TEACHER PERCEPTIONS REGARDING RACE AND GENDER ON
DISPROPORTIONALITY IN THE SPECIAL EDUCATION REFERRAL
PROCESS

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TEACHER PERCEPTIONS REGARDING RACE AND GENDER ON DISPROPORTIONALITY IN THE SPECIAL EDUCATION REFERRAL PROCESS

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored teacher perceptions of disproportionality in special education referrals in relation to race and gender and teacher preparedness to make referrals to special education services. This study was conducted at three Pennsylvania school districts. Two districts were considered rural/suburban, while one district was identified as suburban. Participants were 36 elementary, middle, and high school general education teachers who responded to a researcher-designed electronic survey consisting of multiple-response, Likert scale, and open-ended questions. In addition, three respondents participated in individual interviews with the researcher. The findings of this study indicate that general education teachers have variable responses to how race, gender, and their own preparedness influence referrals of students to special education services. Data showed a need for training for both inservice and preservice teachers in bias in order to allow for an understanding of factors that can influence referral rates of students to special education services. Data also indicated a need for educating all professional instructional staff in disproportionality and whether or not it occurs within their district. Finally, findings revealed the need for teacher preparation and teacher inservice programs to have a heavier emphasis on training educators to work with students with disabilities.
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my students: past, present, and future. While I want so much to inspire each of you, you continue to be my constant inspirations. I hope you each know that you are valued and loved.
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Table of Contents

Abstract...........................................................................................................................................iv
Dedication........................................................................................................................................v
Acknowledgements....................................................................................................................vi
Table of Contents......................................................................................................................viii
Chapter One Introduction..............................................................................................................1
  Need for the Study......................................................................................................................4
  Statement of the Problem..........................................................................................................7
  Definition of Terms....................................................................................................................8
  Limitations................................................................................................................................10
  Research Questions...................................................................................................................11
  Summary....................................................................................................................................11
Chapter Two Literature Review....................................................................................................12
  Literature Search......................................................................................................................14
  Theoretical Framework.............................................................................................................14
  Special Education Referral Process.........................................................................................16
  IDEA – Significant Disproportionality.....................................................................................17
  Implications of Special Education Services..........................................................................19
  Variables Impacting Referral Rates.......................................................................................23
  Overview of Teacher Perceptions of Special Education Students......................................26
  Student Perception of Peers with Disabilities....................................................................29
  Teacher Preparation..................................................................................................................33
  Equal Access and Differentiation............................................................................................35
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Three Methodology</th>
<th>40</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instruments</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Validity</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design of the Study</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedure</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Four Results</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compilation of Data</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographic Information</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question One</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surveys</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple Choice Questions</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open-ended Survey Questions</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question Two</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter One – Introduction

Overview

Kauffman and Hallahan (2011) stated that prior to 1975 special education had a history of reform for student rights and services and it was typical for students with disabilities to be excluded from public school settings. In the late 1960s, there were approximately two hundred thousand students with disabilities that were located in institutions (U.S. Department of Education [USDOE] & Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services [OSERS], 2010, p. 3). Furthermore, in 1970, our public schools educated only one in five children identified with disabilities while also restricting placement based on disability category. Students identified as mentally retarded, blind, emotionally disturbed, and deaf were not permitted to be educated within the public school system (USDOE & OSERS, 2010). In 1975, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) was enacted. That legislation gave school districts funding as long as they created and submitted plans where every student was provided with a free and appropriate public education (FAPE). Thus, the acronym, FAPE, was born and a movement began (USDOE & OSERS).

Important concepts tied to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) included providing students with FAPE in the least restrictive environment (LRE) (IDEA, 2013). Federal legislation defined FAPE as special education programming that had been provided at taxpayer expense, was tailored to specific student needs, and allowed the student to receive a quality education (IDEA, 2013). Federal regulations also defined LRE as having students with disabilities educated with neurotypical peers, removal from a typical environment only when a student’s disability is so significant that including
them within the general education classroom with additional aids and services will not benefit the student (IDEA, 2013).

Multiple revisions were made to the EAHCA. However, one of the most commonly known revisions was completed in 1990 when EAHCA became better known as IDEA. Educational agencies followed this federal guideline. In the revision to IDEA, the concepts of FAPE and LRE were continued with a focus on culturally relevant instructional practices for students with severe disabilities (United States, 2013). Through the implementation of IDEA, students with significant disabilities are now attending their local schools and learning academic and functional skills that they will need in order to be productive members of society, able to integrate with family members, coworkers, neighbors, and other community members (United States, 2013).

According to Howe, Artiles, and Kauffman (2018), educational professionals are required to make multiple decisions and problem solve situations with ethical implications throughout their day to day life. The authors also underlined that all teachers, but especially those serving special education students, will regularly navigate through ethical dilemmas that require input from multiple standpoints. Furthermore, they believed that special education predicaments have strong ethical connotations and will have lifelong implications for families and students.

Students that are given an inappropriate special education classification may suffer long lasting effects (Harry & Klingner, 2006). Students that are identified incorrectly are more likely to have less access to a high quality, rigorous curriculum and be given lower expectations for success (National Education Association, 2007). Receiving special education services as a child can impact academic and behavioral
outcomes throughout a student’s educational career (Morgan, Frisco, Garkas, & Hibel, 2017). The researchers conducted a quantitative study that examined longitudinal effects of special education services delivered in United States schools on student learning and behavior and found that special education services had limited or negative impacts on student’s reading and mathematics skills and their ability to control problematic behaviors. These researchers determined that the costs of identifying a student for special education services should be considered due to identified children having an overall lower academic performance in mathematics and reading as well as a higher level of engagement in problem behaviors.

Receiving special education services as a child can also have long lasting negative implications through childhood (Chesmore, Ou, & Reynolds, 2016). The researchers conducted a longitudinal study to determine if special education placement as a child caused implications into adulthood regarding educational attainment, incarceration, substance misuse, and depression for a primarily minority population. Results of the study indicated that having a placement in special education as a child correlated with fewer years of completed education, a lower rate of high school graduation, and higher rates of mental health issues, drug and alcohol abuse, and incarceration.

A factor that must be considered by special educators is the role of personal bias and implications for students with disabilities (Axt, 2017). Piechura-Couture, Heins, and Mercedes (2011) outlined that the primary reasons students are referred to special education usually revolve around behavioral concerns and slower academic achievement. Regarding racial bias, Axt (2017) found that a large number of teachers demonstrated a high pro-Black bias in relation to behavior, meaning that they set a lower standard for
expected behavior of Black students than their White counterparts. Axt asserted that regardless of a teacher’s desire to be unbiased, it was not enough to keep racial information from influencing decision making. Furthermore, Woodson and Harris (2018) suggested that teacher bias regarding race and gender could increase the likelihood of a student being referred for special education services. The researchers outlined that educators and professionals within the school environment should be aware of how their own perceptions of various racial and ethnic groups influences how they are able to respond to school children of various racial backgrounds (Woodson & Harris, 2018).

**Need for the Study**

Research relating to disproportionality and special education was limited. The researcher conducted an exhaustive search utilizing Google Scholar, EBSCOHOST, and ERIC using the terms: special education, disproportionality, bias, racial disproportionality, and gender disproportionality. The search was then narrowed down to include research conducted no earlier than 2010 in an attempt to identify recent, peer reviewed research relating to the disproportionate identification of special education students. Studies discovered through the search gave the researcher conflicting information regarding disproportionate identification of students, and was thus the cause for a further investigation through this researcher’s current study. In the state of Pennsylvania, when districts are identified as significantly disproportionate, corrective action measures and sanctions are outlined by the state in order to remedy disproportionality (PDE, 2016). Therefore, completing research regarding teacher perceptions of disproportionate referrals to special education in the state of Pennsylvania
could assist in identifying factors that are increasing or decreasing disproportionate referrals.

In response to the conflicting information regarding contributing factors of disproportionality in special education services, Kincaid and Sullivan (2016) investigated through a longitudinal, mixed method study, how school and student socioeconomic status (SES) could be used to predict a student’s chances of being identified for special education. Results of the study suggested that various SES factors did not anticipate whether or not a student would be identified for special education with the exception of the level of the parent’s education. Furthermore, the researchers found that their study did not discover disproportionality within special education identification with the exception of Asian American students who were significantly underrepresented.

Sullivan and Bal (2013) examined disproportionality and the risk of students identified with a disability through various school and individual variables in a quantitative study. Through this study they identified that the biggest risk factor for being identified for special education services was eligibility for free or reduced meals and not student race. The researchers also highlighted the importance of considering multiple socioeconomic and school characteristics when predicting a student’s risk of special education identification.

Morgan et al. (2017) synthesized information through a meta-analysis in an attempt to identify whether or not Black students were overrepresented in special education and through the use of specific eligibility criteria showed no relationship between being a Black student and being identified for special education. Specifically, it was stated that “47 of 48 (97.9%) of the regression coefficients from studies with the
strongest internal and external validity did not indicate that Black children were
overrepresented in special education because of their race or ethnicity” and suggested that
the idea of overrepresentation of Black children in special education lacked empirical
support (p. 192). The researchers also suggested that their synthesis of information
showed that more attention should be paid to making sure all students were properly
evaluated rather than wasting resources lowering overrepresentation that did not exist.
Similarly, Robinson and Norton (2019) examined enrollment data in the United States
and discovered that students who were African American were underrepresented in
speech and language impairment identification.
Zhang, Katsiyannis, Ju, and Roberts (2012) utilized growth models to examine
national trends to review the issue of minority overrepresentation in special education
from 2004 to 2008. The researchers ascertained that there were some improvements made
to minority overrepresentation, especially in regards to African American and Hispanic
students identified as intellectually disabled. While the researchers noted that the number
of Hispanic students identified with learning disabilities grew and that overidentification
of minority students continued to be a concern for school districts, Morgan et al. (2017)
presented contradictory findings.
Morgan et al. (2020) suggested that in the United States, schools are less likely to
identify students of color as disabled than their White peers while enrolled in elementary
and middle school in the southern states. The researchers asserted that these findings
were a strong indicator of improved federal educational policy to prevent the
underrepresentation of students of color and that school districts should work diligently to
safeguard their special education evaluation and identification policies against being culturally unresponsive in order to improve the rate of identification for students of color.

**Statement of the Problem**

The U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services (2016) noted that Black students are 40 percent more likely to be identified for having a disability than their White peers, while American Indian or Alaskan Native students are seventy percent more likely to be identified for special education services. Furthermore, students that are Black were roughly twice as likely to receive the educational classifications of emotional disturbance or intellectual disability than any other racial group (U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2016, p. xxvii). Until disproportionality is no longer a concern, all students will not be guaranteed their rights to a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). Previous research on disproportionality resulted in mixed results. Morgan et al. (2017) focused on African American students’ overidentification, while Kincaid and Sullivan (2017) and Zhang et al. (2012) focused on all races and ethnicities. Zhang et al. (2012) discovered a decrease in the number of identified African American and Hispanic students labeled with intellectual disability; however, still surmised that disproportionality continued to be a problem. Morgan et al. (2017) concluded that African American children were not overidentified in special education; if anything they were underidentified, providing contradictory evidence.

Through the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), the state of Pennsylvania is required “to identify districts with ‘significant disproportionality’ in special education—that is, when districts identify, place outside the regular classroom, or discipline children
from any racial or ethnic group at markedly higher rates than their peers” (United States Department of Education, 2016, para. 2). Furthermore, teacher perceptions of the impact of their students’ race, gender, and other mitigating factors for special education referrals lacked empirical research. As special education becomes more litigious, it behooves school districts, educators, and specialists to understand how teacher perception of disproportionality influenced their referrals to special education services.

**Definitions of Terms**

The following defined terms permit a common understanding of their intended meanings in this study and research conducted to support the study:

*Accommodation* – Accommodation is defined as an adjustment to a student’s education plan including possible changes in presentation, demonstration of mastery, setting, time, or supports needed for the student to meet those expectations (Vander Broek et al., 2019).

*Autism* - Autism is defined as a disability that revolves around “social communication and interaction across various contexts, problems with establishing, understanding, and maintaining relationships appropriate to developmental level, and the presence of restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities” (Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network, n.d.).

*Disproportionality* - Disproportionality is defined as a school entity identifying for special education, placing outside of the general education classroom, or disciplining students from any ethnic, racial, or gender category at a considerably higher rate than their peers (United States Department of Education, 2016).

*Emotional Disturbance (ED)* - Emotional Disturbance is defined as a disability category in the state of Pennsylvania in which students exhibit one or more of the following traits:
unexplained inability to learn, inability to maintain positive relationships with peers and adults, improper behaviors, and showing an overall feeling of depression and/or psychosomatic symptoms (Sec. 300.8, 2017).

**Explicit Bias** - Explicit Bias is defined as “attitudes or affective reactions that people are aware that they have, that they can alter with relative ease as their beliefs change, and that they can strategically misreport when they want to do so” (Starck, Riddle, Sinclair, & Warikoo, 2020, p. 274).

**Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)** - FAPE is defined as a special education placement decided upon by the IEP team of a public school that provides special education services that meet the guidelines set forth by the state (Yell, 2019, p. 60).

**Implicit Bias** - Implicit Bias is defined as “the automatic cognitive associations or affective predispositions individuals have with different social groups” (Starck et al., 2020, p. 274).

**Individualized Education Plan (IEP)** - IEP is defined as a written plan that is created for a student with a disability that is developed, reviewed, and revised in order to ensure the student is making adequate academic and functional progress (Section § 300.320, 2019).

**Intelligence Quotient (IQ)** - IQ is defined as standardized tests and subtests that together formulate a score measuring an individual’s intelligence and helps educators to determine how far below or above a student’s intelligence is in relation to their peer group (Mensa International, 2020).

**Local Educational Agency (LEA)** - LEA is defined as “a public board of education or other public authority legally constituted within a State for either administrative control
or direction of, or to perform a service function for, public elementary schools or secondary schools” (U.S. Department of Education, n.d., para. 12).

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) - LRE is defined as providing students with disabilities with an education that includes nondisabled peers and a general education environment to the maximum extent possible as determined by each student’s IEP team, removing the said student from such an environment only when the severity and nature of their disability requires (LRE Requirements, 2019).

Modification - Modification is defined as a change or alteration to what expectation a student is required to meet, involving possible changes in instructional standards or curriculum (Vander Broek et al., 2019).

Neurotypical - Neurotypical is defined as individuals that are lacking any developmental disorders (Hare, Jones, Evershed, 2006).

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) - UDL is defined as a framework that believes in reducing barriers so that all students can have access to, participate with, and make progress in the general education classroom and curriculum (Ralabate, 2020).

Limitations

There are limitations of this study that will help direct future research studies. This research study was conducted in three public school districts in Pennsylvania and the sample sizes from each district varied due to population; therefore, this study will not be generalizable outside of Pennsylvania or to areas with different demographic sample sizes (Creswell, 2015). The 36 participants were limited to general education teachers. Special education teachers were not included. In addition, data collected by the researcher
were self-reported by the participants and therefore, could contain elements of individual bias.

**Research Questions**

1. What are teacher perceptions regarding race in special education referrals?
2. What are teacher perceptions regarding gender in special education referrals?
3. What are teacher perceptions regarding their preparedness to make special education referrals on behalf of students?

**Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate teacher perceptions regarding race and gender in the special education referral process as well as teacher preparedness to make referrals to special education services. Findings from this research will help school leaders develop appropriate intervention strategies to decrease the likelihood of special education referrals being made without appropriate cause. The researcher will also aid in possibly identifying personal biases of teachers that can impact referral rates. Analyzing these areas will help provide guidance to special education leaders in order to assure FAPE for all students regardless of race, gender, or teacher bias.
Chapter Two – Literature Review

Education has always been a reflection of societal acceptance as Kirby (2016) noted and it was further suggested that groups of people who are oppressed within their own communities are often treated similarly in the school setting. Through conducting a literature review of trends in special education, Kirby was able to identify that the typical framework of special education is based on a medical model which considers disabilities as something that makes humans defective and that require remediation. Kirby asserted that an implicit assumption was formed that outlined the belief that due to their disability, students should be educated in different settings in order to correct their deficit areas.

Inclusion is now considered best practice from a global perspective in order to educate all students (Ajuwon et al., 2012). Students with disabilities should be included fully within the general education classroom; however, it would currently require a systemic overhaul (Kirby, 2016). Ajuwon et al. (2012) outlined that instead of utilizing the medical model, students would be better served if society viewed the environment as disabiling the student and not the disability itself, which aligns with the social construction ideals. Kirby believed that an emphasis should be placed on making the classroom a conducive learning environment for all students, regardless of disability or identification category.

In order to effectively instruct students within the inclusive environment, attention should be focused on preservice instruction at the university level (Kirby, 2016). Yuknis (2015) conducted a study examining the influence of an introductory special education course on undergraduate and graduate students looking to acquire a general education teaching license. Specifically, the researcher targeted perceptions regarding educational
placement of deaf students within the school setting. The researcher discovered that while it would be ideal for preservice teachers to be instructed on how to educate students with disabilities, the instruction is typically delivered in one course with most of the preservice learning focused on becoming experts in their field of education. Ajuwon et al. (2012) conducted an empirical study with one hundred and sixteen teacher candidates from universities in the southwest and midwest regions of the United States. Using a preservice inclusion survey (PSIS), the researchers found teacher training programs should educate preservice teachers on how to modify and accommodate their content areas for students with disabilities while also embedding a belief that students with disabilities are accepted in their classrooms.

Tucker and Stronge (2005) outlined the importance of a quality educator and the implications for student achievement. They asserted that if a student is given a teacher with high quality characteristics for one of their years in school, that teacher will influence their future years of education. However, if they are given a low quality educator that will have negative implications for their future years. Robinson and Young (2019) completed an empirical literature review specifically examining current research on the dynamics of teacher attitudes in inclusive education and student outcomes. Through the review they were able to identify most research revolved around teacher skill sets and how it is related to specific disability categories. Robinson and Young described a need for research regarding teacher perceptions and aspects of special education. Mason-Williams et al, (2019) conducted an empirical literature review of 25 peer reviewed articles between the years of 2008 and 2018 and asserted that special education has long suffered from an unqualified teaching pool, and therefore, has never
fully followed through with the provision of FAPE for all students with disabilities. The researchers outlined multiple factors that played into the special education teacher shortage including wages and working conditions; however, the researchers believed it could be rectified by paying teachers a more competitive salary and improving their working conditions.

The predominant goal of this research study was to focus on the influence of teacher perception regarding race and gender on disproportionality in the special education referral process. Studying teacher perceptions related to these factors in the special education referral process may help to ensure that all students, regardless of race or cultural affiliation, have access to a FAPE that is free of teacher bias.

The search for current, 2013-2020, peer-reviewed articles was conducted via the Immaculata online library. These databases included Education Full Text, Educator’s Reference Complete, and ERIC. Google Scholar was also utilized to locate open access articles. The following search terms were used to locate articles specific to this study: special education, disproportionality, race, gender, bias, and referrals. Variations of these terms were used to ensure exhaustive search results.

Theoretical Framework

In order for all students to receive a free and appropriate public education, there must be an equality of access to services in special education. This literature review was conducted from the lens of equity theory specifically related to special education students. All students, regardless of race or disability, should have access to a free and appropriate public education. The theoretical framework of this study was informed by
the work of Dr. Linda Darling-Hammond (2017) in conjunction with the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework.

Educational equality occurs when all students are treated in the same manner and have access to the same resources, whereas equity occurs when all students have access to resources needed in order to graduate from high school prepared for post-secondary life (Barth, 2016). Educational equity is impacted by school funding, access to high quality curriculum, access to highly qualified and exceptional teachers, and fair discipline (Barth, 2016). Specifically related to disproportionality, Darling-Hammond (2017) advocated for schools to hold themselves accountable by utilizing the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to support marginalized students by looking at disproportionality indicators regarding these factors.

UDL is a framework that emphasizes the need to create surroundings in educational entities that can challenge all individuals while also being accessible; a heavy emphasis is placed on changing the environment rather than the student (CAST, 2018). The framework was developed with each student’s unique brain in mind; specifically, the framework outlines three networks as a focus: affective network, recognition network, and strategic network. The CAST organization described the affective network as how a student used their environment to behave and engage in learning, while the recognition network focused on how students perceived stimuli in their environment and transferred it into knowledge and the strategic network revolved around how students acted in the environment.
Special Education Referral Process

In Pennsylvania, all districts have an obligation to actively seek and identify students that may require special education services that are referred to as a child find responsibility (Lowman, Darr, & Roth, 2014). Additionally, Lowman et al. (2014) outlined that the child find responsibility is not limited to students currently enrolled within the school district, but also students in the child welfare program, homeless, migrants, and private school students in order to provide special education evaluations regardless of parent concerns.

The special education referral process can be triggered in two ways: at the LEA request or at parent request. According to the Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network (PATTAN), parents can make the request for a special education referral to any employee, whether administrator or general education teacher (2019). According to PATTAN (2019), legislation requires that the request be received in writing and must include parental permission before continuing. The evaluation will be conducted by qualified professionals within a team which is composed of a minimum of the parents, teachers, and a school psychologist and should include assessments as well as teacher recommendations within sixty calendar days of receiving the written request (Lowman et al., 2014). The author’s outline that upon completion of the evaluation, the team will decide whether the student is eligible for and in need of special education services within the school setting; if eligible, an IEP will be developed and appropriate specially designed instruction, related services, and placement will be determined.
IDEA – Significant Disproportionality

IDEA has been revised multiple times since 1990 (Federal Register, 2016). On February 23, 2016, the United States Department of Education recommended the “Equity in IDEA” rule with hopes of addressing the perceived issue of overrepresentation of minority students in special education (Federal Register, 2016). Through this rule, the concept of significant disproportionality was outlined as identifying students with disabilities, placing students in educational settings of children with disabilities, and disciplinary actions against students that were based on race or ethnicity (Office of Special Education Programs [OSEP], OSERS, & USDOE, 2017). IDEA did not formally define what constituted as significant disproportionality, but instead required that by July 1, 2018 states develop their own standard methods for analyzing disproportionality, this also included each state, setting a specific threshold for which disproportionality was deemed excessive (OSEP, OSERS, & USDOE, 2017).

Standard methodology can vary from state to state but each is required to use a risk ratio to review seven ethnic and racial groups and compare each to all other students within the LEA (OSEP, OSERS, & USDOE, 2017). In 2016, Pennsylvania adopted a Risk Ratio analysis in order to identify whether a public school district had concerns with significant disproportionality. Specifically, the risk ratio examined 14 ethnic and 7 racial groups and a district was identified with significant disproportionality when risk ratios in any of those groups exceeded the allowable limit for three consecutive years (Pennsylvania Department of Public Education, 2016). However, Pennsylvania also outlined that it was possible for districts to remain unidentified as significantly disproportionate if they could show that they were making progress in reducing the risk
ratio. Progress was deemed reasonable if it showed a reduction of at least .25 for two consecutive school years (Pennsylvania Department of Public Education, 2016).

Risk ratios are numbers that identify the amount of risk for a particular result for a racial or ethnic group in the school district compared to the risk of the same result for all other students within the district (OSEP, OSERS, & USDOE, 2017). The higher the risk ratio, the higher the possible risk to the racial or ethnic group:

A risk ratio of 1.0 indicates that children from a given racial or ethnic group are no more or less likely than children from all other racial or ethnic groups to experience a particular outcome. A risk ratio of 2.0 indicates that one group is twice as likely as all other children to experience that outcome. A risk ratio of 3.0 indicates three times as likely (OSEP, OSERS, & USDOE, 2017, p. 4).

A cell size is a minimum number, set by each state, of students that are experiencing a particular result. Pennsylvania continues to use this methodology currently, but is asking stakeholders to weigh into the development of methodology following the issuance of “Equity of IDEA” (Pennsylvania Department of Education, n.d.). When a state education agency (SEA) identifies a local education agency (LEA) with significant disproportionality under IDEA in one or more areas, the SEA must: (a) ensure the LEA review and, if necessary, revise policies and procedures to become compliant with IDEA requirements; (b) enforce the LEA to publicly report on any revisions to policies that occurred in accordance with the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and IDEA; (c) and require the LEA to utilize at least 15 percent of its IDEA, Part B funding to address the factors that contributed to the significant disproportionality (OSEP, OSERS, & USDOE, 2017).
Implications of Special Education Services

Receiving special education services as a child can impact academic and behavioral outcomes throughout a student’s educational career (Morgan, Frisco, Garkas, & Hibel, 2017). The researchers used data from a large-scale quantitative study that looked at the longitudinal effects of special education services delivered in United States schools on student learning and behavior by comparing outcomes of children getting special education services between eight and nine years old to their neurotypical peers with similar characteristics after two years of intervention. Through assessing a nationally representative sample of students in the United States, the researchers found that special education services had statistically irrelevant or negative impacts on a student’s reading and mathematical skills and their ability to control problematic behaviors (Morgan et al., 2017). Therefore, the costs of identifying a student for special education services should be considered due to identified children having an overall lower academic performance in mathematics and reading as well as a higher level of engagement in problem behaviors as outlined by the researchers.

Receiving special education services as a child can also have long lasting negative implications through childhood (Chesmore, Ou, & Reynolds, 2016). The researchers conducted a longitudinal study in Chicago that looked to identify if special education placement as a child caused further implications into adulthood regarding educational attainment, incarceration, substance misuse, and depression for the 1,377 participants that were primarily low-socioeconomic minority students. Their study found that being placed in special education services or programs in childhood correlated to higher high school
dropout rates, fewer years of completed education, an increase in drug and alcohol abuse, and greater incidence of depression or incarceration.

Kanaya, Wai, and Miranda (2019) studied the implications of special education services on adult outcomes. The researchers used a compilation of 17 different variables and interviewed students that had participated in special education services during any of the years of their education compared to their general education peers. Eligible students were born between 1980 and 1994 and had a minimum of one Behavior Problem Index (BPI) or Peabody Individual Achievement Test (PPVT) score during their youth. The researchers identified that students that received special education services who were born between the years of 1980 and 1994 did not have better adult outcomes than those of their peers who were likely eligible for special education instruction but did not take advantage of the service. The exception to this finding was when the researchers discovered that Hispanic students seemed to have more favorable adulthood than that of their non-Hispanic peers. Furthermore, the results of the researchers’ study indicated that impacting factors, including socioeconomic status and level of parental education, are able to more accurately predict the outcomes for students in adulthood than actually receiving special education services.

Szumski, Firkowska-Mankiewicz, Lebuda, and Karwowski (2018) conducted a longitudinal study in order to identify how special education identification or separate school placement for special education services impacted the quality of life for adults. Specifically, the researchers measured each student’s intelligence quotient (IQ) and parental interviews were conducted before following up with students 23 years later when they became 36 years old. The participants of the study included 49 adults with borderline
intellectual functioning (BIF), with 21 of the participants being identified as special education students requiring special school settings. Through this study, they were unable to find any explicit correlation between students receiving special education services and lower adult quality of life than that of their general education peers (Szumski et al., 2018).

Sheffield and Morgan (2017) specifically researched the impact of special education services on adult outcomes for students identified with social, emotional, and mental health difficulties which would fit under the emotional disturbance classification in the United States. The researchers used purposeful sampling in order to enlist nine students between the ages of 13 and 16 who all participated in general education secondary level schools in London. The researchers found that various study participants said that they had limited friendships and had been subjected to bullying behaviors, as their needs were easily apparent to their peers. Participants of the study discussed the stigma of special education services, explicitly when they were separated from the general education population.

Myklebust and Myklebust (2017) attempted to identify the impact of psychological and social health in a special education student’s adolescent and adult mental health. Using a longitudinal study, the 760 Norwegian participants were studied from their teenage years through their mid-30s of adulthood. Participants specifically provided information regarding their mental health during the year 2012. The researchers surmised that the psychological health of adults that received special education services was negatively impacted by increased health problems and social security benefits; furthermore, the risk for poor mental health was higher for girls over boys with females
twice as likely to experience concerns. Specifically, the researchers outlined that students that received assistance from paraprofessionals in the classroom while attending high school did not have improved mental health as adults, but rather increased risk of negative mental health.

Langøy and Kvalsund (2018) investigated various elements that impacted the independence levels for special education students in high school through a longitudinal study. Using data that were collected from 357 people, the researchers examined the outcomes of independent living and competitive employment for students that had behavior and learning disabilities using a logistic regression analysis. Langøy and Kvalsund asserted that having special education services in high school correlated to negative independent living outcomes for students with disabilities. The researchers outlined that having learning difficulties and/or behavioral needs in high school resulted in students being a part of a dependent living environment lacking full time employment; furthermore, women were at a disadvantage compared to male peers in regards to full time employment and their participation in special education in school continued to impact their trajectory for nearly ten years following graduation.

Myklebust (2018) specifically studied the transition of more than 250 students that received special education services in high school from student life to parenthood. The researchers used logistic regression at 23 and 36 years old in order to assess the transition to parenthood. They concluded that students that received special education services anytime in high school were followed through their thirties in order to identify how their disability impacted parenting. Through the study, the researchers were able to ascertain that females that had special education services had a higher chance of having
early births, earlier than the age of twenty-three, than their male counterparts. Myklebust did note that having an early birth does not equal a negative life outcome.

**Variables Impacting Referral Rates**

Research has identified that teacher race, gender, and teaching level could impact the likelihood of a teacher referral (Alter et al., 2013). The comprehensive literature review completed by Alter et al. (2013) found that African American and Caucasian teachers did not identify verbal behaviors as extremely frequent. The researchers identified that these same populations of teachers were less concerned with off task behaviors in the classroom. The same study identified that female teachers were most likely to find students being off task as problematic compared to that of their male colleagues. The researchers also determined that elementary level educators were more bothered by student behaviors than their secondary counterparts.

Students that come from households designated as low income have been documented as having an elevated risk of underperformance in the subject area of reading compared to their higher income peers as mentioned by Stevenson et al. (2016). However, Stevenson et al. conducted research with 4,215 sixth, seventh, and eighth graders finding that there was no correlation between low socioeconomic status of students and how well they performed in reading as assessed by Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) and Maze screening tools. The researchers also determined that socioeconomic status was not a bias of these assessment tools that led to predicting lower reading levels.

Bryan, Day-Vines, Griffin, and Moore-Thomas (2011) specifically worked to identify which teachers were most likely to make referrals for behavior that disrupted the classroom. The researchers followed a specific cohort of tenth grade students with 4,981
students in mathematics classes and 2,607 students in English classes in public high schools within the United States; 25% of the districts were urban, 25% were rural, and 50% of the school districts were identified as suburban. Through their study the researchers were able to identify that English teachers referred Black female students twice as often as their White peers and multiracial females three times as often. Conversely, the researchers found that mathematics teachers referred females for behavior concerns less often than males with no relation to race. The researchers also discovered that students that had exhibited previous risk behavior, such as truancy or suspension, and previous disciplinary action increased the likelihood of referral by both English and mathematics teachers.

There is also an unbalanced identification of minority students due to flaws in the process of referring students to special education services, specifically in relation to emotional disturbance (ED) classification (Raines, Dever, Kamphaus, & Roach, 2012). The researchers outlined that at the time of the study educational practice had involved teachers, family, and administrators making referrals for special education evaluations although there is evidence that this form of referral can result in disproportionate special education services for students. In order to rectify the disproportionality, Raines et al. (2012) suggest that the school district should be encouraged to utilize a universal screening model for students that are emotionally disturbed that gathers input from multiple stakeholders. If this was done, fewer students of color would be admitted to special education programs and more children would have their educational needs met on an equal playing field (Raines et al., 2012). The researchers additionally outlined that a universal screening method would ensure teacher teams can focus on how to intervene
and treat students with ED as well as prevent special education referrals for those students at risk for identification.

The previous model may have led to a disproportionate number of African American males in special education (Woodson & Harris, 2018). Woodson and Harris (2018), conducted research to examine variables of both educators and students that were likely to impact whether a male student would be referred to special education. The researchers recruited respondents from a large urban school district in Pennsylvania, in which 30.3% were African American, 18.5% were White, 23.2% were designated Latino, and 28.1% of students were from other racial backgrounds. The study established that the following factors increased the likelihood of a teacher referral of a student to special education: race of both student and teacher, experience level, and educator feelings toward inclusion of special education students within the general education classroom. The study found that specific variables including teacher gender and years of teaching experience contradicted previous research indicating a higher referral rate to special education; in contrast, female teachers and teachers with less experience were not significant predictors of special education referral. However, Woodson and Harris identified that teacher race could be a predictor of increased referrals to special education, with white teachers most likely to refer.

Dever, Raines, Dowdy, and Hostutler (2016) suggested that other racial and ethnic groups outside of African American were having their needs more appropriately met than their African American peers. The researchers used a norm-referenced self-report to compare 4946 students that could be designated as at risk for emotional or behavioral problems to those actually receiving special education services. The
researchers found that students whose mother had lower levels of education and male students were more likely to receive special education services; overall, an increased likelihood of overrepresentation in special education was associated with lower socioeconomic status, being male, and lower English language proficiency. The authors suggested ensuring referrals to special education services are data driven and can help to decrease the disproportionality of males and students of color within the special education system. This was also corroborated by Szumski et al. (2018) who found that students that were products of families with low socioeconomic status were actually discriminated against in public school throughout the evaluation for disability process, through a study previously described in this literature review. Szumski et al. also discovered that students with poor health were more likely to be assessed for special education services and be placed in a specialized school to receive special education services.

Furthermore, seminal research conducted from Skiba et al. (2006) discovered that African American students were consistently overrepresented within education environments that were restrictive in nature and underrepresented in LREs in comparison to all other students in equal disability categories. De Valenzuela et al. (2006) also concurred that students that were designated as English language learners and students in minority groups were disproportionately identified in special education services and placed in more restrictive settings.

**Overview of Teacher Perceptions of Special Education Students**

LeDoux, Graves, and Burt (2012) completed action research to address some of the concerns regarding special education inclusion. The research was conducted in a
Texas Title 1 elementary school with a primarily Hispanic and African American population with roughly 11% of the student body receiving special education services. Fifty-six highly qualified teachers with various levels of education and experience were surveyed. The study found that general education teachers were most concerned with limited professional development plans, completing grading and progress monitoring, breakdowns in communication between departments, and lack of collaboration between educators. The researchers identified that the teachers’ most common frustrations with including special education students was the individual student’s lack of ability to keep up with typical coursework followed by the amount of time necessary to meet special education needs. The authors stated that when general education teachers worked in coordination with special education professionals, they would gain a stronger base knowledge of the impact of inclusionary practices on their students while also increasing the likelihood of developing positive feelings toward inclusion within the classroom setting.

Pearson, Clavenna-Deane, and Carter (2015) conducted a study using the Attitudes of Teachers of Students with Significant Disabilities about Aspects of their Jobs survey with 92 teachers from a midwestern state that measured teacher attitudes toward working with students with severe disabilities, they then compared it to the amount of inclusion the student received. The study suggested there was a positive impact of having students with severe disabilities included within the general education classroom on the job satisfaction and demeanor of special education teachers. The authors suggested it was important to not only consider how inclusion benefits students with disabilities, but also the teachers instructing special education students.
Educators must be able to identify implicit bias as they can attribute to differences in discipline for students (Cook et al., 2018). Clark and Zygmunt (2014) conducted a qualitative study through examining online graduate discussion board responses of 302 elementary and early-childhood teachers by looking at teacher perceptions when confronted with their own personal bias. The researchers identified that 96% of their participants had a preference for individuals with lighter skin tones. When confronted with that information, the subjects exhibited the following reactions: nearly half of the participants did not believe the results were valid, while about one quarter of the participants displayed acceptance of this personal bias. As educators challenge the thoughts and experience of their students, they should also be open to identifying areas of self improvement and personal development as imperative to the teaching process (Clark & Zygmunt, 2014).

Classrooms that have varying cultural, linguistic, and academic needs have intense challenges that impact teachers (Markova et al., 2016). The researchers assessed 46 preservice teachers based in Germany and learned that preservice teachers demonstrated apathetic implicit attitudes toward students that possessed an ethnic background different from their own, thus concluding that preservice teachers had a preference toward students that shared their background. Markova et al. (2016) also concluded that participants had positive attitudes toward students without immigrant backgrounds. Furthermore, participants overwhelmingly expressed a desire to treat students without prejudice but struggled with positive explicit attitudes towards students with special education needs.
Teacher expectations also impacted outcomes for students, and biases impacted
teacher expectations (Gershenson & Papageorge, 2018). Gershenson and Papageorge
(2018) found that while all educators in the study were positive about student
graduations, Black students received less optimism than their White classmates; Black
students were subjected to a negative bias from their White teachers by not receiving the
same belief in their capabilities as their White peers. Gershenson and Papageorge
proposed that the expectations of teachers shaped student outcomes and that Black
students were at a disadvantage due to the expectations of their White teachers (2018).

Mason et al. (2014) examined the relationship of teacher cultural and ethnic bias
and how they rated student behaviors through a study, using a complete literature review.
The researchers suggested that inconsistent presence of ethnic bias in teachers when
completing behavioral rating scales, did indicate strong evidence of cultural bias on the
part of the teacher; this meant that a teacher was harsher on students outside of their own
cultural identity. Since special education evaluations utilize behavior rating scales to
identify problem areas or possible education classifications, the researchers asserted that
bias could influence the results of the scales depending on the completing teacher’s
cultural bias.

**Student Perceptions of Peers with Disabilities**

The educational community, state, and federal legislation are consistently
proclaiming the importance of inclusionary practices for students with disabilities;
therefore it is imperative that peer perception of students with disabilities is evaluated
(Shalev, Asmus, Carter, & Moss, 2016). Through a small pilot study, the researchers
examined the perceptions of 44 secondary school age students that participated in general
education classes with peers with disabilities across 21 high schools in 12 districts from two different states; for the most part, students that had a history of inclusionary practices with students with disabilities demonstrated a more positive attitude toward their peers with significant disabilities and the importance of inclusion. Overall, the authors found that female students were more accepting of their peers with disabilities than their male counterparts.

de Boer, Pijl, and Minnaert (2012) reported how neurotypical peers perceived their peers with disabilities after conducting a comprehensive literature review of studies from seven countries; the researchers concluded that the majority of studies reviewed indicated that, on average, students had indifferent reactions toward their peers with special education identifications. Furthermore, the study identified that neurotypical students' perceptions were impacted by a variety of factors including their own gender, age, disability knowledge, and previous experiences with inclusive environments. The authors stated that students that have intellectual disabilities or those with emotional and behavioral concerns are particularly impacted by negative attitudes of their neurotypical peers. The literature review also concluded that neurotypical students having a positive attitude toward peers with disabilities impacted socialization within the inclusive classroom.

de Boer, Pijl, Post, and Minnaert (2012) completed a cross-sectional study of 985 students without disabilities and 65 students with disabilities that investigated variables that impacted friendships and acceptance for students with disabilities. By breaking down the classroom students by sex (male and female), the researchers were able to examine the peer relationships more thoroughly and discovered that it was atypical for a
neurotypical male or female to identify a student with a disability of the opposite gender of their own as their friend. The researchers were unable to establish peer acceptance rates for boys based on characteristics including type of disability, age, and behaviors; however, they were able to surmise that males with disabilities have an increased likelihood of acceptance in classes where the class as a whole views males, with or without disabilities, in a more positive fashion. Conversely, the authors found that female students with disabilities were less likely to be accepted by other female peers when they displayed social concerns in the classroom; acceptance by their same sex peers seemed to correspond to the amount of socially acceptable behaviors the students possessed. For both sexes, the researchers were able to surmise that one on one adult assistance negatively impacted the attitudes of neurotypical peers.

Cairns and McClatchey (2013) conducted research in Scotland where 82 children were interviewed following watching videos of other students with various levels of disabilities. The researchers identified that students that were a part of inclusive school settings displayed more positive attitudes toward peers or others with disabilities than students in less inclusive environments; the students were also able to give more acceptable intervention ideas to help others with disabilities. Furthermore, the researchers asserted that interacting and having knowledge about individuals with disabilities were imperative for positive beliefs and acceptance of others with disabilities. The researchers summarized that inclusion in the school setting could lead to more positive attitudes toward people with disabilities in general.

In regards to bullying of students with disabilities, it was hypothesized that students with disabilities were disproportionately engaged in bullying relationships with
peers (Rose & Gage, 2016). Rose and Gage (2016) examined preparation and victimization of roughly 6,500 students between the grades of 3 and 12 in which 16% of the student sample was identified as special education students. As referenced in their study, the researchers were able to identify that longitudinally, students with disabilities were the victims of bullying more often than their non-disabled peers regardless of their disability category. Furthermore, the authors determined that students with disabilities were more likely to be perpetrators of bullying behaviors than their nondisabled peers; this could correlate to the fact that they are also more likely to be victims. The researchers believed that due to these concerns, special education students should receive specialized instruction in communication and social skills in order to help them navigate through these experiences.

Georgiadi, Kalyva, Kourkoutas, and Tsakiris (2012) explored the correlation between young student attitudes toward fellow classmates with intellectual disabilities (ID) and the type of school they attended. Two hundred fifty-six students from Greece, 9 or 10 years old, completed a questionnaire and drew pictures of a student with ID. Half of the neurotypical third grade student participants were in inclusive settings while the other half attended non-inclusive schools. Contrary to other research, in this study all student participants regardless of their school setting demonstrated neutral thought patterns toward their peers with ID. However, the researchers discovered that students that attended inclusive school environments seemed to demonstrate a more positive attitude towards peers with disabilities than those that attended non-inclusive school settings. The authors also identified that female students chose more positive descriptors for students
with ID than males. Students that shared positive attitudes towards students with ID were more likely to choose the positive descriptors for students with disabilities, in general.

**Teacher Preparation**

Taylor and Ringlaben (2012) summarize that regardless of the multiple requirements through federal and state legislation to educate students identified as needing special education services in the LRE, educators have demonstrated conflicting emotions about their own preparation to effectively educate special education students. Through their study at Jacksonville State University in Alabama with over 190 preservice teachers enrolled in a special education survey course, Taylor and Ringlaben established that teacher education students possessed a resounding belief that special education teachers were the best intervention to educate student deficits on a one-to-one basis rather than through inclusion in larger classrooms. Additionally, the researchers asserted that preservice teachers did not deem it necessary to change their current modus operandi for instruction of special education students; yet, preservice educator teaching capabilities increased through taking a course regarding methods to instruct special education students (Taylor & Ringlaben, 2012).

Teacher preparation to educate students with disabilities is extremely important in order to meet the needs of all students; furthermore, preservice teacher preparation programs are lacking in order to train educators to include special education students within their classrooms (Joshi & Moudgil, 2017). Joshi and Moudgil claimed that preservice programs lack specialized instruction surrounding meeting the needs of all students and emphasized a focus on finishing a degree over challenging any negative beliefs about inclusive education. To make inclusive education a reality, the researchers
suggest that preservice teachers should be equipped with tools that can assist them in incorporating all students into their classrooms.

Classrooms with varying cultural, linguistic, and academic needs have intense challenges that impact teachers and therefore impact preservice teachers (Markova et al., 2016). Markova et al. gave evaluative tools and a questionnaire to 46 preservice teachers and found that the majority of the preservice teaching communities used for their study believed that instruction on culturally sensitive and inclusive practices was not a major focus of their academic program, issues specific to inclusionary practices were rarely addressed. When analyzing the data, the researchers found that preservice teachers who had more exposure to intercultural and inclusionary instructional practices had more affirmative attitudes toward including students with special education needs within their classrooms. They also concluded that teachers must be instructed in a wide variety of approaches and methodology while teaching heterogeneous groups within the classroom.

Due to data outlining an increasing number of students with disabilities being placed in general education classrooms for more significant periods of time, Vitelli (2015) conducted research by giving an online survey to general education teachers to examine whether or not preservice general education teachers were being instructed in UDL during their undergraduate programming. The researcher discovered that at least 21 states were instructing preservice educators with instruction in UDL on at least a limited basis. However, only 22% of respondents were familiar with UDL as an instructional framework demonstrating that the framework had yet to become a routine subject that was taught to the general education teacher population.
Specifically related to autism spectrum disorders (ASD), Sanz-Cervera et al. (2017) used the Autism Knowledge Questionnaire with 866 per-service teachers and found that preservice teachers with majors in special education and speech-language pathology had superior knowledge about ASD compared to their general education peers. However, the researchers outlined that this was not helpful to an inclusive environment as it made specialists more experienced and preserved a dual model of instruction where the special educator held the most knowledge while teachers in mainstream situations did not have the necessary knowledge to instruct special education needs. The researchers asserted that this puts general education teachers at a disadvantage and lack of training to intervene appropriately with their students with disabilities.

Students with emotional disturbance (ED) required different interventions than other students with disabilities and it was important for preservice teachers to be trained thoroughly in intervening with students with ED (State, Simonson, Hern, & Wills, 2018). State et al. composed a manuscript and believed that training that includes both special education and general education teachers due to educators sharing the responsibility of instructing students in the LRE was vital. The researchers continued to advocate for intense focus on evidence based instruction and interventions that would improve educational and functional outcomes for students for both preservice and established teachers.

**Equal Access and Differentiation**

Ferguson, Desjarlais, and Meyer (2000) stated that education’s major purpose was to ensure that students receive knowledge, information, and skill sets that will help prepare them to contribute to society in a functional, meaningful way. The authors
declared that segregating special education students in their own classrooms prevented them from accessing the same curriculum as their nondisabled peers. Due to lack of inclusion in the same curriculum, Ferguson et al. found that removal from the general education classroom negated the ability to meet common educational purposes.

McLaughlin (2012) outlined six major principles to keep in mind when working in an inclusive classroom, one of these was that teachers needed to remember that students with disabilities within the classroom caused heterogeneous grouping and that each student would require individualized planning in order to make educational progress. McLaughlin believed it was imperative that teachers understood that what they had always done or how they had always taught may not work with a group of such diverse students; differentiation would be key to classroom success.

Glatthorn, Boschee, Whitehead, and Boschee (2016) opined that all classrooms benefit from differentiated instruction, similar to UDL; however, it was absolutely imperative in inclusive classrooms. The authors purported that differentiated instruction is neither an instructional technique nor specific pedagogy, but rather a different way of learning and teaching a variety of students. Thus, differentiated instruction could apply to many aspects of the curriculum including content, process, and products. The authors offered three general principles of differentiation: the necessity for ongoing assessment of gained skills and adjustment to instructional practices, providing appropriate tasks, and keeping student grouping flexible. Glatthorn et al. asserted that it is important for teachers to show students their learning is respected by making sure that all tasks assigned in the classroom, regardless of ability level, are intriguing and interesting to students. The authors contended that flexible grouping in the classroom would also
provide the teacher with the opportunity to group students homogeneously or heterogeneously depending on the learning outcome and skills set of individual group members. The researchers maintained that it was also important that teachers not rely on one test at the end of the unit to prove mastery; teachers that are differentiating instruction are evaluating student performance often and using that evaluation to drive their instruction within the classroom.

McLaughlin (2012) noted that accommodation and modification have become interchangeable vocabulary within classrooms; however, they are two separate ideas. Glatthorn et al. (2016) opined an accommodation as an item, intervention, or procedure given to a student with a disability that allows the student to have equal access to the curriculum, but does not change the content being instructed. The researchers provided examples of common accommodations such as extended time to complete tests or testing in a separate location to reduce distractions. In these examples, the content being taught or learning expectations are not affected or changed; instead, the researchers outline that it provides the student with individualized, necessary changes to ensure that they have an equal playing field. Contrary to accommodations, the researchers opined modifications as an item, intervention, or procedure given to a student with a disability to give equal access to education, but may change the expectations of performance or the content being instructed. The authors explained that a commonly used modification is the use of modified tests, which may include fewer choices and/or less writing; this modification changes the expectation of student performance by lessening the necessary amount of output.
Summary

Public school educators have expressed concern regarding the disproportionality of minority students represented in special education (Kincaid & Sullivan, 2017; Morgan et al., 2017; Sullivan & Bal, 2013; Zhang, et. al., 2014;). Each of these studies sought to investigate disproportionality within special education in some manner. Morgan et al. (2017) focused on African American students’ overidentification, while Kincaid and Sullivan and Zhang et al. (2014) focused on all races and ethnicities. While Zhang et al. discovered a decrease in the number of identified African American and Hispanic students labeled with intellectual disability, they still surmised that disproportionality continued to be a problem. However, Morgan et al. (2017) concluded that African American children were not overidentified in special education; if anything, they were underidentified, providing contradictory evidence to the other study. Kincaid and Sullivan suggested that while disproportionality was an issue, other socioeconomic factors did not contribute other than the level of parent education. Sullivan and Bal (2013) maintained that gender and free/reduced lunch statuses were the biggest predictors of special education identification. Each study had its own limitations, reaching different conclusions regarding whether the concern of students being disproportionately identified in special education continued to be a problem.

Disproportionality continues to be an issue in IDEA guidelines; however, the manner in which disproportionality is assessed is left open for individual states to interpret (Office of Special Education Programs, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, & United States Department of Education, 2017). Furthermore, disproportionality continues to be an issue due to the possible negative impacts of special
education on student outcomes (Chesmore, Ou, & Reynolds, 2016; Morgan et al., 2017). Therefore, it is important to analyze teacher perceptions of disproportionality and their efforts on special education referral factors in order to provide students with a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment.
Chapter Three - Methodology

This qualitative study explored teacher perceptions of disproportionality in special education referrals in relation to race and gender and teacher preparedness to make referrals to special education services. Analyzing these areas will help provide guidance to special education leaders in order to assure FAPE for all students regardless of race, gender, or teacher bias. This multi-site qualitative study examined teacher perceptions about disproportionality in special education and referrals. Participants were recruited from three school districts. The districts had a variety of special education and general education programming. Participating general education teachers completed a survey containing 18 Likert-type items, six multiple choice items, and seven open-ended questions. In addition, participants could volunteer to participate in a structured interview with the researcher following completion of the survey.

Participants

Participants of the study were 36 elementary, middle, and high school general education teachers. Participant anonymity and rights were protected by not asking for their names, other than those who participated in the voluntary structured interview in which the names of the participants were known only to the researcher. All participants participated on a voluntary basis with no compensation. Participants were invited to take part in the study regardless of educational levels or years of experience; however, participants were sorted by discipline and those with special education certifications were excluded from the study based on their response to question number three in the survey in order to firmly assess the general education teacher perspective. Participants had various levels of education and teaching experience within a public school setting.
Setting

This study occurred at three school districts out of the eleven across the state of Pennsylvania in which permission was sought. The researcher desired to have multiple district participants ranging from urban to rural category within the state of Pennsylvania. However, the researcher’s solicitation for study participants from all urban districts went unanswered. Two consenting districts were considered rural/suburban, while one district was identified suburban. One school district employed 219 teaching professionals, while the second employed 362, and the third 252 teachers. Each district consisted of multiple elementary schools, a middle school, and a high school.

The student population in the districts identified as rural/suburban ranged from 3,106 to 5,277 with respective special education populations of 13.9% to 17.3%. In the suburban district, the special education population was 9.8% of the 3,492 total students (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2020). Table 3.1 shows the ethnic/racial composition of the three participating districts. None of the three school districts were identified as having disproportionality for disability category identification for race or ethnicity (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2020). Each district had students that received free or reduced breakfast and lunch benefits ranging from 29.7% of the student body to 40.6%. All three districts received Title 1 funding through the state of Pennsylvania in order to target economically disadvantaged students; economically disadvantaged student enrollment was 42.8%, 22.8%, and 21.1% respectively.
Table 3.1

Percent Composition of General and Special Education Populations in Participating Districts by Race

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>District A</th>
<th>District B</th>
<th>District C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>3.1 2.4</td>
<td>1.6 0</td>
<td>12.6 4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>5.2 6.6</td>
<td>1.7 3</td>
<td>4.8 9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>15.8 23.7</td>
<td>9.3 14.1</td>
<td>8.3 15.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiracial</td>
<td>3.2 3.9</td>
<td>5.3 5.4</td>
<td>3.6 3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>72.5 63.3</td>
<td>81.8 75.6</td>
<td>70.3 66.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian/Alaskan Native</td>
<td>0 0</td>
<td>0 0</td>
<td>0.2 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander</td>
<td>0 0</td>
<td>0 0</td>
<td>0.2 0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Information taken from the Pennsylvania Department of Education Special Education Data Reporting website.

Instruments

Survey. The researcher created an online survey (Appendix A) based on research conducted in the literature review that requests the perceptions of general education teachers related to the disproportionality of race and gender in special education referrals. It also asked for teacher perceptions regarding their own preparedness to make student referrals for special education evaluations. An online service, Google Forms, was utilized
to collect data from the respondents. Preceding dissemination of the online survey to the
participants, the survey instrument was reviewed by a panel of education experts
including administrators from a non-participating district; instruments were revised based
on feedback. The panel of experts utilized a formal rubric from Simon and White (2016)
to evaluate the survey tool. The team of experts included three professionals. The first
professional was a former teacher who received their Doctorate in Educational
Leadership in 2019 who now teaches at the university level in both instructional coaching
and instructional technology. The second expert panel member is the superintendent of a
non-participating district. The third expert panel member has a master’s degree in special
education and currently serves in a student services administrative role in a non-
participating district. The invitation to participate in the survey was sent directly by the
researcher or by the method prescribed by each district’s superintendent (Appendix B).
Two districts preferred to send the survey out to their staff members while one district
asked the researcher to contact participants directly. The survey included 18 Likert-type
items, six multiple choice items, and seven open-ended questions that gave the
respondents further opportunity to elaborate upon survey questions. The electronic survey
took roughly 10 minutes to complete.

*Interview.* The researcher utilized a structured interview (Appendix C) consisting of five
researcher created questions. The last question of the survey was used to invite
respondents to be interviewed. Three teachers volunteered for the structured interview
following the online survey. The purpose of the interview was to allow participants to
expand on their survey answers and provide more anecdotal feedback related to the
research topic. Each structured interview took approximately 10 minutes to complete.
Preceding dissemination of the one-on-one interview with the volunteer participants, the interview instrument was reviewed by the same panel of education experts from non-participating districts and was revised based on feedback from the expert panel. The expert panel utilized a formal rubric from Simon and White (2016) to evaluate the structured interview questions. Prior to participating in the interview, each participant was given an informative letter asking for written permission to record their responses to assist with transcription and to anonymously report specific quotes applicable to the study. The interview participants were then given the option of meeting virtually through an online platform including Zoom, Google Meet, or via phone, due to the current concerns with social distancing and the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Validity**

Creswell (2015) stated that validity in qualitative research should focus on identifying whether the results are accurate from the perspective of the study’s participants and researcher, which can be done by utilizing certain procedures such as triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing. The researcher field-tested the survey and structured interview questions with an expert panel prior to formally conducting data collection in order to enhance validity. The expert panel utilized the *Survey/Interview Validation Rubric for Expert Panel - VREP* (Simon & White, 2016) in order to increase the validity of the instrument questions as well as an alignment table to ensure a comprehensive approach to answering the research questions. The researcher also triangulated the Likert-scale responses, open-ended question responses, and interview responses in order to identify commonalities, themes, and discrepant data that appeared during the research study.
Reliability

Creswell (2015) asserted that qualitative research reliability should ensure that the researcher's specific tools and approach are consistent. The expert panel utilized the Survey/Interview Validation Rubric for Expert Panel - VREP (Simon & White, 2016) to increase the reliability of the instrument questions as well as an alignment table to ensure a comprehensive approach to answering the research questions. The researcher maintained reliability of instruments by reviewing transcriptions of the structured interviews to ensure there were no errors in the transcription process as well as thoroughly documenting the basic procedures of the data collection process. The researcher utilized a consistent procedure for gathering data as outlined under the procedures heading of this document that follows. Answers to selected questions were coded and interpreted in order to report accurate, reliable data.

Design of the Study

Creswell (2015) described qualitative research as lending itself well to gathering data with a more explicit amount of detailed information; therefore, the research was examined through a qualitative research design. The qualitative design was chosen by the researcher due to the researcher’s desire to find possible underlying causes of disproportionality in special education referrals in relation to race and gender and any impeding factors to a teacher’s preparedness to make referrals to special education services. The data were collected from all participants to investigate teacher perceptions regarding race and gender in the special education referral process as well as teacher preparedness to make referrals to special education services. Analyzing these areas will help provide guidance to special education leaders in order to assure FAPE for all
students regardless of race, gender, or teacher bias. Data were collected through an
electronic survey utilizing Google Forms that included Likert scale, multiple-choice, and
open ended questions along with a voluntary one-on-one structured interview with
volunteer participants.

Procedure

The researcher began this study by seeking participants from 11 different school
districts ranging from rural to urban settings in the state of Pennsylvania. Of the 11
districts, the researcher obtained permission from three district superintendents. The
researcher developed her own instruments and had them reviewed by an expert panel. In
order to conduct the research with general education teachers, the researcher obtained
permission and approval from Immaculata University’s Research Ethics Review Board
(RERB). Once permission was granted from Immaculata University’s RERB (Appendix
D), the researcher contacted the superintendents of each participating district in an effort
to coordinate the preferred method of distribution of the online survey invitation. The
invitation letter was given to all potential participants and outlined the purpose of the
study, approximate length of completion, and an assurance of anonymity. General
education teachers that chose to participate in the study were provided with a link to the
Google Form online survey. The final question on the online survey invited the
participants to expand upon their answers during a structured interview during a one-on-
one session. Once the researcher received notification of interest to participate in a
structured interview, written permission of the volunteer was obtained to record and
potentially report verbatim interview responses.
Teacher participants had roughly two calendar weeks to complete the online survey. After the two weeks transpired, the researcher sent a reminder email about the study in progress to participants and then gave an additional week to complete the online survey. Following the completion of the three weeks of survey access, the researcher utilized an additional month of time to complete the structured interviews with volunteer participants. The researcher then analyzed and synthesized information collected through the survey using the data collection tool, Google Forms. The researcher recorded responses and then personally transcribed the optional interviews in order to discover patterns of information; to ensure accuracy of information, the researcher read the transcription while listening to the recording twice. A summary of all information gathered through the survey and interviews will be presented by the researcher in Chapter Four.

**Data Analysis**

Data collected from the Likert scale, open-ended, and interview questions provided the researcher with information regarding the perceptions of general education teachers. The Likert scale questions were assigned numerical value with “strongly disagree” earning one point and “strongly agree” earning four points. Utilizing numerical values helped the researcher determine the mean response from all participants, prevented researcher bias, and gave statistical information to the researcher. The researcher coded all information gathered from the survey and the interview to identify themes, commonalities, and differences in responses of teacher participants and the specific relationship to each of the research questions.
Summary

This study explored teacher perceptions of disproportionality in special education referrals in relation to race and gender and teacher preparedness to make referrals to special education services. Analyzing these areas will help provide guidance to special education leaders to assure FAPE for all students regardless of race, gender, or teacher bias. The research occurred at three public school districts in South Central Pennsylvania. The researcher used an online survey with Likert scale, multiple-choice, and open ended questions for general education teachers as well as one-on-one structured interviews. The data collected through the interviews and online survey were analyzed and appropriately coded to report findings in Chapter Four.
Chapter Four - Results

This study explored teacher perceptions of disproportionality in special education referrals in relation to race and gender and teacher preparedness to make referrals to special education services. Only the perspectives of teachers without special education certifications were the focus of research. A researcher-created survey and interview questions that were reviewed by a panel of experienced educators were used to collect data. The results from the survey were compiled and analyzed for patterns or themes. The survey and structured interview questions were purposely designed to elicit responses to three research questions.

In the survey, questions one through six were created to collect specific demographic information about each participant. The demographic questions requested information on the participant’s racial identification, years of public school teaching experience, active teaching certifications, grade level and discipline of instruction, and identifying gender; the questions about gender and race were optional to complete. Following demographics, 18 Likert-scale statements were given which included the following options: strongly disagree, disagree, agree, and strongly agree. The online survey also included six multiple choice questions and seven open-ended questions. Survey questions 8, 9, 15, 20, 28, 30, 32, 34 addressed research question number one, while questions 11, 13, 18, 25, 26, 27, 29, 37 addressed research question number two. Research question number three was addressed in questions 7, 10, 12, 14, 16, 17, 19, 21, 22, 23, 24, 31, 33, 35, 36. Structured interview question number one aligned with research question number one while question number two pertained to research question number two. Interview questions three, four, and five aligned with research question
number three. Forty-four participants completed the survey in its entirety. However, through screening of demographic information, participants were removed from the participant group due to having a special education certification, giving a total of 36 participants (N=36). Three participants volunteered to be interviewed.

Research participant responses to survey items are outlined in the “Survey” heading under “Compilation of Data” and are grouped according to research questions. Participant responses to the open ended questions are reported in the “Open-Ended Questions” heading under “Compilation of Data” and are also grouped according to research questions. Five researcher designed interview questions were approved by the expert panel; three participants (N=3) completed the interview portion of the study. The participants of the interview were coded as IA, IB, and IC. Participant responses to the interview questions are reported underneath the “Interviews” heading under “Compilation of Data” and are also grouped according to research questions.

**Compilation of Data**

**Demographic Information**

The first question asked the participants to identify their racial/ethnic identity. Thirty-two participants (89%) stated they identified as White/Caucasian, one respondent identified as Roma (3%), and two participants were multiracial (6%). One participant (3%) preferred not to answer this question; due to rounding these percentages do not add up to 100%.

Question two of the demographic portion of the survey asked participants to outline years of experience as a public school teacher. One participant (3%) indicated that they had one year or less of teaching experience while four participants (11%) designated
their years of experience as being between two and five years. Five participants (14%) outlined they had six to ten years of experience. The majority of participants, 26 (72%), indicated they had 11 or more years of experience in public education.

The third demographic question of the survey asked participants to list their current certifications. Twenty-six participants (72%) held a general education certification while one (3%) participant was a specialist. Five participants (14%) held general education and administrative certifications simultaneously while four other respondents (11%) held general education and specialist certifications concurrently.

The fourth demographic question asked respondents to outline the grade level bands of students that they teach the majority of their instructional day. Four respondents (11%) primarily teach early childhood grades ranging from kindergarten to second grade. Seven participants (19%) serviced students in intermediate elementary levels from third grade through sixth grade. Seven participants (19%) taught students in middle school and 18 (50%) respondents predominantly teach high school students.

The fifth demographic question asked participants to outline the subject areas that they instructed during the majority of the school day. Nine respondents (25%) indicated they primarily teach language arts with four different respondents (11%) outlining mathematics as their main instructional discipline. Four participants (11%) instruct in science and another four respondents (11%) focus mainly on social studies. Eight participants (22%) reported they teach enrichment subjects while seven other participants (19%) stated that they taught many different subjects and listed their discipline as multidisciplinary.
The final demographic question asked participants to name their identifying gender. Seven of the participants (19%) were male. Twenty-nine participants (81%) were female. No participants identified as non-binary or used the free response option to fill in a different gender identity.

**Research Question One.** What are teacher perceptions regarding race in special education referrals?

**Surveys.** The following statements on the survey were designed to elicit data specific to research question number one: 8, 9, 15, 20. Participants were asked if students within their district had access to their FAPE and LRE regardless of race in survey question eight. Two participants (6%) stated they strongly disagreed while one participant (3%) stated that they disagreed with the statement. Nineteen (53%) participants stated that they agreed with the statement, while fourteen (39%) other participants identified they strongly agreed with the statement.

In survey question number nine, participants were asked if they believe minority students are disproportionately referred to special education services within their district. Seven (19%)-participants strongly disagreed with the statement, while 19 (53%) disagreed. Seven (19%) participants agreed with the statement, and 3 (8%) participants reported that they strongly agreed with the statement.

In survey question 15, participants read a statement that outlined race was not a factor impacting a referral to special education services. Three (8%) participants stated that they disagreed with the statement. Fifteen (42%) participants stated that they agreed with the statement with 18 (50%) strongly agreeing with the statement. None of the participants strongly disagreed with the statement.
Survey question 20 made the statement that a disproportionate amount of minority students are referred to special education services within the participant’s district. Three (8%) of the participants strongly disagreed with the statement, while 19 (56%) disagreed. Seven (19%) agreed with the statement that a disproportionate amount of minority students are referred to special education services while seven (19%) strongly agreed with the same statement.

Multiple Choice Questions. Multiple choice questions 28 and 30 also inform research question number one. Both items posed questions to the participants relating student needs with their race or ethnicity. Question 28 asked the participants which students were most likely to have behavioral needs that required special education intervention. Participants were able to choose from the following: White/Caucasian, Black/African American, Hispanic or Latino, American Indian or Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, or there is no group that requires special education intervention more than others; the option of “other” was also included. Thirty-two (89%) participants stated they believed that no group required special education intervention more than others. Three (8%) participants stated that they believed Black students were more likely to have behavioral needs than any other choice. One (3%) participant indicated that they believed Hispanic or Latino students were more likely to have behavioral needs than any other choice.

Question 30 asked the participants which students were most likely to have academic needs that required special education intervention. Participants were able to choose from the following: White/Caucasian, Black/African American, Hispanic or Latino, American Indian or Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, or
there is no group that requires special education intervention more than others; a free response option was also given to participants. Thirty-one (86%) participants stated that they believed there was no group given that required special education intervention more than others. Two participants (5%) stated they believe that Hispanic or Latino students require more academic special education intervention. Two participants (5%) stated they believe that Black or African American students require more academic special education intervention. One participant (3%) stated, “Students who are learning to speak English may have more academic needs, but not necessarily require special education apart from ESOL services/supports.” This was not an option given on the survey.

*Open-ended Survey Questions*. Open-ended questions 32 and 34 and interview question number one informed research question one. Question 32A asked participants if they believed that students from a specific racial or ethnic group are referred to special education more than others. All 36 participants participated in this question; 23 (64%) of the respondents stated they did not believe that to be true, while 13 (36%) of participants stated that they did believe it to be true. In question 32, 13 participants that stated they believed the statement was true were asked to specifically identify races of students that they believe are referred to special education services more than others in question 32B. The information collected from participants is outlined in table 4.1; participants were able to select more than one racial group, resulting in a higher number than the sample group total. The majority of participants noted that both Hispanic and Black students were referred to special education services disproportionately.
Table 4.1

*Teacher Perception of Student Referrals to Special Education and Student Race*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>White/Caucasian</th>
<th>Black/African American</th>
<th>Hispanic / Latino</th>
<th>Asian or Asian American</th>
<th>American Indian or Alaska Native</th>
<th>Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>32b. Which students from a specific racial or ethnic group do you believe are referred to special education more than others?</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* Numbers not indicative of sample group; participants were able to select more than one response.

The last component of the question, 32C, asked participants that answered yes to question 32A what evidence exists that supports their belief of disproportionality. All thirteen of the respondents answered this question. Key words or phrases that were noted in response to this question included: observation, data, experiences, special education, and race.

Many participants discussed their observations of classroom compositions, with the theme of classroom makeup presenting in 40% of responses. One participant responded that, “The special education classrooms appear more diverse racially than an AP classroom for example.” A different participant stated, “Students who are not White and struggle academically are often identified as having behavioral needs rather than
academic needs.” Many respondents disclosed that their district shared data with them that corroborated their belief, with data being a theme present in 47% of responses. One participant stated, “The district also breaks down the special education population by race so teacher(s) can identify how one group is over or underserved compared to the percentage in the district.”

The next open-ended question related to research question number one was question 34; here, the participants were asked if they had ever examined their own implicit or explicit bias when teaching. The participants were also asked to explain why they had or had not examined their biases. All 36 participants participated in this question. Thirty (83%) participants stated yes; they have examined their biases related to teaching. Three (8%) participants stated that they have not examined their own biases related to teaching. One participant (3%) stated that they did not examine it enough; two (6%) other participants stated that they had slightly or had just begun examining their biases.

Of the participants that reported they had not examined their own biases related to teaching, when asked to explain why or why not, the feedback given by participants was minimal with one participant not giving any further explanation. One participant stated that they had never really thought about it before. The last participant stated, “I have not because I don’t believe I have a bias.”

Of the 30 participants that reported they had examined their own biases related to teaching, three common themes occurred. The first major theme was that participants had examined their own bias due to college courses or work related training offered by their districts; 17 (47%) participants stated that this is how they had examined their own
biases. One respondent noted that they had taken a graduate course on this subject matter, a feeling that was mirrored by other respondents. Similarly, four other participants had stated they were participating in “an Equity Project” through their district.

The second major theme was four (11%) participants explained they had examined their own biases by listing them out. One participant stated, “I know that I have stronger feelings regarding certain groups of students and I must consciously remind myself to check my bias.” Another participant stated, “I must admit I do tend to react more strongly to identified males, or any race or ethnic background, when misbehavior happens.” A third participant, a Spanish teacher, admitted assumption-related bias and stated, “I sometimes assumed that Hispanic or LatinX students would do best in my class because they are heritage/native speakers but that is often not the case.”

The last major theme was the participants explaining that they had examined their own personal biases by describing student centered activities; four (11%) participants indicated that concerns from students or by leading student organizations prompted them to examine their biases. One participant describing an experience stated the following in response to the question:

Yes, particular [sic] when I had some LatinX students that I was having a difficult year with. I was accused of being biased against them because I pulled them to work with me as a group during some study halls. I pulled them because they all were making similar mistakes and I wanted to help them improve, but the thought from the students was that I was grouping them all together. I understood their concerns, but I was able to explain and show why that was not the case.
Another participant credited their examination of personal bias to their involvement with a student group stating, “Yes, as advisor to the school's GSA, I have made it a point to re-examine my thoughts and mindsets.”

A minor theme that occurred in answering question 34 was the mention of diversity by two (6%) of the respondents as a rationale for why or why not bias was examined. One participant stated, “I do not teach in a very diverse school” to further explain their initial answer to the question. The second participant stated, “I teach in a truly diverse district. We have MANY different cultures and races represented and a growing lower socio-economic population” as their explanation for their initial answer.

**Interviews.** A total of three staff members that represented two of the three participating districts participated in the structured interview process. Interview question one related to research question one. The question asked participants if they believed a student’s race influenced special education referrals within their school district of employment. The participants were also asked to explain their rationale. Two (67%) of the participants affirmed that they did believe that a student’s race would impact their referral rate within their districts of employment. Interview participant IA shared detailed information:

Yes. I think that it is unintentional and I think that in some ways it’s not probably as prevalent in our district as other districts. I think it’s a combination of ways along with socioeconomics, because we certainly have a very extremely diverse, especially for Central Pennsylvania, demographic. Many of our children who are non-Caucasian are from homes of medical professionals, but once you cross that
line of not that then I think that we are much quicker to judge, much quicker to make assumptions, and much quicker to make referrals.

Interview participant IC shared that they knew this to be true due to personal experiences within their district. Participant IC stated that they had “made some referrals and they have been questioned more than referrals if the person, if the student, is of a different race.” Interview participant IB shared that they found that question difficult to answer due to having multiple viewpoints. They believed that personally, race did not impact their referral of students to special education but they were unaware of what district statistics showed.

**Research Question Two.** What are teacher perceptions regarding gender in special education referrals?

**Surveys.** The following statements on the survey were designed to elicit data specific to research question two: 11, 13, 18. Multiple choice questions related to research question two include: 25, 26, 27, 29. Furthermore, open-ended question number 37 and interview question two pertained to research question two.

In question 11, a statement was made that a disproportionate number of female students were referred to special education services within the participating school districts. Seven (19%) participants stated that they strongly disagreed with that statement and 29 (81%) other participants stated they disagreed. No participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statement.

Survey question 13 stated that a student’s gender would not influence the participant’s decision to refer to special education services. One (3%) participant stated that they strongly disagreed. Eighteen (50%) of participants stated they agreed with the
statement and 17 (47%) different participants marked that they strongly agreed with the statement. No participants disagreed with the statement.

In question 18, participants also read a statement that all students regardless of gender have access to FAPE and LRE within the district. No participants strongly disagreed with the statement, while one (3%) disagreed with the statement. Twenty-four (67%) of the participants agreed with the statement that gender does not impact accessing LRE and FAPE. Eleven (31%) participants indicated that they strongly agreed with the statement.

**Multiple Choice Questions.** Multiple choice questions related to research question two included 25, 26, 27, and 29. All questions included elements of gender and student needs. A summary of responses is illustrated in Table 4.2. The majority of all respondents believed that they did not perceive one of the listed gender options to be more likely to require special education intervention or that one group is more difficult to educate than the others. Twenty percent of White respondents stated that male students have more behavioral needs that require special education intervention compared to 0% of non-White participants. Twenty percent of high school level participants stated they believed male students also have more academic needs that require special education intervention, while 18% of elementary level participants shared that same belief. Male teacher participants (43%) identified male students as having more academic or behavioral concerns than other students; 21% of female participants shared this perception. In all of the multiple choice questions related to gender, no participants listed that they perceived females to require special education intervention more intensely or that females are difficult to include within the general education environment. Male
students and non-binary students were the subpopulations that were identified by participants as having more intensive special education needs, with males being a more common response than non-binary.

**Table 4.2**

*Regarding Gender in Special Education Referrals*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Non-Binary</th>
<th>No Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25. Which students are more likely to have behavioral needs that require special education intervention (Example: preferential seating, behavior plans, prompting, etc.)?</td>
<td>8 (22%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>1 (3%)</td>
<td>27 (75%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. Which students are more likely to have significant special education needs (Example: deficits in math, reading, etc.)?</td>
<td>4 (11%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>1 (3%)</td>
<td>31 (86%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. Which students are more likely to have academic needs that require special education intervention (Example: deficits in math, reading, etc.)?</td>
<td>6 (17%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>2 (6%)</td>
<td>28 (78%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29. Which students with special education needs are more difficult to educate within the general education classroom?</td>
<td>4 (11%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>32 (89%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Participant Response (N=36). Totals may not equal 100 percent due to rounding.*

*Open-ended Survey Questions*. Question 37 asked participants if they believed male students were referred to special education services more so than other gender
populations. All 36 participants responded to this survey question. Sixteen (44%) participants stated that they did believe males were referred to special education at a higher rate than other genders.

Two major themes emerged from the open-ended responses, the first was behaviors. Nine of the 16 participants (56%) that stated they thought males were referred to special education more than other genders cited a form of social, emotional or behavioral need. When asked to explain why they believe it to be true, one participant stated:

Anecdotally, yes. Intervention seems to be about 50/50 but social/emotional seems to be far higher with male students. I think (and I have thought it myself) that we are concerned about what happens when he is physically bigger? I don't think that concern is as prescient [sic] with female students and we therefore allow them more grace and more time to grow out of it.

The second theme that emerged was the concept of males having more academic needs. Two (13%) of the respondents stated that the increase in referrals for males related to academic needs in some way. One participant explained, “Traditionally, reading is something that male students may find more difficult and so much of our curriculum relies on reading for learning.”

In response to open-ended question 37, another 16 (44%) participants stated that they did not believe males were referred to special education at a higher rate than other genders. Of those 16 participants, five (31%) cited their own personal experiences or classroom populations when explaining why males were not referred more than other populations. One participant stated, “No, because throughout my years of teaching my
male:female ratio is about equal.” Other participants mirrored this belief by citing having the “same amount” in the classes they teach.

Seven (19%) of the original 36 participants stated that whether males were referred more to special education services than other populations was unknown. One participant stated:

I don't know but it wouldn't surprise me. We expect a lot of academic skills out of very young children that may lead to special ed referrals when kids can't meet these expectations. But I think it's the expectations that are out of line, not the kids.

Other participants expressed sentiment of not knowing district statistics in order to express a firm opinion.

**Interviews.** A total of three staff members that represented two out of the three participating districts participated in the structured interview process. Interview question two related to research question two. The question asked participants if they believed a student’s gender influenced special education referrals within their school district of employment. Two (67%) of the participants believed that gender impacted special education referrals within their district. Interview participant IA responded with the following detailed information:

I do. I think that actually we are slower to look at females than males. I don’t necessarily think that we are jumping the gun, that we are referring males that you don't need to be referred, but I think you might be missing females that could use it. I think, I’m probably guilty of this as well, that we give females a little bit more leeway.
Interview Participant IC explained their affirmation by further outlining that they believe “some of the differences between girls and boys biologically, or maybe the ideas that we have about what those differences are” can impact one gender being referred to special education more than others. However, contradictory to interview participant IA, she identified that girls are referred more often to special education than boys and stated, “We’re quick to diagnose girls when they don’t conform to an expectation.”

As expressed in response to a previous question, interview participant IB found this question to be difficult to fully answer. They did not believe that gender influenced their own personal referrals, but the participant did not know the statistics of gender based referrals for their district. The participant shared that “most teachers have had education classes where they learn, at least in the past, that more boys have been” but that they were unsure if that still occurred in current day education.

**Research Question Three.** What are teacher perceptions regarding their preparedness to make special education referrals on behalf of students?

**Surveys.** The following statements on the survey were designed to elicit data specific to research question number three: 7, 10, 12, 14, 16, 17, 19, 21, 22, 23, 24. Furthermore, the following open-ended questions also related to research question number three: 31, 33, 35, 36. Interview questions three, four, and five also informed research question three.

In question seven of the survey, participants were asked if they were well versed in the special education referral process of their district. One (3%) of the participants stated that they strongly disagreed while nine (25%) participants stated that they disagreed. Twenty-two (61%) of participants stated that they agreed that they were well
versed in the special education referral process of their district while four (11%) participants stated that they strongly agreed with the statement.

In question 10, a statement was made that the participant felt well prepared to make referrals for special education evaluations. While no participants were in strong disagreement, there were 12 (33%) participants who disagreed with the statement. Twenty-one (58%) of the participants agreed with the statement with three (8%) participants stating that they strongly agreed with the statement.

Question 12 of the survey stated that the participant’s preservice and/or inservice training had prepared them well for differentiating instruction for students within their classroom. Two (6%) participants stated that they strongly disagreed with the statement while 12 (33%) stated that they disagreed. Twenty (56%) participants agreed with the statement. Two (6%) participants strongly agreed with the statement.

In question 14 of the survey, participants were given a statement asserting that the participants have a strong knowledge base about appropriate interventions for students prior to referring them for special education evaluations. No participants strongly disagreed with the statement, while nine (25%) participants disagreed with the statement. Twenty-four (67%) participants responded that they agreed with the statement, while three (8%) participants stated they strongly agreed with the statement.

Question 16 stated that participant’s undergraduate or graduate degree training programs had a strong emphasis in special education evaluations. Nine (25%) participants stated they strongly disagreed with the statement, while 23 (64%) participants disagreed. Three (8%) participants agreed with the statement. One (3%) participant stated they strongly agreed with the statement.
In question 17, participants were given a statement that their preservice and/or inservice training had prepared them well for making modifications within their classrooms. No participants strongly disagreed, while nine (25%) of participants stated they disagreed with the statement. Twenty-three (64%) participants agreed with the statement and four (11%) participants strongly agreed with the statement.

Question 19 stated that the participant believed that a student that is economically disadvantaged would have a higher probability of being referred to special education services. One (3%) participant stated they strongly disagreed with the statement while 12 (33%) participants disagreed. Eighteen (50%) participants agreed with the statement, with five (14%) participants stating they strongly agree with the statement.

In question 21 of the survey, participants were provided with a statement that disproportionality in special education was addressed in their preservice or inservice experiences. Eight (22%) participants stated that they strongly disagreed with the statement, while 18 (50%) participants disagreed. Seven (19%) participants agreed with the statement. Three (8%) participants strongly agreed with the statement.

Question 22 made the statement that the participant’s preservice and/or inservice training had prepared them well for making accommodations within their classroom. One (3%) participant stated they strongly disagreed and another seven (19%) participants disagreed with the statement. Twenty-six (72%) participants agreed with the statement. Two (6%) participants strongly agreed with the statement.

Question 23 on the survey made the statement that the participant had the same expectations for all students in their classroom regardless of whether or not they received special education services. One (3%) participant strongly disagreed with that statement.
Fourteen (39%) participants disagreed and 16 (44%) participants agreed. Five (14%) participants strongly agreed with the statement.

Question 24 was the last survey question relating to research question number three. Participants were presented with the statement that their preservice and/or inservice training had prepared them well for including students with disabilities within their classrooms. Eleven (31%) participants disagreed with the statement. Twenty-two (61%) participants stated they agreed with the statement and three (8%) participants stated they strongly agreed. No participants strongly disagreed with the statement.

Open-ended Survey Questions. Open-ended questions related to research question number three included questions 31, 33, 35, and 36. Question 31 was broken into three different components. In 31A, participants were asked if they had ever been instructed in Universal Design for Learning (UDL). All 36 participants completed this question. Twenty-seven (75%) participants stated that they had not received instruction in UDL; nine (25%) participants stated that they had been instructed in UDL. The nine participants that stated they had received instruction in UDL were then asked to explain how they had incorporated the framework into their classrooms. Of those nine respondents, no common themes were identified; each participant listed a different way they incorporated the framework. Examples given by participants included giving assessment choices, using a variety of rubrics, giving accommodations to the entire class, and offering tiered intervention approaches.

Question 33 asked participants to explain how they felt about including students with disabilities within their classrooms. Participant responses were varied with three central themes emerging, the first of which being fully supportive of including students
with disabilities in the general education classroom. Twenty-eight (78%) participants were supportive of the concept of inclusion. A theme emerged that general educators believed in utilizing the least restrictive environments or shared experiences teaching students with disabilities. One respondent outlined their perception of inclusion as such:

I teach in the high school. In a typical class, I usually have over half of my students with IEPs. Every student has gifts and graces. The gifts they possess may not be in the subject matter that I am teaching, but each day I look to make a connection to what matters to them and what they are good at to what I am teaching and how they may share their knowledge with me. I would be lying to say that there are not challenging days, but the ah-ha moments make it all worthwhile.

Other participants also described the ways that they felt inclusion “enriched the class” and “positive experiences” when including students in the past.

Eight (22%) participants expressed reservations in relation to including students with disabilities within their classrooms. Some participants expressed discomfort when including these students within their classrooms. One participant stated, “It can be really hard to meet an individual’s needs when there are so many competing needs in the classroom.” Two (25%) of the eight participants that expressed reservations about inclusion explicitly outlined their worry about effective teaching for all needs.

Three (8%) respondents stated that inclusion could be beneficial and they would support it if certain conditions were met or if inclusion occurred with exceptions. One participant stated, “As long as the students are willing and able to try, and are not a distraction to other students, I have no issues including special education students in my
classroom.” Other participants discussed that it is only appropriate to include students with disabilities when “supports” are available.

Question 35 asked participants if they believed students with disabilities were perceived differently by their peers. All 36 participants answered the question. Sixteen (44%) participants responded that they did believe students with disabilities were perceived differently by their peers. One participant explained that they found it “impossible for all students not to notice all students’ differences; but I also think the younger generations are more tolerant, kind, and curious than what we've seen in the past so it doesn't need to have a negative connotation.”

Ten (28%) participants stated that whether or not peers perceived special education students differently depended on their disability. One participant wrote:

I think it depends on the disability. I think there are special education students who have mostly regular education classes and interact frequently with all students. However, there are life skills students who have disabilities in which they are unable to communicate or are seen as "different" and those students are the ones that I believe are perceived as different because they aren't able to connect with their peers as well.

Five (14%) participants stated that whether or not peers perceived special education students differently depended on their grade level. One of the participants stated, “Teaching 3rd graders, I would say students see it more as part of the student's personality, not that something is "wrong" with them. Teaching 6th graders and middle school, students with disabilities seem almost ostracized.” Two (6%) participants stated that special education students are sometimes perceived differently by their peers.
Another two participants (6%) stated that they did not know if students with disabilities were perceived differently by their peers and one respondent (3%) stated that no, students with disabilities were not viewed differently than their peers.

Question 36 asked the participants to think about factors that influence student achievement and describe some of the reasons they referred students for special education evaluations; responses were varied but all participants responded to the question. Three major themes emerged. Ten (26%) participants stated that academic achievement and performance were key reasons they referred students to special education. One participant stated, “Academic gaps are the main reasons for referring students to special education services. Realizing that students have difficulty with reading comprehension, fluency, writing, or gaps in knowledge has been the major factor in my referrals.” Four (13%) participants stated that they referred to special education services when students were not achieving similarly to that of their peers. One participant wrote, “I would refer a student to special education if the student is showing signs of not keeping up with his or her peers and the reason is not for lack of trying.” Another 13% of the respondents stated that they had never referred students to special education services.

**Interviews.** A total of three staff members representing two out of the three participating districts participated in the structured interview process. Interview questions three, four, and five related to research question three. Question three asked participants to describe the post-secondary preparation they had received as a preservice or inservice teacher to make student referrals to special education. Each participant had a variety of experiences. Interview Participant IA gave the following detailed account:
I went back to school after my kids are grown, so I just received my degree in 2011 so I actually did have a three hour special education class as a part of my general education curriculum. That wasn’t really how to make referrals, as it was just familiarizing us with the acronyms and maybe some perspectives. As far as my student teacher placement and stuff like that it didn’t address it at all. My professional development, as part of induction, I had some sort of orientation toward special-education and maybe a rough overview of the referral process. I have never received any structured or specific referral determination guidelines.

Interview Participant IB outlined that their collegiate training was very limited; the participant expressed remorse about that fact. Similarly, Interview Participant IC reminisced about taking one class about diversity when getting their Master’s degree and then a specific special education graduate course. All three participants (100%) shared that they had never received explicit training on how and when to refer students to special education evaluation. Instead, each participant shared that their district gave basic overviews of special education and what to do if they needed to make a referral.

Interview Participant IC even went further to describe:

At my school, we’ve been told we make too many referrals. We’ve also been told that all the referrals that have been made have resulted in getting services, but our numbers are too high so we need to stop referring the kids. We will exhaust everything else until we get a child referred. There’s also been this thing where if parents are going to be involved, that they’re more likely to get services.

Question four asked participants to give their perceptions of whether or not disproportionality was occurring within their district of employment; participants were
provided the definition of disproportionality given in the survey. Two (67%) participants stated that they did believe disproportionality was occurring within their districts.

Interview Participant IC gave the following detailed account:

Yes and I know that in the past two years there’s been a determined effort to try to understand why those referrals, specifically the discipline referrals are taking place and to, I guess, address the systemic racism from within the educational system. Do I think more should be done? Yes. Do I think that we are making an effort? Yeah. I don’t personally have the evidence, but our district does. They shared that publicly with us, especially the discipline referrals. They’ve broken it down by race and by gender in every elementary school, and I believe middle and high school as well. You can see which students are getting the most referrals and it is overwhelmingly the non-White students.

Interview Participant IA agreed with Interview Participant IC, stating that disproportionality does exist, however, they cited anecdotal information. Interview Participant IB explained, “When you see the kids in service, you’re seeing the typical groups you’d expect to see. Our self-contained autism classroom is almost always exclusively male. Our social emotional classes are almost exclusively male.”

Interview Participant IB does not believe that disproportionality was occurring within their district. Instead, Interview Participant IB explained that the demographics of their district was already disproportionate and used that as their explanation. Interview Participant IB stated, “I mean, where I teach, I would guess we’re 80% to 90% White, upper middle class so it’s disproportional to begin with but the way you described it for your purposes, no.”
Question five was a two part question. Question 5a asked participants if they had confidence in their ability to make a referral recommendation for special education services, with 5b asking what factors could enhance their level of confidence in this area. Two (67%) participants shared that they had limited confidence in making special education referrals. Interview Participant IB attributed their confidence to getting “that feeling” and then referring to the school psychologist. One (33%) participant stated that they did not have confidence in their ability to make referrals to special education services. Specifically, Interview Participant IA related the following detailed account of why they did not have confidence in making referrals:

No, I would not say that I have ultimate confidence. I think that what I do is when I am not sure, I reach out. I push when I feel like I need to push; being old helps with that. There are many times that I am not positive of what I’m looking at, and my fall back is to ask for help [or] to ask for observations. Ask for somebody who does know more to put eyes on the situation. Do I feel confident? No.

When asked what factors could help enhance their level of confidence to make referrals, each participant had a different account. Interview Participant IA stated that training would help them to feel more confident, but that walking away from the training with something tangible would be important to them as well. Interview Participant IB shared that “having like 140 students a year” that a checklist for a quick reference on the referral process would be most helpful to them. However, Interview Participant IC was unable to list factors that could help to enhance their level of confidence to make special education referrals. They gave the following detailed account:
If I can speak honestly, I feel hesitant to make referrals because I am afraid that I will be reprimanded. Not specifically at the school where I currently work, I feel very supported there, but in previous schools within the district I have been cautious about making a referral because we’re very mindful of our numbers. We want our numbers to be a certain way and, again, if I happen to say I think this student needs help and that student happens to be an African American male with an attitude, it’s written off. I don’t know that teachers who make referrals are necessarily supported and I don’t think it’s enough to say this is where the worksheet is.

Summary

The data collected and analyzed in Chapter Four are the results of the qualitative research study on teacher perceptions of disproportionality in special education referrals in relation to race and gender and teacher preparedness to make referrals to special education services. Thirty-six general education professionals from three school districts in South Central Pennsylvania participated in the study. Three staff members representing two of the three participating districts shared further details and information in individual structured interviews with the researcher. Selected-response, Likert scale, open-ended question responses, and interview responses, were categorized and shared in tables and written summaries. A summary and interpretation of the research findings, the findings related to previous research, limitations of the research study, and implications for further research are examined in Chapter Five.
Chapter Five - Discussion

Summary of the Study

This qualitative study explored teacher perceptions of disproportionality in special education referrals in relation to race and gender and teacher preparedness to make referrals to special education services. Analyzing these areas may help provide guidance to special education leaders to help provide FAPE for all students regardless of race, gender, or teacher bias.

The researcher sought permission from school district superintendents at 11 districts across the state of Pennsylvania. The researcher examined the perceptions of 36 general education teachers in the three school districts in South Central Pennsylvania where permission from school superintendents was secured. Data were collected using the online survey instrument Google Forms. Participating general education teachers completed a survey containing 18 Likert-type items, six multiple choice items, and seven open-ended questions. In addition, participants could volunteer to participate in a structured interview with the researcher following completion of the survey.

The qualitative data gathered from this multi-site study provided insight from general education teacher perceptions regarding race and gender on disproportionality in the special education referral process. The information gathered in the research was shared through data tables and summary statements in the previous chapter. Chapter Five provides a discussion of the findings from the survey questions in the study; discusses the relationship between the data collected and previous research; and suggests recommendations for future research studies.
Summary of the Results

This study was guided by three research questions which explored, from the perceptions of general education teachers, the relationship of race and gender as it relates to special education referrals and their own preparedness to make referrals to special education services. Each of the 36 survey participants responded to the 18 Likert scale items, six multiple choice questions, and seven open-ended questions. In addition, three participants took part in individual interviews which included five interview questions. Data collected showed that teachers do not perceive race or gender to impact their referrals to special education. The research also determined that there is a need in the area of special education instruction for general education teachers, particularly the referral process.

Research question one sought to identify the perceptions of general education teachers related to race and referrals to special education. Ninety two percent of participants agreed or strongly agreed that students within their school districts have access to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) regardless of race. When asked if race was a factor that impacted the referral of students to special education services, 92% of the participants stated that it was not a factor. When asked if a particular race or ethnicity had more behavioral needs that required special education intervention, 89% of the participants stated that no ethnic or racial group required special education services more than others; the rest of the participants identified Black and Hispanic students as requiring more referrals to special education for behavioral needs. When asked if a particular race or ethnicity had more academic needs that required special education intervention, 86% of the participants stated that no ethnic or racial group required special
education services more than others with the rest of the participants perceiving that they believe Black or Hispanic students require more academic special education services than other peers.

The open ended questions related to research question one asked participants if they believed that students from a specific racial or ethnic group are referred to special education more than others. While the majority of respondents (64%) did not believe that to be true, 36% of the participants stated they did perceive that students from a specific racial or ethnic group are referred to special education disproportionally to other populations; Black and Hispanic students were again identified by participants in this question. This was also substantiated through the structured interview, in which 67% (2) of the interviewees believed that a student’s race impacted their referral rate to special education. When asked to provide evidence that supports their belief regarding disproportionality within their district, many participants cited anecdotal evidence like visible differences in classroom compositions when comparing general education classrooms to special education classrooms. Nearly half (47%) of participants also shared that their district shared data that corroborated their beliefs. In addition, participants were also asked whether or not they had examined their own biases related to teaching students. The majority of respondents (83%) stated that they had examined their own biases and three common themes emerged from the responses regarding the manner in which they had examined their bias: college class or work related training, listing known bias, and reflection on student centered activities or problems.

Research question two sought to identify the perceptions of the general education teachers related to gender and referrals to special education. None of the 36 participants
perceived that female students are referred to special education services in a disproportionate manner. Furthermore, 97% of the participants stated that a student’s gender would not influence the participant’s decision to refer to special education. Additionally, 98% of the participants stated that all students regardless of gender have access to FAPE and LRE within their district of employment. Males were identified as being more likely to require behaviorally based special education services by 22% of respondents and for academically based special education services by 17% of respondents in comparison to other genders. Males were also identified as more likely to require significant special education services than other gendered students by 11% of participants. Male was the only identified gender that was reportedly more difficult to educate in the general education classroom by 11% of participants.

The open ended question that related to research question two asked participants if they believed male students were referred to special education services more so than other gender populations. The results were mixed, as 44% of participants believed that males were referred disproportionately to special education services while another 44% of participants believed that males were not referred disproportionately. Themes emerged in participant responses that outlined a behavioral or social belief related to why males are referred to special education services at higher rates. To support the belief that males are not disproportionately referred to special education services, 31% of the respondents outlined their own classroom gender composition. While 67% (2) of structured interview participants believed that gender influenced special education referrals, one participant stated that females were referred to special education at higher frequency due to
nonconformity while another participant stated that males are referred more frequently than females.

Research question three sought to identify the perceptions of the general education teachers related to their preparedness to make referrals to special education evaluations. When asked if they were familiar with their district’s special education referral process, 72% of participants identified that they were familiar. Only 66% (24) of participants believed that they were well prepared to make a referral to special education services; this was corroborated by 100% of structured interview participants stating that they had never received explicit training on how and when to refer students for special education evaluations. Sixty-two percent of respondents believed that their preservice or inservice experiences had prepared them for differentiating instruction. Furthermore, 89% of participants did not believe that their undergraduate or graduate programs had a strong emphasis in the special education evaluation process. Structured interview participants expressed slight confidence in this area of making referrals to special education services (67%) or no confidence (33%). Sixty-nine percent of participants reported that their preservice or inservice training had prepared them in how to include students with disabilities in their classrooms. However, 75% of respondents believed that they had a strong knowledge base of interventions to use with students prior to referring to special education services and that their preservice or inservice experiences have given them a good understanding of modifications needed in the classroom. Seventy-eight percent of participants also agreed that their preservice or inservice experiences had prepared them to make accommodations within the classroom. Seventy-two percent of participants asserted that disproportionality was not reviewed in their preservice or
inservice experiences. However, 67% (2) of structured interview participants believe that disproportionality occurs within their school district. Related to how participants interact with students with disabilities, 58% of participants shared they have the same expectations for all students regardless of disability within their classroom. In regard to categories that influence referral rates, 64% of participants shared that they believe economically disadvantaged students have a higher probability of being referred to special education services.

The opened ended questions that related to research question three asked if the participants had ever been instructed in Universal Design for Learning (UDL). The majority of participants (75%) had not received any training in UDL. Another open ended question asked participants to explain their feelings regarding students with disabilities within their classrooms. The majority of participants (78%) were completely comfortable with students with disabilities being included within their classrooms. Of the 22% of respondents that expressed reservations about including students with disabilities in their classrooms, 25% of the participants were concerned with their effectiveness as a teacher. An additional open ended question asked participants how they felt students with disabilities were perceived by their peers. The majority (44%) of participants shared that they believed neurotypical peers perceived students with disabilities differently than other neurotypical peers. Participants were also asked to think about factors that influence student achievement and describe some of the reasons they referred students to special education evaluations. Answers were varied with participants outlining academics (26%) and students achieving differently than peers (14%) as likely reasons for referrals to special education services.
Limitations of the Study

In addition to the limitations that were cited in Chapter One, other limitations were noted through the completion of this research. First, this study occurred in the months of December and January and was open to all general education teachers no matter how many years of service each participant had. Due to the timing of the survey and breaks in school scheduling due to holiday vacations, participation may have been negatively impacted. Additionally, there was one participant who responded to the study who had less than a year of teaching experience and four other participants that had two to five years of experience. Therefore, these five participants could have a lack of experience related to the topic of the study, creating a limitation. Furthermore, the study itself created a participation limitation with it being conducted with general education teachers only, rather than full representation from all teaching professional disciplines including special education.

Secondly, this research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, schools and teaching staff were cycling in and out of open and closed status as the infection rate fluctuated. This could have impacted teacher participation within this study. Furthermore, it is unknown to the researcher if participating districts provided Critical Race Training, or something similar, to their staff in the previous or current school year; completion of this training could influence the response of participants and could be seen as a limitation.

Additionally, although permission was received from three school district superintendents, and there were participants in the study from all three districts where permission was granted, there were only 36 total participants. Of the 36 total participants,
only three agreed to share further information through the study interviews. Limited participation impacts the outcome of the study, and is therefore a limitation. Furthermore, although the researcher sought permission from 11 districts in the state of Pennsylvania across urban, suburban, and rural settings no urban districts accepted the request for research. Therefore, this study is limited to the teacher perceptions of participants in rural and suburban districts.

Through conducting this research, it was discovered that survey question number 30 allowed participants to list a free choice answer; this was caused by researcher error. This resulted in a participant listing an answer that was not aligned with the current research questions. When asked which students require more academic special education support, the participant listed English language learners. While this question was answered by all participants, the results of the question had to be explained within the results and could be seen as a limitation.

**Relationship to Other Research**

Inclusion is now considered best practice from a global perspective to educate all students (Ajuwon et al., 2012). In order to effectively instruct students within the inclusive environment, attention should be focused on preservice instruction at the university level (Kirby, 2016). In Pennsylvania, all districts have an obligation to actively seek and identify students that may require special education services; that responsibility is referred to as a child find obligation (Lowman, Darr, & Roth, 2014). Several inconsistencies surfaced when comparing the results of this study to the research in Chapter Two.
Morgan et al. (2020) suggested that in the United States, schools are less likely to identify students of color as disabled than their White peers. However, the research from this study does not indicate teachers are aware of disproportionality occurring within their school district, as evidenced by 72% of participants stating they do not agree it is occurring. Furthermore, 92% of participants stated that race was not a factor they considered when referring students for special education services. By comparison, 8% of participants believed that Black students required behavioral special education intervention more than other races and 5% of participants stated Black students required more academic interventions.

Teacher preparation to educate students with disabilities is extremely important in meeting the needs of all students; furthermore, preservice teacher preparation programs are not training educators to include special education students within their classrooms (Joshi & Moudgil, 2017). Research gathered by this study largely supports Joshi and Moudgil’s (2017) research as evidenced by only 69% of participants reporting that their preservice or inservice training had prepared them in how to include students with disabilities in their classrooms. Furthermore, 89% of participants did not believe that their undergraduate or graduate programs had a strong emphasis in the special education evaluation process. To make inclusive education a reality, Joshi and Moudgil suggested that preservice teachers should be equipped with tools that can assist them in incorporating all students into their classrooms.

Vitelli (2015) conducted research by giving an online survey to general education teachers to examine whether or not preservice general education teachers were being instructed in UDL during their undergraduate programming and discovered that 22% of
their participants were familiar with the framework. The research conducted in this study found similarly that 25% of the participants had been instructed in UDL. Ferguson, Desjardlais, and Meyer (2000) stated that education’s major purpose was to ensure that students receive knowledge, information, and skill sets that will help prepare them to contribute to society in a functional, meaningful way; UDL instruction for preservice and inservice teachers could help to promote meaningful education for all students.

Ajuwon et al. (2012) found teacher training programs should educate preservice teachers on how to modify and accommodate their content areas for students with disabilities while also embedding a belief that students with disabilities are accepted in their classrooms. Joshi and Moudgil (2017) claimed that preservice programs lack specialized instruction in meeting the needs of all students. This was supported by current research data that indicated only 62% of teachers believed their preservice programs had prepared them for differentiating instruction and 11% of teachers believed their preservice programs emphasized special education evaluations. Teacher preparation to educate students with disabilities is extremely important in order to meet the needs of all students; furthermore, preservice teacher preparation programs are lacking in training educators to include special education students within their classrooms (Joshi & Moudgil, 2017).

Mason et al. (2014) examined the relationship of teacher cultural and ethnic bias and asserted that bias could influence the results of special education evaluations. Therefore, this researcher found it pertinent to ask participants if they examine their own bias regularly as classroom teachers. Thirty (83%) participants stated that yes, they have examined their biases related to teaching. The majority of respondents (47%) indicated
that examination of bias came through school district offered or collegiate level training. Educators must be able to identify implicit bias as they can attribute to differences in discipline for students (Cook et al., 2018).

Woodson and Harris (2018) conducted research to examine characteristics of both educators and students that were likely to impact whether a male student would be referred to special education. The researchers ascertained that being a female teacher did not correlate to increased special education referrals for males. This was supported by data from this current research that indicated that male teacher participants (43%), rather than female (21%), identified male students as having more academic or behavioral concerns than other students. Alter et al. (2013) also determined that elementary level educators were more bothered by student behaviors than their secondary counterparts. However, 20% of high school level participants stated they believed male students also have more academic or behavioral needs that require special education intervention compared to 18% of elementary level participants. Therefore, contrary to previous research, this researcher did not find a large discrepancy between responses of elementary and secondary educators regarding perception of male student needs. Woodson and Harris identified that teacher race could be a predictor of increased referrals to special education, with white teachers most likely to make referrals. This was supported by data from this current research that found 0% of non-White participants stated that male students have more behavioral needs that require special education intervention compared to 20% of White respondents.
Recommendations for Future Research

This qualitative study explored teacher perceptions of disproportionality in special education referrals in relation to race and gender and teacher preparedness to make referrals to special education services. The research relied upon triangulation of data from general education teachers in three school districts through an online survey with multiple-choice questions, Likert scale statements, and open-ended questions; three general educators also took part in individual interviews. The findings of the study cannot be generalized across all settings as a result of its limitations. This study suggests further research recommendations.

This study had general education teachers as participants. A researcher might replicate a similar study, but alter the focus to gain perceptions directly from school-aged students as the participants in a future study. In addition, this research took place in public school districts in South-Central Pennsylvania. This study could be replicated at charter schools, private schools, or approved special education center-based programs and within different geographical regions of the state of Pennsylvania to determine if the results are similar or different than the results of this study.

The school districts that participated in the study were classified as suburban or rural school districts. Therefore, a further recommendation would be to have a similar study focused on an urban setting. In addition, rather than general educators as participants, the research study could be altered to gain the perceptions of teaching professionals with special education degrees.

General education teachers, as evidenced by more than 89% of the data, indicated that they had not received enough training in their preservice or inservice career on
making referrals to special education services. This data could prompt a qualitative study as to the possible implications of professional development and preservice education for teaching staff on these procedures. This could help promote more comprehensive education for educators in order to ensure students have access to their free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment.

**Conclusion**

The qualitative study explored teacher perceptions of disproportionality in special education referrals in relation to race and gender and teacher preparedness to make referrals to special education services. The general education teachers who participated in the study responded to Likert scale items, multiple-choice questions, open-ended questions, and structured interview questions.

In general, the majority (92%) of participants in this study indicated that they believe that students within their districts have access to FAPE and LRE within their district regardless of race. The majority of respondents (92%) shared that race is not a factor considered when choosing to refer students to special education services, yet 22% of participants also stated that they believed minority students are disproportionately referred to special education services within their district. Most participants stated that no ethnic, or racial group, (89%) or gender (78%) required special education services more than others. However, 10% of participants identified ethnic or racial groups that require more intervention than others and at least 10% of participants also identified males as requiring more special education services, showing a possible concern with teacher bias. Furthermore, three participants specifically outlined that Black students require more behavioral intervention than other races. Currently, this research may be indicative of
personal bias regarding race or gender and need for special education intervention. It also demonstrates conflicting views from participants of whether disproportionality exists within participating districts. It is recommended that school leaders and administrators ensure that their teachers review data regularly to ascertain if disparities exist among referral rates of students. Bias should continue to be an area of training for both inservice and preservice teachers in order to allow for an understanding of factors that can influence referral rates of students to special education services.

This study also brought to light discrepancies of how teachers perceive disproportionality within their own district. While almost all of the general education teachers (92%) believed that students within their district had access to FAPE and LRE regardless of race or gender, roughly half also believed that boys were referred to special education services at higher rates than their peers. These data indicate that teacher perceptions of disproportionality vary and may not be based in fact, as all participating districts were not identified by the state of Pennsylvania as meeting criteria for disproportionate special education services. It is recommended that district leaders focus on educating all professional instructional staff in disproportionality and whether or not it occurs within their district. Furthermore, it may be beneficial to provide teachers with specific data regarding each racial and gender group in order to provide them with a comprehensive understanding of the occurrence of disproportionality.

Finally, this study highlighted the need for teacher preparation and teacher inservice programs to have a heavier emphasis on training educators to work with students with disabilities. Regarding confidence with making referrals to special education services, this researcher was able to clearly identify an area of need in
improving training for teachers regarding the special education referral process on behalf of students. Seventy-five percent of participants felt that their preservice and inservice experiences did not prepare them to make referrals for special education services; 11% of participants felt that these programs focused heavily on special education services. Many participants shared that they had been adequately trained in making accommodations (78%), modifications (75%), differentiating instruction (62%), and how to include students with disabilities (69%). However, an overwhelming majority of participants shared that their preservice or inservice training experiences did not emphasize special education evaluations (89%) or the occurrence of disproportionality (77%). Furthermore, one of the structured interview participants shared that their district discourages referrals, unless parents are heavily involved; the teacher went on to explain that they fear being reprimanded for making referrals. When teachers have the ability and responsibility to refer students to special education services due to child find obligations, it is imperative that they are trained on how students are evaluated for special education services, how to make good referrals for services, and the existence of disproportionality in special education populations. Teacher preparation programs and inservice programs should be purposefully designed to increase knowledge in these areas in order to promote LRE within the school setting.

The research from this study may provide school districts and teacher preparation programs with strategies to increase awareness of disproportionality in special education referrals in relation to race and gender. This research may also highlight training needs for teacher preparedness to make referrals to special education services by incorporating the study recommendations within current practices. Focusing on teacher training
regarding disproportionality and preparation to refer students to special education services will be important in order to provide all students with a free and appropriate public education. It is hoped the findings of this study may be taken into thoughtful consideration regarding teacher preparation and inservice programs.
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Appendix A
Survey Instrument

Perceptions of Students in Special Education and the Referral Process

The purpose of this qualitative study is to investigate teacher perceptions regarding race and gender in the special education referral process as well as teacher preparedness to make referrals to special education services. Due to the nature of the current racial climate, some of these survey questions could cause discomfort for some participants.

By beginning this survey, you are agreeing that I:
· Have read the information presented in the information email about a study being conducted by Juliet Ashton of the Department of Education at Immaculata University. I have had the opportunity to ask any questions related to this study, to receive satisfactory answers to my questions, and any additional details I wanted.
· Am aware that excerpts from the survey may be included in the dissertation to come from this research, with the understanding that the quotations will be anonymous.
· May withdraw my consent at any time without penalty by advising the researcher.
· Am aware that this project has been reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Review Board at Immaculata University. I was informed that if I have any comments or concerns regarding my participation in this study, I may contact the Chair of the Research Ethics Review Board.

* Required
Demographic Information

Complete the following demographic information. Please note that all personal information will be kept completely confidential and none of the responses you provide will be connected to your name, email address, or other identifying information unless participating in the optional structured interview at the end of this survey.

1. What is your racial/ethnic identity? *

*Mark only one oval.

- White or Caucasian
- Black or African American
- Hispanic or Latino
- Asian or Asian American
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
- Prefer not to Answer
- Other: ____________________________

2. Including the current year, how many years have you been a public school teacher? *

*Mark only one oval.

- 1 year or less
- 2 to 5 years
- 6 to 10 years
- 11 years+
3. What current certifications do you hold? (Check all that apply.) *

*Check all that apply.*

- General Education (Elementary, Content Area, etc.)
- Special Education
- Specialist (School Counselor, Speech Therapist, Psychologist, etc.)
- Administrative
- Other

4. What grade level do you currently predominantly instruct? *

*Mark only one oval.*

- Early Childhood: Kindergarten - 2nd Grade
- Intermediate Elementary: 3rd Grade - 6th Grade
- Middle School: 7th Grade - 8th Grade
- High School: 9th Grade - 12th Grade+

5. What discipline do you currently teach the majority of your day? *

*Mark only one oval.*

- Language Arts
- Mathematics
- Science
- Social Studies
- Enrichment
- Multidisciplinary (Example: Elementary general education teacher that teaches multiple subjects per day.)
- Other: ________________________________
6. What is your identifying gender? *

*Mark only one oval.*

- Male
- Female
- Prefer not to Answer
- Other: ____________________________

The following questions contain a number of statements with which some individuals agree and others disagree. Please rate how much you personally agree or disagree with each statement.

The following terms are used in this survey and are important for you to understand:

**Accommodation** – an adjustment to a student’s education plan including possible changes in presentation, demonstration of mastery, setting, time, or supports needed for the student to meet those expectations (Vander Broek et al., 2019).

**Disproportionality** - a school entity identifying for special education, placing outside of the general education classroom, or disciplining students from any ethnic, racial, or gender category at a considerably higher rate than their peers (United States Department of Education, 2016).

**Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)** - special education placement decided upon by the IEP team of a public school that provides special education services that meet the guidelines set forth by the state (Yell, 2019, p. 60).

**Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)** - providing students with disabilities with an education that includes non-disabled peers and general education environment to the maximum extent possible as determined by each student’s IEP team, removing the said student from such an environment only when the severity and nature of their disability requires (LRE Requirements, 2019).

**Modification** – a change or alteration to what expectation a student is required to meet, involving possible changes in instructional standards or curriculum (Vander Broek et al., 2019)
7. I am well versed in my district's special education referral process. *

Mark only one oval.

☐ Strongly disagree
☐ Disagree
☐ Agree
☐ Strongly agree

8. All students regardless of race have access to special education services that promote FAPE within their LRE in my district. *

Mark only one oval.

☐ Strongly disagree
☐ Disagree
☐ Agree
☐ Strongly agree

9. I believe that students designated as minorities are disproportionately referred to special education services within my district. *

Mark only one oval.

☐ Strongly disagree
☐ Disagree
☐ Agree
☐ Strongly agree
10. I feel well prepared to make referrals for special education evaluations. *

   Mark only one oval.

   - Strongly disagree
   - Disagree
   - Agree
   - Strongly agree

11. There is a disproportionate amount of female students referred to special education services within my district.*

   Mark only one oval.

   - Strongly disagree
   - Disagree
   - Agree
   - Strongly Agree

12. My preservice and/or inservice training has prepared me well for differentiating instruction for students within my classroom. *

   Mark only one oval.

   - Strongly disagree
   - Disagree
   - Agree
   - Strongly agree
13. Gender does not influence my decision to refer students to special education evaluations. *

*Mark only one oval.*

- [ ] Strongly disagree
- [ ] Disagree
- [ ] Agree
- [ ] Strongly agree

14. I have a strong knowledge base about appropriate interventions for students prior to referring them for special education evaluations. *

*Mark only one oval.*

- [ ] Strongly disagree
- [ ] Disagree
- [ ] Agree
- [ ] Strongly agree

15. Race or ethnicity do not influence my decision to refer students to special education services. *

*Mark only one oval.*

- [ ] Strongly disagree
- [ ] Disagree
- [ ] Agree
- [ ] Strongly agree
16. My undergraduate and/or graduate degree had strong emphasis in special education evaluations. *

Mark only one oval.

☐ Strongly disagree
☐ Disagree
☐ Agree
☐ Strongly agree

17. My preservice and/or inservice training has prepared me well for making modifications within my classroom. *

Mark only one oval.

☐ Strongly disagree
☐ Disagree
☐ Agree
☐ Strongly agree

18. All students regardless of gender have access to special education services that promote FAPE within their LRE in my district. *

Mark only one oval.

☐ Strongly disagree
☐ Disagree
☐ Agree
☐ Strongly agree
19. I believe that a student that is economically disadvantaged would have a higher probability of being referred to special education services. *

*Mark only one oval.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

20. There is a disproportionate amount of minority students referred to special education services within my district. *

*Mark only one oval.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

21. Disproportionality in special education has been addressed in my preservice or in-service experience. *

*Mark only one oval.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree
22. My preservice and/or inservice training has prepared me well for making accommodations within my classroom. *

*Mark only one oval.*

- [ ] Strongly disagree
- [ ] Disagree
- [ ] Agree
- [ ] Strongly agree

23. I have the same expectations for all students in my classroom, regardless of whether or not they receive special education services. *

*Mark only one oval.*

- [ ] Strongly disagree
- [ ] Disagree
- [ ] Agree
- [ ] Strongly agree

24. My preservice and/or inservice training has prepared me well for including students with disabilities in my classroom. *

*Mark only one oval.*

- [ ] Strongly disagree
- [ ] Disagree
- [ ] Agree
- [ ] Strongly agree

Multiple Choice

The following questions are multiple-choice questions. Read each question and answer choice carefully and choose the ONE best answer.
25. Which students are more likely to have behavioral needs that require special education intervention (Example: preferential seating, behavior plans, prompting, etc.)? *

*Mark only one oval.*

- Male Identifying
- Female Identifying
- There is no group that requires special education interventions more than others.
- Non-Binary Identifying

26. Which students are more likely to have significant special education needs (Example: deficits in math, reading, etc.)? *

*Mark only one oval.*

- Male Identifying
- Female Identifying
- There is no group that requires special education interventions more than others.
- Non-Binary Identifying

27. Which students are more likely to have academic needs that require special education intervention (Example: deficits in math, reading, etc.)? *

*Mark only one oval.*

- Male Identifying
- Female Identifying
- There is no group that requires special education intervention more than others.
- Non-Binary Identifying

28. Which students are most likely to have behavioral needs that require
special education intervention (Example: preferential seating, behavior plans, prompting, etc.)*:

*Mark only one oval.*

- White or Caucasian
- Black of African American
- Hispanic or Latino
- Asian or Asian American
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
  - There is no group that requires special education intervention more than others.
- Other: ___________________________________________________________________

29. Which students with special education needs are more difficult to educate within the general education classroom? *

*Mark only one oval.*

- Male Identifying
- Female Identifying
- There is no group that is more difficult to educate than others.
- Non-Binary Identifying

30. Which students are most likely to have academic needs that require
special education intervention? *

Mark only one oval.

☐ White or Caucasian
☐ Black or African American
☐ Hispanic or Latino
☐ Asian or Asian American
☐ American Indian or Alaska Native
☐ Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander

There is no group that requires special education interventions more than others.

☐ Other: ____________________________

Open Ended Questions

The following questions are open ended in nature in order to allow you to express your complete understanding, feelings, and knowledge about a particular topic. Please fill in the text box, making sure to elaborate on your explanations.

The following terms are used in the following section and are important for you to understand:

Explicit Bias - “attitudes or affective reactions that people are aware that they have, that they can alter with relative ease as their beliefs change, and that they can strategically misreport when they want to do so” (Starck, Riddle, Sinclair, Warikoo, 2020, p. 274).

Implicit Bias - “the automatic cognitive associations or affective predispositions individuals have with different social groups” (Starck et al., 2020, p. 274).

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) – a framework that believes in reducing
barriers so that all students can have access to, participate with, and make progress in the general education classroom and curriculum (Ralabate, 2020).

31A. Have you ever been instructed in the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework? *

*Mark only one oval.*

☐ Yes

☐ No  *Skip to question 3*

31B. How have you incorporated the framework within your classroom? *

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

32A. Do you believe that students from a specific racial or ethnic group are referred to special education more than others? *

*Mark only one oval.*

☐ Yes

☐ No  *Skip to question 36*

32B. Based on the answer of your previous question, which students from
a specific racial or ethnic group do you believe are referred to special education more than others? Check all that apply. *

Check all that apply.

☐ White or Caucasian
☐ Black or African American
☐ Hispanic or Latino
☐ Asian or Asian American
☐ American Indian or Alaska Native
☐ Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
☐ Other

32C. What evidence exists to support your belief? *

____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

Open Ended Questions (continued)

33. How do you feel about including special education students within your classroom? Explain. *

____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

34. Have you ever examined your own implicit or explicit bias when teaching? Explain why or why not. *

____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

35. Do you believe that students with disabilities are perceived differently by their peers? Why or why not? *
36. Thinking of multiple factors that can influence student achievement (socioeconomic status, disability category, etc.) what are some of the reasons that you refer students to special education services? *

______________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________

37. Do you believe that male students are referred to special education more than females? Why or why not? *

______________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________

Interview Information

- Optional

Thank you so much for participating in this important study! A second optional step is to participate in a structured interview in a one-on-one format with the researcher via phone or Zoom session. Utilizing data collected through the survey in conjunction with structured interview questions will help to ensure that the researcher is getting the most comprehensive information. The structured interview will be composed of five questions and will take approximately 20 minutes. Thank you in advance for considering being a part of this second step of data collection!

Completing the following question "yes" to volunteer for a structured interview will cause a loss of anonymity, as contact information will be shared with the researcher. However, the researcher assures confidentiality of all responses will be maintained and will be known to no one but the researcher. If you click "no", you will be redirected to press "submit" in order to record your responses.

38. I am interested in participating in the structured interview. *

Mark only one oval.
Structured Interview

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed! Please outline your contact information below in order to email you a formal consent form. Once the consent form has been received, I will contact you within 30 calendar days to set up an appointment to meet virtually or via phone depending on your preference. I will keep your contact information in confidence. Once you complete your phone number, please click "submit".

Name: *

Email Address: *

Phone Number: *

Appendix B
Invitation to Participants/Recruitment Letter
Dear General Education Teacher,

I am pursuing my doctoral degree at Immaculata University and engaged in research for my dissertation. Your superintendent is one of several who have given consent to conduct this study. I am examining perceptions of general education teachers regarding students in special education and the referral process. The data you provide will be recorded anonymously and your participation and all responses will be held in the strictest confidence. Due to the nature of the current racial climate in our area, some of these survey questions could cause discomfort for some participants.

You may participate by completing an online survey that contains 38 questions and will take approximately 10 minutes to complete. If you choose to participate in the interview, please indicate that choice on the appropriate question and provide contact information in the space provided; participating in the structured interview will result in a lack of complete anonymity due to providing contact information. However, the researcher assures participant confidentiality. The interview will take approximately 20 minutes and may be scheduled at your convenience, via phone or Zoom.

Your participation is on a voluntary basis, and you may refuse to participate at any time without consequence or prejudice. Any questions you have about the research can be directed to me, Juliet R. Ashton, on my cell phone at (610) 717-8831, or juliet.ashton@gmail.com. You may also contact Dr. Marcia Parris, Chair, Research Ethics Review Board at mparris@immaculata.edu if you have any concerns or comments regarding your involvement in this study.

Please click on the link below to participate by completing the survey. Clicking this link will indicate your consent to participate in this study. I am grateful for your participation in my study!

Sincerely,

Juliet R. Ashton

Appendix C

Structured Interview Questions
1. Do you believe that students’ race influences referrals to special education evaluations within your district? What evidence exists to support your belief?

2. Do you believe that students’ gender influences referrals to special education evaluations within your district? What evidence exists to support your belief?

3. Describe the post-secondary preparation you had as a preservice or in-service teacher to make appropriate referrals to special education services.

4. Remember the definition of disproportionality from your survey: 
   *(Disproportionality* is defined as a school entity identifying for special education, placing outside of the general education classroom, or disciplining students from any ethnic, racial, or gender category at a considerably higher rate than their peers). Given that definition, do you believe there is disproportionality occurring within your school district? What evidence exists to support your belief?

5. Do you have confidence in your ability to make appropriate referrals of students for special education services? Explain.

5a. What factors could enhance your level of confidence?

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**Appendix D**
Research Ethics and Review Board Permission

IMMACULATA UNIVERSITY RESEARCH ETHICS REVIEW BOARD
REQUEST FOR PROTOCOL REVIEW—REVIEWER’S COMMENTS FORM
(R1297)

Name of Researcher: Juliet Ashton

Project Title: Teacher Perceptions Regarding Race and Gender on Disproportionality in the Special Education Referral Process

Reviewer’s Comments:

Your proposal is Approved. You may begin your research or collect your data.

PLEASE NOTE THAT THIS APPROVAL IS VALID FOR ONE YEAR (365 days) FROM DATE OF SIGNING.

Reviewer’s Recommendations:

______ Exempt
______ Expedited
______ Full Review

X Approve

_____ Conditionally Approved
_____ Do Not Approve

Marcia Parris, Ed.D.
Chair, Research Ethics Review Board

Date

December 22, 2020