The Context of Minority Disproportionality: Practitioner Perspectives on Special Education Referral

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Although there is extensive documentation of minority overrepresentation in special education, knowledge of the factors that create the context within which disproportionality occurs is limited. To gain an understanding of the local processes that may contribute to special education disproportionality, we interviewed 66 educators about their perspectives on urban education, special education, available and needed resources, and the specific topics of diversity and disproportionality. A number of clear themes emerged. Teachers and schools feel unprepared to meet the needs of economically disadvantaged students. Classroom behavior appears to be an especially challenging issue for many teachers, and cultural gaps and misunderstandings may intensify behavioral challenges. Special education is perceived by many teachers as the only resource available for helping students who are not succeeding. Finally, there was a surprising reticence among many respondents to discuss issues of race. These results paint a surprisingly complex picture of the factors that may cause and maintain minority disproportionality in special education. Together, they suggest that successful remediation efforts will avoid simplistic or linear solutions, increase resources to address learning and behavior problems in general education, and seek methods to use data on racial disparity as a stimulus toward reflection and action.

In a field grounded in the principle of nondiscrimination (Sarason, 1996), the disproportionate representation of minority students represents a central and continuing challenge for the field of special education. Documentation of the fact of disproportionality has been consistent and longstanding (Dunn, 1968; National Research Council, 2002). Yet, far less attention has been paid to exploring the contextual variables that create and maintain the
conditions leading to unequal placement. In this investigation, we inter-
viewed teachers, administrators, and related services personnel in seven
urban and near-urban school districts to gain a richer understanding of
those contextual factors. The results describe a complex and sometimes
surprising tapestry of educational policies and practices that yield disparate
placement in special education.

BACKGROUND AND EXTENT OF THE PROBLEM

Concerns about the issue reach back to seminal works in the field (Dunn,
1968; Mercer, 1973). The belief that test bias was responsible for overre-
ferral has led to important legal decisions (Larry P. v. Riles, 1979; PASE v.
Hannon, 1980) that have, on occasion, reached contradictory conclusions
(Reschly, 1997). Three National Academy of Sciences panels (Heller, Ho-
ltzmann, & Messick, 1982; Morrison, White, & Feuer, 1996; National Re-
search Council, 2002) have been convened to study the issue. Yet, despite
this history of almost continual attention, recent national reports indicate
that disproportionate minority placement remains a serious and significant
problem (Coutinho & Oswald, 2000; Ladner & Hammons, 2001; Losen &
Orfield, 2002; National Research Council; Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002). An
extensive descriptive literature at both the national (Chinn & Hughes,
1987; Finn, 1982; Harry & Anderson, 1994; Oswald, Coutinho, & Best,
2002; Oswald, Coutinho, Best, & Singh, 1999; Parrish, 2002; Zhang &
Katsiyannis) and the state levels (Coulter, 1996; Ladner & Hammons, 2001;
Skiba, Chung, Wu, Simmons, & St. John, 2000; Skiba, Wu, Kohler, Chung,
& Simmons, 2001) has documented a relatively consistent pattern of dis-
proportionality that appears to be most severe in the judgmental disability
categories, especially serious emotional disturbance and mild mental retardation,
and among African American and Native American students (see, e.g.,
Losen & Orfield; National Research Council).

Although descriptions of the extent of disproportionality appear to be
consistent, there is less consensus on the causes of minority disproportional-
ity, however. Coutinho and Oswald (2000) identified two important
general factors that appear to contribute to disproportionality: sociodemo-
graphic factors and educational factors. The National Research Council
(2002) report explored three possible sources of disproportionate repre-
sentation: social and environmental factors that may disproportionately
impact the school readiness of minority students; contributions of general
education; and contributions of the special education referral process. Yet
research to identify the factors associated with minority disproportionality
has not necessarily yielded consistent findings. Inconsistencies appear to be
partially attributable to differences in the level of data being examined (e.g.,
school, district, state), suggesting that the interactions that shape placement pattern variations at distinct levels have not yet been clearly identified (A. Artiles, personal communication, 2002).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: CULTURAL REPRODUCTION AND THE NEED FOR INTERPRETIVE STUDY

A useful perspective from which to view the contributions of local educational processes to racial and economic disparity is cultural reproduction theory (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Originally used primarily as an explanation of the perpetuation of class-based differences, the theory has been further developed in an effort to show how racial and class inequity are reproduced over time through institutional and individual actions and decisions that maintain the status quo at the expense of less privileged groups (Mehan, 1992; Oakes, 1982; Skiba, Bush, & Knesting, 2002). One important implication of cultural reproduction is that such actions or processes may be driven by individual or institutional habit patterns without ever reaching a conscious level of awareness on the part of those who participate in those institutional actions. For example, the interactional and evaluative techniques routinely used by teachers may not be adequate to fully identify the intellectual resources and talents of low-status children, who are subsequently assessed as poor performers (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Unchallenged, such patterns can unintentionally re-create and reinforce existing inequities in school processes.

Two previous qualitative investigations exploring process of the special education referral and assessment have illustrated the unconscious and reproductive nature of special education referral. Mehan, Hertwick, and Meehls' (1986) ethnographic exploration of the referral-to-placement process illustrated the socially constructed nature of disability decision making. At each step in the process ultimately leading to a student's placement in a special education program, both individual teacher judgments and institutional constraints made a strong contribution to the ultimate decision to label a student as disabled. Almost one third of those students who were not declared disabled, for example, failed to be served simply because there was a breakdown in the process and the assessment was terminated. Harry, Klingner, Sturges, and Moore (2002) described similar sources of variability in an ethnographic study focusing primarily on the contributions of school psychologists to special education assessment and decision making. Harry et al. noted that although psychological testing is often perceived as an objective procedure less likely to be influenced by individual judgments, in fact, the process is often highly idiosyncratic because psychologists choose
tests or test batteries that are more likely to produce the results that they, or the teachers making the referral, wish to see.

RESEARCH GAPS AND PURPOSE OF CURRENT STUDY

The contributions to racial and socioeconomic inequity through microlevel reproductive and perhaps unconscious process suggests a strong need to study local processes and perspectives on inequity, yet few published studies have sought to describe the local processes that may create or maintain disproportionality at the school or district level. The absence of local interpretive data may in fact be a critical barrier to understanding and remediating disproportionate representation. The recent National Research Council report on minority disproportionality in special and gifted education (2002), for example, provided extensive recommendations for educational reform in areas as diverse as early intervention, teacher training, assessment, and classroom behavior management. If, however, habit patterns or unexplored assumptions on the part of school personnel contribute to disparities in special education service, it seems highly unlikely that those local personnel will perceive the need for, much less actively support, the need for sweeping change.

In particular, data are needed about local perspectives on the influence of race/ethnicity itself on disproportionality. Conversations concerning disproportionality are inherently difficult because they bear directly upon the complex and emotionally loaded issue of race. As noted in Quality Now! (Public Education Network and Public Agenda, 2000), a description of recent national conversations about education and race, "With identities, long-held beliefs, and futures at stake, it is not surprising that Americans find it difficult, and even painful, to engage in open and honest conversation about education and race" (p. 13). Yet the widely divergent and often hidden views held by individuals of different racial/ethnic groups make it critical to hold such conversations as a start toward understanding the complexity of issues involving race (Tatum, 2002).

The purpose of this research, then, was to explore local dynamics and processes that may contribute to special education disproportionality, using a qualitative approach that draws from conversations with school personnel involved in these processes. The current study is part of a multiyear project describing the extent of, and factors contributing to, minority disproportionality in special education in one Midwestern state. Our objectives in this study were to (a) gain insight into the special education referral process as it relates to the treatment of minority students, and (b) to assess practitioner perspectives on and knowledge of minority disproportionality in special education. We interviewed school practitioners in seven urban and near-urban (relatively diverse districts typically on the fringe of urban areas)
school districts to gain a fuller understanding of their assessment of student, classroom, and school-level factors that contribute to placement in special education, and particularly to minority disproportionality in placement. We concentrated on interviews with teachers because it is teachers who make critical judgments about the teachability of students and thereby control the passage of students into school processes that can lead to placement in special education (Gerber & Semmel, 1984). Our conversations touched upon classroom and school processes to assist struggling students, the availability of resources, and the role of poverty, race, and other factors in the referral process.

METHODS

PARTICIPANTS

Seven school districts in and surrounding a large Midwestern city participated in this study. All seven districts had previously been identified as having disproportionate numbers of minority students served in special education (Skiba et al., 2002). Each district became involved with the project through the voluntary participation of the district's special education director.

Two elementary schools from each district were selected and agreed to participate in this study, for a total of 14 elementary schools. Each pair of schools from each district included one school with statistically significant minority disproportionality using a z-score test, and a second for which statistical analysis showed proportional representation of minority students in special education. The paired schools were matched closely on race and poverty level, which was operationalized as percent eligible for free or reduced-rate lunch. To ensure that our sample of teachers was representative of a broad range of referral practices, two teachers were selected by their principals to participate in the study—one perceived by the principal as making relatively frequent referrals to special education and the other perceived as having a low referral rate. No guidelines were provided to principals in their selections of high- and low-referring teachers.

A total of 64 individuals were individually interviewed for this project. The participants included the special education director from each of the seven districts, 9 school psychologists from the seven districts whose caseload included primary responsibility for the schools included in this study, 20 school principals and assistant principals, and 28 classroom teachers. Descriptive information for the interviewees is provided in Table 1. A $100 certificate designated for classroom supplies was awarded to participating teachers as remuneration for their time.
Table 1. Descriptive Information for Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>Low-Referring</th>
<th>High-Referring</th>
<th>Total</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Years</td>
<td>19.18</td>
<td>16.27</td>
<td>17.73</td>
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</table>

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

<table>
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<th>Principals/Assistant Principals</th>
<th>School Psychologists</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>Female</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Black</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>21</td>
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INSTRUMENTATION

Protocol Development

To focus the conversation on perceptions of the special education referral and placement process and the issue of minority disproportionality, a semi-structured interview protocol was developed. The development of each protocol began with an extensive review of current literature pertaining to minority disproportionality in special education (Skiba et al., 2001). From this review, factors that potentially influence minority disproportionality were organized into three categories: demographics, differential educational opportunities, and the referral, assessment, and placement process (National Research Council, 2002). Further analysis of this research literature yielded four broad themes that were used to organize the interview process (Carspecken, 1996): perceived challenges related to demographics, attitude and perception of diversity, resources (tangible and personal), and accommodations for nonmodal students. Separate interview protocols were tailored to each of the four groups of respondents: classroom teachers, school administrators, school psychologists, and special education directors.

Protocols were pilot tested with a representative from each of the four respondent groups, none of whom would be participating in the study proper. In addition, two experts in the field of minority disproportionality
and a prominent qualitative researcher reviewed the protocol and made suggestions for increasing comprehensiveness and clarity. Once the coding was completed and the initial results written up, that preliminary version was shared with three external reviewers nationally recognized for their work in the area of equity in education. Of the research consultants throughout the process, three were White males, one was a Latino male, and one was an African American female.

PROCEDURES

Interviewer Description and Training

Ten interviewers were trained to conduct the interviews. Interviewers consisted of project staff and graduate assistants, and education graduate students recruited through e-mail. All were selected specifically because of previous experience in interviewing techniques and qualitative research. One interviewer was an Asian male, another was a White male, and the remaining interviewers were White females.

Interviewers received approximately 4 hours of training on qualitative interviewing strategies and reviewed the protocols and covert themes several times before the actual interviews. Finally, simulated interviews among the interviewers were taped and transcribed in order to provide feedback on interviewing techniques.

Interview Procedures

Face-to-face interviews with school personnel took place on site during the course of the school day. Substitute teachers were provided to release classroom teachers for the interview period. Interviews were taped with the permission of interviewees and in accordance with Institutional Review Board review. All but one individual, a classroom teacher, agreed to be taped. All interviewers were blind to the referral status (high or low referring) of the teacher and disproportionality status of the school, with the exception of one interview; in order to correct a taping error, an individual who had knowledge of the referral status of the teachers conducted one teacher interview. One school, including a principal, 2 teachers, and a school psychologist, was not included in the final analysis because of taping errors.

ANALYSIS

The organization of the interview material into themes involved several phases of analysis based on the three concurrent aspects of data analysis described by Miles and Huberman (1994): data reduction, data display, and
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conclusion drawing and verification. In the data reduction phase, the research team extensively reviewed and familiarized themselves with the interview transcriptions, reading them over several times to get a general sense of the material (Creswell, 2002). After initial review, the entire team reconvened to develop codes to organize the materials. Pairs of researchers worked together on transcripts to refine the codes and resolve coding discrepancies. Regularly scheduled meetings of the entire team were used to resolve disagreements and ensure coder reliability across all coders. In the data display phase, the decision was made to organize the data via a thematic conceptual matrix (Miles & Huberman, 1994), crossing the four themes described above with structural elements of the interview: student/classroom characteristics, identification, classroom accommodations and prereferral intervention, diversity and resources, and minority disproportionality (see the appendix for a sample of the conceptual matrix). Pairs of coders then went back through the transcription, locating text segments and mapping them onto one or more of the four covert themes (Carspecken, 1996) or into a new coding category. Again, weekly team meetings were used to resolve coding disagreements. It is important to note that the majority of coders had also conducted interviews; although coders were not assigned their own interviews to code, the experience of having conducted the interview helped ensure the validity of the coding process with respect to the original interviews. In the conclusions/verification phase, we reviewed the material within each coding category, synthesizing across the comments to identify prominent subthemes. The resulting comparisons of both coding techniques and overarching themes that emerged in these discussions enabled us to continually "triangulate observers" (Patton, 1990) to ensure reliability and prevent bias in subsequent analysis.

RESULTS

The sections below summarize the themes that emerged from the analyses of the interviews, organized into five sections: sociodemographic factors, general education factors, special education process, available and needed resources, and perspectives on minority disproportionality and diversity. We do not endorse all opinions presented; although we found the majority of responses to be compelling and extraordinarily insightful, there are also perspectives that we expect will make readers as uncomfortable as they made us. Initial analyses showed that the perspectives of the four respondent groups tended to be more similar than different on most of the themes. Thus, responses from all groups are included within each theme; any differences that emerged between subgroups of respondents will be described specifically. All responses are attributed to respondent groups and the gender and race of each respondent is specified for each.
I. CONTRIBUTIONS OF SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS

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

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

In particular, respondents identified a number of particular challenges that students from disadvantaged conditions bring with them. Respondents noted a lack of academic readiness skills at school entry among their students from poverty backgrounds: "We get kids in first grade that do not know their colors. They do not know their letters. They don't know what the alphabet song is. They are very street savvy. ... But they don't have those educational tools" (principal, WF).

A number of respondents suggested that norms of violence in some communities may teach children survival skills, such as aggression, that may be ill-suited to school settings: "Some of our children feel that fighting is the way to solve problems, and this doesn't correspond with one ethnic group or another. It seems to be kind of a broad understanding from our children's background" (classroom teacher, WF).

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

So the kids kind of come in having gone to six schools already by second grade. (classroom teacher, WF)

I find a lot of people who are very transient don't tend to be involved. ... It is pretty much the ones who, I hate to say this, but they are just not really interested in their child's [education] anyway. (classroom teacher, WF)

Although the relationship between poverty and educational disadvantage was almost universally recognized, individual reactions to that perception varied significantly. A number of respondents felt that their students'
learning difficulties began in the home: “A lot of times I see students where education is not a priority and it starts at home. If mom or dad is just not into it and they’re not helping with homework and they don’t view that as special—a lot of times, it’s just right there” (classroom teacher, BF). Others empathized with the difficult situation that many working-class parents face: “Most of my parents are not able to come in during the day because of their work schedules which I understand, of course, being a working parent” (classroom teacher, WF). Finally, some teachers, sympathetic to the plight of low-income parents, blamed the system in part for the mismatch between school and parent expectations:

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

The relationship between economic risk factors and school readiness has been well documented in detail in quantitative analyses and reviews (National Research Council, 2002; Phillips, Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov, & Crane, 1999). But what those sources cannot capture is the emotional impact on school staff who face what they perceive to be an ever-increasing number of children suffering from the effects of poverty. Some teachers emphasized the effects on students:

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

Others focused on the impact on their own teaching:

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

Clearly, a majority of teachers raised serious questions about the extent to which students can learn, and teachers can teach, in the face of the effects of
poverty. These feelings were further exacerbated by respondents' frustration with the insufficiency of district and school resources for assisting students from disadvantaged backgrounds. One school psychologist summed up the typical reaction to our question, "Do you have sufficient resources to meet the needs of your students?" by responding, "Does anyone ever say yes?" A number of teachers told us they often made up the difference between inadequate resources and student needs out of their own pockets: "What I do takes extra time and resources. For example, I can't send [school district] books home, so I go out and buy books that I can send home. . . . We need to do more with less time, less resources and it's hard to do all that" (classroom teacher, WF).

Far from having resources sufficient to meet increasing needs, most viewed school resources as shrinking. Many described the imminent loss of their school of social workers, teacher aides, or special program assistants in the face of state budget shortfalls. The feelings of frustration among teachers about lacking the resources to meet the needs of their students were palpable: "They need more than what I can give them . . . I don't have the time. I don't have the resources. I'm not trained. And yet I am losing all this instructional time. There must be a way we can fix this" (classroom teacher, WF).

It gets to the point where they are asking, they are saying, "I can't do this, I need more help than I am getting" with all of these other students around, "I need you." . . . I help them but when you have other students there is only so much you can do. (classroom teacher, WF)

But there are days that I walk away with like 200 pounds on my shoulders thinking, it keeps getting worse. The stories are more bizarre, more traumatic; how can we possibly meet all these needs? (classroom teacher, WF)

II. CONTRIBUTIONS OF GENERAL EDUCATION

Our respondents remarked on how differences in the way in which schools interact with poor and minority students and their families might make a contribution to special education referral. Of these, problems related to classroom management were most often cited by school personnel: "African American children seem to be more outspoken. They seem to be louder. They seem to be active. They seem to be disrespectful," and for that reason, sometimes teachers don't want to deal with them" (classroom teacher, WF). A number of respondents identified a disjuncture between classroom behavioral expectations and what some have termed an African American behavioral style (Hosp & Hosp, 2002):
Sometimes we tend to put “middle class” values and expectations on another group and another culture. And when you look at a school setting ... the majority of teachers are Caucasian, middle class ... as I said, I find a lot of my African American boys need movement. They’ve got to be able to get up and move. So I’ve talked with these teachers and you know, just because they like to do that, it isn’t ADHD or any of those things, this is just a kid who’s got to move. So you’ve got to provide them the opportunity to do that. (principal, WF)

Like the National Research Council (2002), respondents emphasized the problem in urban systems of large class size and suggested that reduced student-teacher ratios could significantly improve the capability of teachers to attend to student needs. A number also concurred with the National Research Council that barriers in disadvantaged communities may differentially affect parent involvement: “So probably the proximity to the school could be [related to parental involvement], and because it’s our African American children who are bussed, they would be the one that would be farthest away” (classroom teacher, WF).

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

We’ve gotten a huge increase in the number of parents wanting their child tested. And part of that has to do with our district policy on retention and the fear of [the state accountability test] and all that, so, whenever a teacher starts talking to a parent about the child being in trouble or probably going to be retained, then the parent asks for testing. (school psychologist, WF)

Our expectations for youngsters have skyrocketed, more and more aren’t attaining the standards the feds and state think should occur. A lot of stressed teachers feel tremendous pressure to get kids to a certain level and if I don’t then by gosh I better ... find a reason why. (special education director, WM)

Both teachers and psychologists felt that accountability standards as expressed both in standardized testing and in local “no social promotion” policies may limit the school’s ability or willingness to be sensitive to students’ individual developmental needs: “Learning is so developmentally
determined, but I feel a lot of pressure from [the school district] due to the rules about no social promotion” (classroom teacher, WF). In at least one school, the relationship between the state’s minimum competency test and referral to special education was quite explicit: “This year we were told that we had to refer anyone who didn’t pass [the competency test]. So I had to refer 13 kids to the GEI [General Education Intervention Team] and I don’t really need that” (classroom teacher, WF).

III. CONTRIBUTIONS OF SPECIAL EDUCATION PROCESSES

Throughout the history of concern about minority disproportionality in special education, there has been a strong focus on the possible contribution of the processes of referral, assessment, and decision making that lead to eligibility determination. Indiana Disproportionality Project (IDP) interview respondents were mixed in their reactions as to whether the referral-to-placement process contributes to minority disproportionality. Many felt that the process is, in general, sound and does not make an appreciable contribution to disparities in placement:

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

When I first started teaching, special ed was a dumping ground, but that’s really changed. I think we’ve gotten better. (classroom teacher)

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

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

One teacher said that she avoided making referrals to special education because of the complexity and deliberateness of the process: “Sometimes they’re referred and it seems like nothing is done because the process is so slow. . . . It’s a time-consuming process. And if you’re the teacher in charge of that individual, it’s a real long time” (classroom teacher, WF).
Classroom Behavior Management

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

As they move up through the grades the issue has a lot more to do with behavior then it does academics. I think behaviors are driving referrals. A very quiet child who cognitively has a depressed IQ is much less likely to be referred than a child with acting out behavior. (special education director, WF)

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

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

Academics are a lot easier to make up for than behavioral differences that can really wreak havoc with your class climate . . . I spend a lot more time with students who have behavioral problems. And it's fine when I have the time to spend with them, but where I get stressed out is if I don't have as much time to spend with them, because sometimes you feel like you're cheating the other students. (classroom teacher, BF)

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

If we had more resources for behavior and we could take care of those problems and address those issues in class with peer mediators with different available resources [to the point] that we could get that behavior controlled in the classroom they might not need a referral. (classroom teacher, WF)
Some respondents believed that lack of resources was secondary to cultural issues when it came to behavior management. A number of administrators and teachers believed that African American students were overreferred as a result of behavior and that some of the reason for that was a cultural mismatch or perhaps insufficient training:

A lot of things that go on if the teacher doesn’t understand it, while it isn’t really acting-out behavior, it could appear to be ... threatening behavior (special education director, WM)

Just an example ... Johnny was acting up in Mrs. Bluett’s class who could be a White teacher. But when he came to Mrs. Green’s class, who’s a Black teacher, he would not have the same problem. (classroom teacher, BF)

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

IV. AVAILABLE AND NEEDED RESOURCES

To better understand the relationship between special education referral, diversity, and resources, we asked interviewees about available resources and resources that they felt could make a difference in supporting diversity in the classroom. Four subthemes emerged: classroom accommodations, needed resources, prereferral teams, and special education as the primary resource.

Classroom Accommodations

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

Many teachers echoed the feelings of one teacher, who stated, "You have to tailor your instruction to meet the needs of your kids." She described a wide range of interventions that they used prior to considering special education referral, including peer tutoring, instructional accommodations, novel regroupings with other teachers, and cooperative learning. One teacher described them as "all sorts of little interventions that you would not normally do with every single child that you could see that this might help get this child to where he or she needs to be. You know, the little extra effort. And you try all of those, you know, you pull them out of your little bag" (classroom teacher, BF).

That individualization requires effort however, and may create additional time and resource burdens for teachers: "There are so many different ways to work with children, and the assessments in the books don't work for it all, so I have to be creative. It takes a lot of work" (classroom teacher, WF).

Although the majority of teachers we interviewed seemed willing and able to accommodate their instruction to fit their students' needs, a number expressed frustration at the number of skills and roles that are required of them to address the diverse needs of their students: "They tell you, you are a nurse, you are going to be a social worker... you are a social worker, you are a psychologist, you are a nurse, you are a mother, and then way back on the burner is the teaching part" (classroom teacher, WF).

Needed Resources

As noted, the vast majority of school personnel felt that resources were insufficient to meet the needs of their students. A number of respondents blamed inadequate educational funding for that shortfall of resources:

I'm sad to say that I don't think that the services for ESL students are quite satisfactory. We need to do, we need to come up with more finances and a lot more resources to better help the students because they're here, they really are here. (classroom teacher, BF)

In the school, they need more materials for hands on. ... We give these standardized tests, these children have no idea about some of these things because they have never touched it, never felt it, never seen it. They've never seen an ocean. If we are studying social and
geography we need to have more maps, globes, and videos. (classroom teacher, WF)

A number of possible interventions were identified, including parent support for families, hiring instructional coaches to better understand how to meet the needs of diverse learners, more remedial services, a Web site with a bank of differentiated instructional lessons, and a full-time counselor. The single resource identified most frequently as needed to address the types of problems that our interviewees identified was early intervention. As one principal (WF) noted, “I do have to sometimes wonder why we don’t invest a little bit more resources at the primary level, when things are a little smaller... as opposed to waiting till they get to middle school and high school and their parents have just about given up.”

**Prereferral Teams**

Prereferral intervention teams have been identified in the literature as a positive resource that may reduce the overreferral of minority students through the development of a process specifically designed to meet individual needs prior to referral (Harry, 1994; Maheady, 1983; National Alliance of Black School Educators, 2002). Yet for those who have experience with such teams on a regular basis, we found reactions to the prereferral process, and especially prereferral teams, to be decidedly mixed.

In some schools, teachers were highly positive, viewing the prereferral team as an effective peer-driven process to increase classroom resources for addressing student needs:

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

> It is helpful to have that committee, just giving you one more idea or even just to say, “Hey, you know, you’re doing good, you’re doing good things there, keep on pluggin.” (classroom teacher, WF)

At other schools, however, the team was viewed as less helpful, or even as an obstacle to be cleared prior to placing a student in special education:

> If I can speak freely, I think it is a waste of time. ... Maybe for inexperienced teachers, maybe that is a good thing because they don’t
have the knowledge or the tools, but for teachers who have been at this for a while, I think it is just delaying the inevitable. (classroom teacher, WF)

As another teacher put it, “I figure they’re not going to tell me anything I don’t know after all these years” (classroom teacher, WM).

As a result, we were told by a number of respondents that it was not atypical for teachers who believe that their students truly need to be referred for special education to actively short-circuit the prereferral process by encouraging parents to request assessment prior to the convening of the prereferral team:

A lot of times I’ll try to bypass [the prereferral team]. I think if you get a parent to call in for testing, you get it done much quicker ... I just tell them, if you call in, I mean, you know he’s got a problem, I know he’s got a problem, why do we want to go through this 30-day thing? I don’t tell them what the 30-day thing is. ... If you call the counselor and request testing, it might be done a little bit quicker. And it’s their right. (classroom teacher, WM)

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

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

**Special Education as the Primary Resource**

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

[Teachers] know that something is not working for a child and they feel that they can’t tap into some resources. One stable resource that they have to tap into is special education. It has funding to support it,
Teachers, in contrast, viewed the availability of special education in a highly positive light, almost a lifeline in the face of a general scarcity of resources:

I am pretty open to referring any child that is not finding success. My goal is for every child to be successful. (classroom teacher, WF)

If there’s a chance they might qualify, it’s always to their benefit to have them checked. (classroom teacher, WF)

We are thinking of sending them on to middle school and they can’t read yet. It is scary—let’s get these kids tested, let’s see what we can do. If we can give them a label, at least we can get them help as we let go. (classroom teacher, WF)

Mehan et al. (1986) described the overidentification of students for special education as largely an unconscious process. These responses would suggest that it is also well meaning, intended to help students who are failing academically or socially.

PERCEPTIONS OF MINORITY DISPROPORTIONALITY AND DIVERSITY

From the broad perspective of policy, the overuse of special education for students of color constitutes a serious problem demanding remediation. For teachers facing academic and social problems among the students in their classrooms, however, referral to special education is primarily a method of providing additional resources for any student who is struggling: “If you look at the big picture, overrepresentation of minorities in special ed is a serious problem. But [at the individual teacher level], I truly believe they just want Johnny to succeed” (school psychologist, WF).

Indeed, for most of the classroom teachers we interviewed, the disproportionate representation of minority students in special education appeared to be a topic that had not been previously considered. A common response among classroom teachers to the question, Why do you think there is disproportionality? was simply to equate high numbers of minority students in special education with high rates of enrollment of students of color in general education, sidestepping the phenomenon of disproportionate representation:

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

Views on Diversity

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

Most of the teachers we interviewed regarded the diversity of their classroom as a positive. In speaking about diversity, this classroom teacher captured the positive feelings expressed by many of our respondents:

Children need to learn how to act, relate, respond to all backgrounds and socioeconomic levels and behaviors and talents and so on. So I think the more diversity you have, the more opportunities the children have for getting practice in a classroom, kind of a miniworld situation for the big world. (classroom teacher, WF)

Some teachers expressed a strong personal commitment to teaching students about diversity and building an accepting and tolerant community in their classroom. One teacher had become a trainer for her district in a national program on diversity instruction and conducted her own research to supplement what she viewed as a limited discussion of diversity in the standard curriculum: “The research that I found said that over a third of the cowboys out West were African Americans, and I even found a coloring book which had African American cowboys in it. . . . And that is, unfortunately, not something that was presented there in the textbook” (classroom teacher, WF).

Although less common, we also heard less tolerant perspectives on racial and ethnic diversity. We were surprised by the level of racial stereotyping in a few of the responses, such as this one in response to a question about whether referrals differ in any way by race:

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

Difficulty in Speaking about Race

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

Teacher: I think we're over 52%, 53%, something like that. We're over 50%. So you would expect that percentage to be of . . .

Interviewer: To be of . . . 52% minority?

T: Minority . . . yeah. I don't have those numbers.

I: Is that primarily one minority? . . . like African American?

T: I think that's all minorities.

I: So like do you have . . .

T: Indian, we have a lot of Hispanic . . . (classroom teacher, WF)

A number of the classroom teachers who were interviewed claimed not to have noticed or thought about the racial or cultural diversity present in their classroom: "The racial diversity, I always have a hard time with that when people ask me, because I don't pay any attention" (classroom teacher, WF).

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

Teacher: When you say minorities, are you, what are you speaking of?

Interviewer: Ethnic and racial minorities
T: Oh...OK...Alright. We have like...I guess we have about half and half. I don't know that, I've ever really paid attention to it. (classroom teacher, WF)

When you're speaking of diversity, what are you referring to? (classroom teacher, WF)

It was also interesting to note that our admittedly small sample of African American teachers seemed to be markedly less reticent in describing the racial makeup of their classroom. The following description, volunteered as a classroom description by an African American teacher even before any specific probes concerning diversity, was more typical of the responses of teachers of color: “We have 23 students and out of the 23, I have 5 who are White and the rest are Black” (classroom teacher, BF).

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

DISCUSSION

This study was designed to explore perceptions of possible contributing factors to minority disproportionality in school districts that show evidence of significant disproportionality. It should be noted that because only districts showing disproportionality were sampled, the study in no way identifies variables unique to situations in which racial disparities in special education are evident. Indeed, one would expect many of the perceptions of the process of referral to special education are common to a broad range of school districts. Thus, the variables identified in this investigation may or may not be causal in terms of creating or maintaining racial disparities. The types of processes identified by our respondents do, however, identify a context within which students of color come to be overrepresented in special education programs and placements.

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

Teacher and administrator responses in this study were consistent with the findings of previous research on the impact of poverty (e.g., National Research Council, 2002; Phillips et al., 1998). Our respondents described, often in disheartening detail, a host of risk factors associated with low income, including both biological factors and social/environmental stressors. Respondents also appeared to resonate with a perspective that a "culture of poverty" creates disjunctures between what schools expect of students and families, and what students and families from poverty backgrounds bring with them (Payne, 2001). Further, our respondents made it clear that the needs of students from poverty backgrounds vastly outpace the resources available for meeting those needs, and were in substantial agreement with research (e.g., National Research Council), suggesting that a strong commitment to early intervention could significantly offset socioeconomic risk factors.

The impact of poverty on educational readiness has indeed been widely documented (National Research Council, 2002). Yet it must also be noted that empirical investigations of disproportionality have found the relationships among race, poverty, and special education placement to be anything but linear. Rather, the impact of poverty on the likelihood of special education referral appears to vary considerably by disability category and percent minority enrollment, and often reveals relationships that are in a direction opposite to that expected (Oswald et al., 1999; Parrish, 2002; Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002). In these interviews, the simple fact that the issue of cultural mismatch in expectations or behavior management was a significant subtheme among our respondents argues that poverty is not the sole predictor of minority disproportionality. In short, although the powerful impact of poverty on educational readiness cannot be doubted, it is not yet clear how or to what extent the relationship between poverty and achievement affects minority placement in special education and how these relationships may be mediated by local context, including the presence of supportive social networks (Stanton-Salazar, 1997) and adequate human resources (Nieto, 2000).

Some of the perceived effects of poverty may not be directly attributable to poverty itself but to the difficulties that disadvantaged students may have in negotiating the unfamiliar culture of schools. Stanton-Salazar (1997) argued that success in school is determined not only by students' cognitive and academic skills but also by their ability to "decode the system"—that is, to learn and respond to the implicit expectations and communication patterns of school settings. Although many students from disadvantaged backgrounds lack the skills they need for such decoding, it is also true that schools are not particularly successful in helping students learn the
“decoding” skills that will help them be successful in school (Stanton-Salazar). Without question, students from troubled or disadvantaged backgrounds pose a challenge to classroom teaching. Yet, a “predisposition to blame families for children's learning and behavioral difficulties” (Harry et al., 2002, pp. 78–79) may also impede appropriate efforts to help children overcome disadvantage by blinding educators to the responsibility of assisting disadvantaged students in learning what they need to know to negotiate the complex maze of schooling.

GENERAL EDUCATION CONTEXT

Given multiple sources of unequal schooling, it is not surprising that the National Research Council (2002) panel found affirmative evidence that schooling independently contributes to the unequal rates of achievement that predict minority disproportionality in special education. Participants in this study echoed some of these same themes, chief among them the contribution of a cultural mismatch regarding social behavior. Hosp and Hosp (2002) concluded that there is evidence of such a distinct African American behavioral style in schools. If our respondents are correct, it is not uncommon for teachers unfamiliar or uncomfortable with that behavioral style to react in ways that are educationally unproductive (e.g., Townsend, 2000). Such a hypothesis is congruent with particularly high disproportionality in the emotionally disturbed category.

One of the more interesting findings of the current study is the strongly held belief among respondents that accountability testing creates pressures that increase inappropriate referrals to special education. Heubert (2002) noted that although high-stakes testing can be expected to have a strong impact on the achievement of students of color, it is not clear whether that impact will be positive or negative. On the one hand, pressures on schools and classrooms created by a strong focus on accountability have the potential to strengthen both teacher training and classroom instruction. On the other hand, unless accountability testing is paired with high-quality instruction, it may be associated with a number of negative outcomes for disadvantaged learners, including disparate failure rates (Natriello & Pallas, 2001), increased dropout (Madaus & Clark, 2001), and the shift in local resources away from teaching and toward testing, especially in districts with high poor and minority enrollments (McNeil & Valenzuela, 2001).

Accountability testing represents a fundamentally different kind of contributing factor to minority disproportionality in special education. In general, the variables identified as possible general education contributions to disproportionality by both our respondents and the available research (e.g., National Research Council, 2002) are related to resource deficits at the classroom, school, or district level. High-stakes and minimum competency
testing, however, are driven by national and state-level policy choices. In this case, it is possible that a key national policy choice, accountability testing, conflicts with another federal priority, reducing the disproportionate placement of minority students in special education.

SPECIAL EDUCATION ELIGIBILITY AND DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES

The process that begins when a teacher considers referring a student to special education and continues until that student is deemed either eligible or ineligible for services is highly complex. Respondents in this study identified a number of points in the referral-to-placement process that may contribute to an increased likelihood of minority referral to special education. Teachers, administrators, and psychologists all complained about the excess proceduralism of special education, although the cumbersome nature of the process may in some cases lead teachers to make fewer referrals to special education. In addition, the responses of all respondent groups indicated a serious gap between the level and types of classroom behavior that classroom teachers face, and their preparation and resources for addressing that behavior. Finally, these data suggest that prereferral teams may or may not contribute to the reduction of minority overreferral. In some cases, teachers believed such teams to be of strong benefit to themselves and their students; in other schools, the teams appeared to be viewed simply as an additional administrative obstacle to be cleared prior to actual referral. Clearly, further investigation is necessary to explore the school or classroom characteristics that may make prereferral teams more or less effective (Whitten & Dieker, 1995).

Teachers in this sample held beliefs regarding the value of special education referral and disproportionality in referral that appear to run contrary to generally held perspectives in policy and research. Both research and policy perspectives on minority disproportionality in special education (e.g., Coutinho & Oswald, 2000; National Research Council, 2002; Losen & Orfield, 2002) view the disproportionate referral of poor and minority children to special education as a cause for serious concern. Special education directors in our sample tended to share that concern, viewing overreferral as a negative for their district. But among classroom teachers, special education was almost universally viewed as a valuable, and sometimes the only, resource for students with learning and behavior problems. If anything, teachers preferred to err on the side of overreferral rather than underreferral in order to ensure that needy students received any and all resources for which they might qualify. Debates about whether special education is effective (Finn, Rotherham, & Hokanson, 2001; National Research Council) seem to matter less to these teachers than the simple fact that it is there for those who need it.
There are currently at least three different frameworks within which to view problems of racial and economic inequity; each of these lenses takes the same data on disparity and arrives at very different conclusions. The most longstanding perspective grows out the hereditarian tradition in psychometric theory (Galton, 1869; Spearman, 1927). Exemplified most recently by The Bell Curve (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994), this perspective tends to support fixed genetic explanations over environmental explanations of the Black-White test score gap and typically attempts to make the case that social programs have not, and probably cannot, close the gap in measured performance on standardized tests (Jensen, 1969). A dramatically different perspective is provided by critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2002). Growing out of a discourse of legal scholars in the 1980s and 1990s, critical race theory focuses on the concept of race as a social construct and on the ways in which that construct has been used to maintain the relative privilege and power of the dominant group. A third discourse that has provided a productive framework is cultural reproduction theory (Bowles & Gintis, 1977). Originally used to explain class differences, the model has been expanded (Mehan, 1992; Oakes, 1982) to explain how everyday actions by institutions and individuals, conscious or not, support and reproduce both racial and socioeconomic inequity in school and society.

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

In addition, however, our interviews suggest a fourth paradigm among some practitioners, a perspective that might be termed, “maybe we just shouldn’t talk about it.” A number of respondents were clearly uncomfortable in talking about the issue of race, or took the “colorblind” perspective that they simply do not pay attention to racial differences in even highly diverse classrooms. That difference in perspective appeared itself to be race based; among our limited sample of African American teachers, the topic of race was approached with far less hesitation and trepidation than among our White respondents.

As noted above, the majority of our respondents denied that minority disproportionality in special education was a race-based issue, preferring to
explain it as an economic issue that affects minority students only because of their disproportionate representation in lower socioeconomic classes. In light of the high level of discomfort that the mere mention of the topic of race elicited, one might well ask whether the emphasis placed on the influence of poverty in these interviews was in part a way of avoiding the more troubling issue of racial disparity. Despite its tragic effects, poverty remains a less emotionally charged and cognitively complex topic than race.

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

Systems change is a difficult undertaking in any organization, even when it does not involve an emotionally laden issue. If this analysis of the concept of racism is correct, however, it compounds the difficulty of change. School practitioners may well resist attempts to solve the problem of disproportionality if they believe that they first have to admit that they are currently engaging in racist practice. Further, the magnitude and apparent intractability of the problem often leads to recommendations for sweeping reform in assessment, classroom management, or teacher training (National Research Council, 2002). Independent of the merit of such proposals, the ability to implement reforms in any meaningful way is dependent on the participation of school staff, and in particular on the leadership of school administrators. It is highly unlikely that schools that are unwilling to fully explore racial disparities will understand or accept the need for extensive reform. Those seeking to implement interventions addressing inequity may need to attend not only to the data and the recommendations for reform that flow from those data but also to the way in which "dysconscious" attitudes and beliefs about the topic of race (King, 1991) may prevent some listeners from being able to fully respond to data indicating racial disparity.

IMPLICATIONS

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

1. The factors that create and maintain racial disparities in special education referral and placement are highly complex and interactive. Therefore, it is critical to avoid simplistic or linear solutions in addressing these issues. A tempting policy solution for minority disproportionality in special education would be to "draw a line in the sand" by simply setting a numerical or proportionate cap on the enrollment of minority students in special education. Yet the needs-driven nature of referral described by these educators suggests that simplistic responses may harm the very students who are the target of reform by closing the door to an important resource for some disadvantaged students.

2. Reducing minority student referrals to special education without reducing the access to needed educational resources will require substantial increases in the resources available in general education to meet the needs of disadvantaged students. Analyses of the determinants of referral to special education (Gerber & Semmel, 1984; Skiba, McLeskey, & Waldron, Grizzle, & Bartley, 1993) suggest that teachers will refer students to special education whom they perceive as exceeding their classroom's resources, regardless of whether that referral is validated by standardized assessment. Meeting student needs prior to a special education referral thus requires an infusion of resources into general education classrooms sufficient to enable teachers to meet individual student needs without compromising their instructional responsibilities to the rest of the class. Until a range of other resources that can support students with academic or social needs becomes widely available, teachers cannot be blamed for continuing to use, and perhaps overuse, one of the only reliable resources at their disposal.

In particular, the likelihood that a cultural mismatch regarding classroom behavior is driving special education referral suggests that the strong commitment to increased training of classroom teachers and school psychologists in culturally competent methods of instruction, classroom management, and intervention must be among the highest priorities of reform in this area (National Research Council, 2002). Providing teachers a framework for sharing expertise through a prereferral team may also hold some promise for increasing classroom resources and reducing referrals. But the mixed success reported for such teams (Rock & Zigmond, 2001) suggests that the mere implementation of such teams is less
critical in changing referral practices than ensuring that participants are trained in effective collaborative strategies and supported in their efforts.

3. The apparent unwillingness or inability on the part of many White educators to confront the inescapable facts of racial disparity in education may itself contribute to the continued inability to effectively address those problems. Systems change requires an awareness on the part of those participating in the process that there is something that needs to be changed. These and previous data strongly suggest an inability or unwillingness on the part of some educators to perceive or accept the fact of continuing inequity in education. A clear challenge facing those seeking to bring an end to the remnants of educational inequity will be to find methods of information delivery that can enable evidence of racial disparity to become a motivator for commitment to program improvement, rather than a stimulus for defensiveness and denial.

CONCLUSIONS

The overriding theme that emerges from these conversations is that the processes that may produce and reproduce special education disproportionality are complex, interactive, and perhaps even contradictory. Exposure to poverty and poverty-related stressors clearly increases the likelihood of referral to special education for many students of color; however, poverty alone does not seem sufficient to explain the various sources of cultural incongruence cited as a factor by some of our respondents. Lack of resources, particularly for managing disruptive behavior, does appear to be linked to overreferral for minority students, yet in using special education as a key resource to help struggling students, classroom teachers do not share the negative perspective on referral that seems to be implicit in the national policy discussion. Some aspects of the special education referral and placement process may indeed be sufficiently flawed to differentially increase the likelihood of referral or placement for minority students, but any inequities that characterize special education must be placed within the context of general inequities of educational opportunity that still pervade American public education. Finally, discussions with these committed and often eloquent educators deepened our knowledge of local processes that may make a contribution in reproducing inequity, yet a pervasive reticence to discuss issues of race may itself serve as an obstacle to addressing problems of racial disparity. Ultimately, multiple and sometimes conflicting sources suggest that serious efforts to address the critical problem of unequal placement in special education will necessarily be complex, interactive, and responsive to local needs.
### Appendix. Sample Thematic Conceptual Matrix from One Interview (Topic: Classroom Accommodations and Prereferral Intervention)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Commitment to Students/Teacher Challenges</th>
<th>Attitude/Perception Toward Diversity</th>
<th>Available Resources</th>
<th>Perceptions of Successful Accommodations &amp; prereferral process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Referral when accommodations are tried and fail: “with reduced assignments and peer tutoring, the individual help with me, if they are still struggling then it is time to make the further step.”</td>
<td>Teacher responsibility about accommodations: “Usually I start with me. And I start spending time on my breaks on my after school, before school.” … “a lot of personal and trying.”</td>
<td>Teacher as a resource: “Usually I start with me. And I start spending time on my breaks.”</td>
<td>Parent assistance: “I will send home reteaching materials to their parents”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents not always helping: “I will send home reteaching materials to their parents … I can’t always be sure that is going to happen because they may be working late hours.”</td>
<td>Parents aren’t involved: “It is really difficult in this environment because … the parents are unable to … be heavily involved in that because of working or jobs.”</td>
<td>Peer tutoring</td>
<td>Peer groupings of different ability levels.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Send to another teacher: “Sometimes we will do grouping as teachers and I will send them to another teacher if I feel they need a different approach.”

Success? “I would say because I so thoroughly exhaust my efforts before I make the referral that if I feel they are a student who is going to be referred almost 90% of the time, they will be because of these efforts still aren’t doing the job.”
Appendix. (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Commitment to Students/Teacher Challenges</th>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Attitude/Perception Toward Diversity</th>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Available Resources</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents aren't fully involved: &quot;It is really difficult in this environment because... the parents are unable to... be heavily involved in that because of working or jobs.&quot; Parents passing off referral responsibility: &quot;They don't have the time to do a lot of work with the child at home; they want us to take care of it here at school.&quot; Need more parent involvement: &quot;I need more parental involvement; I need parents reading to them at nighttime.&quot;</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>But teacher seems to be understanding: &quot;In the majority of the referrals that I have made the parents are concerned, they've verbalized that concern, they don't have the time to do a lot of work with the child at home.&quot;</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Presence of prereferral: &quot;Yes we have Student Support Team (SST) [goes on to describe].&quot; Required process.</td>
<td>6-7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Lack of resources in district: &quot;We really don't have the resources we need.&quot;</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Lack of district resources: &quot;[Our district] adopted a science program... but they did not order the things for the experiments, so the science program is useless.&quot; State resources: &quot;We need to have more maps, globes, and videos available through the state.&quot;</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>SST may be better for younger teachers: &quot;Maybe for inexperienced teachers, maybe that is a good thing because they don't have the knowledge or the tools but for teachers who have been at this for a while I think it is just delaying the inevitable.&quot;</td>
<td>7</td>
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*Page numbers represent the page number of the transcript on which the original quote is found.*
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Notes

1 A full description of the methodology for determining the extent of disproportionality may be found in Skiba et al., 2001, 2002.
2 Specific differences in responses between schools or teachers are not explored in the current report.
3 Codes for respondents: B = Black, W = White; M = Male, F = Female.

References


The Context of Minority Disproportionality


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