a problem being the lack of quality and

consistent professional development programs for teachers and administrators. She expresses

that these programs must be in place so that teachers and administrators can teach children

conceptually and not have the students be learning from low-level rote procedures. The learning

should be purposeful for the student and allow them to extend their thinking into real-world

situations. Lawrence (5/19/2021) can concur with Jennifer in that he perceives that people are

looking for excuses. He states that staff are making excuses about why students aren't learning at

a determined rate or pace. Students learn at different paces and in various ways. Lawrence feels

that growth must be a part of conversations when referring to children. He says that a growth

mindset must be a part of those conversations and the focus of education today should shift to a

growth mind set. Peggy (4/16/2021) is adamant that ignorance is the problem in public education

today. She expresses that the standpoint she is coming from is that "I don't know, what I don't

know" or "I think I know, but really I have no idea". Peggy also believes that ignorance blooms

from fear and laziness by stating, "is anyone trying to find out how I can increase my skills and

knowledge so that I can positively impact the educational outcomes for students that don't look

like me". Peggy continues with strong feeling about the teachers in public education, especially

from the urban school settings. She expresses that there is a lack of teachers of color in urban

settings and therefore what do they really know and understand about their students of color.

Politics is a part of public education but there are some educators that believe that it has no place

in education. David (5/28/2021) finds that funding, facilities, educator positions, and politician

decisions are substandard. He feels that these areas are not being thought through carefully

enough to provide the best possible education for students today. He believes that the politicians

are making decisions without the input of educational stakeholders that could guide them with a

better understanding and view before a decision is made. David states that the issue he expressed

point to the final issue of equity in education for all. Jalissa (5/26/2021) observes politicians or

people in decision-making positions not believing that all students have the capacity to learn. She

states that "if policy makers and educators have this view, they would legislate, fund, and teach

all students in an equitable fashion.

Summary

This study employed a purposeful, criterion sample of 10 participants. Before the

participants were received as part of the study, they had to meet the criteria of being an

administrator in a public school system for at least 3 years. They could fulfill the role of principal

or assistant principal. The participants were also required to be of African American descent.

This study, in conjunction with purposeful sampling, enlisted the sampling strategy of

snowballing. The field of education is infamous for sharing ideas and resources. This study relied

on the assistance of the initial participants to suggest other participants for interviewing and

gaining their perspective of the phenomenology.

The data were primarily collected through the venue of Zoom. This collection of data was

necessary due to a pandemic that existed. Data were also collected through phone calls and one

in-person interview. All data collections were audio recorded for transcription purposes. Notes were also taken by me as the participants shared their experiences. Once all data points were collected, the audio recordings were transcribed professionally. The data were kept locked in a lock box in my residence until analysis was to take place.

The analysis of the data mimicked Moustakis (1994). The analysis incorporated general analysis strategies by Huberman and Miles (1994) and Wolcott (1994). To begin the analysis process, horizonalization occurred when I identified significant statements from the participants that provide the information about them and the phenomenology. To locate these statements, I first read the transcribed text in its entirety. A second reading was employed with the addition of highlighting certain information in description (Wolcott, 1994). As noted, the statements are displayed in tables throughout the chapter as they are related to the research questions (Wolcott, 1994). From there, I identified codes within the statements and made memos on the text directly to find patterns of words and thoughts (Huberman & Miles, 1994). The identified codes, frequency of codes (Huberman & Miles, 1994), and how these codes are related to the themes identified are found in Table 13. An explanation of the correlation of codes and themes to the research questions follows the noted table.

Table 13

Enumeration of Codes and Themes

Open-Codes	Enumeration of open-code appearance across data sets	Themes
Effective Monitoring	9	Leadership
On-going Support	9	
Guidance	3	
Believing in Students	1	
Setting Goals	2	
Being Proactive	2	
Counseling	2	
Training Staff	1	
Consistency	10	
Disproportionality	10	Implementation of RTI
Actual Implementation	3	
Addressing a Need	4	
Continued Support	3	
Data Driven	4	
Management	3	
Fidelity	3	
Making Connections	2	
Effective Communication	8	
Growth Mindset of Adults	1	
Concerning Components	4	Inequity
Exclusivity	2	
Lack of Diversity	10	
Lack of Cultural Programming	10	
Politics	10	
Biased	9	
Over Identification	4	
Mostly Black Boys	2	
Ignorance	5	
Lack of Knowledge/Training	10	Quality and Effective Resources
Individualized	4	
Scientifically Researched-Based Interventions	4	

Yocum, R., Silvey, R., Milacci, F., & Garzon, F. (2015). Spirituality in school counseling practice and implications for school counseling education. *Journal of Academic Perspectives, 2015*(3).

For the central research question, "How do African American public school administrators describe their experiences utilizing RTI in the identification of African American males in special education?", the participants agreed that their needs to be consistent communication about discussing students and their needs. Doug (5/12/2021) expresses it completely when he states, "where the breakdown occurs is not having true communication between administration or the RTI team and a team of teacher". All stakeholders must work together for the needs of the student, including the families. Having parents as partners is key to making sure that a holistic view of the child is observed. Forty percent of the participants expressed that their integration of RTI in their school environment consists of providing interventions that are differentiated and having the student express their needs by providing input at discussions. While the administrator fills many roles throughout the school day and beyond, the participants expressed those administrators that are embracing the idea of RTI should serve as a monitor (50%), a support (50%), provide the leadership needed to accomplish the goals of RTI (40%), provide guidance (30%), and ultimately believe in the students (10%). As the administrator has the goal of embracing the framework of RTI and making sure that all stakeholders are meeting the needs of the struggling student, they must also determine the effectiveness of RTI through data and discussions. The participants indicated that disproportionality (20%) is found to make the true meaning of RTI ineffective. Peggy (4/16/2021) indicated that "a student who wants to act out or not hand in work may be struggling with instruction but is looked at as having a lack of participation, this is mostly African American males". The participants had expressed mixed viewpoints of the implementation of RTI deeming it effective or ineffective (30%). Jennifer (4/26/2021) notices that there are so many supports for students who are struggling in the elementary and middle school years that by

the time they arrive at the high school level, the supports are significant, and the students do not feel comfortable obtaining all that support.

Research question two asks, "How do African American administrators describe the ability of the RTI framework to effectively address the misidentification of African American males in special education"? The participants were quick to identify numerous strengths and weakness. The strengths expressed were those of RTI addressing a specific need, providing support, mainly through targeted assistance, and being data driven. Kevin (4/22/2021) expressed in a concise and succinct way that RTI "catches the leak before the pipes burst" The participants also indicated numerous factors that revealed weaknesses of RTI. Included in those were management, fidelity, connection, communication, or lack thereof, and the growth mindset of adults. Thirty percent of the participants agreed that the sheer management of RTI with a high student volume is difficult and taxing. There could be 100+ students needing intervention in a school, each with varying interventions. Finding the time for these interventions and the talent to provide the intervention is overwhelming. Participants revealed that fidelity is an issue with the implementation of the RTI framework. All stakeholders need to be on the same page, providing the best possible instruction for the struggling student. Another weakness expressed was one of connection (20%). Peggy (4/16/2021) shared that there first has to be a connection to Tier 1 instruction, ensuring it is in place and solid". Tier 1 is the first step of the RTI framework; it consists of the teacher providing interventions to students that struggle in the form of differentiation along with multi-modality instruction. If Tier 1 fails, then struggling students to a more specific form of intervention. Peggy expresses those teachers must realize their part in the connection of the struggling student and Tier 1 interventions, strong, rigorous, and engaging instruction. Communication or the lack thereof becomes a weakness along with the growth

mindset of adults. Along with weaknesses, disproportionality becomes a reality in certain school districts. The participants of this study are employed in either an urban or suburban school setting yet the participants from both school districts expressed that the over identification of minorities is increasing disproportionality in special education. When compared to the literature, the participants emphatically that minorities are becoming a part of special education due to inequity, a lack of cultural proficiency, and referring students from certain demographics that are not indicative of the whole student population. Doug (5/12/2021) summed up his perceptions by stating, "Kids are overly identified, being pumped into a system they don't belong". When asked about the connection between CRT and RTI, the participants indicated that the connection is data driven, are influential of each other, and can be perceived as opposites.

Research question three, "How do African American administrators describe the cultural responsiveness of the RTI framework toward African American males in public education?" was included in this study to ascertain if all students are being given the best education possible. To accomplish this goal, participants stated that the strategies of weekly team meetings (30%), check in, check out (30%), setting goals (20%), being proactive (20%), counseling and providing student assistance (20%), retraining staff (10%), and student choice (10%) are being utilized to ensure that all struggling students are being offered the best educational experience that they can be offered. Through all these influential strategies, the participants expressed consensus in implementing these measures for struggling students served as reducing the risks that these students would not be identified for special education unless necessary. Marva (1/29/2021) simply put it when she stated, "building assets and reducing risks". Janet (5/19/2021) agrees as she states, "we put safety nets into place". The participants were asked how they perceived the education of African American males to be as opposed to other ethnic groups. All the

participants suggested that the African American male education is negative or unsatisfactory. Forty percent of the responses focused on the education being concerning. The participants expressed that equity, support, and negative stereotyping are the main premise of their negative education. An overarching response was that African American males are perceived to be aggressive and are therefore referred for more behavior issues than academic issues when their lack of understanding the academics may be leading to the negative behavior. Jalissa (5/26/2021) expressed that "African American males are often not academically challenged in the same way that students from other ethnic groups are". There was one participant, Penelope 5/14/2021), that the negative education of African American males is indicative of the educators who are providing it. She feels "educators of other races do not know how to build bridges to connect with them". The focus group question of "Describe the training your staff has had with regard to Response to Intervention" cemented the perception of Penelope. The results of this question revealed that the professional development in each of the site school districts are lacking. The John James school district participants responded prior to 2021, there had not been much professional development at all due to transitions and change in central administration. Since that time, there is more outgoing training in the form of data driven instruction and supporting struggling students, stress, and trauma training, understanding gangs, teacher language to enhance student engagement, and teaching social competencies. There has been no specific training regarding RTI and cultural responsiveness. The Sam Sulley participants expressed that the majority of their professional training has focused on social and emotional learning. The district does implement RTI as the sole indicator of identifying students for special education therefore staff is receiving extensive professional learning on how best to provide support for the struggling student.

The final research question "How do African American administrators perceive the treatment and education of African American males in public education?", revealed how the administrators, connected RTI and the disproportionality of African American males in special education, viewed misidentification and misclassification of minorities in special education, and interpreted the overarching problems in public education. Overall, the participants felt that the connection was one of allowing students to become a part of the disproportionality that necessarily did not belong there. There was agreement that those included in the disproportionality did not necessarily match the overall population scene of the building. The participants expressed that it was usually the most behaviorally challenged students that inherited being a part of the disproportionality because their real root challenge was not interpreted correctly through the data. Peggy truly summed up the thoughts of the participants when she stated there seems to be no connection because "it is hard to see that teachers have truly down RTI in the way it is intended". The participants moved forward with their views on the misidentification and misclassification of minorities in special education. The focus group was the venue for these responses, the interaction and responding to each other brought heat from the participants with their responses. The participants that ultimately took part in the focus group expressed their feelings strongly and agree that there is misidentification and misclassification of minorities in special education. Their responses ranged from "school to prison pipeline" (Doug, 5/12/2021) to "an overabundance of mislabeled scholars placed in special education" (David, 5/28/2021). Kevin (4/22/2021) responded with a unique answer of "people have the wrong mindset that everyone has started equally". He explains that students do not all come from the same place or the same background and therefore begin at various places in their education. The students may have issue with memory, writing, or reading. A teacher cannot assume that all

students in their classroom are on the same level. The teacher must incorporate differentiated

learning experiences to the students to ensure they all have an equal opportunity of learning the

concepts presented. To finalize this study, the participants were asked about what they perceived

as the overarching problems in public education. The responses were succinct and revealing. The

participants expressed that diversity is lacking in both curriculum and people delivering that

curriculum. Other responses included inconsistency in building expectations and academic

strategies and expectations along with ignorance (Peggy, 4/16/2021). Ignorance encompasses the

way our students are treated, instructed, and thought about at a face level. There are many

educators not aware of minority backgrounds, traditions, and trials and tribulations of the

minority student. Educators must be informed. Looking at the overall view of education, the

participants expressed that policy makers along with central administrators are not necessarily

making the best decisions regarding our minority students. This parallels with equity in funding,

outdated facilities, and the lack of qualified educators (David, 5/28/2021).

Summary

In the concluding chapter, Chapter 5, a detailed summary of the findings will take place.

In this summary, the development of the themes as they were identified will ensue along with the

specific data that corroborates the theme. The discussion of the empirical and theoretical

literature take place with answers to how this study confirmed or aligned with the previous

research. This discussion also delves into how this study extended the previous research and

what contribution was made to educational research through this study. The implications of this

study are addressed through the theoretical, empirical, and practical viewpoints. During this

section, recommendations are made for educators in all levels of education. Delimitations and

limitations follow, revealing the extenuating circumstances of the study followed by

recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of African American administrators in public schools with their use of Response to Intervention (RTI) when identifying African American males in special education. Ten administrators represented two public school districts, one identified as medium, urban (John James School District) and the other identified as small, suburban (Sam Sully School District). All ten administrators in the study are experienced administrators with 209 years of educational experiences combined, under their belts. To offer reliable and credible results, the data were triangulated through the venues of interviews, reflection blogs, and a focus group. Data were analyzed through the Moustakas (1994) transcendental phenomenology model seeking to find the "essence" or common themes of the shared experiences of the participants. Chapter 5 commences with the summarization of the findings about the four research questions presented and continues with discussion of the findings as they relate to the theoretical framework, relevant literature, and the themes identified. The chapter will continue with the discussion of the implications of the study, the delimitations, and limitations of the study with future research recommendations. The chapter will then conclude with a summary.

Summary of Findings

This transcendental phenomenological study was guided by the central research question: How do African American public-school administrators describe their experiences utilizing RTI in the identification of African American males in special education? This central question was addressed more specifically with an additional three research sub-questions. This section will

provide a concise summary of the responses to these research questions in addition to revealing the themes that were identified through the responses.

The following four research questions informed the study:

1. How do African American public school administrators describe their experiences utilizing RTI in the identification of African American males in special education?

The administrators provided responses that were both positive and negative in nature. The overall themes that were identified in their responses were: (1) Supportive implementation; (2) Consistent leadership; (3) Quality interventions. The leading area of concern for the administrators was a supportive implementation. The administrators believe that the key to this supportive implementation is communication (80%). There must be quality and timely communication between the administrator, the RTI team and the team of teachers in the school, thereby making sure that all stakeholders are on the same page. The participants also indicated that support dictates that there is belief in supporting students by supporting teachers (50%). To ensure that students are receiving the best possible instruction daily, the administration must ensure that the teachers are supported also. A concern expressed by the participants in regard to a supportive implementation was that they observe young students obtaining a plethora of supports year after year. The concern occurs when the student enters high school and continues to require those supports. The participants observe the students experiencing not being comfortable in front of their peers due to all the assistance they are requiring (30%).

The next area expressed to research question one was the idea of consistent leadership. While this idea can be considered parallel to supportive implementation, consistent leadership is an area that reflects upon the administrator solely. The participants agree that consistent leadership consists of monitoring the implementation and securing that all the necessary systems

and structures are in place for a successful implementation (100%). Administrators are the final point of contact for approval for all systems in their buildings and must ensure that they are providing the best possible educational experience for all stakeholders, parents, students, and staff.

In conjunction to providing consistent leadership, the responses indicated that quality interventions must be ensured to take place for all students. Quality interventions means that each student is being met at their level of need in regard to academics. It is not only the job of the school to aid the students, but it is also the job of the parents and guardians (40%). Therefore, leadership should be identified as supportive and all encompassing. The borders of leadership must reach beyond the doors of the school to invite parents and community as partners into the students' realm. It truly does take a village to ensure that students receive the best education possible.

2. How do African American administrators describe the ability of the RTI framework to effectively address the misidentification of African American males in special education?

Two themes identified from this question were: (1) Individualized, (2) Adult perception. The participants indicated through the idea of individualization that the effectiveness of the RTI framework is due to addressing a specific need (40%), making sure that there is targeted support (30%), and considering the holistic child through the interpretation of data (10%). The administrators also expressed that the RTI framework held weaknesses. These weaknesses included the immense job of managing a large population of students that require intervention (30%). The participants also indicated that RTI must be implemented with fidelity; all people should be on the same page (30%). Another weakness that was revealed was that there

must be an explicit connection to tier 1 teaching (20%). The teacher is the first stop in the

intervention process and administrators must ensure that they are performing at high levels by

providing engaging, rigorous, and critical thinking activities for every child.

Adult perception was the second theme that was identified for research question two. The

administrators believe that it is the perception of the adults providing the interventions as to

whether they are effective or not (100%). All stakeholders of the intervention process have the

responsibility that all students are being provided the assistance that they require or need. It is

when negative perceptions of students and biases cloud the minds of the adults in the school

system that ineffective support and interventions surface.

3. How do African American administrators describe the cultural responsiveness of the

 RTI framework toward African American males in public education?

The responses indicated two themes prevalent: (1) Concerning; (2) Lack of knowledge.

While the participants shared that there is a plethora of strategies and tactics to ensure that

African American males are ensured a quality and successful education, they allude to the fact

that there are numerous concerns that are intertwined with those strategies (100%). The

participants indicated that the strategies of weekly team meetings, check in and check out, setting

goals, and being proactive have been effective when addressing the needs of all students. The

participants also indicated that setting up counseling or student assistance for the students

enables the tactic of a risk review. In addition, the participants expressed that allowing student

choice and retraining staff have ensured some successes in interventions.

While the administrators indicated that retraining staff allows for a positive and helpful

atmosphere with interventions, they indicated that their staff is not receiving the proper

professional development required to embrace cultural differences in students. While the

respondents indicated that the professional development includes topics such as differentiated instruction, student engagement, and small group instructional strategies, it lacks any type of topic that pertains to cultural responsiveness. The participants' districts, at this time, seem to be making the steps necessary to ensure that staff are well versed in cultural proficiency and responsiveness.

It is the lack of knowledge, from stakeholders, that keep the meeting of specific students' needs from progressing in a positive way. It is also the lack of knowledge of students' culture that adult perceptions are skewed in a negative way. The participants indicated that the African American male that is overrepresented in their data regarding school discipline. When the data were analyzed for the needs of African American males in academics, there was none. Most of the data indicates behavioral issues rather than academic issues. The participants agree that in public education, they observe issues of negative stereotyping and inequity when it concerns the African American male (40%). Ultimately, the participants stated that African American males just do not receive the education that other ethnic groups do (20%) and that the educators responsible for their education just do not know how to connect with them to be able to provide the best education possible (10%).

4. How do African American administrators perceive the treatment and education of African American males in public education?

The results revealed three themes as the participants were asked research question four: (1) Biased; (2) Ignorance; (3) Inequity. These themes became identified as the participants, were inquired about the connection of RTI and disproportionality, provided their views on the misidentification and misclassification of minorities in special education, and expressed their thoughts on the overarching problems in public education today.

The theme of bias brought forth numerous responses from the participants regarding the education of African American males in public education. The responses began with the participants observing that it is predominantly the African American male that is referred for or engaged in, behavioral interventions instead of academic interventions (40%). The participants explained that these referrals for behavioral interventions does not match the population of the entire building there by indicating a form of bias (40%). The data revealed that in order to rid public education of bias, stakeholders in the system must rid ourselves of their own bias.

The second theme identified from research question four was ignorance. The participants explained that ignorance demonstrates in the form of many things in public education today. Teachers must be able to analyze data correctly or else the students will receive the wrong intervention or type of instruction that best fits their need (20%). Data analysis provides the teacher and RTI team with information that dictates how best to serve the student. If the teacher or team reads data incorrectly or does not have a toolbox of strategies to instruct the student based on their need, the education of that child will suffer and not be as successful as it could be (10%). There are numerous views that ignorance is demonstrated in the school, but it can also be seen in the home and parents. The participants have found that in either their urban or suburban schools, the parent has stated on occasion that they are just concerned with the social security check that comes from a student being identified with a special education label. Parents are the forefront of providing an education to the student. If parents are concerned with the money, their judgement is clouded. Public schools must work with the parents and be able to offer correct information and knowledge about their child as a student and what works or does not work for their success as a student. To offer the parent the best information, the school must embrace the idea of being consistent, always searching for the best possible answer to a given scenario and

become a lifelong learner by searching out additional professional development and learning programs. Ignorance is not bliss in public education.

The last theme of inequity offers a Pandora's Box of thoughts from the participants. The research question has revealed that people in education have the wrong mindset when it comes to the students each beginning their journey in life equally. Each person in life has begun their journey from birth until now in various ways. Stakeholders in education should not assume that each person had the same resources or opportunities. That type of equity does not exist. The participants' main concern with equity came from their perceptions and experiences of people with power making the wrong decisions for children they do not know. The participants noted that politicians make numerous decisions for education yet have no connection to the children. There has been inequity in funding (20%), outdated facilities (10%), and lack of educators (10%). The lack of educators goes hand in hand with the lack of diverse educators, educators that look like the students (10%). The participants perceive politicians are not aware of the challenges of operating a public school and do not understand the funding that is related to proper operations. The consensus with the participants was one of, if the district or school is failing, then funds are withheld. The participants perceived those politicians are not the only ones making poor decisions for education today. The participants also feel that some central office decisions may be made without the best interest of the child being taken into consideration. An educator should remember where they have come from and base decisions on the needs of children.

Discussion

The discussion embraces the research findings with the empirical research and the theoretical frameworks that are the foundation upon which this transcendental phenomenological

study is built. Four final themes identified from this study will be the basis of this discussion. The overarching themes revealed are leadership, resources, the actual implementation of RTI, and inequity.

Empirical

It is no secret that there is a defined disproportionality among minorities in special education. In 2015-2016, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that African American students make up 20% of all students enrolled in special education. Of the 20%, there are 37.3% receiving services for a specific learning disability (NCES, 2017). The participants of this study concur those findings with their own within their school districts. The participants expressed that 90% of their referrals are African American males (Penelope). Twenty percent of the participants revealed that in their schools they have a black male population of 60%. Unfortunately, of the 60%, 80% of those black males are being referred or have been referred for suspension (Marva). In 2013, Wiley, Brigham, Kauffman, and Bogan conducted a study that noted that disproportionate poverty was positively correlated with minority representation in ED. The authors also noted that poverty and students of color not being identified appropriately may be factors in causing the disproportionality in minority populations. The participants expressed that the African American males that they are in contact with on a daily basis are overrepresented in discipline but underrepresented in honors and AP classes (Marva). Kevin represented the African American males that appear submissive are doing just "fine" in school but those who are strong willed and strong minded, are deemed disrespectful and possess continuous behavior issues. To describe the disproportionate populations in schools, two terms can be utilized: misidentification and misclassification. Misidentification is defined as inappropriately identifying students from racial and ethnic minority groups as students with disabilities.

Misclassification is the inaccurate labeling of students who have been identified for special education services (Togut, 2011; Voulgarides, Fergus & Thorius, 2017).

Since misidentification and misclassification are seemingly a covert issue in public education today, leadership must take charge. School districts must find the leadership style in their administrators that is going to minimize or put a stop to the misidentification and misclassification of African American males. Blackaby and Blackaby in 2011 identified leadership as influence with a person influencing others to accomplish a purpose. DuFour and Marzano in 2011 agree with the Blackaby's as they state that leadership is possessing the ability to influence others. The participants of this study expressed strong feelings about leadership ability and the implementation of the RTI framework. The participants believe that the leader should serve as a monitor (50%) and a support (50%). The monitor side of leadership is making sure that RTI is happening and happening in the proper way, all systems being in place. The support side of leadership should be to support students, teachers must be supported first and foremost. The leadership associated with RTI must take into consideration that it is not a cookie cutter approach. Each student is an individual and requires their own type of intervention that suits just their need. Values and principles are essential when decisions are being made for the greater good of the children in schools (Blackaby & Blackaby, 2011). The literature alludes to varying types of leadership style but the one that exceeds them all in providing the type of leadership that is needed to eliminate the misidentification and misclassification of African American males is transformational leadership.

Transformational leadership encompasses the idea that the leader will influence others based upon their values and beliefs. This type of leader will also be able to gain the respect of their staff. A transformational leader inspires a desire to act beyond self-interest. Lastly, the

transformational leader can affect the consciousness of a positive group goal and facilitate creative thinking (Maier et al., 2016).

For the leader to effect change, the study indicated there needs to be the proper and correct resources. RTI offers early identification of struggling students if implemented with fidelity. Thirty percent of the administrators in this study believe that fidelity is a weakness of RTI especially when people are not on the same team with the same agenda (Penelope). Once a student is identified as struggling, a classroom teacher will accommodate them with a series of interventions on their level. This approach considers individualization and differentiation (Villarreal et al., 2016). While the administrators concur that RTI is strong in providing targeted assistance to a student (30%), they believe that a classroom teacher may be unable to provide the appropriate intervention for a struggling student consistently and solidly (Peggy).

The literature adds that RTI incorporates a lack of research-based interventions and produces a lack of clarity in the process of diagnosing a disability. The research goes on to add that there is a lack of professional development for the teachers (Bineham, Shelby, Pazey & Yates, 2014; Linton, 2015; Castro-Villarreal, Villarreal & Sulivan, 2016). This research exemplifies the fact that teachers need more tools in their toolbox to facilitate learning effectively.

The next theme extracted from the study was inequity. Researchers beyond this study have defined that there are multiple factors that continue to shape the problem of disproportionality. Past researchers have discovered these factors to be the pervasive impact of poverty on minority children's development, the knowing or unknowing racial bias of educators, inequity that runs the line of class and race, and power struggles among parents of students of color and school officials (Fuller & Shaw, 2011; Togut, 2011; Voulgarides, Fergus & Thorius,

2017). Forty percent of the administrators in this study stated they observe no equity regarding RTI and reducing the disproportionality of African American males in special education. The administrators expressed their experiences with RTI and the process that accompanies it as biased. The administrators also indicated that stakeholders that are a part of the experience have an ignorance when it comes to minority children and the adult perception of African American males is skewed.

The final theme identified in the study was the actual implementation of RTI. It seems, that as districts and schools peruse resources for the proper implementation of RTI, the focus should be resources that deal with diversity and cultural responsiveness. One of the participants so eloquently stated, "Educators of other races do not know how to build bridges to connect with our African American males" (Penelope). The literature concurs with the responses of the participants. Fuller and Shaw (2011) believe that one way to address issue of disproportionality and the proper implementation of RTI is to prepare teachers better for teaching in diverse classrooms. "Teacher education programs must address the curricular needs of their pre-service students by ensuring preparation in the areas of diversity and multicultural education" (Becker, 2004, p.9). A teacher in the classroom is the main resource and point of origin for the effective implementation of RTI.

This study revealed that there is indeed an over identification and mislabeling of African American males in special education today. The participants were honest and open with their responses, expressing what the literature stated in the research. The surprise of this study was that the participants revealed what they believed to be the root cause of this over identification and mislabeling of African American males. The literature did not reveal any root causes for this phenomenon. The participants expressed that education must do a better job of making sure that

educators are equipped with cultural awareness and responsiveness. The education system also must ensure that all stakeholders are well informed on how to deal with a diverse population of students with a culturally responsive curriculum and a toolbox of differentiated strategies. Higher education must demonstrate a covert awareness and platform of educating future teachers for urban, public education. Teachers may not look like their children in urban education, but they should be informed of and embrace their familial background and culture.

Research in education should shift the focus of placing blame on minority children and their families for their low achievement and disabilities, to placing responsibility on the schools and school policies that directly affect minority children (Harry, Klinger, & Hart, 2005). There are too many stereotypes about African American families. When teachers do not have first-hand knowledge of African American families, they tend to believe stereotypes without investigating for themselves. When these perceptions take over, they feed into lowered expectations for both the student and their family festering into a substandard education. There has been an air of "blaming the victim" when it comes to low achievement and disabilities (McDermott & Varenne, 1995).

Theoretical

The theory utilized in conjunction with this study is critical race theory (CRT). CRT was born from the critical legal theory in the 1970s by law school professors who were angry and impatient with civil rights justice (Zorn, 2018). In the 1980s, CRT commenced with the analysis of race into education by explaining achievement gaps between students of color and their Caucasian peers (Dixson & Anderson, 2018; Creswell, 2013; Howard & Navarro, 2016; Jett, 2012; Parker & Lynn, 2002). The theorists that subscribe to this theory stand their ground in stating that racism is normal in society today (Harris, 2012). CRT has noted that there are

institutional structures along with educational practices that perpetuate racism (Jett, 2012). This study incorporated the critical race theory through a social justice lens as it pertains to RTI implementations and African American males and any possible injustices of racism embedded in education.

To ascertain the understanding of CRT with the participants, they were asked directly what their definition and perception is of CRT. Their responses were direct and offered no sugar coating. Two of the participants (20%) observe CRT as a social construct. It is theory that offers a way of understanding how racism has shaped public policy (Jalissa). Within CRT being a social construct, Marva believes that the social construct has been utilized to establish a caste system within the United States. Glenn Loury (2002) has presented three assumptions in his book The *Anatomy of Racial Inequality* concerning the subject of race, as it exists in the United States. His first assumption is that race is socially constructed. He explains that humans feels the need to divide people into subgroups called "races" based upon the way people look. This assumption of Loury explains the way that race is perceived in America but not the premise on which CRT stands. CRT was created to contribute to social justice by breaking down racist barriers. A portion of the participants expressed some poignant quips about CRT. One such participant expressed that "CRT does address the whitewashing of history" (David). Penelope, on the other hand, defines CRT as producing "a greater divide among race in education, more than one thinks". Three of the participants defined CRT exactly how the theoretical framework defines it. Peggy defines CRT as the theory in which a person of color "needs to understand who they are from a historical perspective so they can understand the world". The last response defined CRT as a theory "in which systemic structures have been put into place to maintain privilege, dominance, and "rights" to a particular race" (Jennifer).

While all of the participants offered differing definitions of CRT, they collectively touched upon aspects of the definition and function developed by the CLT. CRT is a way to "link theory and understand about race from critical perspectives to actual practice and action going on in education for activist social justice and change" (Parker & Lynn, 2002, p.18). In 2021, America surfaced with negative connotations about CRT being taught in the classrooms. School district boards passed policies that stated CRT would not be a part of the educational curriculum. CRT in education "challenges the discourse on race and racism as they relate to education by examining how educational theory, policy, and practice are used to subordinate certain racial and ethnic groups" (Parker & Lynn, 2002, p.122). The participants were directly asked to offer their perception of the connection between CRT and RTI. Their answers provided numerous ideas related to the final themes established in this study of leadership, resources, and inequity, and ultimately the implementation of RTI.

The participants and the literature have already demonstrated that leadership is key for anything related to education be successful. Leadership defined is the process of persuasion by which a person induces a group of people to pursue thoughts and objectives held by the leader or shared by the leader and followers (Fullan, et. Al., 2007). Leaders must take a stand and ensure support for students and staff as they navigate through the implementation of interventions. Even with all the literature about what and how leadership should look and sound like, one participant is overwhelmed by how many minority students are being placed in Tier 3 interventions (Kevin). Blackaby and Blackaby (2011, p.34) define leadership as "a person influencing people to accomplish a purpose". The purpose of this study was to ascertain that RTI is being implemented appropriately for African American males specifically. If leaders were ensuring fidelity of interventions and teachers providing cultural appropriate instruction, there

should not be as many minority students placed in Tier 3 interventions. Administrators, as well as staff, need to be offered professional development on diversity and cultural proficiency to be able to provide alternate avenues of support to the minority struggling student. On the opposite end of the spectrum, a participant expressed that the connection of CRT and RTI can be encouraging and powerful. He states, "together they can be a powerful tool to help reduce the racial discrimination in evaluative decisions" (Lawrence). CRT would bring to the forefront that racism seems "normal" to people all over the United States. If educators would embrace this postulate of the theory, then scrutiny could take place of how education is conducted in the schools today. Critical race theorists proclaim that the dominant culture does not fully understand how equality and liberty function (Dixson & Anderson, 2018; Howard & Navarro, 2016). All teachers need to be informed of what the true meaning of equality and liberty is and the way they look and sound in a classroom. Cultural responsiveness must be a part of the professional development of teachers and in the education of future teachers of America.

Resources are necessary for an educational institution to function appropriately. There has to administrators, teachers, books, etc. Unfortunately, there are school districts and schools that fail to accumulate the optimum resources in which to function. CRT would express that this is due to a form of racism existing in which funding is allocated to schools. Some participants concur with CRT theory. Those participants expressed that "perceptions of race may influence supports and services" (Marva). Not only the perceptions of the government when it pertains to funding but also the perceptions of staff. Critical race theorists offer a critique of whether the motive behind Caucasian support of legislation and policies were designed to benefit people of color in the first place (Dixson &Anderson, 2018; Howard & Navarro, 2016; Jett, 2012). The participants, with their responses, indicated that staff of other ethnicities observe minority

students in a way they truly are not. This type of observing accounts for the "over identification of black and brown students always needing supports" (David). Glenn Loury (2002) expresses that the enduring and pronounced social disadvantage of African Americans is not the result of any unequal innate human capacities of the "races". His belief is that the on-going disadvantage exists as a product of the history, culture, and political economy of the American society (Loury, 2002). Janet feels that CRT along with the RTI framework work together to address weak areas and located the root cause of the students' struggle. In the avenue of the reflection blog, one participant felt that CRT and RTI are complete opposites and hold no connection. In fact, she perceives "RTI provides support, but CRT has a hidden agenda to NOT support equity" (Penelope).

The final theme to be addressed through the theoretical framework is inequity. It is evident that CRT addresses inequity or racism as normal in society. The participants concur with this theory and its tenets. CRT explains why black and brown students have been marginalized in our education system" (Jalissa). The perspective of the African American administrators in this study was open and honest. CRT has indicated that racism is affluent in institutional structures and in educational practices. Jalissa has observed minority students being marginalized year after year in her position. Peggy offers an explanation as to why minority students, especially the African American male, is marginalized in education today. She states, "educated scholars not educators truly know and understand the history of black and brown students in order to see how to best understand them and meet their needs" (Peggy). It is evident that the participants of this study perceive the African American male to be marginalized and not offered the support that he needs. CRT was created as a response to the marginalization of students of color from a law school's curriculum (Gillborn, 2015; Jett, 2012). The literature has provided

numerous examples of students of color, particularly African American males, being over identified and mislabeled in special education. CRT may offer the foundation on which to "fight for the rights" of minority students but there must be more than a theory. There needs to be dedicated people to fight for what a student deserves.

Implications

The data of this transcendental phenomenological study allude to implications when utilizing RTI in identifying African American males for special education. These implications are addressed through the lens of the theoretical, empirical and practical viewpoints.

Theoretical

The theoretical foundation for this study was critical race theory (CRT). CRT commenced in the 1980s with the premise of extending the analysis of race into the field of education by explaining achievement gaps between students of color and their white peers. Even though racism is condemned by policies and laws (Dixson & Anderson, 2018; Creswell, 2013; Howard & Navarro, 2016; Jett, 2012; Parker & Lynn, 2022), CRT subscribers are grounded in the fact that racism is normal in society today and is integral to social institutions (Harris, 2012). CRT observes that the United States has institutional structures along with practices in education that perpetuate racism (Jett, 2012).

This study offered the African American administrators the opportunity to clarify their perceptions on the education of the African American male and if they observed signs of racism or practices in their institutions that perpetuate the idea of racism. The administrators reported that they indeed witnessed an over identification or disproportionality in their respective schools (60%). One administrator specifically reported that her school has a 60% African American male

population (Marva, 1/29/2021). Of that 60% of African American males, 80% of them have been or are being suspended.

Other administrators in the study expressed that they have experienced their African American male students consistently identified as special education even though they do not belong there. One reason for this over identification is the African American male is demonstrating an aggressive demeanor. This demeanor worries public education teachers of differing ethnicities. These teachers are more apt to refer these males for reasons of fear and simply not knowing what to do with them in the classroom.

The administrators also expressed those scholars and educators that are of the Caucasian persuasion are not culturally responsive or proficient (60%). To be culturally proficient and in turn responsive means to be able to understand the African American male and his history to best understand them and meet their needs. If the student is not understood or their background is not taken into consideration for their displays of behavior, their needs will not be met.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines racism as the systemic oppression of a racial group to the social, economic, and political advantage of another. Since a school district or school building is supposedly built on systems, the information provided by the administrators would indicate racism to be taking place in public schools today.

Empirical

The Brown v. Board of Education., 347 U.S. 483 case in 1954 was to be the court case to eliminate racial segregation, particularly in public education. Kenneth Clark, an African American psychologist, testified that racial segregation causes psychological harm to African American children. The court declared racial segregation unjust and should be eliminated (Fuller & Shaw, 2011). The elimination of segregation soon found African American students being

identified into the area of special education at alarming rates creating a disproportionality of students of color.

In 2004, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEIA 2004) mandated that students with disabilities would be ensured access to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE). In this same act, information expressed that numerous minority children are continuing to be served in special education than would be expected from the percentage of minority children in the general population. The act continued to inform those African American children are identified as having mental retardation and emotional disturbance at rates greater than their Caucasian counterparts have (Wright, 2004).

The administrators in this study concurred with these data as, 60% of the participants agreed that disproportionality and over identification of minority students, particularly males, occurs in their respective school districts at a great rate. The administrators also noted that the African American males are being referred and identified for most behavioral issues as opposed to academic issues. Forty percent of the administrators have noticed that when an African American male is well-behaved and submissive, there are no issues of dissension, but if the African American male is boisterous and strong willed, they are considered disrespectful and a behavior problem (Kevin, 4/22/2021). The administrators also corroborated that the African American male is receiving more punitive consequences that their Caucasian counterparts (Doug, 5/12/2021). Disproportionality is a pervasive problem in education today. If there are certain racial and ethnic groups placed unfairly and denied access to important educational opportunities, disproportionality will be identified not just as an educational problem, but a violation of civil rights (Banks, J., 2015; Voulgarides et al., 2014).

To address the over identification and disproportionality of minorities in special education, RTI was introduced as a framework of choice when IDEA was reauthorized in 2004. The premise of the reauthorization was that policies and procedures needed to be readjusted into districts to assist the struggling student before they were identified for special education services. There are three tiers to the framework. Tier 1 is indicative of classroom intervention implemented by the classroom teacher for the struggling students (Swanson, Solis, Ciullo & McKenna, 2012). Tier 2 is characterized by providing intervention to struggling students in Tier 1 who have failed to make progress and need a more targeted intervention (Swanson et al., 2012). Tier 3 intervention consists of a more targeted intervention than Tier 2 on a more intense schedule than two or three days a week as in Tier 2.

The administrators report that they are indeed the person that binds the implementation and framework of RTI together. The administrators oversee meetings, serve as the heavy or the mean person that make sure things are happening and happening effectively (50%). The administrators also stated that they are the ones who makes sure the systems are in place for success (40%). Ultimately, an administrator not only ensures that interventions for all students are running and operating smoothly and effectively, but they must also believe in the students (10%).

Practical

The practical applications of this study are aligned with the qualities of school leadership along with implementation of teacher practices. Leadership is about the ability to influence others (DuFour & Marzano, 2011). The school leader or administrator can exert a negative or positive influence upon staff and students. In the field of education, there are numerous configurations of how to influence. For success to be a part of the school community, the leader

should exert a positive influence. This influence is through possessing a leadership style. Administrators should feel comfortable with their leadership style in order to influence others and reap success. Mary Parker Follett, 1995, believes that effective leaders do not persuade others but shows them what to do. A leader is not a person who thinks for their people but one who trains them to thin for themselves. A great leader is one who will train their followers to become leaders themselves. There are varying forms of leadership, but transformational leadership has been found to be the most warranted when wanting to build a community of success. Transformational leadership encompasses the idea of the leaders being able to earn respect from the staff. To achieve this respect, the leader inspires a desire to act beyond self-interest and provide influence upon others due to personal charisma. Transformational leaders can facilitate creative thinking and possesses the innate ability to customize their approach with their followers (Maier et al., 2016). Vitaska, (2008) in addition to Waters and Marzano, (2006) stated that leadership is second to strong and effective classroom instruction among all the factors that contribute to student achievement and success.

Regarding this study, school leaders can provide time to collaborate with others to gain a wide range of strategies to enact with the struggling student. The school leader can also provide time to teachers to visit colleague classrooms while they are teaching to observe the strategies in action with their students, struggling or not. The idea that the teacher would take away from the visit would be how to provide for the student before they are struggling. School leaders, along with district leaders, can create a position of instructional coach where said coach would visit classroom teacher classrooms and assist in providing strategies and practices that would engage the student with instruction thereby ensuring the student is learning and constructing knowledge. Pertinent to the implementation of Tier 1 instruction and intervention, the school leader must be

able to make time to visit every classroom to offer feedback conducive to engaging and rigorous learning. In essence, a school leader must not forget where they come from to be an effective leader.

While the leader is ensuring that instruction is engaging and rigorous, the interventions utilized at the Tier 1 phase of the framework should be targeted for the struggling student. As a teacher, it is acceptable to provide interventions to all students as a whole class, but if that intervention is not reaching all students, a more targeted intervention must take place for the struggling student.

The participants of this study agree that the intervention be targeted and differentiated (40%). RTI should be addressing the specific needs of the struggling student. The interventions provided should not be cookie cutter. Teachers in schools today have edicts that they must deal with on any given day. Teachers must possess a wide range of knowledge and skills to provide specific, targeted interventions for each struggling student. To achieve this comprehensive knowledge base, teachers should be participating in regular, prioritized professional development sessions regarding teaching strategies. Their professional development should also include differentiation practices along with scientifically based research strategies expressed by PEW research.

In order for teachers to understand the cultural background of students, they should enroll in a cultural proficiency course or attend one provided by their school district. The realm of education has become diverse ever since the Brown vs. the Board of Education decision. Teachers are engaging with students who do not look like them. There can always be a fear of something not understood. As the administrators expressed, teachers cannot assist someone who is struggling if there is no understanding of why they are struggling in the first place. Teachers

should gain as much knowledge as they can about diversity, but the most important thing teachers must do is establish a relationship with their students so that they can ascertain struggling before it even occurs.

Delimitations and Limitations

For this study, delimitations are the decisions made by me that limit or define the boundaries of the study. Delimitations to this study were the ethnicity and job role of the participants. A second delimitation of the study were the setting protocols, public versus private school. The reason for enforcing the described delimitations of this study was to offer a voice to the African American administrators overseeing the implementation of RTI about identifying African American males for special education. The literature noted and revealed that participants responding to this topic or similar topic were primarily Caucasian. The literature also revealed that administrators in general were sparsely utilized as participants. Most of participants included in the literature surrounding this topic were Caucasian classroom teachers.

The second delimitation dictated the type of school system being included in the study. I selected to choose participants from public schools for the reason of being able to obtain a saturation of participants that engaged with RTI on a regular basis with African American children, particularly males. The delimitations may have dictated the parameters of the participants and setting of the study, but ultimately enabled the participants to express their voice in a manner that they have not had, before this study.

For this study, limitations are defined as the weaknesses of the study that cannot be controlled by me. Limitations particular to this study are the ethnicity of the administrators and the geographical location of the participants' school districts along with the sample size. These limitations have reduced the ability to generalize the results to other geographical locations and

other ethnic populations. The sample size of 10 met the requirements of a phenomenological

qualitative study as defined by Creswell, 2013. Having only 10 participants does not allow for

data saturation. The sample size does not offer a plethora of ideas and answers along with a

reinforcement of already stated ideas and answers. The geographical location of the schools in

this study were neighbors, one urban and one suburban. The fact is that the urban district feeds

into the suburban district as residents move from the city. The idea of being neighboring school

districts does not allow this study to generalize into other areas of the country and the ways that

their districts may interact with RTI. The limitation of inviting only African American

participants to provide feedback in this study limits the scope of what other ethnic populations

are thinking, feeling, and perceiving. The literature provided many aspects and points of view

from the Caucasian population and lacked a point of view from the African American

population. Therefore, it was the responsibility of this study to provide the venue for their voice

to be heard concerning the topic of RTI being utilized when identifying African American males

for special education.

The final limitation to be addressed is my own personal and educational background and

experiences with RTI that could interfere with providing an objective, unbiased study, and

analysis of the data. Moustakas (1994) described in his writing of phenomenology that the

influence of a researcher's shared experiences with the participants of a study could create

preconceived judgements and biases. To address the preconceived judgement and bias, I

acknowledged my bias by providing an epoche (Appendix I), stating how my past personal

experiences and bias could influence the research. By revealing my personal experiences with

RTI as a parent, teacher, and administrator, the reader would be able to examine the research

with much more clarity.

Recommendations for Future Research

The realm of education is changing constantly. Since the inception of this study, RTI has metamorphosed into multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS). This new framework incorporates an academic and behavioral framework for struggling students. The new framework bloomed from the marriage of RTI and PBIS. In this study, the results revealed that the behavior of students was an issue in that the students who demonstrated destructive behavior were the ones often identified for special education due to just the behavior. Oftentimes, it revealed in the data that stakeholders never looked at the negative behavior being due to some academic deficiency. The first recommendation then for research would be to conduct the same study to determine the effectiveness of both systems merging.

The second recommendation would be to conduct this study in public school districts across the United States. This study focused on two school districts in the same area of the country. The study would demonstrate more reliability if conducted in other school districts. Even though the primary focus of education is the same across the world, varying entities conduct it in varying ways. The perspective of the African American administrator in large suburban, rural, large and small urban school districts would provide a mirror into how their particular school districts approach the disproportionality issue with African American males.

A third recommendation would be to invite central administrators of all ethnicities to be participants of this study. At times, the central administration of a school district may not exactly have the pulse on what is occurring in their buildings. This study would be eye opening for them in the perspective of how teachers in classrooms perceive their students. Tier 1 is the first tier of RTI and MTSS. This is the tier where the frontline of intervention is conducted through the teacher. If the teacher is failing in this intervention, the students are struggling. Central

administration would need to acknowledge this failure and provide numerous and rigorous professional development opportunities to teachers for them to feel comfortable in the classroom with their instruction and to provide tools for the teacher's toolbox to meet each student where they are struggling.

The last recommendation for research would be to conduct this study with teachers of all ethnicities. Part of the underlying theme of this study was cultural responsiveness. Cultural responsiveness is a new way of thinking about culture. It means being open to new ideas that may conflict with the ideas, beliefs, and values of your own culture, and being able to see these differences as equal. For example, some cultures believe that their religion or spiritual awareness and practice is essential for their well-being. Teachers of all ethnicities should be informed of how best to incorporate all cultures into their classroom and realize the parameters of those students whose culture is conflicting with their own.

Research is meant to open avenues of success or struggle. This research, in the same design, would be useful to expose those thoughts and ideas that participants are having success or struggling with. The study would allow all stakeholders to reexamine current practices and see best where to make changes if needed in order to address students of all cultures and practices. Education should attempt to be proactive with students instead of reacting suddenly because they are struggling. As with anything that is constantly changing, it is best to stay one-step ahead and celebrate successes before they become too overwhelming to address.

Summary

The voice of the African American administrator has spoken. The literature related to this study was full of perspectives from Caucasian educators, rarely, if any were from an African American teacher or administrator. This study has revealed an "essence" that cannot be denied.

Leaders in education must take a stand for what is right and appropriate for African American males. It is a fact that African American males are marginalized, and it is the responsibility of the administrator to ensure that this does not happen. The leader must be present and be a model for the staff to emulate. The leader must support the staff through a social and emotional venue but also by providing the necessary resources in which to provide the best education possible to their students. This means that staff, is to be developed with a plethora of tools for their toolbox of educational strategies.

Resources are pertinent for a successful education. Resources are not always "things" but could also be a class on diversity or cultural responsiveness. All teachers must take the step to enlarge their knowledge base of all students but according to this study, the African American male. This study has demonstrated that if a change does not occur in the education of the African American male, the school to prison pipeline will continue to grow.

As much as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wanted to have freedom in the world for minorities, the participants in this study concur that racism still exists in education today in varying forms. The CRT indicates that racism exists in institutions and educational practices. The participants have indicated that racism is exhibited through ignorance. Ignorance, in the form of adults having a misconception of the African American male. It does take a village to raise a child. If you ask the village about how they are successful in raising all children, they will answer with "relationships". It is of the essence in education, that all educators take the time, establish a relationship with each of their students, and truly get to know whom they are and how they think. The children may surprise us all.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Good day, please describe to me your background in education?

2. Please describe the experiences that led you to become an educator in the first place?

3. Describe your school; population #, grades, teachers, demographics of both students and teachers, staff roles beyond classroom teacher, etc.

4. What is your view of the strengths of special education?

5. What is your view of the weaknesses of special education?

6. How do you define disproportionality?

7. As an administrator, describe the characteristics of the children that you observe being identified for special education the most frequently?

8. What measures does your school have in place to assist struggling students?

9. What is the demographic data breakdown of the referrals of struggling students in your school? In your district?

10. How do you define Response to Intervention (RTI)?

11. How is Response to Intervention integrated into your school? District?

12. As the administrator, what is your role in how Response to Intervention is conducted in your building?

13. What do you observe as the strengths of RTI?

14. What do you observe as the weaknesses of RTI?

15. What connection, if any, do you see between Response to Intervention and disproportionality?

16. Would you care to elaborate on anything that we have talked about or offer any thoughts on how RTI is utilized as a tool for special education identification?

17. Thank you so much for your time and the information that you supplied me with. I will be forming a focus group with all of the participants of this study and would love for you to be a part of it. Please look for an email from me regarding when and how this will be starting. Thank you again!

APPENDIX B: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. Hello! Please introduce yourselves to each other and inform each other as to your job position?

2. Please share with each other your special education identification process in your school.

3. What similarities or differences do you notice with the descriptions given for the special education identification process?

4. What are your views on the misidentification and misclassification of minority students?

5. What does Response to Intervention look like in your school buildings?

6. How effective do you feel the Response to Intervention framework is in assisting struggling students?

7. Describe the training your staff has had with regard to Response to Intervention.

8. How effective do you feel that Response to Intervention has been with reducing the disproportionality of minorities in special education?

APPENDIX C: REFLECTION BLOG QUESTIONS

1. What is your definition and perception of critical race theory?

2. What do you see as the connection between critical race theory and RTI?

3. How do you observe the education of African American males when compared to any other ethnic group?

4. What do you view as the overarching problem in public education today?

APPENDIX D: IRB APPROVAL LETTER

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

July 9, 2020
Barbara Batts
Meredith Park

Re: IRB Approval - IRB-FY19-20-34 AFRICAN AMERICAN ADMINISTRATORS
UTILIZING RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION FOR IDENTIFICATION OF AFRICAN
AMERICAN MALES IN SPECIAL EDUCATION: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

 Dear Barbara Batts, Meredith Park:

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University
Institutional Review Board (IRB). This approval is extended to you for one year from the date of
the IRB meeting at which the protocol was approved: July 9, 2020. If data collection proceeds
past one year, or if you make modifications in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects,
you must submit an appropriate update submission to the IRB. These submissions can be
completed through your Cayuse IRB account.

Your study falls under the expedited review category (45 CFR 46.110), which is applicable to
specific, minimal risk studies and minor changes to approved studies for the following reason(s):

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

Your stamped consent form can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission
Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. This form should be copied and used to gain the
consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information
electronically, the contents of the attached consent document should be made available without
alteration.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely, G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
 Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
 Research Ethics Office

APPENDIX E: CONSENT FORM

CONSENT FORM

AFRICAN AMERICAN ADMINISTRATORS UTILIZING RESPONSE TO
INTERVENTION FOR IDENTIFICATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES IN SPECIAL
EDUCATION: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

Barbara J. Batts
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study of analyzing the utilization and effectiveness of RTI when identifying African American males for special education. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a principal or assistant principal, possessing administrative certification for your state, in a public school, are of African American descent, and your school district or school utilizes RTI as a tool for special education identification of African American males. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Barbara J. Batts, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information: The purpose of this study is to describe the experiences of African American administrators in public schools in their use of Response to Intervention (RTI) when identifying African American males in special education. The following research questions will be addressed; RQ1: How do African American administrators describe their experiences with utilizing RTI in the identification of African American males in special education? RQ2: How do African American administrators describe the ability of the RTI framework to effectively address the misidentification of African American males in special education? RQ3: How do African American administrators describe the cultural responsiveness of the RTI framework toward African American males in public education? RQ4: How do African American administrators perceive the treatment and education of African American males in public education?

Procedures: If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:
1. Interview. The interview will consist of 17 questions that will take approximately an hour to answer. The interview will be conducted through the Zoom online system of meetings and will be recorded and transcribed through Zoom itself.
2. Focus Group. The focus group will consist of 8 questions that will take approximately 30 to 45 minutes to answer. The focus group will also be conducted, with an agreed upon time by the participants, through the Zoom system. Zoom will record and transcribe the group meeting.
3. Blog. The blog will consist of 4 questions that should take approximately take 45 minutes of the participants' time. Each participant will receive each question, one at a

time, to blog their original answer through an online, secure system. The participants' blog answer will be retrieved from the online, secure site, and utilized as the transcribed word. After all blogs are retrieved from all participants, the blog will be eliminated.

Risks: The risks involved in this study in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

Benefits: Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include extended information regarding RTI and misidentification to special education with African American males, ideas for RTI effectiveness and efficiency with struggling African American students, and the cultural perspective of African American administrators as to the effectiveness of public education for African American males.

Compensation: Participants will be compensated for participating in this study. Once the participant completes an interview, a focus group and a blog, they will be compensated with a $20 Visa gift card. The gift card will be sent via United States mail to the address of choice that the participant notates.

Confidentiality: The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report, I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participants will be assigned a pseudonym consisting of a letter and number. Any study locations will be provided with a pseudonym to protect their identity in the study. I will conduct the interviews online in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation or see the participant.
- Data will be stored on a password locked computer. Data may be utilized in the future for a book written on this particular study and/or topic. Any transcribed, hard copy papers will be locked in a box and stored in a storage unit. After three years, all electronic and paper records will be deleted.
- Interviews and focus groups will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- I cannot assure participants that other members of the focus group will not share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

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 Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time, without affecting those relationships.

How to Withdraw from the Study: If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed

immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Contacts and Questions: The researcher conducting this study is Barbara J. Batts. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her. You may also contact the researcher's faculty chair, Dr. Russell Yocum.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.

Statement of Consent: I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record/video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____
Signature of Participant   Date

_____
Signature of Investigator   Date

APPENDIX F: ADMINISTRATOR RECRUITMENT EMAIL

To Whom It May Concern:

Good Day!

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of my research is to investigate the utilization of Response to Intervention (RTI) and its effectiveness in decreasing the disproportionality of African American males in special education through the lens of the African American administrator, and I am emailing you to invite you to participate in my study.

If you are 18 years of age or older, an African American male or female certified administrator of a public elementary, middle or high school that utilizes RTI as an identification tool for identifying African American males for special education and are willing to participate; you will be asked to participate in an interview, a collaborative focus group, and a secure online blog. It should take approximately one hour and forty-five minutes for you to complete the procedures listed. Your name and other information is requested as part of your participation, but all information will remain confidential.

In order to verify you meet the participant requirements for the study, I ask that you send me a copy of your resume in an email to bjbatts@liberty.edu, as an attachment. Please include your administrator certification documentation. I have also included a consent document as an attachment to this introductory email. The consent document contains additional information about my research.

I will contact you concerning your eligibility for this study by phone. If you meet the requirements and you wish to be a part of the study, please sign the consent document and send it back to me as an attachment in an email to... Along with the attachment, please include the dates and times that are convenient for you to participate in the interview. Please also include your contact information in your email response.

If you participate in and complete all aspects of data collection; the interview, focus group and blog, you will receive a $20 Visa gift card.

Thank you,
Barbara J. Batts
Doctoral Student/Liberty University

APPENDIX G: JOHN JAMES RESEARCH APPLICATION

Request for Data Application
Internal Requests

Date of Request: August 10, 2020		
Section A: DATA USER INFORMATION		
Name of requesting individual: **Barbara J. Batts**	Building: 123	Department: 6th Grade
University Affiliation: Liberty University	Date to begin data collection: 8/2020	Date to end data collection: 10/2020
Degree or grant being sought: Doctorate of Curriculum and Instruction	Anticipated graduation or grant implementation date: May 2021 or 2022	
Telephone number:	Email:	
Name of program advisor: Dr. Russell Yocum	Telephone:	Email:

Section B: BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Purpose for Request:
I am requesting to interview a specific population of administrators in the district in order to extract their perspectives on RTI and its utilization with African American males in regards to identification for special education.

How will the data be used?
To fulfill requirements for doctoral study but to also provide information for future book on RTI and additional study.

Section C: TYPE OF INFORMATION REQUESTED

(Mark all that apply):
☐ Gender   ☐ Race   ☐ Ethnicity   ☐ Age   ☐ Socioeconomic   ☐ Grade   ☐ School

☒ Other: ___interviews with administrators in regard to perspectives on RTI
_____

Section D: PROCESS FOR COLLECTING DATA

What process will be used to collect data?
I wish to only interview African American administrators. I would conduct a virtual 45 minute to one hour interview based upon their convenience to talk. After all interviews have been conducted, I will conduct a virtual focus group with all participants together. This would also probably take an hour and will be conducted with convenience again to the administrators' schedule. The last piece of data collection is a blog which will be conducted much like the professional development strategy of a Chalk Talk. All data collection will take place virtually for all participants.

Section E: PRIVACY

What steps will be taken to ensure that privacy of students and teachers is maintained?
I will assign a letter and number to each participant so that I am the only person who knows their identity. All data collected will be stored in a locked box in a locked storage until after the final paper is written. Upon the three-year completion, all data will be shredded. Privacy of students is not an issue for my research.

Section F: BENEFITS

In what way will this research benefit John James School District?
The information that I collect may lead to a reform of how the process RTI is conducted in the John James school district. The information could also lead to a reformation of how the Core instruction is presented and by whom, ensuring that our students are reaping the benefits of a rigorous and strong core before any type of intervention needs to occur.

Section G: APPROVALS

☐ **Request Approved as Written**

☐ **Request Approved with the following modifications:**

_____
_____

_____
_____

☐ **Not Approved**

Section H: SIGNATURES

By signing below, I understand that the plan above will be followed without modifications, unless approval is granted by the Chief Academic Officer:

Requestor Name (please print): _____

Requestor Signature: _____ Date: _____

COA Signature of Approval: _____ Date: _____

8/10/20

APPENDIX H: SAM SULLEY RESEARCH PERMISSION

From: Timmons, William

Sent: Wednesday, June 17, 2020, 9:34 PM

To: Barbara Batts Subject: RE: conducting research with African American Principal

Hi Barbara, I am willing to grant permission for our administrators to participate. However, we currently have one building that is in the process of receiving approval form the state to utilize RTI to identify students for special education. We do not have approval to use this model in any other building. I am not sure how this will impact your research, but am willing to allow our team to participate if they choose to do so. Please forward any paperwork needed for your study and best of luck to you.

William Timmons, Ph.D. Superintendent of Schools Sam Sulley School District

From: Barbara Batts Sent: Monday, June 15, 2020, 8:33 AM To: Timmons, William

Subject: conducting research with African American Principals

Dear Dr. Timmons, My name is Barbara Batts and I attend Liberty University and am currently pursuing a Doctorate degree. My research is to gain African American experiences while utilizing RTI to identify African American males for special education. I am contacting you to obtain your permission to interview the African American principals and/or assistant principals in your school district. I am more than willing to supply you with more information as needed. If you are willing to grant permission, I will email you the permission document for you to sign and return.

Thank you for your consideration, Barbara J. Batts Doctorate Student

APPENDIX I: EPOCHE

Epoche, according to Moustakis (1994), is defined as when an investigator sets aside their experiences to take a fresh perspective of the phenomenon under examination. For this transcendental phenomenology study, the researcher will attempt to view everything as if for the first time.

As the researcher of this study, I will address my presuppositions and bias in order to approach the research with objectivity. My twenty-four span of education encompasses my topic of study via varying roles held in my tenure. I also have a personal connection with the study topic as I am a parent to four mixed race children who had been identified for special education. I must add that one of the school districts that was recruited for this study is the school district in which I am employed thereby warranting an explanation of my role.

For my twenty-four-year tenure in education, I have served in varying roles. I entered the realm of education after my four children were in school. I was an at-home mother prior to all four entering school. I began as multi-age teacher in the 4th and 5th grades for five years. I then transferred to another urban district in the role of an instructional facilitator. This transfer was to the district of which I am employed and utilized for this study. From the facilitator position, I was promoted to a Curriculum Coordinator of math, social studies, science, and technology for three years. From this position, I became a principal in three different schools throughout the district for 6 years. I then voluntarily moved to a Title 1 Reading position and eventually into my current position of 6th grade, self-contained teacher.

These positions afforded me the ability of learning and acquiring a wealth of knowledge of numerous topics. I also was the employee who offered professional development to district employees on the topics deemed a priority at the time. It was during these professional

development days that I presented information about differentiation, behavior management strategies, and ways to implement intervention in the classroom. I was also able to attend professional development opportunities that extended my knowledge base of RTI and PBIS. These opportunities actually had led to me being a trainer of trainers in these topics.

In the role of classroom teacher, I have experienced students who are struggling with varying topic areas. My role of the classroom teacher is the first point of intervention in Tier 1 of the RTI framework. I may have been the teacher of one grade but of 30 students in a class, there are 30 levels of understanding and learning. My role as teacher, or facilitator of learning, is to ascertain what the struggle is with students and provide the intervention needed to ensure their success. As the classroom teacher, I am their first interaction with interventions. I must ensure they are targeted, rigorous, and meet their needs as best they can.

I was blessed to be able to birth four, wonderful children. Their father is African American and I am Caucasian. Because of this background, I took an active role in their education before I became employed as a teacher. I wanted to ensure that they were treated fairly and with dignity as they moved through each grade level. My first child was identified as gifted in the first grade but did not receive the granted services on a regular basis in his elementary years and consequently not at all during middle and high school. My next three children were all identified with a learning disability in math. My noticing was that their teachers were unable or not willing to work with them on the areas that they were struggling with. When I questioned the teachers, I was informed that there were too many children in the class for them to be able to work with my child effectively.

Based upon my experiences that I have described, I must make the conscious decision to bracket (epoche) myself from the following presuppositions and bias of the RTI framework utilized to identify African American males for special education:

- RTI provides the framework for which targeted interventions are implemented for struggling students through Tier 1 with the classroom teacher.

- African American males are misidentified and misclassified for special education services.

- Teachers are culturally responsive to the needs of all of their students.

- Classroom teachers have a strong knowledge base of intervention and strategies to meet the needs of struggling students.

- RTI / intervention is implemented with fidelity.

- Communication about struggling students is constant and with numerous stakeholders.

My presuppositions and bias are authentic, based upon my personal life and experiences. However, my view is limited. I have only served students and staff in urban school districts, one small and one medium in student population. I have been a facilitator of learning in just three grade levels, fourth, fifth, and sixth grade. Even though my experiences have been limited to two school districts, the education realm of constantly changing and progressing. I have also expressed that I will learn something new every day, the day that my learning ceases is the day I must depart from education. With that, my view in this study is to remain focused on the goal at hand and to remain objective and nonbiased as I interact with the participants through interviews, a focus group, and a reflection blog.