

A Qualitative Analysis of Teachers' and Counselors' Perceptions of the Overrepresentation of African Americans in Special Education

A Preliminary Study

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In this study, the authors investigate the perceptions of general educators, special educators, and school counselors on the topic of overrepresentation of minorities (specifically, African American) in special education programs. The study took place in a rural school district in south central Alabama, where overrepresentation of African American students in the category of mental retardation had been identified as a chronic problem by the Alabama State Department of Education. Participants took part in focus groups that were held separately for each identified group (e.g., general educators: $n = 5$; special educators: $n = 4$; and school counselors: $n = 4$). Qualitative data collected from the focus groups were examined using content analysis, resulting in the identification of multiple overlapping themes related to overrepresentation. These themes included a lack of family involvement, misinterpretation of assessment results, a lack of understanding of overrepresentation, and unclear ideas about disability characteristics. Findings from the data include a discussion of variables related to systematic bias and susceptibility to disability labeling. Implications for professional development and educator training are presented.

Keywords: *overrepresentation; African Americans; counselors; teachers*

Students of color are overrepresented in special education and likewise underrepresented in talented and gifted programs (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Harry & Klingner, 2007; Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002). Without a doubt, this problem has been a long-standing challenge in the field (Dunn, 1968). Research indicates multiple causes of this phenomenon, which include poverty, teacher bias, testing bias, cultural bias, inadequate access to research-validated instruction, and institutionalized racism (Ferri & Connor, 2005; Hosp & Reschly, 2004; Losen & Orfield, 2002). Although research has not to date

identified the exact cause of the complex nature of overrepresentation of minorities in special education, the federal government has mandated through the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 1997, 2004) that school districts with overrepresentation of students of color in special education take immediate corrective action, including financial sanctions and professional development.

Oswald, Coutinho, and Best (2002) posited that eligibility for special education services could be tracked through nine sociodemographic predictor variables or susceptibility

variables, a third of which related to socioeconomic status (e.g., median income of households, percentage of children below the poverty level, and median housing value). These researchers asked the specific question, "Does poverty in a community significantly affect the chances that a student will be identified as mentally retarded?" (p. 6). Through analysis of the National Center for Educational Statistics Common Core Data CD-ROM and the Office of Civil Rights (in 1994) time series data, these researchers found that the sociodemographics of a school district are strongly associated with the proportion of students identified with disabilities. As noted, these sociodemographic variables were termed *susceptibility* variables, whereas a second category of predictor variables were termed *systematic bias* variables.

For example, systematic bias variables for individuals identified with mental retardation (MR) "indicate a need to carefully scrutinize . . . MR identification" (Oswald et al., 2002, p. 10). The complexity of issues surrounding systematic bias may be daunting, but data analysis seems to indicate the existence of this phenomenon. The problem of overrepresentation has plagued the field of special education since its inception (Dunn, 1968). The field has sufficient empirical data that point to this phenomenon emanating from both susceptibility and systematic bias (IDEIA, 2004). The need to disentangle the susceptibility effects from the systematic bias effects is critical to ensure appropriate identification and placement of students of color. That is, systematic bias may be a malleable phenomenon through professional development, whereas susceptibility bias may be external to educational structures. This complex relationship between susceptibility and systematic bias complicates the understanding of overrepresentation.

Further complicating the issue of overrepresentation is the fact that trends in the

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2003) indicated that the achievement gap for African American students, especially those in special education, is staggering and that no measurable change has occurred to close the gap in the past decade. It is known that without sufficient intervention at any stage of learning, the gap in achievement widens (Kauffman, 2002; Stanovich, 1986). Whatever the impetus for the achievement gap, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001) mandates sweeping accountability in public education and points squarely at the need to address equitable education for minority students, students with disabilities, and students living in poverty.

Specifically, in Alabama, where the study was conducted, the overrepresentation problem is markedly pronounced. In fact, in the special education category of MR, African American children in Alabama are nearly three times more likely to be labeled MR than their European American counterparts (*Fifth Annual Report on Lee v. Macon*, 2005). Once labeled MR, African American children are 82% more likely to be served in a more restrictive environment, which further confounds their opportunity for equal access to the general education curriculum. The issue of more restrictive placement of African American students with disabilities is not isolated to Alabama (Skiba, Ploni-Staudinger, Gallini, Simmons, & Feggins-Azziz, 2006).

Based on the challenges outlined above, the purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of general educators, special educators, and school counselors on the topic of overrepresentation of African American students in special education programs with specific interest in the role that systematic bias may contribute to overrepresentation. The district where the study took place has a history of overrepresentation. For example, between 2000 and 2007, the Alabama State Department of Education reported this district

as having African American students overrepresented in the area of MR. Participants took part in focus groups, and the data from these groups were analyzed.

Method

Setting and Participants

The study took place in a rural school district in Alabama, which was chosen based on its history of overrepresentation of African American students in special education. In the district where the study took place, the composite index for disproportionality in the category of MR was 90% (Hosp & Reschly, 2004). That is, the district had an enrollment of 2,843 students. Of this enrollment, 55% were African American, 43% were European American, and 2% were other (e.g., Asian American, Hispanic American, and Native American), whereas 90% of the students identified with MR were African American. In the categories of (a) learning disabilities, 67% were African American; (b) developmental delay, 79% were African American; and (c) emotional behavioral disorders, 50% were African American. The average teacher-student ratio in the district was 15:1. The district has three elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school.

The participants in this preliminary study were selected and invited to participate in the study by the Director of Special Education for the district where the focus groups took place. Participants' selection was based on (a) their willingness to participate in the study, (b) their willingness to candidly discuss this sensitive topic in a focus group, and (c) their role as elementary educators and counselors in this historically overrepresented school district.

The participants in the study were elementary general educators ($n = 5$), special educators ($n = 4$), and school counselors ($n = 4$)

who were invited to participate in the focus groups by the Director of Special Education for the district. General and special education group members were elementary teachers. For all three focus groups, participants were individuals who identified as either African American ($n = 2$) or European American ($n = 11$) in ethnicity, and all participants were female ($n = 13$).

The school counselors participated in the study in their role as facilitators of the prereferral intervention team for each of their respective elementary schools. The prereferral intervention team, in Alabama, is referred to as the Building Based Student Support Team (BBSST). In this capacity, the school counselors have direct impact on which students are referred for formal assessment as part of the determination of the need for special education services. This prereferral process for many students is the initiation point of assessment that leads to identification. In this way, the role of school counselors in this school district directly affects which children have the potential to be referred for special education.

Research Design and Procedures

Focus group methodology was determined appropriate for this investigation, as focus groups have been identified as a method of obtaining qualitative data for analysis (Morgan, 1993, 1998; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Focus groups are characterized as carefully planned discussions designed to obtain perceptions surrounding a defined area. They typically include 8 to 12 participants with similar experiences in a specific content area and are led by an unbiased moderator asking open-ended questions of participants. The focus group is audiotaped and/or videotaped, with the session being transcribed and this content being used for data analysis. The goal of focus group methodology is one in

Table 1
Focus Group Guiding Questions

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1. What is your perception of the issue of overrepresentation of minorities receiving special education services? Does overrepresentation of minorities exist? If so, in your perception, what makes this an issue? If not, what makes this an issue?
 2. Based on your perception, do you think the referral process to the Building Based Student Support Team (BBSST) has anything to do with overrepresentation of minorities?
 3. Based on your perception, do you think the referral process to special education services has anything to do with overrepresentation of minorities?
 4. In a perfect school system, what would the BBSST referral process look like?
 5. In a perfect school system, what would the special education referral process look like?
 6. What keeps us from this perfect school system? What barriers get in the way of making this happen? Would overrepresentation of minorities exist if the school system was perfect?
 7. What would the composition of students look like if there wasn't overrepresentation of minorities receiving special education services? Specifically, the composition of students in BBSST? Specifically, the composition of students in special education? Specifically, the composition in the general education population?
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which specification of information is sought, not necessarily generalization of data. Focus groups have been especially helpful in uncovering the reasons behind an outcome and answering *how* and *why* questions as opposed to *what* and *how many* questions. Additionally, the use of focus groups as a research methodology has the capacity to yield valuable insights into information, perceptions, opinions, attitudes, and values expressed by participants that may not be available from other sources.

In this study, focus groups were held separately for each of the three groups (e.g., general educators, special educators, and counselors). A predetermined set of questions was developed by the researchers as the protocol to be used for each of the independently held focus groups. The content of these questions was developed based on focus group methodology—where a common area of concern is investigated as to the perceptions, attitudes, and values of the participants regarding this specific topic. The researchers intended to develop questions that would potentially identify indicators of systematic bias without directly questioning participants if, in their perception, systematic bias exists within the system. The questions were composed in such

a way to allow participants to discuss their perceptions of (a) the general issue of overrepresentation within their school district, (b) the prereferral intervention process, (c) the referral to special education process, (d) the barriers and facilitators within the prereferral and referral processes that affect overrepresentation, and (e) the composition of students in an imaginary “perfect” school district without overrepresentation (see Table 1 for focus group questions).

The focus groups were facilitated by the second author, who served as the moderator for each of the focus groups. Reliability of results using qualitative data gleaned from focus groups is enhanced by the consistent use of the same moderator across groups (Morgan, 1993, 1998). In keeping with focus group methodology, the moderator had not met or interacted with participants prior to the focus group meetings.

Each of the focus groups was tape recorded while two independent observers (trained graduate students) took notes during the sessions. The tape-recorded conversations were transcribed by trained graduate students. The graduate students were trained in note taking and transcription of taperecorded data by the second author in two 1-hour sessions.

Table 2
Common Themes Across Groups by Systematic and Susceptibility Variables

| Theme | Group Identification | | |
|--|--|---|--|
| Systematic variables | General educators | Special educators | School counselors |
| Misunderstanding of overrepresentation | Unaware of the problem | Issue does exist | Misunderstanding of definition |
| Assessment | Questions about how and when needed | Need for authentic cultural forms | Misunderstanding of definition and characteristics of disabilities |
| Referral process | | Confusion over models | Focus is on failing |
| Susceptibility variables | Ineffective | Effective | |
| | Frustrating | Positive process | |
| Sociodemographics | General educators | Special educators | School counselors |
| Parents/family | Socioeconomic status | Socioeconomic status | Socioeconomic status |
| | Lack of resources in area of state | Lack of resources in area of state | Lack of resources in area of state |
| Disability | Lack of involvement | Lack of involvement | Number of children who receive "free lunch" |
| | School system has an obligation to support parents by teaching them how to help their children | Support defined differently by parents and school | |
| | | Parents/families do not understand or accept the disability | Negative influence of parents with disabilities |
| | | | Parents do not understand the child's needs |

Transcripts and notes were used in the content analysis of data. The initial analysis of data was conducted independently by the authors, yielding the identification of multiple themes for each group. The authors then collectively examined all themes by group, yielding overlapping themes for the three groups.

Data Analysis and Results

Content analysis of the data resulted in multiple divergent and overlapping themes. Efforts to maintain reliability and content validity were used in the focus group process. Data were analyzed by contrasting the independent observer notes and observations for each focus group with transcribed materials. Each group had a different perspective on the general issue of overrepresentation and some common perceptions as to contributing factors. Resulting themes for each

group were identified and are noted in the following section. Also, overlapping themes were identified and are presented in Table 2. Finally, identified themes were confirmed with participants by the use of a follow-up debriefing session to review findings.

General Education Teachers

Overrepresentation

On the issue of overrepresentation, general education teachers ($n = 5$) voiced an unawareness of the problem and a great deal of misunderstanding. One individual noted that she thought overrepresentation was not an issue because "it has already been dealt with in our system." These teachers did not exhibit an understanding that overrepresentation is based on the ratio of disability to ethnicity. Rather, participants primarily associated the general demographic statistics for the county and school district as the source of overrepresentation.

A misunderstanding of overrepresentation led to its causes being attributed solely to susceptibility factors by the group. Factors such as socioeconomic status, lack of resources, lack of parental involvement, and the changing nature of raised expectations for schools based on new legislation (NCLB) were cited. Additionally, there was a level of general acceptance of overrepresentation itself. One participant stated, "it is what it is," and other group members nodded in agreement.

Referral Process

Ineffectiveness. For the general education teachers, there was a general perception that the referral process was an ineffective one. It appeared to these teachers that the referral process took too long when students needed the help that might be afforded them if deemed appropriate candidates for special education services. These teachers indicated that by the time classroom strategies had been identified, implemented, and determined ineffective for certain children, many such students had already begun a cycle of failure. According to participants, the amount of time that elapsed from the teacher first noticing a student's struggles to him or her receiving special education services (with all the intervening events) was simply too great. Teachers' perceptions were that students who needed the help were put off and did not receive appropriate assistance despite the best efforts of teachers.

Frustrations. General education teachers indicated frustration with timelines and established procedures in the referral process itself. Teachers' voiced frustration with what was described as opposing forces inherent in the referral process (i.e., the push by the system to refer early enough but not too early, the push by the system to provide enough documentation that illustrated multiple remediation attempts, and at times, the pressure

by the system to not refer at all). Frustrations in this area led to the perception that established timelines and procedures feel arbitrary and teachers' best efforts are often constrained by unnecessary road blocks. For example:

'Cause to me its like they want you to wait so many days after school starts because they feel like you don't know the child long enough, then you've got to wait for the next meeting, and then when you get there, you've got to have all these loads of documentation that you've got to take time to get together so that you can prove to this committee, and then once you get, there they are like, "Have you tried this, this, this, and this?" Well, you didn't try the exact thing, but you've tried something similar, but you know their job is to give you ideas for you to go back and try for 30 days. Then, you have to wait for the next meeting to meet again. Then, by the time, then you have to fill out the paperwork and then it's turn it in and then it's wait until the psychometrist or whatever can come or, you know, your process would be doing good if you can get a child tested before halfway through the year.

Assessment. General education teachers additionally identified the area of assessment as one of concern. This topic closely mirrored many of the frustrations indicated as being inherent in the referral process. Teachers indicated that the issue of assessment for special education services all too often constitutes a balancing act based on timeliness. For example, some asked how early is too early for assessment to occur and how much assessment is too much. Teachers indicated that the answer to these queries is critical in that timelines affect the potential for future testing and the possible receipt of needed services. Teachers indicated that if testing occurred too early, a child could be precluded from further testing, and therefore,

the receipt of services could be postponed or negated altogether in a given academic year.

More important, a generalized misunderstanding of at least one basic statistical principle involved in assessment became apparent in the course of the focus group. This issue appeared to be closely linked to the misunderstanding that many of the general education teachers had about overrepresentation—that is, a misunderstanding of ratio or the basic statistical concept involved in the definition of overrepresentation. For example:

Well now, _____ County is not on watch and they're almost 100% African American, but they are not on watch. So now every child in special education is African American. That makes no sense to me, because we have White children and Black in the same school system. We may not have as many Whites in with the Blacks. I don't understand why we are on watch and they are not. I mean, does that make sense to you why we are on watch?

Parental influence. General education teachers felt strongly about the role of parental and family influence in the educational process. Based on educators' comments, parental and family influence fell into two categories, including (a) the perception that parental and family influence is an attributable as well as a contributing factor in overrepresentation and (b) the feeling that the school system has a responsibility to help support parents and families by teaching them how to positively affect their children's school progress. Teachers mentioned multiple factors attributable to parents and families that get in the way of learning and, in their opinion, contribute to overrepresentation. These include parents' negative attitudes toward their own educational experience, having a parent with learning difficulties, lack of parental or family involvement based on time and scheduling of working parents or

single moms, lack of parental involvement because parents simply do not know how to help or lack the knowledge needed to help their children, embarrassment and avoidance because parents do not know how to help, the phenomenon of reading not taking place in a home, and parents' personal negative feelings and experiences with school or teachers.

Teachers indicated a number of things that schools and teachers can do to help support parents as they try to encourage their children's progress. These suggestions included creating a welcoming environment for parents by the school and teachers, providing transportation and/or child care so that parents can meet with teachers personally, attempting to increase communication by use of phones or other nontext formats (for example, tape recorders), and holding parent education workshops.

Special Education Teachers

Overrepresentation. The focus group comprising special education teachers ($n = 4$) voiced their perceptions that overrepresentation does exist in the current system. When asked what overrepresentation specifically means to these teachers, they indicated that in their system, African American children are overidentified with a label of MR.

Special education teachers indicated a number of contributing factors to overrepresentation, which were both susceptibility and systematic in nature. Although these factors were not directly attributed to overrepresentation, the teachers indicated that they do contribute to this happening. These factors include gaps in early education services for children within the system, socioeconomic status, lack of parental involvement and/or support, the lack of prenatal care in some instances, the presence of a parent with disability, and challenges to working parents, including time constraints and scheduling issues.

Referral process. When addressing questions concerning the referral process, special educators, unlike general educators, indicated their perception that the current process is effective. Additionally, it was indicated that special educators felt that attitudes are more positive about special education in general, that numbers are decreasing, and that the entire referral process has the feel of being a more cooperative effort between all involved parties. These educators did indicate their perception that referral is typically a last resort. Additionally, they recommended the need for the system to hire a full-time psychometrist as an aid in making the referral process more effective and timely.

Assessment. Special educators, like general educators, indicated that assessment was an area that did need attention and support within the school system. To help alleviate overrepresentation, these educators indicated a need for authentic forms of assessment, such as the use of nonverbal intelligence testing, in an effort to more effectively assess intelligence and remove cultural variables. Special educators additionally recommended that eligibility for special education services needs to be data driven and not subjective in nature. Special education teachers offered a recommendation that would help support the referral and assessment process—that is, hiring contracted personnel for prereferral assessment:

See I was thinking of contracted personnel. We sit around and a teacher tells it and we go yeah, yeah, you know? And we do offer input and all, but it would be so great, well, I say contract personnel but I know . . . not the BBSST but to go in with just a completely nonjudgmental, nonbiased look at a child in three or more settings and this is what I see and I would like for you to try this. Measure it in a week or so and say we saw improvements here so let's continue this and why don't we try this and see if we

can't get more improvement, almost a case study.

Special educators indicated that there is confusion over models used to assess and identify disability characteristics leading to diagnosis. This confusion left some wondering which model would be better to use to help alleviate overrepresentation. Confusion seemed to abound around the area of disability identification for children with learning disabilities versus those with MR. Educators indicated a need for policy statements regarding the identification of children with learning disabilities using what they referred to as "the new model." When questioned as to identifying the "new model" versus the "old model," teachers identified the "new model" as "response to instruction," whereas the "old model" was a "regression to the mean."

Parental influence. Special educators as well as the general educators indicated the perception that parental influence was a contributing factor in overrepresentation. Contributing factors that were mentioned included a lack of parental involvement and/or support, parents' personal negative experiences with school, challenges faced by working parents (time and schedules), and the lack of resources or socioeconomic status of families and the community. These educators indicated that although parents really do care, they often do not know how to support their children with schooling efforts. It was indicated additionally that parents may define support in terms not readily identified by teachers, as noted in the following discourse:

Some parents have the desire for their child to do well, but they believe they are being supportive by sending them [to school] in clean clothes. So if I ask them to write out or call out these 10 words they do, it's just the matter of they can't just call them out one time.

A lot of mine [parents of children] work two jobs and night jobs and they [students] are left at home with older siblings.

Most of my parents work at night.

A lot of grandparents or great-grandparents step in.

Yeah, we hear a lot of "I told them to put igt on my dresser but I didn't see it on my dresser when I got off work."

So support by the family . . . as defined by the families is not the same as what the school is defining as support. Like what you were saying if they brought them to school and fed them breakfast that is support based on the family's definition . . . but maybe not.

Finally, parental influence was identified by these educators as a contributing factor in that parents have various levels of understanding and acceptance when it comes to disabilities. Based on this perceived lack of understanding these educators believe, parents may not know how to help their children.

School Counselors

Overrepresentation. School counselors ($n = 4$) voiced a misunderstanding of overrepresentation when discussing the issue. School counselors were similar in their misunderstanding of overrepresentation, as noted in discussions held by general education teachers. Again, overrepresentation was attributed to population demographics of the school system and county and not the ratio of disability to ethnicity. As seen before with the general education teachers, the perception of overrepresentation was one directly attributable to numerous factors that indeed may contribute to overrepresentation but are not in and of themselves causes of overrepresentation. These factors included socioeconomic status, demographics of the county and school district, geographical location within the state,

lack of parental involvement, "home life," "genetics," parents with disabilities, and an association with the number of children who participate in the school district's "free lunch" program.

Of interest in the focus group discussion with school counselors was a questioning of the relevance of school to life outside of school for children. This theme appeared in response to the question, "If you had the perfect world or school system and you could have all the resources you could possibly have, what would the process [referral, BBSST] look like then?" It is interesting that the discussion centered on motivation and the disconnection that seems to take place in school for many children when compared to what is experienced in everyday life outside of school. School counselors indicated their perception that this disconnection negatively influences a child's motivation to the learning that takes place in school. Societal changes focusing on technology, including computers, ipods, video games, and other technology, were seen as negative influences to learning, as noted in the following discussion. It appears that there is almost too great of a discrepancy between what and how children learn in school and life experienced outside of the classroom:

If you had the money, you would pay them. Yeah, we are going to pay kids to learn. I think money motivates. I think the kids would try even harder. Now that's when you would really find the kids with the problems because they wouldn't be able to earn the money. I really believe we live in a society; our motivation is not with Nintendo anymore. I mean, that's old hat. So that's not the motivator. I think the money issue is a thing, of course, certain people you bring up socioeconomic and that's one way to get out. They might want to work a little harder. In the big perfect world, I think it works. We are commercial. We are competitive, and I think that one place we aren't competitive is in the classroom. I think our motivators

aren't there. The times have changed, and I don't think we are changing with it.

Sensitivity to subject. School counselors also voiced feeling helpless and blamed for the current focus on overrepresentation. The school counselors voiced their desire for assistance and support from other teachers and administrators as they made important determinations that have the potential to significantly affect the lives of children and families. In fact, school counselors indicated that the focus appears to be on failing, both for students in general and for the job the BBSST facilitators are doing. School counselors noted the need for training to help them perform their jobs more effectively when offering interventions to teachers.

Assessment. In the area of assessment, school counselors voiced some confusion in their understanding regarding disability characteristics and defining qualities by diagnosis. When discussing the differences between a diagnosis of learning disability and MR, confusion was noted as defining characteristics were inappropriately attributed to this diagnosis. Characteristics associated with MR were perceived overall more negatively when discussed by the school counselors, and factors that may or may not have bearing on the diagnosis were again brought to the forefront of this discussion. For example, environmental causes were attributed to a diagnosis of MR, and some blaming of parents and other factors occurred as well.

Common Themes Across Groups by Systematic Bias and Susceptibility Variables

Common themes were identified that crossed all groups. These themes were then placed in the categories of predictor variables

recognized as either systematic or susceptibility variables as defined by Oswald et al. (2002) (see Table 2).

Systematic Variables

Misunderstanding of overrepresentation. This was a common theme across the groups and was an area clouded with misunderstanding and unawareness. Although general educators and school counselors did not appear to have a complete understanding of the definition and issues involved, special educators and school counselors indicated that overrepresentation does exist in the school district and did so without identifying reasons or assessing blame.

Assessment and the referral process. These were variables that general educators, special educators, and school counselors all identified as common themes affecting overrepresentation in the school district. Assessment was a variable associated with confusion and misunderstanding of the subject and process. Additionally, it was noted by special educators of the need for authentic forms of assessment that are not culturally driven. The referral process was perceived by general educators and school counselors as one that is ineffective and focuses on failure. Special educators differed in their opinion of the referral process as one that is working and effective.

Susceptibility Variables

Themes across the three groups that fell into the category of susceptibility variables were also identified. These included socio-demographic variables, parents and family factors, and the impact and understanding of disability.

Sociodemographic variables. Sociodemographic variables were identified by all three

groups. All groups indicated socioeconomic status and lack of resources for the district and/or county as being an influential factor in overrepresentation. Some groups were more inclined to indicate socioeconomic status as a cause rather than a contributing factor in overrepresentation.

Parents/family. This was a variable that was again identified by all three groups as being an influencing factor and, at times, cause of overrepresentation. All groups indicated that parent and family lack of involvement is an issue that negatively affects children's education.

Disability. The variable of disability was one which all educators felt played a role in overrepresentation. Some groups indicated their perception that having a parent with disabilities was a negative influence on children's learning. General educators especially indicated the need for the school system to find ways to support parents' efforts by teaching them how to help their children.

Debriefing Session

Six months following the focus groups, themes were presented to participants in a follow-up debriefing session. The researchers met with educators and counselors in a collective group. Findings from each focus group as well as overlapping themes across all groups were presented to the collective group in chart format. Participants discussed the themes. During this discussion, participants voiced an overall agreement with the data presented and made recommendations and suggestions. This debriefing was conducted with the Director of Special Education present, and suggestions were given by the group for potential follow-up professional development sessions.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of general educators, special educators, and school counselors on the topic of overrepresentation of minorities in special education programs in a district where overrepresentation is a chronic problem and to what extent their views relate or do not relate to systematic bias. Both convergent and divergent themes were identified within and between participants. It is interesting that the findings in the present study align with the systematic and susceptibility variables identified by Oswald et al. (2002). For example, two susceptibility variables identified by the participants in the study included high poverty levels in the community and lack of educational support from parents or guardians. Depressed levels of socioeconomic status and lack of parent or community resources are typically associated with poverty levels and have been identified as predictor variables for eligibility for special education services.

Although susceptibility variables may indeed be potential predictors of eligibility for special education services, these variables in and of themselves do not identify individuals who fall into a status of overrepresentation. When educators cognitively link susceptibility variables with individuals who are from a minority population, the type of faulty thinking that was exhibited by educators in this study becomes commonplace. The susceptibility variable, rather than being a potential warning sign, becomes the reason for labeling an individual. In this way, susceptibility variables can strongly contribute to systematic bias variables. When used as pejorative labels, susceptibility variables can easily become unintentional bias or discrimination that leads to a culture of institutionalized discrimination and potential racism in a school system (King, 1991).

Because of a lack of understanding of overrepresentation and how this status is derived for the school district, it appeared that participants in two of the three groups engaged in attempting to explain contributing factors as the cause of overrepresentation for the school district. This appeared to lead to a perspective wherein the individuals associated with being in a susceptible group were thought of in negative terms rather than in terms of the individual and challenges they might represent.

Understanding assessment is of concern because it is closely tied to the misunderstanding that many of the general education teachers and school counselors had about overrepresentation. This misunderstanding of assessment may be considered a systematic variable as well. Of issue is how one defines and understands overrepresentation as a statistical concept and how one assesses and defines disability based on evaluation. Without a thorough grounding in evaluation, causes for overrepresentation can be ascribed to nonattributable factors. Assessment and the identification of disability may become confused, leading to a generalized conceptualization of disability as "handicap-ness" rather than an understanding of disability based on defining characteristics and functioning abilities. This apparent lack of understanding across participants was a critical finding that has significant implications for practice.

and participants did not represent secondary educators and counselors. In light of these limitations, the findings of this study should be viewed with caution. Although this study may not be readily generalizable to all similar school districts, the authors propose that the results of this study have implications for practice.

Data from this study do suggest that educators link susceptibility variables with disability labels. The identification of overlapping themes for all three groups helps to illustrate professional development needs. Ongoing in-service training that serves to refresh practicing educators and counselors on characteristics and interventions for students with disabilities became one such apparent area for this collective group. One could argue that effective professional development has the potential to benefit districts where overrepresentation is a chronic issue (Artiles, Harry, Reschly, & Chinn, 2002).

Another implication for practice derived from this study is the need to reconcile the relevance of life outside of school with educational needs within schools, specifically a need to understand the responsibility of the school to support parents in communities where resources are limited. By creating a welcoming educational environment through services such as transportation and child care, parents and guardians may be able to become more involved in the school community.

Limitations of the Study and Implications for Practice

This study is not without limitations. As previously stated, the goal of focus group methodology is one in which specification of information is sought, not necessarily generalization of data. Also, this study is preliminary in nature, was conducted within one school district with a history of overrepresentation,

Conclusion

In a debriefing session with the focus group participants, there was agreement that the authors had correctly categorized the themes and accurately represented responses from the focus group to the questions. Since the debriefing, the district has implemented ongoing professional development on characteristics and interventions for students with

mild disabilities and contracted with a social worker, psychometrist, and a parent training agency to address issues yielded in this study. Future professional development sessions are planned in the areas of assessment for special education identification and the special education referral process. This proactive response by the district leaves the authors hopeful that, at least for this district, change is being actively pursued.

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