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# How do Special Education Teachers View the Phenomenon of Black Male Overrepresentation in Special Education?

Lelon B. Jeffers

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HOW DO SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS VIEW THE PHENOMENON OF BLACK  
MALE OVERREPRESENTATION IN SPECIAL EDUCATION?

by

LELON BAILEY JEFFERS

(Under the Direction of Delores Liston)

ABSTRACT

As the student population in many U.S. public schools grows increasingly more diverse, the need to assess the educational practices utilized in public schools grows as well. It is imperative for educators to make a concerted effort to ensure the rights and needs of minority students are being addressed in public schools. It is the duty of educators and policy makers to protect those students who are most marginalized by society. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the phenomenon of Black male overrepresentation in special education, and to ascertain the views and perspectives of special education teachers regarding this phenomenon.

Additionally, this study sought to explore any commonly accepted school practices that may be contributing to disproportionality. The overarching research question that guided this study was: How do special education teachers view the phenomenon of Black male overrepresentation in special education? A total of four current special education teachers participated in this study. Participation included completing a semi-structured interview, which contained questions and prompts relating to Black male overrepresentation in special education. The resulting interview data were transcribed and coded using qualitative analysis techniques, and three major themes were identified. The three major themes were: (1) Black male overrepresentation in special education is a commonly experienced phenomenon; (2) Social/personal factors are the best predictors of a Black male being placed in special education; and, (3) Educators feel powerless in

regard to ameliorating the prevalence of Black male overrepresentation in special education. The results of this study suggest that Black male overrepresentation in special education is a racially driven phenomenon, and continues to plague many public schools.

**INDEX WORDS:** Black males, Critical race theory, Special education, Over-representation, Disproportionality, Teachers

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COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to all the educators who continue to work tirelessly for their students, in spite of increasing difficulties, and to my wife and family, who have always supported me as an educator.

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I would like to thank Dr. Delores Liston for serving as my committee chair during this challenging endeavor. I would also like to thank Dr. Cordelia Zinskie, Dr. Joseph Telfair, and Dr. Kymberly Harris for serving on my committee. This accomplishment would not have been possible without the guidance, insight, and patience provided by each of you. I am forever grateful for your contributions.



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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

The topic of student overrepresentation in special education programs has become a heavily debated issue. Although many individuals recognize that various demographic groups are disproportionately represented in remedial academic programs, such as special education, it appears that overrepresentation remains a common occurrence (Strassfeld, 2017).

Overrepresentation in special education can be defined as a phenomenon which occurs when a specific subgroup comprises a larger percentage of the special education population than they do of the general population (Wiley, Brigham, Kauffman, & Bogan, 2013). It is possible that overrepresentation may elicit a variety of harmful outcomes for the students impacted by this phenomenon (Connor, 2017). While the practice of placing disproportional numbers of minority students in special education programs may certainly induce immediate negative consequences in the lives of students, such as decreased academic achievement, reduced self-esteem, and behavioral issues, the long-term effects of such actions may be equally detrimental (Booker & Mitchell, 2011). It is plausible that disproportionate placement practices might even perpetuate the systemic poverty, crime, and limited employment opportunities which have all too often characterized minority life in our country (Hero & Levy, 2016).

Arguably, no demographic group has been more disproportionately referred to and identified for special education services than have Black males (Woodson & Harris, 2018). The challenges faced by many Black males in public schools have been addressed for decades (Oswald, Coutinho, Best, & Singh, 1999; Pendarvis & Wood, 2009; Watkins & Kurtz, 2001), and continue to resonate in contemporary academia (Connor, 2017; Rynders, 2019; Strassfield,

2017; Sullivan & Bal, 2013). Many educators acknowledge that, even under optimal circumstances, Black males are less likely to achieve similar academic success as their non-Black peers (English, Lambert, & Ialongo, 2016). A great deal of the research and literature which currently exists on the issue of Black male overrepresentation in special education elects to frame the issue as a natural byproduct of the confluence of a variety of risk factors, including low socioeconomic status and a lack of educational opportunities (e.g., Zosky, Avant, & Thompson, 2014), non-traditional family structures (e.g., Malecki & Demaray, 2006), and limited family support for academics (e.g., Liasidou, 2012). According to this view of disproportionality, overrepresentation can be linked to measurable forces which impose themselves upon the lives of young Black students, resulting in the need for remedial academic support (Shifrer, 2018). While these risk factors are not easily refuted, and an undeniable link between these risk factors and placement in remedial programs certainly is evident, this particular view of disproportionality does not account for the less easily measured forces that are in play, such as implicit bias and discriminatory practices. Here is where I believe a gap exists in our current understanding of this phenomenon. I believe we need to re-evaluate the internal forces that may perpetuate the disproportionate number of Black males being referred to and placed in special education, placing a particular emphasis on the ways in which internal bias may factor into the process. I believe this was an important question to consider and an important time to consider it. As our society gravitates towards a more *socially just* trajectory, it is increasingly important to evaluate all facets of society in attempts to expose how those various facets may or may not lead to equality. Few social institutes have as great an impact on society as does public education. The National Center for Education Statistics ([NCES], 2019) estimated

that nearly 51 million students attend public school each year in the United States. It would seem reasonable to suggest

that the U.S. public education system impacts nearly every family in the nation to some degree.

As such, true social justice is unlikely to ever be attained unless the education system supports

this agenda. While I do feel as if the public education system does a reasonable job of

encouraging equality and a commitment to living in a diverse society, I also believe there are still

gains to be made. Namely, I believe the education system can improve the way in which it

identifies and serves students with disabilities, paying special attention to the overrepresentation

of Black males. If we are to truly move towards a culture free from bigotry and

disenfranchisement, we must be willing to grapple with these types of tough issues; at the same

time, we also must be willing to honestly evaluate how our actions support or hinder the equality

movement.

Throughout this study, I sought to explore two major facets of contemporary education that I presumed to have a profound impact on minority overrepresentation: institutional racism and implicit bias. To provide context to the usage and application of these two terms, I believe it is beneficial to provide an operational definition of each. Institutional racism, as it applies to this study, can be thought of as a systematic approach to propagating the views, ideals, and overall betterment of White individuals, while simultaneously seeking to accomplish the inverse result for individuals of color (Multiple citations needed here). Bailey et al. (2017) defined institutional racism as the totality of ways in which a society perpetuates racial discrimination through strategic social structures which serve to further reinforce discriminatory beliefs. My particular application of institutional racism also included the subversive quality of this systematic approach, as institutional racism seeks to operate discreetly. Implicit bias refers to the

unintentional ideals engrained in one's mind, which are imposed upon others through actions and behaviors (Rynders, 2019). Much like institutional racism, implicit bias is not an overt phenomenon. Rather, implicit bias exists mostly within the realm of non-consciousness. Both, institutional racism and implicit bias operate within a cloud of concealment and subterfuge, and are often difficult to combat.

### **Statement of the Problem and Research Question**

The primary goal of my research was to invoke a conversation as to how the educational system itself may be influencing the overrepresentation of Black males in special education classes. As stated above, a variety of risk factors that are not under the control of the education system manifest themselves upon the lives of many Black males, resulting in poor academic achievement. My purpose was not to discredit or disprove the undeniable impact that these risk factors impose upon at-risk students; rather, I attempted to foster a dialogue which explores the ways in which the educational system may be exacerbating these risk factors by exposing Black males to additional disadvantages. Thus, my overarching research question was: How do special education teachers view the phenomenon of Black male overrepresentation in special education?

### **Procedures**

The exploration of the overrepresentation of Black males in special education was conducted via a qualitative design utilizing a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix A) based on the literature and utilizing the framework of CRT. The purposive sample consisted of four special education teachers who met the inclusion criteria. Due to the current pandemic, interviews were conducted online and were audio-recorded. Recordings were transcribed by a professional service and coding was conducted employing thematic analysis, which resulted in three emergent themes.



### **Contemporary Significance of the Study**

In an increasingly interrelated society, in which social issues are commonly viewed from holistic perspectives, sensitive social issues are no longer isolated to specific departments within that society. Frequently, what affects one aspect of a society is likely to affect multiple aspects of society. Modern social life is frequently characterized by the ubiquitous nature of information readily available on the internet and social media, and by the proliferation of voices being heard in mainstream media. Often, these voices are speaking up on social issues which were previously considered taboo, and as such, were all too often left unaddressed. Social issues, such as gender, race, sexual orientation, and religion are now front and center on many media platforms. Human rights issues commonly permeate political and academic conversations. Such conversations are necessary and are long overdue. The issue of minority overrepresentation in special education is no exception. On the surface, overrepresentation within the confines of a school may seem like an *education* issue, best left to the expertise of educators. However, as the included review of literature reveals, overrepresentation is much more than simply an education issue.

Overrepresentation originated largely from the anti-integration practices which were commonly invoked during the court ordered *integration* era. As such, it is necessary that the topics of disproportionality and overrepresentation continue to remain a talking point in contemporary society. A major significance of this study is that it explores the issues associated with minority overrepresentation in special education through the Critical Race Theory framework, primarily intended to examine the ways in which existing social structures and ideological beliefs may directly/indirectly influence the disproportionality which affects so many schools. Left unchecked, many of these practices would likely continue to exist. This study was intended to add to the conversation surrounding minority rights, particularly as the conversation

pertains to young Black males, which is of extreme importance in a society where Black males are frequently marginalized by many social structures (Gibson, 2018).

The study of Black male overrepresentation in special education presents the opportunity to provide educators and decision makers with additional insight into possible means by which disproportionality in special education may be ameliorated. This should be of heightened interest to many educators, considering compliance data surrounding disproportionality are key components of many educational policies (Sullivan & Osher, 2019). In the current educational environment, terms such as *overrepresentation* and *disproportionality* are now imbedded in the everyday language used by many educational policy makers. Representatives at the state and local levels consistently gather disproportionality data in an effort to ensure that demographic subgroups are not being overrepresented in remedial programs, such as special education. As a trickle-down effect, administrators and educators have now become sensitive to these phenomena, and often go to great lengths to ensure their schools are not in violation of disproportionality standards (Fergus, 2017). However, the increased scrutiny surrounding these issues has yet to unearth a solution to disproportionality, with many schools still over-serving and/or under-serving specific subgroups in various programs, such as special education (Cooc & Kiru, 2018). In previously observed instances, research data suggested that White students were commonly overrepresented in gifted programs while Black students were frequently overrepresented in remedial programs (Pendarvis & Wood, 2009). As such, it should come as no surprise that disproportionality has become a national talking point.

This study does not seek to provide a remedy to these problems, nor does it posit that a remedy is even ascertainable. Rather, this study seeks to propel the dialogue and conversation surrounding these challenging issues. Now, more than ever, I feel it is necessary for individuals

to welcome uncomfortable conversations that force us to evaluate the social structures to which we willingly adhere. Such conversations are the backbone of modern curriculum studies efforts and are necessary when evaluating policies and practices (Apple, 2018). In doing so, perhaps we are able to uncover the next step forward on the path which may ultimately lead us to a more equitable society. Studies of this nature are extremely relevant for educators in today's diverse society.

Another major significance of this study is derived from the multi-faceted nature of minority overrepresentation in special education. As stated earlier, overrepresentation in special education has progressed beyond simply being an *education* issue; overrepresentation is now considered by many to be a *civil rights* issue. Some would argue that the maintenance of systems that perpetuate the existence of minority overrepresentation in remedial programs is, in fact, a form of modern racial discrimination (Kauffman & Anastasiou, 2019). While this issue is addressed in greater depth in the included literature review, for now, it is possible to assume that the overrepresentation of minority students in remedial programs may be traced back to the manipulative practices which were first introduced during the Civil Rights Movement as a means to prevent full integration. Educational tracking and homogenous cohort groupings became increasingly popular during the 1960s as a strategy to limit the interactions of White and minority students in integrated school systems. It has been argued that contemporary overrepresentation can be linked to prior implementation of such strategies (Tomek, 2014). Therefore, minority overrepresentation in remedial programs is more than just an education issue; rather, it is a social justice issue which warrants continued critiquing. A study of Black male overrepresentation in special education is perhaps more justifiable now than at any other point in history if our society is to truly move beyond the shadow of racism and social injustice. I

feel that special education teachers possess a wealth of insight and information on this sensitive topic, as they encounter this phenomenon on a very consistent basis. An exploration of their views on the issue should propel the discussion towards potential strategies that may prove effective at ameliorating the negative effects of overrepresentation

### **Significance to the Field of Curriculum Studies**

While the broader social significance of this study has already been discussed, it is also important to explore the significance of this study to the specific field of curriculum studies. Curriculum studies, as explained by Kridel (2010), pertains to the examination of the process of conceiving and configuring experiences that potentially lead to learning. Researchers originating from a curriculum studies background will inevitably concern themselves with the process of learning and how that process is shaped by power, experiences, and any other dynamic that imposes itself upon the process of learning. An exploration of the issue of minority representation in special education is well situated within the curriculum studies field of interest, and checks many of the boxes required to be included in this area of academia.

A common theme across many curriculum studies endeavors is an examination of how the existing power dynamics either support or inhibit equality within education. Foucault (1980) contended that power and knowledge are inextricably interconnected, and that power dynamics can either support or hinder one's quest for knowledge. With this understanding, it becomes necessary that we continually analyze the power dynamics that are in effect, particularly when they impact the lives of young children. Therefore, a critique of the processes that have continually led to the over-serving of minority children in special education is not only appropriate, it is necessary. While this study is certainly not the first to explore this power dynamic, it is one of a very small list of studies that positions the issue of Black male

overrepresentation in special education as a systemic issue, possibly connected to the potential biases of educators and to the utilization and implementation of flawed practices. As such, this study is of importance to the overall field of curriculum studies, as it seeks to provide a unique perspective to a long-standing issue within the field.

From a much broader perspective, this study has the ability to inform the ways in which educators are trained and prepared for their careers working with diverse students. As the educational milieu continues to rapidly transform from a majority-based population to a minority-majority, it is of great importance that teachers and pre-service teachers be exposed to adequate training on sensitive issues such as diversity and cultural awareness. When considering the data surrounding minority overrepresentation in school punitive and remedial programs, it could be assumed that many educators lack the requisite skills to effectively serve such a diverse student population. The issue is unlikely to remedy itself in the absence of improved preparation practices for those choosing to pursue a career in the field of education. Perhaps this study may prove to be a resource when considering ways to improve teacher preparation practices. For example, Liu and Ball (2019) argued that critical reflection could result in a teacher workforce that is more readily able to address the needs and challenges of a diverse student population. This study of minority overrepresentation in special education could provide such a critical look into educational practices, and perhaps lead to a better understanding of strategies which may be used to prepare teachers for the challenges associated with diversity.

### **Personal Significance of the Study**

I am approaching the topic of Black male overrepresentation in special education from a Critical Race Theory perspective. The prevailing beliefs of Critical Race Theory (CRT) are discussed in greater length in Chapter 2. As a proponent of CRT, I believe Black males are

overrepresented in special education due to a confluence of risk factors that perpetuate the placement of minority students into remedial programs, coupled with traditional educational practices that further exacerbate the already increased likelihood of Black males being placed in special education. I believe my purpose, which is to propel the discourse surrounding Black male overrepresentation in special education, justifies the incorporation of a critical theory framework. Crotty (1998) asserted that, “Critical inquiry illuminates the relationship between power and culture...” (p. 158). Additionally, Crotty suggested that a critical framework is ideal for questioning social constructs that are often left unchallenged. This is precisely my objective: to question a social justice issue that seemingly subjects minority individuals to a commonly accepted, yet detrimental, practice. I certainly believe that many recent state and federal laws, such as IDEA, have rapidly improved the educational experience of many minority students. However, in spite of these advancements, Black males continue to rank among the most overrepresented demographic subgroups in special education. Perhaps this is attributable to the possibility that society has created an environment in which educators have been conditioned to adopt stereotypical racial ideologies, even when many educators possess no intentional racial agenda.

Several factors are in play, which greatly affect the context through which I am approaching my research topic. One such factor is the geographic location in which I live. I have spent the entirety of my life in what is colloquially known as the *Deep South*. Life in the south has stereotypically been characterized by a resistance to change and the continued existence of racial tensions. In fact, the issue of persistent racial tensions in the south is still being addressed by contemporary researchers (e.g., Knuckey, 2017; Rose & Firmin, 2016). Considering the impact that race continues to have on the lives of individuals living in my geographic location, it

would seem reasonable that someone would remain skeptical of a system that continually marginalizes minority students in public schools. Therefore, I certainly take the position that the continued over-utilization of remedial education programs for minority students may not be as innocuous as it may seem. And while I am not suggesting that current educators and decision-makers possess a racially charged agenda, perhaps we are seeing the ripple effect of practices that were once designed to counter mainstream integration. These factors lead me to believe that further discourse is warranted on the topic of Black male overrepresentation in special education.

A second factor that will further contextualize my research objective includes information about my current career. As a tenured special education teacher, I have worked with students with disabilities for nearly 15 years. During this time, I have grown increasingly alarmed at the high number of minority students I have served in special education, particularly Black male students. Although I have spent my entire teaching career working in districts that were predominantly White, every special education caseload I have ever served contained a majority of Black students. Even prior to having studied the research on minority overrepresentation in special education, I was curious as to why the majority of my students were Black or Latinx. I found this phenomenon to be quite interesting, and ultimately decided to investigate the topic in greater depth. As such, I have committed this research to exploring the forces, which directly or indirectly, lead to the overrepresentation of Black males in special education. While many of the risk factors for special education present an undeniable imposition upon minority students, I chose to implement an internal focus on the education system itself. Therefore, a particular emphasis was placed on the role of the teachers in the special education referral and placement process. Specifically, I aimed to gather the thoughts and ideas of experienced special education teachers who have personally experienced the phenomenon of

minority overrepresentation in special education, as they possess a unique and valuable perspective.

A third factor that provides context to my research includes the fact that I am a White father of three multi-racial children. My oldest child, a 10 year old male student, is, in my estimation, an intelligent, thoughtful, polite young boy. He loves to attend school and takes great pleasure in attending extracurricular school events, such as reading carnivals and math nights. Like many young boys his age, he tends to display an increased level of energy at school, becomes easily distracted, and struggles to focus on mundane tasks for extended periods of time. A few of his teachers have been willing to address his high level of energy with me, but are all quick to dismiss his behavior as simply *boys being boys*. While I certainly appreciate their patience with my son, I do occasionally wonder if, by virtue of being the son of a White educator, he receives extra leniency that may not be provided to other minority boys demonstrating similar behaviors. As such, I have taken an increased concern in the well-being of minority students in public education and have a personal connection to the challenges facing minority students.

As an educator, I am uniquely positioned to advocate for my children, making sure that they are being provided the necessary resources and support to be successful in school. I am able to attend parent-teacher conferences, work with my children's teachers to ensure they are maximizing their potential, and proactively address any issues that may surface during their school experience. However, not all students have such an advocate. In fact, based on personal experiences, it is often minority students, who are already at risk of increased academic deficits, that frequently lack the necessary advocacy to change their circumstances. Therefore, I believe



my research provides a unique platform to help advocate for those who may have become marginalized or whose voices have been silenced.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF THE RESEARCH AND RELATED LITERATURE

In the following literature review, I begin with a discussion of Critical Race Theory as that provided the framework through which this topic under study, the overrepresentation of Black males in special education, was explored. From that, a brief exploration of civil rights in education, reviewing a few of the cornerstone cases and legal precedents which have profoundly shaped contemporary education ensues. Following this introduction, I address the issues of minority rights in education, particularly as they pertain to special education. In this section, I review some of the harmful practices that crept into many schools as a means to prevent the full integration of minority students into mainstream education. As I begin to focus my review of literature on minority rights in special education, I review the literature surrounding minority overrepresentation in special education programs, addressing some of the commonly accepted risk factors associated with overrepresentation. Finally, I attempt to locate potential gaps in the literature pertaining to the specific causes of Black male overrepresentation in special education programs, with the intent of being able to determine how teacher interpretations of behavior and ability may contribute to the high number of Black males being referred to, and placed in, special education programs.

#### **Theoretical Framework: Critical Race Theory**

My inquiry into Black male overrepresentation in special education programs will be guided by the theoretical framework known as Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1996). While the underlying beliefs and assumptions of CRT are continuously evolving, many CRT subscribers hold to the most basic beliefs of CRT. While by no means exhaustive, these beliefs and ideas serve as the driving force of CRT.

Delgado and Stefancic (2012) discussed several common characteristics of CRT. The six dominant assumptions, or tenets, of CRT are discussed below.

The first assumption of CRT is that racism is not an aberration; rather, it is a normal occurrence in society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Despite popular sentiment that racism is a cultural anomaly, CRT asserts that racism is a common social occurrence. Arudou (2013), a Japanese-American proponent of CRT, pointed out that, “Racism is seen as necessarily existing to advance and promote, both materially and psychologically, the interests and privileges of members within the dominant power structure” (p. 156). In fact, racism is so prevalent that many of its victims have been conditioned to accept the ill effects of racism without questioning its authority. Kozol (1991) identified such common racism when he stated, “A new generation of black urban school officials has been groomed to settle for a better version of unequal segregated education” (p. 82). While the prevalence of racism has shown minimal evidence of subsiding, the ease with which racism is detected has declined. Delgado and Stefancic stated that the white-over-color ascendancy serves important purposes, making racism hard to identify and address. Such a position allows for only the most obvious forms of racism to be remedied. Thus, CRT activists position CRT as a tool by which racism can be exposed.

A second assumption of CRT is known as interest convergence (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Interest convergence is the proposition that the rights of racial minorities are only addressed when they align with the interests of the controlling powers (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Bell (1992), developer of the interest convergence theory, argued that school desegregation was not a movement designed to address the needs of racial minorities; rather, it was a movement designed to appease the masses, which ultimately served to benefit the needs of the White power holders. Bell suggested that the interests of Blacks and Whites temporarily

coincided, prompting the White-elites to develop a token legal policy designed to perpetuate the feeling of equality among Blacks, while at the same time promoting the White's quest for control. Such legal policy, according to Bell, would never have been developed had it not expressly satisfied the needs of the White power holders.

A third assumption of CRT posits that race is a socially constructed term and holds no biological or genetic validity (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). According to CRT, individual races are stratified and balkanized based upon illegitimate criteria, such as skin color and cultural similarities. Obach (1999) reinforced this belief with his statement that the "...socially constructed nature of racial categories can, in part, be demonstrated by reviewing historical developments in which the commonly used racial categories...have changed over time" (p. 253). The criteria used for such delineation does not correspond to inherent, naturally occurring differences. As such, issues of race are subject to frequent manipulation and, when convenient, eradication.

This understanding of race leads to a fourth assumption of CRT, which holds that society racializes various minority groups differently at varied points in time and based upon varied societal demands (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). For example, Takaki (2008) described how thousands of Japanese citizens were placed in internment camps due to heated national temperament towards Japan during World War II. Zinn (2001) spoke to the biased citizenry tests presented to a large number of legal immigrants during the 1890s. Zinn stated that "For perhaps half a million legal immigrants, passing the tests required for becoming a citizen was quite impossible..." (p. 648). As noted by the examples above, racial views and behaviors tend to be fluid and are commonly altered at the discretion of the dominant group. Until the 1960s, many Black students were forced to attend segregated schools. As court-ordered integration became

forced upon many White-schools, tracking emerged as a preferred method of segregating schools by establishing schools-within-schools. These subversive behaviors support the fourth assumption of CRT by demonstrating how society can manipulate racial stratifications to fit the agenda of the controlling group.

A fifth assumption of CRT is known as intersectionality (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). According to Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall (2013), intersectionality is a term "...to focus attention on the vexed dynamics of difference and the solidarities of sameness in the context of antidiscrimination and social-movement politics" (p. 787). Crenshaw (1989), who is acknowledged as the first scholar to utilize the term *intersectionality*, introduced the phrase as a response to the mass-grouping of individuals into homogenous units, which was a common practice in the 1980s. Crenshaw contested that individuals should not be categorized based solely upon race, as individuals experience race differently. The experiences of a Black single mother will vary greatly from the experiences of a Black married male. Such variances, according to Crenshaw, should be taken into consideration. Intersectionality encourages one to look beyond race or any singular means of classification. Delgado and Stefancic (2012) stated that, "Intersectionality means the examination of race, sex, class, national origin, and sexual orientation, and how their combination plays out in various settings" (p. 57).

A final assumption of CRT is that people of color, whether Black, American Indian, Asian, or Latinx, possess a unique voice that has been shaped by experiences with oppression (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). As such, these individuals possess the ability to communicate matters of which Whites will have limited ability to articulate. Delgado and Stefancic (2012) reinforced this assumption with their statement: "Minority status, in other words, brings with it a presumed competence to speak about race and racism" (p. 10). When analyzing modern

education practices and procedures, one quickly realizes that the minority voice has often been silenced during the conversation surrounding educational reform (Evans & Radina, 2014). As a White male, it is extremely imperative for me to attempt to bracket my own biases and views so as not to silence or muffle the voice of the minority participants in my research. However, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to completely negate the influence of my personal biases on this study. As such, the effectiveness of my research is limited by my personal biases.

Much like any theoretical framework, CRT is not free of detractors. One criticism of CRT is that the framework utilizes generalized statements to explain the challenges faced by many minorities, while failing to provide specific forms of racism or exploring solutions to the challenges. For example, Cabrera (2018) contended that CRT frequently referred to "...systemic racism...as the cause of race-based educational inequality, but offers little in terms of the nature of this oppressive social force within their central tenets" (p. 214). Cabrera's argument is that, while the basic tenets of CRT hold true, the framework does not provide a model of racism and does little to expose how racism operates. Zorn (2018) stated that, "Unlike scientific theories, CRT never construes its claims as testable hypothesis. Instead, it presents them as self-evident axioms that acolytes apply as is" (p. 205). In doing so, Zorn suggested that CRT identifies the causes to many of the challenges facing children of color, but fails to provide a meaningful path to test its own claims.

Another critique of CRT is that the implementation of a CRT framework is inherently biased towards the beliefs and views of those implementing the framework (Litowitz, 1999). Ironically, according to this critique, CRT is undone by its own argument: that people of color possess a unique voice and perspective on race. Litowitz (1999) contended that CRT scholarship is a limited work, framed by the ethnicity and experiences of the one developing it. Litowitz

stated, “I must admit some reservations about the ultimate value of this scholarship” (p. 516). An assertion that CRT scholarship is limited by the personal experiences of the individual involved in the scholarship is of particular interest when you consider that a primary purpose of CRT is to explore and give voice to the experiences of minorities. However, proponents of CRT would likely counter that all scholarship is, in fact, influenced by the personal experiences of those involved. Others might even contend that pure objectivity in science and research is not attainable, and that objectivity should not even be desired. Rather, it is more beneficial to acknowledge one’s subjectivity and to embrace how it influences one’s work. Harding (2015) suggested that the desire for a neutral form of research should take a backseat to research that embraces subjectivity while remaining fair and responsible.

In addition to the critiques stated above, it has also been suggested that CRT focuses too much on a singular Black/White binary, while simultaneously overlooking the nuances of discrimination among members of the same race (Crenshaw, 1989; Trevino, Harris & Wallace, 2008). For example, Trevino, Harris and Wallace (2008) stated that “...CRT does not lend enough credence...to the injustices experienced by multiracial persons and the prejudicial treatment of individuals within a racial or ethnic group based on differences in skin pigmentation” (p. 10). This particular critique suggests that CRT focuses too intently on the marginalization of people of color by the white race, and neglects to acknowledge how members of the same race marginalize and discriminate against, members of their own race. However, this critique is also refuted by many in the CRT community. One need not look any further than Crenshaw’s (1989) theory of intersectionality to disavow the notion that CRT scholarship neglects to account for inner-racial discrimination. Crenshaw stated that individuals face intersections of marginalization and that the experiences of all members of a specific race will

not be the same. Crenshaw's theory is a direct contrast to the assumption that CRT does not account for prejudicial treatments between members of the same race. Furthermore, the very fact that many CRT scholars come from diverse racial backgrounds provides evidence that CRT is not narrowly focused on the Black/White binary, in regard to racism and discrimination.

While aware of the possible limitations associated with CRT, I still elected to utilize this particular lens to frame my inquiry because I believe it is the very subjective nature of CRT, which is critiqued by many, that provided the best vantage point for viewing issues of race. I am deeply interested in exploring a variety of views on sensitive topics, such as minority overrepresentation in special education. As such, the CRT framework profoundly shaped my research, considering that I was seeking to understand the ways in which Black males may have been marginalized by a flawed system of referrals and placements for special education. As a proponent of CRT, my belief is that our society is governed by system of power and control that seeks to maintain a White ideology, and subsequently, the voices of those who may oppose this ideology tend to be silenced or ignored. This general absence of dissenting perspectives serves as a primary motivation for my research, and is largely responsible for my decision to utilize special education teachers in the interview process, as their voices have largely been omitted from the conversations surrounding minority overrepresentation in special education.

Additionally, I believe the cultural and racial differences that exist between the dominant educational voice and that of Black males influence the high representation of Black males in special education programs. However, I diverge slightly from the staunchest of CRT perspectives in that I do believe our society has progressed toward a slightly better version of itself, and that racism can, in fact, be eliminated at some future point in civilization. Also, I am less likely to suggest that all institutions and power holders possess a subordination agenda. Rather, I believe



they were originally designed to subordinate and that, perhaps, the long lasting effects of these power structures continue to influence the thought patterns and behaviors of current society. It seems as if the racial agenda of previous generations continues to resonate with, and influence the thinking of, individuals who might otherwise be less apt to hold so soundly to a racial doctrine. Perhaps it is this same generational indoctrination that leans so heavily upon the implicit biases so many people currently possess. Throughout my research, the CRT theoretical framework provided the lens through which I attempted to review many of the commonly accepted practices being utilized in today's educational system. Additionally, the analysis and evaluation of my data was conducted through a CRT lens.

### **Special Education**

During the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, the topic of segregation and racial inequality in public schools became a highly contested issue. Despite court orders to desegregate schools, a vast number of minority students, including many Blacks, found themselves being served in substandard educational facilities (Ansalone, 2010). In extreme circumstances, some schools and districts would ignore the federal laws entirely, refusing to allow Black students to attend White schools. Often, even when schools would comply with the order to integrate, many minority students were grouped in homogenous pods as a form of tacit segregation (Tomek, 2014). The subversive practice of establishing groups-within-schools laid the foundation for what is currently known as *tracking*. Tracking is defined as the process of placing students in pre-determined groups based on qualifying factors, such as ability level and demographics (Van Houtte & Stevens, 2015). Tracking effectively became a legal loophole that allowed schools and districts to prevent White and Black students from being served together.

While some intervention and/or acceleration programs that involve the process of educational tracking have been linked with positive student outcomes (Aljughaiman & Ayoub, 2013), such as gifted programs and interest-based learning classes, the danger lies in the overutilization of these specialized programs, and in the pre-determination of student involvement in such programs. Spruyt, Van Droogenbroeck, and Kavadias (2015) addressed the detriments of educational tracking when they stated, "...the perception that other people look down on one because of the studies one follows will evoke a feeling of vulnerability..." (p.751). Educational tracking, while commonly used, was never supported by research-based studies to prove its effectiveness. Ansalone (2010) noted that there is little evidence that supports the overall positive impacts of tracking. In addition, he identified that "...lower tracks contain a disproportionate number of Blacks and Hispanics and that tracking facilitates the separation of social classes..." (p. 6).

A common side effect associated with the process of tracking is a phenomenon known as *overrepresentation*. As noted earlier, overrepresentation, as defined by Wiley, Brigham, Kauffman, and Bogan (2013), occurs when "...a group's representation...is different from that group's proportion to the overall population, and/or that a group's proportion...is different from that of a comparison group" (p. 30). Educational tracking has a long history of creating disproportionate subgroups in nearly all levels of academic performance, with a pronounced impact on remedial programs. As such, the inherent risks of tracking become clearly visible. However, despite the widespread acceptance of the limitations of tracking, tracking continues to be a commonly utilized approach to education (Ludemann & Schwerdt, 2013). A cynical view of tracking might contend that it is because of the subversive side effects of tracking, such as overrepresentation, it remains such a common practice (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 2001).

### **Overrepresentation in Special Education**

The issue of overrepresentation in educational programs proves most problematic when it involves minority students and remedial educational programs (Ford, 2012). Few would likely be concerned if minorities were being disproportionately represented in advanced courses or cohorts. When addressing the issue of minority representation in special education programs, Ford stated, “More than any other topic or issue, the high and many times inequitable presence of [minority] students...is the albatross in the field” (p. 398). An exploration of the professional literature surrounding minority overrepresentation in special education reveals that the issue has been discussed for several decades. Researchers began to address the topic of minority overrepresentation in special education classes as early as the 1960s.

Dunn (1968), considered by many to be one of the first researchers to address the controversial issue of minority overrepresentation in special education classes, argued that inappropriate testing and identification processes were being used to misidentify many minority and underprivileged children as mentally retarded. Dunn’s position that minority and underprivileged students may not be as inherently inclined to underperform White students as initially thought was not a popular position. Dunn’s work received a tepid reception from many educators and policy makers, considering his suggestion that special education referral and placement practices may, in fact, be biased against minority students. A few years after Dunn published his report, the federal government passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975. The Education for All Handicapped Children Act was designed to support local school systems in meeting the unique needs of students with disabilities and defined the parameters in which public schools must operate when dealing with students with disabilities. While the new federal law was not in direct response to Dunn’s work, collectively Dunn and the

new law did serve to propel the discourse pertaining to minority rights in special education. As such, the topic of minority overrepresentation in special education classes began to gain national attention in academic literature (Artiles & Trent, 1994; MacMillan & Reschly, 1998).

As a ripple effect to the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, national and federal courts began to grapple with the issue of minority overrepresentation in special education classes. However, according to Arnold and Lassmann (2003), the courts had minimal impact on the issue of minority overrepresentation. Instead, local schools and districts were allowed to deal with the issue of minority overrepresentation in special education in whatever way they deemed appropriate. Much like the obstinate approach many schools took when instructed to integrate, few schools and districts were eager to investigate overrepresentation, especially considering that it was this same overrepresentation that maintained one of the last lines of defense against full integration. As such, minimal efforts were made to resolve the issue of minority overrepresentation in special education programs, as a unified, national movement was never established, and tracking remained front and center as a commonly accepted practice (Arnold & Lassmann).

During the 1970s and 1980s, the movement to address the misuse and often overuse of placement in special education classes began to gain traction. Special education reform continued to improve the quality of education received by many students with disabilities in the US. Spaulding and Pratt (2015) noted that during this time period disability became an issue of civil rights, as opposed to "...charitable, medical, or social issues" (p. 102). Despite the political momentum towards special education reform, new issues began to arise as students with disabilities were integrated into public schools. Dudley-Marling and Burns (2014) noted that, in the decades following the Civil Rights Movements, many students with disabilities were placed

in public schools, but remained segregated in special education classes. Many schools were underprepared to address the needs of students with disabilities, and it seemed reasonable that a proper approach to serving these students would be to group them together in effort to provide them a modified education. While seemingly a good-hearted approach to serving students with disabilities, we now know that grouping students with varying degrees of disabilities was an ill-fated effort.

This model of education seems particularly futile when you consider the fact that many minority students, particularly Black students, were being misdiagnosed as students with a disability, or, in the most nefarious situations, were being intentionally labeled as such as a means to maintain segregation (Artiles & Trent, 1994). According to the existing body of literature, it appears that no cultural group has been more victimized by overrepresentation in special education programs than Blacks (requires multiple citations). The federal government even took note of the issue of Black overrepresentation in remedial programs over 25 years ago. In a report by the U.S. Department of Education (1992), the DOE acknowledged the excessive number of Black students in special education programs when it stated, “Black youth are more highly represented in every disability category” (p. 15). This acknowledgement by the federal government, coupled with the efforts of many early researchers, was enough to propel the discourse surrounding this disturbing trend. After the report was released by the DOE, the phenomenon of Black overrepresentation in special education became a major talking point in contemporary literature. Mills (2003) stated that “...the subject of overrepresentation among African Americans in special education classrooms across the nation...received a respectable level of attention in both theoretical and research literature” (p. 72). This momentum birthed a

larger movement which sought to continually explore the challenges faced by many minority students in public education.

### **Overrepresentation Statistics**

Despite the U.S. Department of Education's (1992) admission that Blacks are overrepresented in special education programs and the increased prevalence of the issue in academic literature, Blacks continue to be the most overrepresented group in special education programs over a quarter century later. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2019), approximately 16% of all Black students received some form of special education services during the 2017-2018 school year. By comparison, only 14% of White students received similar services. Of all minority subgroups in the nation, Black males face the highest risk of overrepresentation in special education programs. Booker and Mitchell (2011) once determined that Black males were 2.39 times more likely to be placed in alternative education settings than White males. Ford (2012) noted that Black males, which comprised only 7% of the national population, accounted for over 19% of all students receiving services for *mental retardation*. Similarly, the most recent statistical estimates from Ed.gov (2019) stated that Black males comprise 7.9% of the total national student population but make up 12.4% of the national special education population. These data provide a clearer image of the challenges faced by many Black males in public schools.

In addition to these statistical data, Watkins and Kurtz (2001) stated that, "Young African American males have been disproportionally identified as appropriate for referral for resources in special education classes..." (p. 224). Sullivan and Bal (2013) echoed this assertion in their analysis of 17,837 urban school children and determined that Black males faced the highest risk of being referred to and placed in special education programs. More recently, Woodson and

Harris (2018) challenged the prevalence of Black males being placed in special education, calling it a "...social problem that must be addressed" (p. 40). When considering statistical data and social science scholarship collectively, a disturbing trend of overrepresentation emerges. This trend continues to impose itself upon the educational experiences of many Black males.

### **Risks Associated with Overrepresentation**

While the existing body of academic literature would suggest that reform is needed regarding the referral and placement practices for special education services, most efforts have been focused on discussing the issue and identifying risk factors. For example, Kearns, Ford, and Linney (2005) called for additional research and reform on special education referral and placement practices when they stated, "Given the exceptionally high percentage of African American students receiving these [special education] services, the effectiveness of the special education system and remedial approaches for Black students should be thoroughly researched" (p. 297). This call for additional inquiry was echoed by Spaulding and Pratt (2015) when they stated "...it is imperative to have an increased...awareness of the significant yet often devastating history of the field" (p. 105).

Despite the growing awareness of minority overrepresentation in special education, minority students, particularly Black males, continue to be disproportionately imposed upon by a system of referrals and placements for many remedial programs. The irony here is that many of the programs that house an overrepresented number of Black males were initially developed and refined in response to the progress made during the Civil Rights Movement, such as special education. In other words, some of the programs that were intended to protect the rights of minority individuals may, in fact, be violating their rights. For example, a dated report by the National Education Association (2011) determined that Black males made up "...20 percent of all students in the United States classified as mentally retarded, although they are only nine

percent of the population” (p. 1). Additionally, the report noted that Black males, along with Hispanic males, made up “. . .80 percent of youth in special education programs” (p. 1). Similar disproportionality existed in the Ed.gov (2019) report on minority allocations in education.

These data prove especially problematic when viewed through the CRT theoretical framework, as the framework would not simply accept these statistical discrepancies as *natural*. Rather, the CRT theoretical framework would obligate one to consider how the system directly, or indirectly, perpetuates these data, and to at least consider if these data are the results of systemic discrimination, whether intentional or unintentional. Regardless of one’s theoretical orientation, these data are, at the very least, quite disturbing. The following literature serves to illuminate some of the more common factors that contribute to the overrepresentation of Black males in special education. Those factors have been identified as poverty, school discipline, institutional bias, cultural bias, and perceptual reality.

### **The Role of Poverty in Overrepresentation**

When reviewing studies that have focused on the issue of minority overrepresentation in special education, it becomes apparent that the majority of the studies have focused on the risk factors that receive recognition as possible causes of minority overrepresentation in special education. The most common explanations for minority overrepresentation in special education are derived from research that links student academic performance to external risk factors, such as socioeconomic status, family composition, and discipline referrals. Many argue that socioeconomic status is the best predictor of poor academic performance, and that poverty is a likely source for minority overrepresentation in special education programs. For example, Zosky, Avant, and Thompson (2014) noted the ill-effects of poverty when they suggested that, “Children who come to school with challenges to their basic needs, such as inadequate nutrition,



health care, and housing, are less able to learn” (p. 78). Malecki and Demaray (2006) pointed out that “...there is evidence that poverty status is a strong predictor of lower academic performance among children and adolescents...” (p. 375). Similarly, Hill (2017) stated, “Poverty is associated with a range of conditions that affect children...students born into poverty do not have access to resources that can support their academic success” (p. 209). As such, the undeniable relationship between poverty and academic struggles becomes more easily identified.

The impacts of poverty are not just limited to generalized academic struggles and achievement deficits; poverty is readily associated with placement in special education programs. Mills (2003) spoke to the link between socioeconomic status and special education placement when she stated, “...the link between poverty and student outcomes has gained general acceptance among educators and policy makers. Given this relationship, the expectation is that placements in special education will be greatest where the percent of children in poverty households is greatest” (p. 75). As such, many of the factors that lead to minority overrepresentation in special education exist outside of the school setting, considering poverty is an external factor. Shifrer (2018) highlighted the influence of external factors on education by suggesting overrepresentation in special education may be most effectively combated by focusing on inequalities outside of school.

These studies clearly position poverty as an inextricable factor associated with the likelihood of being placed in special education. However, it still remains unclear as to how to effectively reduce poverty. Therefore, students born into poverty continue to suffer, and often continue to live a life stricken by the ill effects of poverty. To further complicate matters, the shadow cast by poverty is not limited to just the lives of the children living in poverty; in many cases, the schools attended by children living in poverty are only able to offer substandard

academic resources. Liasidou (2012) acknowledged this issue when she stated, "...studies document the interaction between ethnicity and poverty and attribute the creation of special educational needs to factors related to non-existent learning opportunities in high-poverty schools..." (p. 173). More recently, Hill (2017) pointed out that, "Schools in districts where there is high concentration of poverty face a separate set of challenges...these schools are more likely to be underfunded" (p. 210). Considering that a major source of educational funding is derived from local tax dollars, high-poverty areas will contribute less money to fund local education, further undermining the educational experiences of many minority students. An obvious side-effect of a school having limited financial resources is an inability to hire and retain experienced teachers, who often require higher salaries and compensation packages. Funding for technology and other tools which may assist struggling learners is also limited. As such, many minority children are raised in homes with limited financial resources and are required to attend schools burdened with the same scarcity of funds.

Even if one were to accept the premise that poverty, itself, is the best predictor of academic deficiencies and, subsequently, placement in special education, one must still consider why poverty imposes itself so forcibly upon the educational experiences of Black males. On the surface, it would seem as if poverty would be an equal-opportunity imposition, and that children from all ethnic backgrounds would be affected to similar extents. However, a deeper look into poverty reveals that minorities are often the most commonly affected demographic. It has long been known that individuals living in non-traditional families are most commonly affected by poverty. Nearly three decades ago, Biblarz and Raftery (1999) presented the argument that "...children from alternative families get fewer economic, social, and cultural resources, which help facilitate [educational] success" (p. 323). Their use of the term *alternative families* refers to

any family structure that does not include the traditional dual-parent/single home dynamic. This is particularly problematic when considering that Salem, Zimmerman, and Notaro (1998) had previously noted how “African American family life has long been characterized by a diversity of family structures” (p. 331). When viewed in conjunction, these studies directly connect how the non-traditional family structures, which define many Black families, may present Black school-aged boys with an increased exposure to poverty.

Additionally, a contemporary study by Hero and Levy (2016) aimed to explore modern-day income inequality correlates that exist on the income-inequality spectrum, looking for indicators to possibly explain how poverty chooses its victims. They determined that racial stratification is, perhaps, the strongest correlate of income inequality, noting that “...race inequalities have not only held firm but risen considerably as a share of total income inequality nationally...” (p. 502). These studies suggest that poverty is not a random phenomenon, indiscriminately choosing its victims. Rather, poverty is a form of bondage that is inherently drawn towards specific demographic subgroups. Akee, Jones, and Porter (2019) further demonstrated how poverty is more prevalent among minority and Black families by providing statistical evidence to support the income-inequality which exists in modern society. According to their findings, Black individuals continually ranked lower in total income when compared to White individuals, and that Black families “...have incomes that are between 50% and 80% of the corresponding white income level...” (p. 1002).

Knowing that Black individuals are at heightened risk for poverty and income inequality, and knowing that poverty is directly related to poor academic performance, then it would seem reasonable that more Black males would be served in remedial education programs, such as

special education, than other demographics. However, not everyone is willing to accept that poverty presents a direct pathway to academic deficits or special education.

As is the case with many controversial social issues, much disagreement exists in regard to the underlying causes. In contrast to those who primarily attribute poverty to the high percentage of Black males in special education, a different group of researchers have committed their efforts to disputing the notion that poverty is totally to blame for minority overrepresentation in special education programs. Oswald, Coutinho, and Best (2002), some of the first researchers to challenge the poverty-to-special education continuum, concluded that poverty is not always an accurate predictor of an increased risk of special education placement. In this study, the researchers determined that, in many cases, as poverty increased, predicted outcomes for Black male identification and placement in special education programs actually decreased. Similarly, Roy and Raver (2014) noted that not all risk factors influence academic performance to the same degree. While Roy and Raver did identify a correlation between poverty and poor academic performance, they also stated that certain risk factors, such as poverty and single-parent families “...appear to be less clearly associated with negative child outcomes for Black and Latino children, when compared to their White counterparts” (p. 392). In addition to these two studies, Pratt, McClelland, Swanson, and Lipscomb (2016) determined that coming from a low-resourced family was less likely to lead to decreased school readiness when compared to multiple risk factors existing simultaneously, such as poverty and parental harshness. This study takes the position that poverty is more likely to lead to academic deficiencies when it is partnered with other external factors, such as parenting practices, and that poverty alone may not be the primary culprit.

The significance of these studies is that they provide an alternative perspective to the detriments of poverty, rather than identifying poverty as a guarantee for academic deficiencies. At the very least, the studies referenced above lend credibility to the position that minority overrepresentation in special education and other remedial programs is not always a direct result of common risk factors, such as poverty, further validating the position that poverty is not always the lone culprit responsible for Black male overrepresentation in special education, Yamasaki and Luk (2018) noted that when controlling for factors such as socioeconomic status, minority individuals are still disproportionately overrepresented in special education programs. This study strengthens the position that poverty is not always a guarantee for academic struggles and that, even when accounting for the influence of poverty, minority students are still at the greatest risk of being placed in special education programs. As such, it becomes necessary to further investigate other factors which may be leading to minority overrepresentation in special education.

### **The Role of School Discipline in Overrepresentation**

In addition to poverty, which has been linked to the disproportional number of Black males being placed in special education, disciplinary practices have also been identified as a possible cause of overrepresentation in remedial programs. A natural hypothesis would be to conclude that students who are exposed to exclusionary discipline practices, such as suspension and expulsion, would struggle academically, as time out of the classroom would certainly impact academic performance. Perry and Morris (2014) affirmed this theory with their data that suggested higher levels of school exclusionary discipline practices lead to higher levels of academic struggles. Additionally, Connor (2017) identified how, “The number of behavior referrals is correlated to the likelihood of an ultimate referral to special education” (p. 230).

At first glance, the correlation between discipline and Black overrepresentation in special education may not be obvious, as it would be easy to deduce that all students who are removed from class for discipline reasons are likely to struggle and fall behind their peers. Assuming that exclusionary discipline practices were administered in an equitable fashion, it would be difficult to implicate these practices as a possible culprit for minority overrepresentation in special education. However, after delving deeper into exclusionary discipline practices, it becomes apparent that Black students, particularly Black males, are the most common recipients of exclusionary discipline (Connor, 2017).

Over 15 years ago, West-Olatunji, Baker, and Brooks (2006) identified the disparity in school discipline practices when they stated, "...African American males are at highest risk for...exclusionary disciplinary practices" (p. 3). A study by Anderson and Ritter (2017) provided current statistical data describing how Black students, who represented only 15% of the student population, accounted for 44% of students suspended more than once and 36% of students who were expelled. More recently, Bal, Betters-Bubon, and Fish (2019) noted that, in observed instances, Black students were seven times more likely to receive exclusionary discipline than White students. Rynders (2019) took the argument a step further, by suggesting that minority students not only receive more exclusionary discipline consequences, but often receive them for "...discretionary, subjective offenses, rather than mandatory, objective offenses" (p. 465).

In other words, removal from the educational setting is all too often the consequence of choice for many administrators when it comes to addressing behaviors demonstrated by Black students, when less severe consequences may have been appropriate. When considering that Black males are the most common recipients of exclusionary discipline, it should come as no surprise that the academic performance of many Black males, which is often already

compromised by the ill effects of poverty, is further eroded by disproportionate disciplinary practices. This becomes a two-edged sword of sorts, as many Black students live in poverty, with limited access to their basic needs, while simultaneously attending schools in which they are likely to be over-punished by under-experienced teachers. With Black males being most susceptible to disciplinary referrals, an increased representation of Black males in special education programs is seemingly a logical byproduct, and the labeling of discipline as a risk factor for special education placements seems well deserved.

### **Institutional Bias in Overrepresentation**

While there is a vast body of research which addresses the possible external causes of minority overrepresentation in special education, a different group of scholars have chosen to consider the possibility that the educational system itself maybe a cause of minority overrepresentation in special education. While not all of these scholars necessarily subscribe to CRT, a willingness to look internally at how a system may be designed to perpetuate the subjugation of specific groups is, at its core, aligned with a CRT view. Scholars who choose to look internally for possible causes of overrepresentation would argue that a candid review of special education referral and placement practices may yield additional clues as to why so many Black males are being placed in special education programs. Connor (2017), one such scholar, stated that "...as overrepresentations shows, institutional racism still exists and is created and maintained by people from within..." (p. 230).

While this approach to examining minority overrepresentation in special education has grown in popularity during recent years, it is, by no means, a new concept. In fact, scholars have been critiquing many of these practices for quite some time. Twenty years ago, Watkins and Kurtz (2001) provided a critique of special education referral and placement practices when they

pointed out that, “Biased referral and assessment procedures of ethnic minority students has been reported...Unfortunately, the chances of being placed in special education increases substantially once the referral process is initiated...” (p. 224). A few years later, additional researchers began to challenge the educational practices used to determine special education ability, suggesting Black males were possibly being victimized by a flawed system. For example, Jordan (2005) stated “The acceptance of disproportionate numbers of Black youth who are identified within these categories of disability suggests a widespread perception that such categories are accurate, objective reflections or interpretations of the differences that these students exhibit within schools” (p. 130). Kearns, Ford, and Linney (2005) provided a similar, scathing review of educational practices when they argued, “The effectiveness of the special education system, especially the assessment and treatment approaches used by educational professionals, are areas in need of further research...” (p. 297).

Flash forward to contemporary scholarship and it becomes evident that Black males are still exposed to a potentially biased system of referrals and placements. Clark (2018) provided a damning assessment of contemporary educational practices when she noted that the Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights “...uncovered instances in which similarly situated students of different races are treated differently in the referral process” (p. 405). According to her claim, strong evidence exists which would suggest that being Black may, in fact, influence the results of a referral for special education. Rynders (2019) echoed these concerns when he stated that “Black students are more likely to be misdiagnosed than White students” (p. 465). The disturbing takeaway from these data is that an obvious internal problem exists in the modern education system that unfairly exposes Black males to a flawed system of racial hierarchy. While



these statistics paint a gloomy landscape for many Black students, they do not address the issue of why these biased actions are continuing to occur.

### **Cultural Bias in Overrepresentation**

Another proposed cause of minority overrepresentation in special education that has gained widespread attention focuses on the inevitable difficulties that arise when minority students, particularly Black males, are exposed to a historically White-dominant education system. These studies most closely align with the CRT theoretical framework when viewing the issue of minority overrepresentation in special education. This field of research concludes that Black male overrepresentation in special education is attributable to cultural barriers which perpetuate the existence of biased referral and placement practices. Much like the other risk factors addressed in this literature review, cultural barriers in education have been explored for many years. For example, Cartledge (1999) stated “Although professionals consistently call for more research to identify specific causes and appropriate policies to remedy overrepresentations of African-American males in [special education]...such efforts may remain futile due to the inherent difficulties in defining race or ethnicity and disability” (p. 76). The issue of defining race and ethnicity is one of the major assumptions set forth in the CRT framework (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012), and is of extreme importance when attempting to discuss the cultural differences that exist in many classrooms.

The challenges that arise when members of diverse races, cultures, and ethnic groups are mixed together should come as no surprise. Difficulties in adapting to the dominant cultural expectations would be a logical byproduct experienced by minority groups who do not share the same views and perspectives as the majority group. Irving and Hudley (2008) addressed this issue when they stated, “It is clear that cultural mistrust maintains the most powerful relationship

with academic achievement for...African American males” (p. 692). Toldson (2011) further elaborated on this topic by stating that, “Many Black boys who end up in special education do not have a disability. Rather, they have circumstances that spur behavior patterns that are not compatible with the school environment” (p. 441). According to this field of research, Black males are overrepresented in special education programs due, in large part, to their inability or unwillingness to assimilate to a White system of power and control. Rather than considering specific risk factors, such as socioeconomic status, family composition, and behavior, as the source of minority overrepresentation in special education, this field of research contends that minorities are victimized by discriminatory processes that are unable to account for cultural differences. Even in culturally responsive schools it still becomes difficult to account for the diverse perspectives of the different cultural groups represented within the school.

Although there are studies that considered specific educational practices as a potential source of discrimination, I take the position that a further investigation is still required. As stated earlier, it is imperative that more research be committed to determining why the phenomenon of overrepresentation is allowed to continue, even in the presence of research which quantifies the damaging consequences. Perhaps, the issue is so nuanced the educators do not even realize they are witnessing or perpetuating discriminatory practices. Strassfield (2017) chose to grapple with this particular idea by critiquing many inquiries into minority overrepresentation in special education. According to her work, “A criticism of studies in this area is that some...have not adequately addressed...racial bias...” (p. 1124). Racial bias provides a treacherous terrain upon which individuals from all racial/cultural groups must traverse while interacting with diverse populations.

Let us consider, for example, the referral process for special education. As noted above, the referral-to-placement pipeline for special education is not easily deterred (Watkins & Kurtz, 2001). A referral for special education services increases the likelihood that a student will be placed in a special education program. Harry and Klinger (2006) observed that nearly 90% of all special education referrals lead to eligibilities for special education services. While dated, these data suggested that being placed in special education is almost a certainty once a referral has been initiated. This is particularly alarming when you consider that most referrals are initiated by subjective classroom observations conducted by teachers, who, for the most part, are culturally dissimilar to Black males.

Rogers (2003), who once explored potential flaws in the special education referral process, noted that for many students and parents, the referral process is viewed as an exploratory procedure; one simply intended to gather additional information. However, Rogers stated that teachers were much more "...definitive in their approach to special education..." (p. 154). Even though Rogers' work is nearly 20 years old, it still provides a necessary framework to understanding why so many referrals end in placement. Rogers' study suggested that once the decision to refer a student for special education services has been made, most individuals involved had already arrived at the determination that the child *requires* special education services. For a school psychologist or other evaluator to provide an opposing view on eligibility, it would be equivalent to telling those who initiated the referral *you were wrong*. While declining to place a child in special education, when the data do not support a placement, is exactly what should happen, refuting special education eligibility is not always a common practice.

For example, Sullivan, Sadeh, and Hourii (2019) determined that many eligibility decisions for special education were unsupported by state required data, and that in extreme

cases, some eligibility decisions were made in direct contradiction to the psychological evaluation data. Shifrer (2018) presented a heightened skepticism of flawed referral processes by stating "...referral and diagnosis decisions may depend on educators' perceptions of normative achievement and learning style, with educators' perceptions a function of the average qualities of students in the school" (p. 387). Why a group of trained professionals would place a student in special education, even in the absence of supporting data, remains unknown. This is one area where additional research needs to be conducted. If we accept the notion that a referral for special education frequently leads to placement in special education (e.g., Harry & Klinger, 2006; Watkins & Kurtz, 2001), and we acknowledge that Black males are the most overrepresented group in special education programs (Sullivan & Bal, 2013), then it becomes necessary to critique the referral process in attempts to understand the ways in which this process might be flawed.

I find it disconcerting that, in observed instances, up to 85% of referrals for gifted and accelerated programs are reserved for White students (Pendarvis & Wood, 2009), while Black males are nearly three times more likely to be referred for, and subsequently placed in, special education programs (Sullivan & Bal, 2013). In fact, other researchers have already examined this disparity due to similar concerns. Allen (2017) conducted an investigation to determine the role that teacher perceptions play in the underrepresentation of minority referrals for gifted programs. Allen stated that cultural diversity "...is a very real phenomenon that often negatively impacts teachers' attitudes and perceptions toward [minority] learners" (p. 82). While acknowledging Allen's position that teachers' perceptions of ability tend to be negatively influenced by cultural *different-ness*, it is easy to understand why many Black males are perceived to be in need of remedial services, even in the absence of a disability (Toldson, 2011). The statistical disparity

between student and teacher demographics in the US is overwhelming. According to U.S. Department of Education (2016), students of color "...are expected to make up 56 percent of the student population..." while surveys showed that "...82 percent of public school teachers identified as white" (p. 1). Additionally, Rynders (2019) provided statistics noting that "...only 6.7% of public school teachers were Black...where 16% of students are Black..." (p. 467).

### **Implicit Bias in Special Education Referral**

A major concern regarding the referral process for special education is the implicit bias that exists throughout the process of referral to special education. Implicit bias, according to Rudman (2004), is the non-conscious, unintentional prejudices that exist in each person, particularly as they relate to race and social issues. Rynder (2019) defined implicit bias as "...stereotypes that can impact our actions without our conscious recognition" (p. 462). By definition, implicit bias exists in each of us; it is assumed impossible for individuals to eliminate implicit bias from their daily lives, as implicit bias is seen as inherently existing. Hawn and Gawronski (2019) stated that, "Implicit biases are often presented as attitudes people are unable or unwilling to report..." (p. 791). Implicit bias imposes itself upon how one views society, interprets right from wrong, and even affects how individuals interact with each other. It should come as no surprise that implicit bias even contributes to how educators interpret and deal with student behavior.

Bryan, Day-Vines, Griffin, and Moore-Thomas (2012) observed that, "African American males were 30% more likely to be referred and... to be suspended or expelled for misbehavior than were their Caucasian counterparts" (p. 178). Westerberg (2016) went as far as to associate implicit bias as a cause for the over utilization of punitive actions towards Black male students in early elementary programs. According to Westerberg, "The strikingly high rates of expulsion

from child care...for black males may in part be an effect of implicit bias” (p. 4). Westerberg’s assertion that Black males may be victimized by the implicit bias of teachers is seemingly supported by the statistics showing that the majority of public school teachers are, in fact, White.

Reinforcing Westerberg’s position, Clark (2018) noted that educators who were “...assigned to a Black priming condition were significantly more likely to endorse punitive disciplinary responses and referral for special education...” (p. 136). It is terrifyingly alarming that educators would call for stricter punishment when they perceived that the individuals responsible for the inappropriate behaviors were students of color. When considering that social norms call for Black males to be punished more severely than non-Black males (Anderson & Ritter, 2017), perhaps such nefarious actions by trained professionals do not appear so egregious. Rynders (2019) provided a nice summation of the effects of bias on special education when he argued, “Implicit bias towards students of color...can cause there to be implicit bias in the special education referral process” (p. 466). Rynders went on to note that many referrals for special education “...may be subject to implicit bias that these educators have against students of color...” (p. 467).

As previously noted, most referrals for special education lead to placement in special education. When coupling this fact with Rynders’ (2019) allegation that implicit bias greatly influences the special education referral process, it becomes disturbingly clear how a potentially flawed referral system may be leading to the overrepresentation of Black males in special education. This is the exact point at which the existing body of literature in the field and my personal research objectives coincide. This is also why I believe it is so imperative to interview special education teachers who have experienced the phenomenon of minority overrepresentation firsthand in order to frame this issue through a new, unique perspective. Special education

teachers are, in my opinion, likely to possess one of the most well-informed perspectives on minority overrepresentation, considering they work directly with students who have been diagnosed with a learning disability. Additionally, special education teachers are perhaps the most capable individuals at identifying situations in which a student was placed in special education in the absence of a learning disability, considering they are directly involved in the student's educational process. As such, special education teachers served as the primary source of data in my research.

To help frame my exact position, let me re-summarize what the existing body of literature pertaining to minority overrepresentation in special education sets forth. First, there is existing evidence which supports the notion that implicit bias manifests itself upon the ways in which teachers perceive behavior and ability (e.g., Pas & Bradshaw, 2013; Ross, 2014; Rudman, 2004; Westerberg, 2016). Second, teacher interpretations of behavior and ability directly influence the likelihood that a teacher will refer a child for special education services (e.g., Dunn, Cole, & Estrada, 2009; Oswald, Coutinho, Best, & Singh, 1999; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 2001). Third, the likelihood of a child being placed in a special education program becomes highly likely once a referral for special education services has been initiated (Watkins & Kurtz, 2001). Fourth, Black males are the most highly overrepresented subgroup in special education programs (e.g., Booker & Mitchell, 2011; Kearns, Ford, & Linney, 2005; Sullivan & Bal, 2013). Fifth, Black males are served by a national teacher population that is 82% White (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). When considering these five factors collectively, one begins to gain perspective as to why such a large number of Black males are being referred to, and subsequently, placed in, special education programs.

My position is that additional research needs to be conducted in order to determine how cultural perceptions may be influencing this phenomenon. As previously stated, I believe special education teachers, particularly any who identify as a minority group, are uniquely positioned to speak on this phenomenon. Considering that many special education teachers are heavily involved in the referral and placement process for many Black males, they would seemingly be capable of providing an authentic assessment of instances in which a child's only disability was not being fully adjusted to dominant cultural expectations. I believe that an inquiry into the diverse cultural perceptions that exist between Black males and many of their teachers will propel the field of research forward. Until we are able to explore the ways in which personal interpretations of behavior and ability may lead to a referral for special education services, it will be difficult to discuss ways to prevent personal perceptions from influencing the process. An informed understanding and interpretation of student behavior and ability should always be welcomed.

### **Perceptual Reality**

Evidence exists that supports the assertion that geographic and demographic factors actually influence how behaviors and abilities are perceived by educators, and, consequentially, the level of response certain behaviors receive. For example, Edwards (2017) indicated how the probability of being removed from the typical educational setting increased when disruptive behaviors were perceived to be present. However, Edwards also discussed how difficult it can be to accurately interpret behaviors. Edwards stated that there exists a "...distinct variation in how two people in the same room, who had worked together for one year or longer, could agree on focusing on the same child's behavior, and yet not articulate the same concerns" (p. 228). This study suggested that perceptions of behavior, which frequently drive academic placement



decisions, are often experienced differently by educators, even when these educators are observing the behavior concurrently. Perhaps more alarming than the variance that exists in individual perceptions of similar behaviors are the factors that potentially impose themselves upon one's interpretation of the behaviors.

For example, Hanson (2016) suggested that attractiveness "...triggers a positive response in teachers that leads them to evaluate the ability and behavior of some students more favorably than others" (p. 377). Hanson's assertion, at the very least, presents the possibility that teachers may, in fact, be predisposed to perceive individual behaviors differently based solely on their definition of attractiveness. Hanson's hypothesis may also offer an explanation as to why Weyhmyer and Schwartz (2001) determined that Black males were more likely to be punished for perceived *delinquent* behaviors when the males attended school in largely White communities. Inversely, in populations that were at least 30% non-White, Black males were much less likely to receive punitive action for the same behaviors. Perhaps it is possible that when students attend schools in regions where their ethnicity is different from the majority ethnicity, teacher perceptions of attractiveness may be a cause of misinterpretation of behavior. This should raise particular concern when considering that over 80% of the teacher workforce is White (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Therefore, we must consider how teacher perceptions of acceptable and unacceptable behavior may be manifesting themselves upon the lives of Black male students.

Despite the best efforts of many professionals and an awareness of the obstacles that face many Black males, these students continue to receive a disproportionate percentage of discipline referrals, are frequently removed from the education setting due to behavior, are overrepresented in percentages of special education referrals, and are continually over-served in special education

programs. The intent of my research was not to offer a solution to the cultural barriers which lead to Black male overrepresentation in special education, nor was it to eliminate the inherent biases which exist in us all. Rather, my intentions were to progress the dialogue surrounding Black male overrepresentation in special education in an attempt to increase awareness of the potentially harmful effects associated with this phenomenon.

### **Chapter Summary**

The study of Black male overrepresentation in special education is explored through the lens of Critical Race Theory, a philosophical framework that allows for the examination of social structures and ideological beliefs that may directly or indirectly influence the disproportionality that affects a segment of society. As the literature has indicated, many Black males are victims to overrepresentation in special education largely due to their being on the receiving end of disproportionate numbers of discipline referrals, inconsistent usage of exclusionary discipline, and higher-than-normal referrals for special education. In addition, considering that a predominantly White teacher workforce is teaching a student population comprised mostly of students of color, one would expect that cultural differences will continue to affect teacher perceptions of behavior, intelligence, ability and disability that also contribute to overrepresentation. It is the intent of this researcher to gather perceptions of special education teachers as to why this phenomenon exists.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

As stated earlier, the goal of my research was to propel the conversation surrounding Black male overrepresentation in special education programs, and to address the potentially harmful effects of overrepresentation. If we accept the idea that the measurable risk factors addressed in the literature review are the predominant cause of Black male overrepresentation in special education, then, theoretically speaking, any considerable amelioration of these risk factors would subsequently lead to an equitable change in the degree to which this phenomenon is manifested. However, the statistical data available on Black overrepresentation in special education suggest that disproportionality continues to be an issue. As such, it appears the simple act of naming the risk factors is not a sufficient solution to this challenge. While the identification of risk factors does provide a great starting point towards understanding the complexities of overrepresentation, the journey to a solution must lead to additional inquiries which focus on factors more readily influenced by professional educators. As such, my overarching research question was: *How Do Special Education Teachers View the Phenomenon of Black Male Overrepresentation in Special Education?*

#### **Research Design**

In contrast to many of the studies referenced earlier in the review of literature, which chose to investigate measurable, quantifiable metrics, such as poverty, discipline rates, and teacher demographic data, I sought to ascertain qualitative data that may shed some light on this problematic situation. Particularly, I was interested in the voice of front-line educators who encounter this phenomenon on a regular basis, in attempts to garner their views as to whether or not overrepresentation remains an issue. Considering the primary purpose of my research was to

propel a discourse among educators surrounding Black male overrepresentation in special education, I felt it was best to ground my data collection in the voice of special education teachers. Additionally, the current social climate in which this study was conducted was characterized by a heightened awareness to individual voices. Social justice movements, such as *Black Lives Matter* and *Me Too*, have gained national attention, as individuals are now able to share their unique stories with millions of people via social media. I felt that it was appropriate to design a study which focuses primarily on the stories and views of educators who are likely to possess a unique perspective on this phenomenon.

I elected to frame this study within the Critical Race Theory theoretical framework. The social-reform characteristics of CRT undoubtedly shaped the lens through which my research was designed, conducted, and interpreted. To accomplish my research objectives, I implemented a qualitative research design, driven primarily by interviews with special education teachers. Tewksbury (2009) suggested that qualitative research at its core, "...focuses on the meaning, traits, and defining characteristics of events, people, interactions, settings/cultures and experience" (p. 38). I believe a qualitative, participant-centered design provided the most appropriate research design for accomplishing my objectives. As stated earlier, one of my goals was to avoid revisiting statistical data that simply confirm that overrepresentation continues to be a problem, or discussing risk factors that we already know lead to overrepresentation.

### **Population and Sample**

Upon receiving IRB approval from Georgia Southern University to conduct my research, my first step was to create a pool of candidates who met the necessary requirements to participate in the study. To be eligible for participation, all candidates had to meet each of the following criteria:

- 1) Must be currently employed as a Special Education teacher in a Local, Title 1 public school.
- 2) Must have completed at least 5 years of teaching experience working in a Special Education setting.
- 3) Must have experience working with overrepresented student populations, particularly Black males.

While these criteria reduced the number of suitable candidates eligible for participation and likely did not entirely reflect the larger population, I believe these criteria still yielded results useful in accomplishing my objective. Onwuegbuzie and Collins (2007) provided a justification for utilizing a strategically selected sample when they stated, “If the goal is not to generalize to a population but to obtain insights into a phenomenon...then the researcher purposefully selects individuals...that maximize understanding of the underlying phenomenon” (p. 287).

Considering that my primary objective was to develop an enlightened perspective on minority overrepresentation in special education as it pertains to demographics similar to those represented in my school district, I believe that limiting participation to individuals currently employed in Title 1 schools was a necessary factor. The *Title 1* designation comes from a federal mandate which is designed to provide additional education resources to districts which serve a high-poverty demographic. While not all students attending Title 1 schools will have similar experiences with poverty, most Title 1 schools will display a number of similar characteristics, providing a reasonable amount of consistency as to the types of student populations the teachers employed in these districts may encounter.

In addition to working in a Title 1 school, participants must also have completed at least five years of work experience in special education. While there may be no specific algorithm or

sampling model to support the benefits of *five years of work experience*, as opposed to a lesser or greater number of years of experience, I elected to incorporate this qualification for a few reasons. First, Dickson, McMinn, and Kadbey (2019) discovered that educators with a minimum of five years teaching experience are associated with greater teacher confidence and effective, student-centered learning approaches. Second, I believe that the five-year mandate helped to garner those teachers who possessed the skills and experience necessary to provide a nuanced response to my questions. Finally, my hope was that teachers with at least five years of teaching experience would have developed the confidence to communicate any possible concerns they may have pertaining to minority overrepresentation in special education. It is possible that teachers with less than five years of experience may lack the ability to provide a well-developed view on the phenomenon of minority overrepresentation in special education.

Participation in this study was solicited through a variety of social media platforms, as well as word-of-mouth dissemination. A flyer containing a brief description of the study, along with the requirements for participation, was posted on various social media sites, such as Facebook Group pages and Snapchat. Additionally, I emailed the flyer to a number of colleagues throughout First District RESA, and asked if they would refer any suitable candidates.

Candidates were informed that participation in this study would involve a single, virtual interview, which would last approximately one hour. Candidates were asked to email me if they were interested and eligible. A total of eight qualified candidates emailed me expressing their interest to participate in the study.

The second step of my research involved acquiring an informed consent document from each potential candidate. All individuals who emailed me expressing interest received an informed consent document describing the terms of participation in the research project. The

informed consent document was emailed directly to each potential candidate utilizing the same email address with which they responded to my initial solicitation. Each candidate signed the informed consent document and scanned/emailed the signed document back to me. A signed informed consent document was required before any further communication took place.

The third step in my study was to issue the teacher information questionnaire (see Appendix B) to all eight candidates who had signed the informed consent document. Again, this document was sent electronically, via email, to all candidates. The candidates were asked to complete the survey and scan/email the completed surveys back to me. All eight candidates completed this step of the research project. My purpose for utilizing this teacher information questionnaire was to identify which individuals were most likely to provide meaningful data during the interview process, and to ensure a variety of candidates from a number of different schools were included in the interview process.

The fourth step in my research project was to select the individuals who would be asked to participate in the interview process. After eight total interested participants responded to the recruitment flyer, and had completed the informed consent and teacher information questionnaire documents, I utilized a convenience sampling approach to determine which participants I would select for the interview process. According to Farrokhi and Mahmoudi-Hamidabad (2012), convenience sampling is defined as "...nonrandom sampling in which members of the target population...are selected for the purpose of the study if they meet certain practical criteria..." (p. 785). I initiated the selection phase with an expected sample size of three to four participants. I believe convenience sampling provided an optimal approach when determining participants, as it was necessary to have adequate access to individuals involved in the study. In addition, it was necessary for the individuals to have relevant experiences with overrepresentation in special

education. Even though this decision undoubtedly impacted the generalizability of my data, I elected to utilize convenience sampling due to its ability to provide participants who met the specific criteria necessary for the study.

During the selection phase, total of four participants from the pool of candidates were chosen. Preference was given to individuals based on the results of the teacher information questionnaire, as a desired degree of diverse participants was preferred. Ideally, I desired to include teachers with various years of experience and with diverse demographic information. Specifically, I was hoping to include both male and female participants from different races. While I was able to incorporate four participants representing three different racial groups, only one male responded to the study solicitation. Three of the candidates who were not chosen for participation in this study possessed the same general demographic information as one of the candidates already selected to participate. Therefore, I opted to not include these individuals in the study, as I sought to limit participation to four total participants. Additionally, one final candidate who responded to the study solicitation was not included in the interview process due to scheduling conflicts.

Initially, I had planned on initiating the research process with an estimated range in the sample size, as it may have been necessary to include more or less participants, depending on the data that began to emerge. Blaike (2018) suggested that an estimated range in sample size may be more appropriate for social research, as “The character of the research problem, the context...the purpose...the nature...are critical factors that can have bearing on the sample size...The best that can be achieved is to indicate...a range in the sample size that might be required” (p. 636). It was with this idea in mind that I initially sought an *estimated* sample size between three and four participants, with each participant taking part in at least one interview.



Ultimately, I opted to include four total participants, as I believed this was an adequate number and yielded sufficient data to accomplish my research objectives.

### **Instrumentation and Pilot Study**

While I have already discussed the context and significance of my research, I felt it was necessary to further expound upon the purpose of this study and how the purpose directly informed the research process. As stated above, the primary purpose of this study was to provide a unique perspective and voice to the conversation surrounding Black male overrepresentation in special education, and subsequently, to provide a new lens through which the phenomenon may be viewed. It is my belief that this voice should originate from those directly connected to the phenomenon. Overwhelmingly, the research literature surrounding Black male overrepresentation has focused mostly on risk factors evident in the lives of Black males, and how these risk factors perpetuate overrepresentation in special education. In addition to determining risk factors, much research has been focused on critiquing the processes that appear to have led directly to overrepresentation, such as cultural heterogeneity, implicit bias, and flawed diagnostic tools.

Aside from these *risk-based* approaches to analyzing overrepresentation, other studies have been conducted which were designed to focus on the perspectives of general education teachers, regarding the process of special education referrals, and how this process may also be influencing overrepresentation (Dunn, 2006; Dunn, Cole, & Estrada, 2009). Largely missing from the research literature, however, are the voices of actual special education teachers and their views on overrepresentation. While it can prove difficult to build a strong argument for change based solely on the opinionated responses of individuals, the ideas and thoughts of front line employees do provide another piece to the complex puzzle. This is precisely where I focused my

data collection. I utilized special education teachers in interviews which were designed to gather their unique perspectives on Black male overrepresentation in special education.

While subjective, anecdotal data derived from personal interviews is not necessarily the most common form of data utilized in action research, it is certainly not a new concept. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) pointed out that “As a means of collecting information, interviewing has been with us for centuries” (p. 112). They also acknowledge the unique advantages of conducting interviews by suggesting that interviews provide a platform in which the participants are able to express how they define a specific problem and that interview data is a socially constructed interpretation of the phenomenon by the one being interviewed.

Therefore, by utilizing semi-structured interviews as a means of data collection, I was able to accomplish two key objectives. First, I was able to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon of overrepresentation by viewing it through the perspective of those directly involved in the phenomenon. Second, I was able to initiate conversations on how race, racial views, and internal biases may be influencing the prevalence of the phenomenon. Considering that race is a socially constructed issue, it would make sense to include socially constructed views on topics related to racial disparity. Therefore, interview data provide a unique avenue through which meaningful data could be acquired, and was the basis of my data collection. Specifically, I implemented a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix A) which was designed to elicit useful information while avoiding the constraints associated with a rigid, highly-structured protocol.

Short (1991) shed light on the importance of avoiding constraints when conducting critical inquiry by including the notion that “There is no algorithm (formula) which directs the inquiry...” (p. 54). Rather, critical inquiry should account for different approaches to

ascertaining data and embrace various forms of data, such as the personal accounts of individuals involved in the phenomenon. In alignment with the CRT framework, interview questions were phrased and presented in a method that encouraged participants to consider Black male overrepresentation in special education as more than simply an issue affecting schools. The interview protocol was intentionally designed to focus on Black male overrepresentation in special education, and to consider this phenomenon as a possible issue of social justice. Due to the fact that the interview protocol was inevitably shaped by my own bias towards the subject, I felt it was beneficial to pilot the protocol with a few work peers before conducting the actual research interviews. The pilot interviews were not included in the final report. Based on feedback from these pilot interviews, I identified two major changes which were needed, and modified the final interview protocol accordingly.

The first change I made was to limit the number of questions and/or prompts contained in the protocol. During the piloting phase, I felt as if the high number of questions/prompts forced me to limit the quality of each response, in order to complete the interviews in an appropriate time. As such, the final interview protocol was pared down to eleven total questions/prompts. The second change I made to the interview protocol was to include a prompt asking the participants to include a description of their current job, and the responsibilities they fill in this role. During the pilot interviews, I discovered that it was difficult to frame and interpret many of the responses without a clear understanding of the experiences of the participants. For example, some of the pilot interview data could be interpreted one way if the participant had worked primarily in an inclusion setting, but could be interpreted entirely different if that participant had worked in more restrictive environments. Feeling it was necessary to provide a lens through which the responses could be interpreted, I opted to add the prompt addressing current

job/responsibilities. As is often the case with subjective interviews, a slight deviation from the interview protocol was to be expected during those moments when a participant was providing meaningful information that did not necessarily align with a specific interview question.

One detail worth noting is that this particular study took place during a unique set of global circumstances which have influenced social interactions. A novel strand of the coronavirus, known as COVID-19, rapidly spread across the globe during the recent months. Millions of individuals have been affected by the virus, and hundreds of thousands of individuals have died. Government regulations surrounding social interactions prevented me from being in close proximity with many individuals. As such, it was necessary to conduct my interviews through the usage of electronic sources, such as video meetings. These restrictions obviously impacted the data collection process, as I was unable to conduct the interviews face-to-face. An obvious disadvantage of conducting digital interviews was the lack of ability to read total body language and to create a complete feeling of trust. Ideally, I would have been able to conduct the interviews in an intimate, personal setting. Potter (2018) listed some of the advantages of face-to-face interviews by stating that they "...facilitate the building of relationships, and the establishment of ongoing, productive partnerships...The flow of conversation is easier to manage as well, without the technological disruptions that may characterize electronically mediated communication" (p. 163). Regardless of the obvious influence which remote interviews had upon my research, I felt as if virtual interviews still provided a dependable means of data collection, given the unique circumstances surrounding society during this unprecedented pandemic. Inversely, there were a few advantages associated with virtual interviews. Primarily, utilizing virtual interviews provided me much more flexibility when scheduling a time/location for the

interviews to occur. It was my hope that the reduced time commitment associated with a virtual interview increased the likelihood of individuals being willing to participate.

### **Data Collection**

During the fifth step of my research project, I contacted each of the four participants to schedule a time for the virtual interview. Once a time was established, I created a Google-Meet video conference link, and forwarded it to each participant via email. The link provided direct access to the private video platform which was used to conduct the virtual interview. Twenty-four hours prior to the scheduled interview, I sent out an additional email reminder to ensure the participants were still able to participate in the virtual interview. At the start of each interview, I informed each participant that I would be using the Rev-voice recorder application on my phone to record the audio from the virtual interview. All participants agreed to be recorded. No video recording took place.

To ensure the privacy of the individuals who participated in this study and their associated schools, a number of safeguards were implemented. First, all individual participants were given pseudonyms to prevent them from being identified. During the recorded portions of the interview, candidates did not use their personal names and were directed to refrain from using other identifiable information, such as school names or locations. In the event that any identifiable information was recorded during the interview process, that information was redacted from the written transcripts of the interview. In effort to maintain objectivity as a researcher, I had the participants restate and/or rephrase any statements which might have been interpreted in multiple ways. Second, any accounts of personal experiences provided by the participants were analyzed to ensure that no schools, districts, students, etc. were identifiable. All

interview data were thoroughly analyzed, and all identifiable information presented during the interview was removed from the final draft of the dissertation.

### **Data Analysis**

Once I had completed each of the interviews, the next step of my research was to transcribe the audio recordings of each interview. Utilizing the Rev-recorder application on my phone, I was able to submit the digital audio files to Rev.com for transcription. The transcriptions were completed and forwarded back to me in under twenty-four hours. The transcriptions arrived in the form of a Microsoft Word document and contained line counts and time-stamps, allowing for easy analysis and review. I printed the transcriptions from each interview, and placed each transcription in a separate folder for easy access.

As I initiated the thematic analysis process, I began by reading through each of the interview transcripts to re-familiarize myself with the responses I had received. After reading through all four interview transcripts, I began the coding process with each individual interview transcript. The first step in the coding process was to highlight words and/or phrases which were repeated in each specific transcript. The repetitive words and/or phrases were significant in helping me contextualize the points being made by each participant. Once I had identified the recurring phrases and ideas from each specific interview transcript, I compared these phrases and ideas to the other transcripts, looking for commonalities between the four transcripts. It was at this point that I identified the emergence of three major themes which were observable in every interview transcript. The three major themes, along with a description of each theme, will be provided in Chapter 4.

### **Chapter Summary**

The exploration of the overrepresentation of Black males in special education was conducted via a qualitative design utilizing a semi-structured interview protocol based on the literature. The purposive sample consisted of four special education teachers who met the inclusion criteria. Due to the current pandemic, interviews were conducted online and were audio-recorded. Recordings were transcribed by a professional service and coding was conducted employing thematic analysis resulting in three emergent themes.

## CHAPTER 4

### REPORT OF THE DATA AND DATA ANALYSIS

This section describes the results of the four interviews utilized in the data collection process for my research. The primary goal of the interviews was to initiate new conversations on Black male overrepresentation in special education while avoiding the constraints associated with having to *justify* thoughts and ideas with evidence. The subjective, anecdotal accounts and experiences of special education teachers were the desired outcome for these interviews. Personal accounts and narratives are the very lifeblood of Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012), and considering I elected to design this study within the CRT framework, these subjective, semi-structured interviews provided an ideal platform to accomplish the objectives of the study.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) seeks to explore and expose the intricacies associated with power and race, and to explore how race has been, and continues to be, a tool of subjugation. Specifically speaking, CRT posits that racism is not a social aberration; rather, racism is a normalized experience which shapes and imposes itself upon most social structures (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). When applying the CRT framework to my particular research objective, I intended to discuss the ways in which special education may be a tool of racial oppression, whether intentionally or unintentionally. As such, I utilized an interview protocol which presented a number of challenging questions, designed to require the participants to consider and discuss whether Black male overrepresentation in special education was the culminating result of a confluence of risk factors, or, if overrepresentation was somehow an issue of racial inequality. This chapter provides a description of the research participants, as well as the themes which emerged from the interview data.



### Description of Participants

A total of four individuals were selected to participate in this study. Solicitation for participation in this study was disseminated through a variety of social media outlets, and participants were asked to respond, expressing their interest to take part. While a larger number of individuals expressed interest in participating in this project, I chose to limit the project to four interviews, electing to focus more on the quality of the interviews rather than the quantity.

In addition to choosing to limit the number of participants in this project, I also chose to strategically select a diverse participant pool in attempts to gather a variety of perspectives on the issue of Black male overrepresentation in special education. This convenience sampling approach prevented me from limiting the interviews to participants from a single demographic subset, as I felt it was important to hear from a variety of demographic groups. A central theme of CRT revolves around the suggestion that society changes the way it racializes different groups based on the current social atmosphere, and that the perspectives of one demographic group are likely to vary greatly from another. With respect to this diversity in perspectives, I elected to utilize participants from a variety of racial backgrounds. The demographic breakdown of the participants is provided in the table below.

Table 1: Participant Background/Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Gender	Race	Years of Teaching Experience	Current Employment Level
Rhonda	F	Black	32	Middle
Carol	F	Multi-Racial	22	Secondary
Mike	M	White	15	Middle
Amy	F	White	7	Elementary

The first two questions in the interview protocol were designed to gather personal information about each participant, which might help frame the perspective through which they viewed Black male overrepresentation in special education. Specifically, these two interview questions asked each participant to describe the role and responsibilities they fill at their places of employment, and to discuss how long they have worked with students with disabilities. It is of particular importance to frame the role of each participant, as the research surrounding Black male overrepresentation in special education suggests that overrepresentation is more profound in more restrictive academic environments, and may be less pronounced in less restrictive academic environments (Ford, 2012; National Education Association, 2011). Therefore, understanding the role of each participant provides a lens through which the interview data may be interpreted.

### **Rhonda**

Rhonda (pseudonym) self-identified as a 55-year-old Black female. Rhonda has 31 years of teaching experience in the Georgia Public School system. Rhonda has spent her entire career working in the same school district in which she is currently employed. For the entirety of her career, Rhonda has been employed as a special education teacher. Rhonda stated that the majority of her teaching experience has taken place in a small group, restrictive setting, where she worked with only students with disabilities. She does, however, have some experience teaching students with disabilities in larger settings where general education students were also present.

Rhonda currently lives and teaches in Midville, GA (pseudonym). Midville city has a population of approximately 4,000 people, while the surrounding county has a total population of approximately 11,000. The demographic breakdown of Midville City is 48% White, 36% Black,

12% Hispanic, and 4% Other. The median household income of Midville is estimated to be \$24,465, with nearly 37% of individuals living below the poverty line. Rhonda currently works at Midville Middle School, and teaches a combination of 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade students. Midville Middle School serves a total student population of approximately 500 students.

### **Carol**

Carol (pseudonym) self-identified as a 47-year-old Multi-racial female. Carol has 22 years of teaching experience in the Georgia Public School system. Carol has worked for her current school district for the last seven years, and was previously employed in two other school districts. Carol has spent her entire career working with students with disabilities. Carol stated that the majority of her teaching experience has taken place in an inclusive class setting where general education students and students with disabilities are served simultaneously.

Carol currently teaches in Pleasant County, GA (pseudonym). Pleasant County has a population of approximately 15,000 people. The demographic breakdown of Pleasant County is 72% White, 16% Black, 5% Hispanic, and 7% Other. The median household income in Pleasant County is estimated at \$36,531, with nearly 21% of individuals living below the poverty line. Carol is currently employed at Pleasant County Elementary School, and works with students ranging from 1<sup>st</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> grade. Pleasant County Elementary School has a student population of approximately 680 students.

### **Mike**

Mike (pseudonym) self-identified as a 42-year-old White male. Mike has 15 years of teaching experience in the Georgia Public School System. Mike spent the first seven years of his career teaching Social Studies, and has spent the last eight years teaching special education. Mike has taught in seven different school districts within the state of Georgia, and has taught a

variety of grade levels. As a special education teacher, Mike reported that he has spent the majority of his time teaching students in an inclusive setting, serving general education students and students with disabilities simultaneously. Mike is currently completing his first year of employment in his current district.

Mike currently teaches in Jonestown, GA (pseudonym). Jonestown has a population of approximately 5,100 people. The demographic breakdown of Jonestown is 58% White, 36% Black, 5% Hispanic, and 1% Other. The median household income in Jonestown is estimated at \$43,800, with an estimated 22% of individuals living below the poverty line. Mike is currently employed at Jonestown Middle School, and teaches students ranging from 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade. The student population at Jonestown Middle School is approximately 350 students.

### **Amy**

Amy (pseudonym) self-identified as a 30-year-old White female. Amy has seven years of teaching experience in the Georgia Public School system. Amy spent the first three years of her career teaching general education students, and has spent the last four years working with students with disabilities. Amy has worked for two school districts in Georgia, and is currently in her third year in her current district. Amy reported that she has spent equal time teaching students with disabilities in inclusive and small group settings.

Amy currently teaches in Smallville, GA (pseudonym). Smallville has a population of approximately 2,650 people. The demographic breakdown of Smallville is 58% White, 33% Black, 8% Hispanic, and 1% Other. The median household income in Smallville is nearly \$25,000, with an estimated 42.5% of individuals living below the poverty line. Amy is currently employed at Smallville Elementary School, and works with students ranging from 1<sup>st</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> grade. The student population at Smallville Elementary School is approximately 800 students.

## Findings

Thematic analysis of interviews with the four participants resulted in the emergence of three themes: Black male overrepresentation in special education is a commonly experienced phenomenon; Social/personal factors are the best predictors of a Black male being placed in special education; and, Educators feel powerless, in regard to ameliorating the prevalence of Black male overrepresentation in special education. The following will elucidate these findings by providing direct quotes from the participants.

### **Theme One: Black male overrepresentation in special education is a commonly experienced phenomenon**

After reviewing the transcripts from each interview, and coding the data while looking for patterns in words and/or ideas, the first theme identified was that all of the participants had significant experience with Black male overrepresentation in special education. This theme is of particular importance as it suggests that disproportionality in remedial programs, such as special education, continues to plague many public schools. Not only did each participant acknowledge having experienced and/or witnessed disproportionality during their careers, all of the participants indicated that disproportionality was, and continues to be, a major detriment to many young Black males.

While each participant may have experienced the phenomenon to varying degrees throughout their professional careers, with one participant suggesting that disproportionality has become less of an issue in present-day public schools, all participants identified Black male overrepresentation in special education as an issue that warrants continued reform. This theme provides a useful perspective on Black male overrepresentation in special education, as it positions the phenomenon as a current issue that continues to resonate in many public schools.

The suggestion that Black male overrepresentation in special education remains an issue in modern academics supports the position that the challenges associated with disproportionality continue to deserve further investigation.

When asked to provide a rationale as to why overrepresentation continues to be an issue in public schools, each participant initially pointed to the system of interventions that exists in many schools, and how these systems may be failing young Black males. Carol stated, “I don’t know if every school system has a strong RTI process in place...[and] you don’t know how effective the RTI process is.” According to Carol, regulations designed to prevent overrepresentation, such as RTI, do have the potential to be effective. However, a lack of fidelity in implementation, coupled with limited resources, such as money and/or properly trained staff, limit the effectiveness of these types of regulations. Amy and Mike shared similar perspectives on interventions designed to prevent disproportionality when they contended that the RTI process often needs more time to be successful, indicating that many students have not received enough exposure to effective interventions before being placed in special education. Having worked with younger students her entire career, Amy recognized the “...rush to label students who are struggling in school [as special education]...”, rather than giving the interventions more time to be effective. Amy stated that, “Due to either getting more money or a fear of underserving students who may have a disability...” many schools expedite the referral to evaluation process for special education services, rather than “...allowing time for interventions to do their job.” Similarly, Mike suggested that it takes a long time for interventions to be successful, and “...sometimes we move forward with decisions before the intervention has had a chance to work.”

Rhonda, too, indicated a flawed system of interventions in her response. However, Rhonda's perspective on why these interventions have failed many young Black males was quite different. Rhonda stated that sometimes schools use generic interventions which "...don't fit the needs of the [Black] child." Rhonda proceeded to state that, "Maybe it's possible the school system has taught young Black boys that they are not good enough and that they should just settle for what they have." As such, these same Black boys do not respond well to interventions, as they already possess a feeling of inadequacy and defeat. According to Rhonda's perspective, many interventions fail to prevent overrepresentation of Black males due to the fact that the interventions fail to account for the specific needs and challenges associated with being a Black male.

Embedded within this first theme was a sub-theme which was of particular concern. According to the interview transcripts, each of the participants indicated that, although disproportionality was apparent in all special education settings, it was most prominent in more restrictive settings and eligibility categories. Specifically, the participants indicated that Black males were more likely to be overrepresented in cohorts that required more intensive special education services or in eligibility categories which were reserved for more severe disabilities. For example, Carol stated that she had only ever really noticed overrepresentation "...in the MI category." The *MI category*, as referenced by Carol, refers to students who are eligible for services based on intellectual disabilities. Typically, students who are diagnosed with intellectual disabilities are often served in more restrictive academic settings and are more frequently removed from peers without disabilities. Rhonda provided a similar account when she said "...usually when I had more black males in my classroom, they were students who were intellectually disabled."

A second sub-theme of theme one, which emerged from the interview data, was that cultural heterogeneity plays a major role in the continued existence of disproportionality in special education programs. When asked if any commonly accepted school practices contributed to Black male overrepresentation in special education, the participants were quick to identify cultural expectations and biased resources as possible culprits. According to Mike, "...cultural expectations and preconceived ideas of ability are probably two ways in which schools inadvertently influence Black male overrepresentation." Mike elaborated by describing how, in his experience, the prevailing culture of many schools often place young Black boys at a disadvantage, in that "...they tend to get in trouble much more often, which causes them to fall further and further behind in their school work." He referenced dress codes and behavior expectations as two school-based issues which single out Black males. Mike also described a personal account of a situation where "...the academic ability of this kid [Black male] was thought to be low, based solely on how he looked and responded to teachers." Subsequently, in Mike's opinion, the student referenced in this scenario was placed in special education because "...many teachers simply couldn't relate to him and communicate with him effectively."

Additionally, biased tests and confusing language and terminology were likely factors leading to Black male overrepresentation. "Have you ever read the questions on a typical I.Q. test..." asked Mike, "...they are worded in ways that many Black boys probably don't even know what's being asked." Similarly, Amy suggested that "...many tests that teachers often use contain vocabulary or language which is unfamiliar to young Black boys. They struggle to comprehend what is being asked of them, so they don't do well on these tests." Amy also suggested that many educational videos and resources used during instruction fail to "...include people, songs, or ideas from other Black people. These kids grow up exposed to content made by



White people, starring White people, and they just can't connect. Surely this causes them to struggle.”

While Rhonda's response also addressed the language and terminology used by many school districts, she focused her concern more on how this affected the parents than the students. Rhonda stated “Sometimes we use these big words, and the parent's don't understand. They don't really know what they're getting into ... it's easier for parents to agree with what we suggest than to ask questions, because a lot of times, they don't know what to ask.” At this point, Rhonda specifically implicated the terms and acronyms associated with special education referrals, eligibilities, and placement practices, such as “...IEP...SLD...IDEA...RTI...”. Chuckling, Rhonda contended that “I've been teaching for over 30 years and I still get confused by some of the terms we use in an IEP meeting...Lord knows those parents are confused.” Rhonda suggested that taking the time to effectively communicate the needs and limitations of each child with their parent, and discussing all possible courses of action, would greatly change how frequently “...Black boys are just placed in special education.” Rhonda then shifted her response to testing bias and test expectations which are placed upon young Black children. Rhonda stated “Testing, I think, also plays a lot. I remember taking a test as a child...and knew I had a low score. I knew it was no reflection of my intelligence...sometimes these tests are a little biased against [Black] children...”

While these accounts provide a general overview of the interview transcripts, it became apparent that disproportionality in special education is a commonly experienced phenomenon. Every participant was able to clearly express their experiences and concerns associated with this phenomenon. Additionally, all of the participants were able to identify possible causes of disproportionality which exist in many public schools. After conducting the interviews and

reviewing the transcripts, it is obvious that each participant was extremely familiar with Black male overrepresentation in special education.

**Theme Two: Social/personal factors are the best predictors of a Black male being placed in special education**

The second theme which was identified from the interview data was that all participants considered non-school related factors evolving from the personal lives of their students as having the most influence on whether a specific student would be placed in special education. Specifically, the participants indicated that poverty, income-inequality, and familial support likely influence disproportionality much more than educational practices. The significance of this theme is that it positions disproportionality as an issue of social/racial inequality, rather than simply an educational challenge. Moreover, this theme reframes the conversation surrounding the limited effectiveness of many school-based interventions when it involves ameliorating Black male overrepresentation in special education. The emergence of this theme potentially shifts the culpability for disproportionality to systemic racism, and suggests that interventions will continue to be ineffective in a society where individuals are marginalized based on social/racial demographics.

When asked to consider the most prominent cause of Black male overrepresentation in special education, Mike elected to focus on how society racially discriminates against all people of color, and that Black males being overserved in special education is "...a byproduct of this discrimination." Mike referenced the extreme poverty that many Black families experience, suggesting that "...poverty sets many of these kids up for failure. It should come as no surprise so many Black boys struggle in school." Interestingly, Mike even referenced institutionalized racism in his response. This was the first time any participant had mentioned this particular term.

Mike stated "...so much of what goes on in our society, in our schools, is influenced by institutionalized racism...these [Black] boys face way more challenges than other kids." Mike also suggested that keeping Black males in special education is a way for society to "...make sure they [Black males] do not become masters of their own fate." Much like Mike, Rhonda also implicated racial inequality as the prevailing cause of disproportionality. Rhonda stated "...it's easier to keep some Black males oppressed, rather than allow them success ... you don't want to give them too much power to intellectual success, because that's one thing you can't take from someone, their intelligence...I think it's easier to suppress a Black man's intelligence."

Amy responded by suggesting that racial inequality has made its way into many schools, exacerbating the challenges that inherently exist when serving a diverse student population. To make her point, Amy stated "Black boys seem to get in trouble at school way more than White boys. It seems teachers are primed to look for certain behaviors and to punish certain kids. That's why so many Black boys end up in ISS or special education." According to Amy's view, Black male overrepresentation in special education is certainly an issue of racial inequality, considering "If teachers treated all kids equally, we would see more White kids in special education." Amy also pointed out that "A lot of young Black boys lack the resources to be prepared for school. When they get here, they are already behind everyone else. If we could somehow level the playing field [in regards to familial resources] these boys would probably do way better in school." When asked why it is that many Black boys lack familial resources, Amy stated "Many Black families get caught in poverty and are dependent on welfare. It's hard to get out of that once you become dependent."

Carol was less convinced that Black male overrepresentation in special education was an issue of racial inequality. According to Carol, "I've never experienced it [racial inequality]...in

larger cities and larger areas, I guess there could be. I do believe there is some test bias in intelligence testing, or there has been from some tests I've seen, but I don't have enough experience with it to answer that well." While Carol was less willing to indict racial inequality as the cause of disproportionality, the entirety of her interview data suggests that she does, in fact, recognize how social/racial forces manifest themselves upon young Black males. The possibility exists, that Carol was unwilling to directly attribute Black male overrepresentation in special education to systemic racism. However, much of her interview data suggests that racial forces do influence disproportionality. For example, Carol indicated that being in special education often leads to "...underemployment, which commonly results in people living in poverty." When I asked her to consider her statement in the opposite order, and if living in poverty could lead to being in special education, Carol responded "I certainly do." Here, we see Carol acknowledging how social/racial forces do, in fact, manifest themselves upon the academic challenges faced by many Black males.

One sub-theme which emerged, pertaining to this particular theme, involved the recursive nature of the relationship between special education and future struggles in life. The interview data was littered with statements that identified the pipeline from special education to poverty and/or other social challenges. When asked to consider how Black male overrepresentation in special education impacts society, Mike suggested "Many of these boys will never graduate high school, and will not be able to get a decent paying job." When presented with the same question, Rhonda stated "The first thing I think of is lack of job opportunities. This will lead to these boys being poor." Rhonda elaborated by stating that many Black males who were served in special education will be unlikely to get a high paying job. Rhonda acknowledged that, for many Black males, "...when you can't get a job, you find other means of making money. And of course they

are inappropriate...that leads to you being incarcerated, all because you couldn't find a job." I then asked Rhonda "Is it fair to say that being served in special education as a child leads to living a marginalized life as an adult?" She quickly responded "I do! In fact, I think that was the plan all along...to keep Black boys under control."

In similar fashion, Amy identified the future struggles which many Black males will face after being served in special education. Amy posited "It's likely these boys will never get the chance to have a good career. They will end up with limited job opportunities, and will never make much money." Amy continued by stating "It's likely these boys end up on the streets, in gangs, doing bad things...which end up with them going to jail." Carol, too, acknowledged how disproportionality in special education impacts the future for many Black males. Carol referenced a study she had once read which explored the correlation between school performance and incarceration. While Carol was unable to quote the specific study, she did say "I remember reading that you can take a child's third grade reading level, and that will tell you how many jail cells to build...so it [Black male overrepresentation] could certainly lead to crime."

### **Theme Three: Educators feel powerless in regard to ameliorating the prevalence of Black male overrepresentation in special education**

The final theme that emerged from the interview data was that each participant experienced a sense of helplessness towards preventing many young Black males from being placed in special education. This theme accentuates the pervasive nature of Black male overrepresentation in special education, and highlights the systemic influences that serve to maintain this phenomenon. This theme also strengthens the existence of theme two, in that it places the onus of responsibility on factors which primarily exist outside the scope of public education. Alarming, this final theme also reveals the cruel reality that, in many cases, it

proves difficult for educators to provide sufficient support to prevent young Black males from experiencing academic struggles.

The professional literature on Black male overrepresentation provides us with sufficient understanding of the risk factors that lead to disproportionality in special education programs. Additionally, state and federal regulations are in place that are specifically intended to minimize the adverse effects of overrepresentation. As such, it would seem as if educators should possess a general idea as to how to prevent the continued existence of overrepresentation in special education. Perhaps the feeling of helplessness comes from the fact that educators are unable to pinpoint exactly which factor most readily influences the journey toward special education for many young Black males. An even more nefarious suggestion would be that many social structures serve to maintain this sense of helplessness. For example, when asked why it proves so difficult to prevent many young Black males from being placed in special education, Mike stated "...I'm not sure society wants to level the playing field. It's much easier to just keep minority families in poverty...it's a proven method of controlling a group of people." I asked Mike if he was suggesting that Black overrepresentation in special education is a byproduct of society intentionally trying to control minority groups. Mike responded "It certainly appears that way. How else do you explain the high number of Black males simultaneously living in poverty while being served in special education?" Regardless of the reasons, all of the participants in this study expressed a dire sense of helplessness when involving the phenomenon of Black male overrepresentation in special education.

### **Response to the Research Question**

The overarching research question that this study sought to address was: How Do Special Education Teachers View the Phenomenon of Black Male Overrepresentation in Special

Education? The findings of this study indicated that participants' beliefs emerged as three themes. The first theme was that Black male overrepresentation in special education is a commonly experienced phenomenon. This theme contained three sub-themes: although disproportionality was apparent in all special education settings, it was most prominent in more restrictive settings and eligibility categories; cultural heterogeneity plays a major role in the continued existence of disproportionality in special education programs; and, biased testing and confusing language and terminology usage exacerbate the problem in many ways. Theme two indicated that social/personal factors are the best predictors of a Black male being placed in special education, especially institutionalized racism. Participants believed that there exists a recursive nature of the relationship between special education and future struggles in life. Inherent in the third and final theme was the finding that educators feel powerless in regard to ameliorating the prevalence of Black male overrepresentation in special education.

## CHAPTER 5

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

When I began this research project, my primary objective was to initiate a dialogue with frontline special education teachers in effort to explore the ways in which educational practices may be influencing Black male overrepresentation in special education programs. I developed an interview protocol designed to present educators with a variety of questions/prompts which required them to examine their views on Black male overrepresentation, and to grapple with the possibility of whether or not educational practices may be biased towards Black males. I utilized a screening process to select a diverse candidate pool of participants with the purpose of having a variety of voices represented in the data. I intentionally veered away from utilizing a large, homogenous participant group, as my objective was not to generalize my findings on a larger population. Rather, my aim was to simply hear what educators from different demographic backgrounds had to say about this phenomenon. After completing the interviews, I conducted a thematic analysis of the interview data to identify any themes which appeared. Upon identifying three major themes, I provided an interpretation of each theme, making assumptions as to why the themes existed. I feel as if my research design sufficiently satisfied my initial goal of promoting a dialogue among special education teachers.

#### **Analysis of Research Findings**

Perhaps my biggest takeaway from conducting this research project was the understanding that the phenomenon of Black male overrepresentation in special education was a common experience of all the special education teachers who participated, regardless of the participant's race, age, experience, or location. After hearing the stories of each participant, I determined that Black male overrepresentation in special education is not only a shared



experience, but it is also a strikingly profound experience, as each participant provided striking recollections of their encounters with the phenomenon. As the research literature suggested, many teachers and students experience Black male overrepresentation in special education on a frequent basis (Booker & Mitchell, 2011; National Center for Education Statistics, 2019; Sullivan & Bal, 2013; Watkins & Kurtz, 2001; Woodson & Harris, 2018). However, the research literature did not prepare me for how profound of an impact this phenomenon has on the teachers who experience it. When I began preparing for the interview process, I anticipated that each of the participants would have some level of exposure to Black male overrepresentation in special education. What I was not prepared for was the emotion and passion displayed by the participants as they began to discuss their experiences with this phenomenon. In some instances, the participants displayed anger and frustration with the fact that many young Black males are disproportionately identified as students with disabilities, while in other instances the participants became emotional and would cry as they discussed their experiences.

In my assessment, the major difference between simply researching the literature on Black male overrepresentation in special education and interviewing actual teachers was the infusion of emotion. This infusion of emotion came as somewhat of a surprise and certainly impacted my perspective on the issue. However, the incorporation of emotion into the interviewing process is not a new concept. Hubbard, Backett-Milburn, and Kemmer (2001) acknowledged the unavoidable manifestation of emotion while conducting interviews when they stated, “During an interview...emotions are inescapable...all encounters between respondents and interviewers will inevitably be emotional” (p. 127). It was this very emotion that helped me identify the intense feelings my participants felt towards the phenomenon of Black male overrepresentation in special education. For example, at one point when Amy was recounting a

particular Black male student she had served during a previous school year, she actually began to cry, and requested a few seconds to gather herself. In this particular scenario, Amy was recounting how the young boy would wear the same tattered clothes to school several days in a row, but was always a loving and compassionate student who often put the needs of others ahead of his own. Amy recalled how “selfless” the young boy was, and that, in the right environment, he was able to display “very high academic skills.” Through her tears, Amy explained how this young Black student was placed in special education due to the fact that he was not reading on grade-level, and how she felt his academic struggles were more a product of “lacking the basic needs of life” rather than an actual disability. While the professional research literature certainly identified poverty as a major factor leading to Black male overrepresentation in special education (Liasidou, 2012), and did a sufficient job of providing statistics that supported the point that poverty imposes itself on many young Black males (Hero & Levy, 2016), those particular statistics did not have an emotional impact on me. However, watching and listening to a special education teacher break down and cry as she described her experiences, certainly had a profound impact upon me.

During a different interview, I recall how Rhonda, who identified as a Black female, became angry and frustrated as she provided her perspective on why “...so many Black people just settle for what is given to them and never try for anything more...”. As Rhonda began to expand upon this particular idea, she became visibly frustrated, and even made the comment “...you know, I’m sorry, but this just makes me mad...”. During this particular interview, Rhonda’s anger was apparent and I interpreted that anger as deriving from the fact that many minority individuals feel frustrated and trapped by a system which seeks to perpetuate the status quo. I sensed that Rhonda’s anger was also directed at her perception that many Black

individuals have become placated with menial lifestyles and have given up the desire or willingness to push for more. When studying Critical Race Theory, I remember reading how society often seeks to perpetuate control through the acceptance of a menial existence by minority individuals. Referring back to my literature review, Arudou (2013) contended that racial oppression serves the interests and privileges of the dominant group, while also seeking to keep the oppressed content with their oppression. Similarly, Freire (1972) committed much of his professional career toward exposing the manner in which oppression is perpetuated and maintained through acceptance of oppression by those who are most marginalized. However, even after having read and researched these particular academics, the impact of the frustrations and anger experienced by many minority individuals was transferred much more poignantly when looking in the eyes of one who had actually experienced it.

### **Discussion of Research Findings**

At this point in the dissertation, I believe it is necessary to provide an analysis of each of the three themes that I identified. Circling back to Critical Race Theory, which framed my interpretation process, it is necessary to acknowledge that the data was viewed and interpreted with the assumption that society seeks to maintain systems of control and power, and that minority individuals are often victims of social inequalities. While the accounts provided in the previous section of this study contain highlights from the interview data, these accounts by no means capture the full essence of what the participants were attempting to communicate. As such, the process of identifying and interpreting themes involved a much more robust analysis of the entire interview transcripts, including statements and comments that were not included in the previous section.

The first theme that emerged was that every participant acknowledged that they had experienced Black male overrepresentation in special education during their career. While the level of overrepresentation may have varied based on location and local demographics, the phenomenon was experienced by all four teachers. Three of the participants indicated that Black male overrepresentation had been experienced in all observed situations. Additionally, the participants noted that Black disproportionality was more pronounced in specific special education settings, particularly in more restrictive environments. This view aligned well with Ford's (2012) observation that Black males are severely overrepresented in the more restrictive environments and special education eligibility categories.

One major takeaway from this theme is that overrepresentation continues to plague many schools, and that overrepresentation does not appear to be influenced by the geographic location of the school. Overrepresentation occurs in both rural and urban schools. This theme aligned with the literature and academic statistics that suggest that Black overrepresentation continues to be an issue in public schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019; Sullivan & Bal, 2013; Woodson & Harris, 2018;). Another takeaway from this theme was that overrepresentation has been an issue for many years. Based on the collective accounts of the participants, and the research literature (Artiles & Trent, 1994; MacMillan & Reschly, 1998; Mills, 2003; U.S. Department of Education, 1992), Black disproportionality has occurred in special education for many years, and remains a persistent issue.

The second theme which emerged from the interviews is that social and/or personal factors play a major role in whether or not a Black male will ultimately end up being relegated to special education. This particular theme aligns well with the professional research that links low socioeconomic status with a high likelihood of being placed in special education (Roy & Raver,

2014). During the interview process, each participant indicated that poverty, coupled with the fact that many young Black males are being raised by non-parents, plays a major role in the disproportionality of Black males in special education programs. The assumption here is that, when provided with adequate financial resources and familial support at home, a Black male would be less likely to experience the struggles that ultimately lead to him being placed in special education. Once again, the views of the participants aligned directly with the academic research, as it relates to special education and socio-economic status (Hill, 2017; Malecki & Demaray, 2006; Zosky et al., 2014).

The final theme which emerged from the data was the prevailing sense of powerlessness that many educators feel regarding Black male overrepresentation in special education. Each participant was able to describe risk factors that undoubtedly influence this phenomenon, and they were all well aware of how educational practices may exacerbate the effects of these factors. However, the participants were unable to provide any concrete suggestions as to how this phenomenon may be eliminated. When asked to describe an approach to eliminate overrepresentation, responses included "...I don't know" or "I don't think it's possible." The prevailing view that I gathered from the interviews was that educators are aware of this phenomenon and are responsive in their pedagogical practices, but feel incapable of doing anything meaningful to prevent it from occurring. This powerlessness is likely derived from the feeling that social factors that are largely beyond the control of educators are mostly responsible for the phenomenon. Additionally, considering the participants viewed Black male overrepresentation in special education as a derivative of social inequality, they concluded that simply making changes to educational practices was unlikely to alleviate any of the issues. Yet again, the views of the participants echoed what the academic literature sets forth, in that

educational reform, while needed, is not a sufficient solution the social inequalities experienced by many Black males (Jordan, 2005; Kearns et al., 2005; Watkins & Kurtz, 2001).

### **Explanation of Themes**

I believe the most likely explanation as to why these three specific themes emerged can be found in Critical Race Theory. As discussed at the beginning of this report, a fundamental component of CRT is that racism and oppression are normal experiences in society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). My interview data confirmed what CRT had already stated about racial oppression: racial oppression is a commonly experienced phenomenon. Hence, it made sense that theme one indicated Black male overrepresentation in special education was a common experience among special education teachers. Critical Race Theory provides a justifiable causation for theme two as well in that CRT suggests society racializes various subgroups differently at different points in history. Whether overt or covert, racism exists and manifests itself upon the lives of those who are marginalized by societal forces.

When it comes to my research data on overrepresentation in special education and the accounts of special education teachers, young Black males are currently on the receiving end of this marginalization, and are frequently exposed to a variety of factors that set them up for failure. As discussed in the literature review, Black males experience a number of risk factors in their daily lives which can be linked to a heightened potential for being placed in special education (Harry & Klinger, 2006; Hero & Levy, 2016; Kauffman & Anastasiou, 2019; Kearns, Ford, & Linney, 2005; Liasidou, 2012). As such, the interviewees determined that these risk factors were the best indicator as to whether or not a Black male would be placed in special education, explaining the emergence of theme two.

Finally, based on interview data, it became apparent that these risk factors were so inextricably connected to the lives of young Black males that it was difficult, if not impossible, to identify an action plan to ameliorate the effects of any single risk factor. This would seemingly explain the emergence of theme three, which described the powerlessness experienced by educators and their inability to combat Black male overrepresentation in special education. Again, CRT provides a rational justification as to why these risk factors disproportionately gravitate towards specific demographic subgroups. Simply put, CRT posits that racism and oppression are integral parts of society, serving to maintain the status quo, and the rules of social engagement pre-determine the winners and losers. In the case of many young Black males, the social forces in play have determined these boys are most likely going to be dealt a losing hand. Based on my interview data, I gathered that the special education teachers who participated in this project were resigned to accept the fact that there was little they could do to prevent young Black males from being disproportionately placed in special education, as they lacked the ability to disentangle these students from the factors which undoubtedly shaped the trajectory of their lives. Critical Race Theory would suggest that this indiscernible intersection between the confluence of risk factors and the lives of young Black males is no accident.

### **Conclusions**

When I began this research project, my primary objective was to determine how special education teachers view the phenomenon of Black male overrepresentation in special education by initiating a dialogue with actual special education teachers. In order to accomplish my objective, I constructed this inquiry within the curriculum studies methodology and utilized a Critical Race Theory framework. Any inquiry based in the field of curriculum studies should, at minimum, seek to understand the nuances of education, evaluate the connection between power

and schooling, and hopefully lead to reform. Subkhan (2019) pointed out the transformative capacity of curriculum studies by identifying the methodology as a tool to transform society. As a curriculum studies endeavor, this project was intended to increase our understanding of issues that affect education and to offer additional insight into the factors that impact the educational experience of many students. Additionally, this inquiry also attempted to explore the ways in which societal forces may foster oppression through its manifestation upon the educational experiences of minority individuals, such as Black males. In regard to CRT, Greene (2021) discussed how CRT is centralized on understanding issues of race, and how race is used as a tool of oppression. As such, this inquiry is also inextricably connected to the CRT framework.

After conducting my research and reviewing the resulting data, the most striking conclusion I reached was that Black male overrepresentation in special education is a racially driven phenomenon. In the early stages of my research, after having conducted a thorough review of the literature on Black male overrepresentation in special education, it appeared as if the phenomenon was the natural result of a confluence of risk factors that imposed themselves on many young Black males. It seemingly made sense that students living in poverty, while attending sub-standard schools, would experience less academic success than students living in more affluent areas. Additionally, it also seemed practical that students who were removed from class most frequently, due to behavioral issues, would fall behind their peers. I suspect few would argue that these two factors would logically culminate in higher special education placements for Black males. However, if you are willing to position the risk-factors associated with Black male overrepresentation in special education as *effects*, rather than *causes*, a pattern of systemic racism emerges. When inverting this paradigm, one can see how special education could be used as a tool of subjugation. For example, as pointed out by each of the participants,



being served in special education often leads to a future life defined by reduced earning potential and crime. When considering the profound influence which special education often plays upon a student's future life, you can easily see how the overuse of special education could easily be a tool used to maintain the existing social hierarchy.

One of the most complex challenges surrounding systemic racism is the difficulty associated with identifying which social structures are inherently racist. As Critical Race Theory would suggest, racism is such an integral part of society that it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to detect. Perhaps, this is why many discriminatory social structures continue to exist. I believe the phenomenon of Black male overrepresentation in special education is one such social structure. When asked if the phenomenon of Black male overrepresentation in special education was, in fact, an issue of racial inequality, each of the participants agreed that overrepresentation was racially driven. When pressed to expand upon their response, each participant struggled to articulate the role that racial inequality plays in Black male overrepresentation in special education. The inability of the participants to put into words exactly how overrepresentation in special education is a racially driven phenomenon confirms the notion that many social structures are inherently racist, yet difficult to indict.

After conducting the interviews and reviewing the transcripts, I got the sense that each of the participants clearly understood that Black male overrepresentation in special education exists as a means of control and manipulation. However, the participants either lacked the words or confidence to clearly communicate the ways in which this phenomenon might be a blatant tool of racial oppression. Rhonda possibly provided the most damning perspective when she stated "...it's easier to keep a Black man oppressed rather than allow them success." In saying this, Rhonda was implying that overrepresentation in special education is an effective and efficient

method to prevent many Black males from reaching the same success as their White counterparts. I certainly do not disagree with Rhonda's statement.

### **Implications**

After reviewing my research project and the subsequent data, I believe a major contribution my research offers to the field of curriculum studies is that it shifts the focus from risk factors that cause overrepresentation to the perspectives and ideas of special education teachers. All of my data are derived from the perception of teachers and how they view this phenomenon. Much effort has already been committed to exploring how and why Black male overrepresentation occurs in many schools (Connor, 2017; Mills, 2003; Shifrer, 2018). However, little effort has been allocated towards exploring how this issue affects teachers, and how they view the nuances associated with overrepresentation. Considering my research was grounded in the perceptions of special education teachers, I believe it provides a critical contribution to the academic research, as it aligns with the Critical Race Theory framework, and strengthens the field of curriculum studies in general. As a reminder, the field of curriculum studies concerns itself with the process of learning, while also exploring the ways in which personal experiences and power dynamics influence this process (Kridel, 2010).

Additionally, the curriculum studies practice of didaktik positions reflective teaching as a means of fostering growth in both students and teachers (Ruzgar, 2018). In regard to Critical Race Theory, Delgado and Stefancic (2012) contended that narrative accounts and personal stories, which are central elements of CRT, have largely been excluded from professional academia. CRT advocates, such as myself, would argue that narrative as a form of research is extremely valuable (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw, 1996; Reece, 2019; Takaki, 2008; Zinn, 2001). In this

sense, I argue that my research project is not only valuable to the field of curriculum studies and CRT, but is absolutely necessary.

The interview protocol I utilized in my research presented the participants with a metaphorical mirror with which they could reflect upon their past teaching experiences, while simultaneously considering how power dynamics and educational practices may have served to marginalize young Black males. As indicated by each participant during the interview process, this reflection elicited a new, deeper understanding of the interrelated nature of their actions as a special education teacher and the experiences of Black males in special education. For example, Mike described how he had never taken the time to consider the recursive nature of his actions on the lives of his students, and how some of his behaviors may have culminated in both positive and negative experiences for his students. Amy, on the other hand, discovered her own tendency to erroneously "...assume a child's potential based on some of their physical traits...". Similarly, while Carol was less willing to challenge her own practices, after reflecting upon her career during the interview process she did at least concede that certain school-wide practices may be biased against young Black males. It is this type of active-reflection which lies at the very heart of curriculum studies, and may lead to an improvement of the individual teaching practice of those willing to honestly evaluate their pedagogical methods and grapple with some of the challenges faced by many minority students.

As stated at the beginning of this project, my goal was not to ascertain data that was easily generalizable to the larger population of special education teachers. Rather, my goal was to initiate a dialogue with special education teachers regarding the phenomenon of Black male overrepresentation in special education, with the hopes of discovering how these teachers view this phenomenon. I believe the data and accounts yielded in this project provide a new

perspective on Black male overrepresentation in special education and propel the field of curriculum studies.

While it is beneficial to know and discuss the risk factors that impose themselves on many minority children, it would also be beneficial to develop an action plan to ameliorate the impact of these risk factors. I believe special education teachers possess a wealth of knowledge and experience that could be used to develop such an action plan. Furthermore, this type of action-based reform is a key objective of the field of curriculum studies (Ruzgar, 2018). While conducting my research, I was surprised at many of the novel ideas my participants discussed when talking about overrepresentation, and how these ideas may lead to educational reform. I quickly identified that the special education teachers I utilized in my research had a very solid grasp on their school climate, culture, and needs, and that each participant possessed a valuable perspective on ways to better serve Black male students.

I believe it would prove highly useful to tap into the insight of special education teachers, as it is necessary to understand the actual challenges faced by many Black male students on a daily basis. Apple (2018) argued that insight into the daily realities and challenges of education is an important part of reform when he stated "...it is absolutely crucial to understand the social realities of schooling." (p.687). Apple's point was that it is imperative to gain context and perspective on what is really happening in schools if reform is to be effective. My research project revealed that special education teachers possess a wealth of knowledge and insight on the phenomenon of Black male overrepresentation in special education, which could potentially serve as a spring board for reform. Moving forward, I feel as if additional research can be performed, which sets out to include a larger group of special education teachers, with the intent of yielding generalizable conclusions. I think it would be beneficial to determine the strategies

and areas of reform that special education teachers believe would lead to the greatest impact on Black male overrepresentation in special education.

A second contribution my research makes to the field of curriculum studies is that it provides a potential framework for future explorations into Black male overrepresentation in special education. During my review of literature, I indicated many of the known risk factors which impose themselves on young Black males. Specifically, the professional research identified poverty (Hill, 2017; Malecki & Demaray, 2006; Mills, 2003; Zosky et al., 2014), school discipline (Anderson & Ritter, 2017; Bal et al., 2019; Connor, 2017; Cook et al., 2018; Perry & Morris, 2014), institutionalized racism (Connor, 2017; Jordan, 2005; Watkins & Kurtz, 2001), and cultural barriers (Cartledge, 1999; Irving & Hudley, 2008; Jaeger, 2012; Toldson, 2011) as major risk factors that manifest themselves upon young Black males. However, it is difficult to gain an understanding of just how profound each of these factors may be in relation to the other risk factors. Perhaps this is due to the fact the many of the factors operate in unison with other factors, making it difficult, if not impossible, to delineate the degree of impact any singular risk factor may have.

Validating the interconnectedness of these risk factors, Shifrer (2018) alluded to the ways in which a variety of external factors operate in conjunction to form a convoluted mass of influence upon many minority children. As a subscriber to CRT, I acknowledge that a confluence of factors impact marginalized individuals, and that marginalization is often experienced differently by members of the same demographic group. Crenshaw (1989) referred to this sum-effect as intersectionality, and contended that individuals are not the product of any singular marginalizing factor. With intersectionality in mind, I believe it would be a beneficial endeavor to at least conduct an inquiry into which risk factors are most villainous toward specific groups

of Black males. While educators may not be able to develop a plan focused on alleviating the burden of all known risk factors, perhaps they can make a concerted effort toward offering some relief regarding the most impactful ones.

My research data revealed that special education teachers may possess the unique ability to gauge which risk factors are most in-play for a specific student or group of students. This information and insight could prove invaluable when attempting to develop strategies to lessen the impact of specific risk factors. During my research, each of the major risk factors listed in the review of literature were also identified by the participants during the interviewing process. However, I found it interesting that each of the participants suggested that poverty plays the largest role as to whether or not a Black male will ultimately end up in special education. In every interview, poverty was the absolute first risk factor named by each participant. As such, theme two emerged from my data, which indicated that the participants considered social/personal factors, namely poverty, as the best predictor of a Black male being placed in special education. For instance, Rhonda started off by saying “It doesn’t really matter what we do at school, if these kids don’t have their basic needs met at home, nothing is really going to change.” Amy echoed this sentiment with her assertion that “...until their [Black males] families have the money and resources needed at home, we will continue to see these students being overserved in special education.” Further reinforcing the notion that poverty is the major player in this phenomenon, at the conclusion of each interview, when the participants were asked how they would combat overrepresentation, they unanimously suggested that increasing the financial resources of Black families would almost assuredly decrease the likelihood of a Black male student being placed in special education. In essence, while all participants acknowledged that many risk factors work together to marginalize young Black males, the consensus belief was that

poverty played the largest role. Considering the close geographic proximity of all my research participants, it would make sense that their student populations would demonstrate similarities, possibly explaining why all participants indicated poverty was the most burdensome risk factor. However, in different geographic regions other risk factors may be more pronounced. This is an area where I believe my research provides a framework for future inquiries, as my study positions special education teachers as a valuable source of information towards understanding which risk factors have the most impact on Black males.

A third contribution my research makes to the field of curriculum studies is that it further reinforces the need for continued teacher-training in culturally responsive pedagogy. Although the technology and resources available to educators has exponentially increased in recent years making it easier than ever to create engaging lessons and activities, so too, has the level of diversity in public schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). This same diversity was repeatedly discussed during my research interviews, with the participants noting that it has become increasingly difficult to relate to all of their students. Carol stated that “When I first started teaching, I basically served White and Black students. Now, I serve all types of students...some are White, some are Black, some are part White...part Black. Some are Hispanic, some are just non-White...and the needs of each of these groups is different than all the rest.” CRT provides a logical explanation as to why Carol experienced the lack of distinguishable categorizations she described in her interview. According to CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012), society prefers to stratify individuals based upon a Black-White binary, often refusing to take into account the stark cultural differences between groups of non-White individuals. However, subscribers to CRT contend that, in reality, diverse groups of people display needs and characteristics unique to themselves, regardless of similarities in skin color.

Mike presented a different take on the challenges of diversity when he recounted how “...when I taught in urban schools, not all the [minority] kids were poor, some came from money, but bad behavior would get many of the students referred for special education.” Mike’s observation, that minority students were often over-disciplined for bad behavior is seemingly explained in the professional literature as well. Referencing back to my review of literature, researchers have already been exploring the fact that minority students are overrepresented in exclusionary discipline, and have concluded that, in many cases, minority students receive punitive consequences simply because their behaviors do not align with those of the prevailing culture (Irving & Hudley, 2008; Toldson, 2011).

Finally, Amy revealed yet another challenge faced by educators when she recalled how difficult it was to hold IEP meetings with parents who “...do not speak any English. They want to be involved in the process, but it’s so difficult to communicate with each other.” I would argue that Amy’s experience is likely to become a much more common experience for many educators. As the national student population grows increasingly more diverse, the nuances of cultural heterogeneity are inevitably going to be on display. Minority parents deserve to have their children receive a high-quality education, while also reserving their cultural independence. The concept of maintaining cultural identity, while simultaneously becoming a member of mainstream society, is no easy task. In fact, it has proven quite difficult.

Garcia-Huidobro (2018) acknowledged these difficulties, when describing the concept of *existential contradiction*. According to Garcia-Huidobro (2018), existential contradiction is the conundrum which occurs when minority families “...are happy with industrial development and technology that secure a certain level of material life...[but] feel a certain loss of identity...” (p. 25). Considering that public education impacts countless numbers of minority families



nationwide, one would assume that educators need to be prepared to deal with diversity now more than ever. With this understanding in mind, I believe my research points to the need for teachers to continue to be exposed to quality diversity training and professional development which is intended to improve multi-cultural skills. Additionally, the field of curriculum studies should continue to focus a portion of its efforts towards understanding how students, particularly minority students, experience schooling.

### **Limitations**

As with all studies, my research possessed certain limitations which undoubtedly impacted the data which were obtained from the research. In fact, it can be argued that all qualitative research is influenced, to some degree, by the limitations imposed upon the study. The characteristics which make qualitative research so appealing, such as the use of personal narratives and subjective data, also limit the degree to which qualitative studies can be used to serve as standards or precedents for reform. Munthe-Kaas, Glenton, Booth, Noyes, and Lewin (2019) contended that "...there are challenges in using qualitative synthesis findings to inform decision making because methods to assess how much confidence to place in these findings are poorly developed" (p. 2). This statement addresses the *reliability* question which stigmatizes many qualitative research projects, when the primary source of data is derived beyond statistically calculable means. Inevitably, the same *reliability* concerns applied to the data and findings which emerged from my particular research, considering the intentionally subjective nature of this study.

Aside from the general reliability limitation associated with many qualitative projects, another major limitation of my study lied within the decision to incorporate a CRT framework to position my research. As discussed earlier in this report, the CRT framework offered an

inherently biased view towards power structures and the forces which serve to maintain these structures. Proponents of CRT unapologetically take the stance that people of color continue to face subjugation and marginalization imposed by White systems of control. In regard to this stance, I was no different. Therefore, it seemed reasonable to assume that my data analysis, as well as the lens through which I synthesized the results, were likely skewed toward the rights of minority individuals. In spite of this limitation, I believed that it was necessary for me to invoke the CRT framework as the driving force behind my research. Again, going back to Harding (2015), it is a more noble cause to seek research which embraced its own subjectivity than to hide behind the guise of objectivity, which is, after all, merely a fallacy.

Sampling bias, or selection bias, presented another potential limitation on my research. Collier and Mahoney (1996) warned of the dangers of undermining qualitative research through the deliberate selection of a sample population, and suggested that the generality of findings from studies linked to sampling bias may be rendered useless. Considering that it was my intent to include individuals who met very specific criteria in my research, it could be argued that my findings lacked the ability to lead to meaningful generalizations in the field of education. However, I felt that my personal research objectives were best met through the inclusion of individuals who met specific criteria, and that my goal of promoting a conversation on overrepresentation was sufficiently accomplished, even in the presence of a biased sample. Further, the CRT framework obligated me to conduct a form of inquiry which very thoughtfully identified the target sample population. I believe that any selection bias which may have existed in my study did not minimize the reliability of my results. Rather, I believe the criteria used during the sample selection process added depth and meaning to the findings.

A final limitation which I identified involved the data collection process and the constraints associated with conducting virtual interviews. Ideally, I would have preferred to conduct my interviews in person, creating an environment in which total body language was observable. However, due to global COVID-19 recommendations, I elected to utilize virtual interviews. While I do believe that the virtual interviews served as an effective medium, I certainly think a live, face-to-face setting would have been preferable.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

The phenomenon of Black male overrepresentation in special education is clearly a major issue in many public schools, and is certainly viewed as such by special education teachers. While the dialogue surrounding this phenomenon has been taking place for decades, I believe educators are currently positioned at the tip of the blade, in that we truly have the opportunity to induce change. While it remains a mystery as to what this change might look like, change is no doubt a necessity. I believe the best path forward for educators involves a continued line of communication and a constant evaluation of our practices. Furthermore, I believe we need to offer a seat at the table to those most directly impacted by the phenomenon. Considering this, it is necessary for educators and policy makers to continue to look internally, in order to address the ways in which the educational system itself may be contributing to the overrepresentation of Black males in special education programs. Perhaps by engaging in reflective dialogue, and considering the long-term effects of our actions, we may unearth a new way of effectively educating individuals who require special education services while simultaneously avoiding the disproportionate placement of Black males into special education programs.

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## APPENDIX A

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

#### INTRODUCTORY QUESTIONS

1. Describe your current job and the responsibilities you fill in this role.
2. How long have you worked with students with disabilities?

#### OVERREPRESENTATION QUESTIONS

3. Describe your experiences with Black male overrepresentation in special education.
4. What do you view as the primary cause of Black male overrepresentation?
5. Why do you think state and federal regulations designed to prevent minority students from being overserved in special education, such as RTI, fail to prevent overrepresentation of Black males?
6. In what ways, if any, do commonly accepted school practices contribute to Black male overrepresentation in special education?
7. How might overrepresentation of Black males in special education be an issue of racial inequality?
8. What are some potential long-term effects of Black male overrepresentation in special education?

#### CLOSING QUESTIONS

9. What was your motivation for agreeing to participate in a study focused on Black male overrepresentation in special education?
10. How have your views on overrepresentation evolved throughout your professional career?
11. If you had limitless power over the education system, what would be your first course of action towards addressing overrepresentation of Black males in special education?

## APPENDIX B

## TEACHER INFORMATION QUESTIONNAIRE

- 1) How many total years of teaching experience have you completed?
- 2) How many years of teaching experience do you have in Special Education?
- 3) Do you have experience working with overrepresented sub-groups?
- 4) Do you have experience working with populations containing an overrepresented number of Black males?
- 5) If applicable, in which RESA District are you currently employed?
- 6) With which Race do you most closely identify?
- 7) With which Sex do you most closely identify?