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Exploration of Implicit Bias on Multidisciplinary Team Members When Referring African American Students for Special Education Services

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EXPLORATION OF IMPLICIT BIAS ON MULTIDISCIPLINARY TEAM MEMBERS
WHEN REFERRING AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS FOR SPECIAL
EDUCATION SERVICES

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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DEDICATION

To my son, Trey...

I hope that my achievement will be an inspiration to you as you reach your full potential
and calling in life.

To my mother, Harriet, for having the strength of character to raise me by herself and
succeeding despite all odds.

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I wish to thank my dear friend and mentor, Sauda Green, for being a sounding board and encourager throughout the past four years. We spent hours on the telephone discussing, debating, and answering questions. She encouraged me to continue on until my goal was reached. I also appreciate her patience with me. I am grateful to my husband Kenneth for his willingness to make sacrifices to allow me to fulfill my academic dreams. He tolerated me staying up late nights and attending all those evening classes. He has always been proud of me and supported me in my academic endeavors.

Most importantly, I would like to thank God. All of my academic endeavors were orchestrated by Him. Even when I felt like giving up and running for the hills, He told me to continue on. He never promised me the road would be easy but he did promise me He would see me through the peaks and valleys.

ABSTRACT

The disproportionality or overrepresentation of African American students in special education is a longstanding problem that continues to be prevalent today. There are numerous reasons why this phenomenon continues to persist including but not limited to implicit bias among multidisciplinary team members (MDT). One function of the MDT is to decide if a student needs to be referred for special education services. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the decision making processes of the MDT members to determine if implicit bias impacted their decision to refer an African American student for special education services. This qualitative study utilized one-on-one interviews of eight MDT members at an elementary school in South Carolina with a predominantly African American student body being taught by a majority Caucasian teaching staff. Four significant themes emerged from the study: 1) academic and behavioral factors, 2) race or ethnicity plays no role, 3) academic delays and behavioral problems, and 4) lack of stimulation and motivation. Findings further indicated that when African American students and their families did not conform to the dominant or mainstream European American cultural modes of learning and knowing, deficit thinking and implicit biases surfaced among the MDT members. The “Whiteness as property” critical race theory tenet was also reflected in the way MDT members perceived the African American students and their parent through assumptions and everyday practices that again, perpetuate white, middle-class norms. The current findings emphasized the importance of ensuring that school administrators implement practices in which the

emotional, social, cognitive, and cultural needs of all students are met through a culturally responsive pedagogy. Culturally responsive teaching recognizes student strengths and seeks to build on them. Additionally, one of the major factors emphasized in achieving a culturally responsive classroom is that teachers and administrators engage in self-reflection in order to gain understanding of their own cultural biases in teaching.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The Positioning Public Child Welfare Guidance website (2013) defines disproportionality as the over- or underrepresentation of a particular racial or ethnic group in a program or system when compared to its representation in the general population. As the United States becomes more ethnically and racially diverse, we must closely examine how disproportionality is interwoven in our society. The study of disproportionality is important because of the negative implications it has on certain racial/ethnic groups within our society. For example, Hartney and Vuong (2009) found the criminal justice system to be one of the many areas where disproportionality is widespread. Their study revealed that African American men represented only 6% of the population but they accounted for 28% of all arrests and 40% of all men incarcerated in 2008. Implications include the fact that prior felony convictions temporarily or permanently restricted one in seven African American males from voting (Mauer, 2011).

Disproportionality is also rampant in the juvenile justice system (Snyder, 2004). African American youths are disproportionately arrested, sentenced, and incarcerated when compared to their Caucasian counterparts accused of similar offenses. According to the National Health Council on Crime and Delinquency (2007), African American youth make up approximately 16% of the general population but represented 28% of juvenile

arrests and 58% of youth committed to state adult prisons. Additionally, African Americans are disproportionately represented in the special education programs (e.g., Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002), public health care (e.g., US Department of Health and Human Services), and child welfare system (e.g., Hill, 2006). The breadth and depth of the research in this area demonstrates how pervasively disproportionality is in our social fabric.

Disproportionality in education programs mirrors other areas in society. For example, African American students are underrepresented in gifted programs (Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002). On the other hand, the way it manifests itself in special education is with disproportionately higher referrals and placement of minority students in special education programs than that of other groups of students in the school population (Gravois & Rosenfield, 2006). Historically, minority students have been overrepresented in special education programs for more than 40 years (Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002). Dunn (1968) was the first researcher to raise concerns about overrepresentation in the sixties. He described the disproportionate number of minority students being identified with mental retardation or emotional disabilities and placed in self-contained classrooms. Dunn was worried about special education, particularly what he considered to be blatant segregation of minority students in special education programs. Since Dunn's concerns, the pattern of disproportionality persists and minority students continue to be served in special education programs at an alarming frequency (Skiba et al., 2008).

In 2002, Losen and Orfield reported that African American students made up only 14.8% of the school-age population, yet they represented 20.2% of the students placed in

special education programs. Klingner et al., (2005) reported that African American students are significantly affected by disproportionality. They are 2.41 times more likely than white students to be labeled with intellectual disabilities, 1.13 times more likely to be labeled with learning disabilities, and 1.68 times as likely to have an emotional or behavioral disorder. Overrepresentation of African American students is greater in high incidence categories such as mild intellectual disability and emotional or behavioral disorder (Ferri & Connor, 2005). Students are diagnosed in the high incidence categories after information is provided by professionals based on their judgments, observations, and inferences which can be fraught with ambiguity, uncertainty, and bias (Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, & Ortiz, 2010). Thus, the information received by the professionals and the referral and eligibility processes may involve subjectivity, which may lead to misidentification and increased disproportionality in the high incidence categories.

Research suggests that African American males have been affected more by disproportionality in special education than any other racial group (Coutinho & Oswald, 2005; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 2001). According to researchers (Brown, 2010; Blanchett, 2006; Osher, Cartledge, Oswald, Sutherland, Artiles & Coutinho, 2004), they are more likely to be assigned to segregated classrooms or placements, less likely to return to general education classrooms, and experience higher dropout rates and lower academic performance than their Caucasian peers. Overrepresentation oftentimes results in African American students being misclassified or inappropriately identified which leads to unwarranted services and support (National Education Association, 2008). Misidentified students are also more likely to be exposed to substandard instruction and

less rigorous curricula (Ferri & Connor, 2005). In addition, the long-term effects of labeling African American males increase their chances of incarceration and decrease their graduation rates and employment opportunities (Affleck, Edgar, Levine, & Kortering, 1990; Losen & Welner, 2001). The overall negative effects of disproportionality are lasting and may adversely impact a student's self-worth, personal goals, and achievement.

In the years since disproportionality in special education first appeared in the literature, the reasons for overrepresentation appear to be complex and persistent (Gardner & Miranda, 2001). Past studies have suggested a number of reasons for disproportionality. Poverty has been noted as a probable contributor to disproportionality (Osher et al., 2004). The National Research Council (2002) reported inadequate school funding, class size, and lack of highly qualified teachers as variables linked to overrepresentation. Additionally, Ferri and Connor (2005) cited bias at the pre-referral stage of the special education eligibility process as one possible cause for disproportionality.

The special education eligibility process begins when a parent or teacher refers a student experiencing academic and/or behavioral difficulties in the general education classroom to the multidisciplinary team (MDT). The MDT is also known in some schools as the child study team, pre-referral team, student assistance team, student intervention team, student support team, or teacher assistance team. After the referral is made, the MDT works collaboratively to make recommendations and develop interventions to help the student while he or she remains in the general education setting. The purpose of the MDT is to reduce the number of inappropriate special education

referrals. The decisions made by the MDT may have lasting effects on a student's life because if the recommended interventions or supports are not successful, the student is most likely referred for a special education evaluation (Harry & Klingner, 2006).

The MDT is responsible for reducing inappropriate placements and referrals that may be discriminatory (Friend & Bursuck, 2006). The decision making process of the MDT should be objective; however, at times, the decisions are subjective and may be based on biased information presented by the classroom teacher (Knotek, 2003). For example, an African American male student may be referred to special education because of cultural differences. The teacher may perceive his loud demonstrative talking as aggressive which may be construed as a child with a behavior disability. Hence, biased information may lead to biased labeling. Teacher biases can range from innate personal beliefs about students that are expressed directly or indirectly, to racial preferences for particular students. When a teacher is explicitly biased, he or she is aware of their perception of a group and believes that perception to be correct in some manner (Blair, Steiner, & Havranek, 2011). On the other hand, implicit bias is usually subtle or unintentional (Greenwald & Krieger, 2006; Rudman, 2004).

In conclusion, the prereferral stage of the special education eligible process is critical because the decisions made by the MDT can ultimately result in an African American student's placement in a special education program. At times, the decisions made by the MDT are unfair and based on biased information (Knotek, 2003) which can lead to unnecessary and inappropriate special education referrals and placements often resulting in disproportionality. Therefore, it is important to examine the decisions made by the MDT.

Disproportionality is a multi-faceted problem. One promising strategy for addressing disproportionality is Response to Intervention (RTI). RTI is a problem-solving approach that utilizes ongoing assessment data to help determine if struggling students are benefiting from empirically validated interventions. The procedures aid in reducing over-identification of disabilities due to subjectivity and variability and maintains “emphasis on high-quality, evidence-based practice to provide an alternative to special education” placement (Mastropieri, et.al., 2005, p. 529).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative interview study is to examine the processes of the MDT to determine if implicit bias affects the team’s decision to refer African American students for special education services. A modified van Kaam method by Moustakas (1994) will be employed, with audio taped and transcribed face-to-face semi-structured interviews of a purposive sample of MDT members from an elementary school in South Carolina. Though the primary data source for this study will be open-ended individual interviews, I will also examine documents used by the MDT. NVivo 9 qualitative analysis software will assist to identify themes on the lived experiences of MDT members. Specifically, I will address the following exploratory research questions:

1. Does implicit bias exist in the MDT members’ decision to refer an African American student for special education?
2. What student characteristics or behaviors influence the MDT members’ decision making when referring African American students for special education services?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for a number of reasons. First, my study will examine implicit bias as a contributing factor of disproportionality by examining the decision process made by members of the MDT. Although there has been considerable research on MDTs in special education, few studies have investigated the impact implicit bias may have on the decision making process of team members. If the findings of this study indicate implicit bias by the MDT, hopefully, the study will stimulate change among educators by encouraging them to examine their own hidden biases, perceptions, stereotypes, and beliefs that may negatively affect African American students. Additionally, the findings of this study may help expand future research in the development of effective referral practices and tools needed to assess students in an objective manner.

Second, this study will extend the available literature on disproportionality by examining the key phase in special education placement, the pre-referral intervention process. Although much of the available research indicates the effectiveness of MDTs in reducing special education referrals (Fuchs, Fuchs, Bahr, Fernstrom, & Stecker, 1990; Rosenfield & Gravois, 1996), this study will provide information on whether the pre-referral process may actually contribute to disproportionality due to the biased referrals made by the MDT.

Lastly, this study will broaden the understanding of teacher implicit bias and its impact on the decisions made by the MDT to refer an African American student for special education services and promote meaningful conversations among educators and school administrators about this topic. Consequently, the findings of this study should be

influential in shaping further staff development and personal growth of educators. Most importantly, findings may ultimately benefit African American students with and without disabilities. This study will contribute directly to educational practices and policies by improving our understanding of implicit bias which may contribute to the disproportionate referral and placement of African American students in special education programs.

Assumptions

The researcher identifies the following significant assumptions in the study:

1. Implicit bias will influence the decisions made by the MDT members to refer an African American student for special education.
2. Specific student characteristics and behaviors will impact the MDT members decision to refer African American students for special education.
3. The participants will be willing to openly and honestly share their lived experiences as MDT members.
4. The identities of the participants in this study will be kept confidential.

Definition of the Terms

The following terms are relevant to this study. The definitions are listed to assist the reader in fully understanding their meanings.

Disproportionality – Under the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA 2004), disproportionate representation of racial/ethnic groups in special education is defined as students in a particular racial/ethnic group (i.e., Asian, Black, Hispanic, Native American, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, White, or Two or More Races) being at a considerably greater or

lesser risk of being identified as eligible for special education and related services overall or in a specific disability category (Speech/Language, Specific Learning Disability, Emotional Disability, Intellectual Disability, Autism, and Other Health Impairment) than all other racial/ethnic groups enrolled either in the district or in the state. For purposes of this study, *disproportionality* occurs when African American students are overrepresented in special education programs, specific special education categories or disciplinary practices relative to their group's enrollment in the overall student population.

Bias – The negative evaluation or perception of one group and its members relative to another (Blair, Steiner, & Havranek, 2011) is referred to as *bias*. A biased person prefers a particular group or person over another (New Oxford American Dictionary, 2010). Bias occurs whether the act is intentional or unintentional.

Implicit Bias - Largely unconscious negative thoughts, attitudes, stereotypes, perceptions, or behaviors of which the person is neither aware nor believes that he or she possesses against members of another ethnic or racial group merely because of their membership in that group (Greenwald & Krieger, 2006; Dovidio, Kawakami, Smoak, & Gaertner, 2009) is called *implicit bias*.

Explicit Bias - Those beliefs, attitudes, actions or perceptions (positive or negative) that individuals are aware that they possess against members of another group merely because of their membership in that group (Blair, Steiner, & Havranek, 2011) is *explicit bias*.

Multidisciplinary Team (MDT) – A team of individuals who assist the general education teacher in developing pre-referral interventions for students who are

experiencing academic, social, and/or behavioral difficulties at school and are identified as needing additional support (Chen & Gregory, 2010) is a *multidisciplinary team*. In addition to the student's general education teacher, team members may include the special educator, parent(s), school administrator, and other professionals such as school counselor, speech/language pathologist or school psychologist. The MDT may determine that a special education evaluation is warranted after multiple educational interventions have been implemented and the student continues to struggle educationally. The MDT is synonymous with the Child Study Team, Student Intervention Team, Student Assistance Team, Teacher Assistance Team, Prereferral Intervention Team, or Student Support Team.

Special Education – *Special education* is specially designed instruction that meets the unique needs of a child with a disability (IDEIA, 2004). These services, including instruction in the classroom, at home, or in hospitals and institutions, are provided by the public school district at no cost to parents.

Organization of the Dissertation

The dissertation is comprised of five chapters, a reference list, and appendices in the following manner. The current chapter introduces disproportionality by providing an overview of the phenomenon. Chapter One also outlines the purposes and significance of the study along with the research questions. In addition, assumptions, and definitions of terms are included in the chapter. Chapter Two presents a review of the related literature including understanding bias, sources of implicit bias, and implicit bias and its impact on African Americans in society. Also included is an overview of disproportionality of African American students in special education programs. Finally, a full explanation of

implicit bias and how it may influence educators' decision to refer an African American student for special education services are discussed.

Chapter Three describes qualitative research methodology for the study. The rationale for using a qualitative interview study research design, theoretical framework, data gathering procedures, study population and selection, and sampling identification are also discussed in this chapter. Moreover, specific research instrumentation, factors affecting internal and external validity, data coding, data analysis, and the qualitative analytic software as well as issues associated with participant confidentiality are presented in this chapter. The data and findings are presented in Chapter Four. Chapter Five contains the summary, conclusions, limitations of the study, and offers recommendations for future research and implications for policy and practice concerning disproportionality of African American students in special education programs. The study concludes with the reference list and appendices.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction

Disproportionality of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students in special education referrals and placements has been well documented in the literature for more than 30 years (Artiles, Harry, Reschly, & Chinn, 2002; Harry & Klinger, 2006; Ladner & Hammons, 2001; Losen & Orfield, 2002; Parrish, 2002). African American students are the most over-represented of the CLD groups (Blanchett, 2006; Cartledge & Dukes, 2009). They are referred to special education services twice as often as Caucasian students (Echevarria, Powers, & Elliott, 2004). African American students are also two to three times more likely to be identified in two special education categories, emotional disabilities and intellectual disabilities (Donovan & Cross, 2002). In 2008, African Americans students accounted for 15% of the students enrolled in K-12 schools. Yet, they represented 20.4% of students placed in special education programs and 28.1% of students identified as emotionally disabled (Fergus, 2010). Disproportionality is a complex phenomenon that may be caused by a number of possible factors.

Probable Causes of Disproportionality

The causes of disproportionality are not totally clear. However, several probable causes have been cited in the literature. For example, Skiba et al. (2008) identified psychometric test bias, poverty-related factors, and bias in the special education referral and eligibility processes as contributors of disproportionality. Since the 1970s, test bias

has been mentioned in the literature as a factor that places African American students at risk of being labeled with a disability and deemed eligible for special education services (Skiba et al., 2008). Critics of standardized assessments question their objectivity and stress the biased nature of these assessments towards students who are not Caucasian and middle-class (Reschly, 1996). Although test bias has been examined extensively, researchers have not always reached the same conclusions because of inconsistent findings in certain areas. For example, Flanagan and Ortiz (2001) maintain the issue is not test bias but rather cultural loading. Cultural loading occurs when test items are developed and normed on one cultural or ethnic group and given to children in another culture. Skiba, Knesting, and Bush (2002) argued that the problem is not with the psychometrics of the tests but that the tests are conducted under conditions of social inequities that consistently undermine the performance of minority students.

Overrepresentation of African Americans in special education students may be linked to poverty-related factors because there is a relationship between poverty and school failure (Skiba et al., 2005). African American and other culturally linguistically diverse students living in poverty are at greater risk of poor academic performance and behavioral outcomes because they are more likely to attend fiscally challenged schools (Donovan & Cross, 2002). Fiscally challenged schools usually have increased teacher turnover, have fewer specialists, and offer fewer advanced courses (Blanchett, Mumford, & Beacham, 2005). Inequities in physical facilities, resources, and teacher preparation and experience all have negative effects on the educational opportunity and school achievement of African American students from low socioeconomic status (Skiba, Bush, & Knesting, 2002). In general, poverty-related factors have been shown to result in

academic and behavioral gaps of African American students that may result in them being referred for special education services (Skiba et al., 2008).

Studies (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Knotek, 2003; Osher, Woodruff, & Sims, 2002) have indicated that there are inconsistencies and bias in the referral and eligibility process which may result in the overrepresentation of African American students in special education programs. According to Knotek (2003), the inconsistencies and bias occur within the MDT. Further, Losen and Orfield (2002) have suggested that implicit bias or unconscious bias may be a possible cause of disproportionality. The majority of the students referred for special education are African American males who come from low socioeconomic households. Additionally, there are other factors such as cultural mismatch between teacher and student, cultural communication styles, negative cultural stereotypes held by teachers, and cultural deficit thinking of student achievement that may also influence teacher bias (Artiles & Trent, 2000; Casella, 2003; Ortiz, Wilkinson, Robertson, & Kushner, 2006).

The overrepresentation of African American students in special education programs is persistent, having been first discussed in the professional literature as early as 1968 by Lloyd Dunn (1968). The 28th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of IDEA (US Department of Education, 2009) reported that African American students are 1.5 times as likely to be labeled with a disability as all other racial groups put together. Since the late 1960s, researchers have extensively examined disproportionality and the factors that may contribute to this phenomenon. One critical factor discussed in the literature as a possible contributor of disproportionality is implicit bias during the referral process (Arnold & Lassman, 2003; Losen & Orfield, 2002). There are times

when cultural differences between teachers and students influence implicit bias and teachers may have implicit bias against specific ethnic groups. However, implicit bias can also be exhibited by teachers who share the same or different race or ethnicity of their students. It is imperative that we have a better understanding of implicit bias and its impact on the decisions made by the MDT when referring African American students for special education services.

Understanding Bias

Bias refers to preference (like or dislike) towards a particular person or group. More specifically, bias is prejudice favoring or not favoring one thing, person, or group compared to another (New Oxford American Dictionary, 2012). Although biases may be favorable or unfavorable, they usually imply a negative connotation. When unfavorable, biases may include distorted truths and perceptions which lead to unfair prejudgments and evaluations of others. For example, when we are biased towards someone because of his or her race, ethnicity, age, weight, sexual orientation or religious preference, our perspective narrows and may interfere with our ability to be impartial and objective.

There are two types of bias, explicit and implicit (Blair, Steiner, & Havranek, 2011; Dovidio, Kawakami, Smoak, & Gaertner, 2009). Explicit, or conscious, bias means that we are aware of our behaviors, beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, and action because we express them openly. When we deliberately prefer one social category over another category, we are displaying explicit bias. For example, explicit bias is shown when a teacher refuses to select an African American student in his or her class, who sometimes speaks slang, to give a speech on a topic with which the student is very familiar but selects a Caucasian student instead who has limited knowledge of the topic to

give the speech. Unlike explicit bias, implicit bias manifests itself in an unintentional way. We may not even know that we harbor unconscious biases towards others. Greenwald and Krieger (2006) state that people possess attitudes and stereotypes over which they have little or no conscious, intentional control.

Implicit biases can positively or negatively influence people's decisions, action, and behavior toward others who are typically not members of their ethnic or racial group. Implicit biases are especially problematic because they are subtle often occur automatically without much or no awareness and are usually in contradiction to explicit beliefs we overtly hold about other or our own racial or ethnic groups. Implicit bias has been shown to affect the decision making processes of both Caucasian and African American individuals including physicians (Green et al., 2007; Sabin, Rivara, & Greenwald, 2008; Sabin et al., 2009), police officers (Correll, Park, Judd, & Wittenbrink, 2002), trial judges (Rachlinski, Johnson, Wistrich, & Guthrie, 2009), and potential jurors (Levinson, Cai, & Young, 2010).

Sources of Implicit Bias

Rudman (2004) found that implicit biases are caused by past experiences, affective experiences, and cultural biases (See Table 1.1). Our past experiences are based on developmental events and social learning that could be positive or negative. Affective experiences are associated with our emotions like perceptions of fear or anxiety. Cultural biases are correlated to how society perceived our group members and stereotypes that we have. The sources of implicit biases are interrelated and are found in children as young as six years old (Baron & Banaji, 2006). Regardless of our race or ethnicity, we all possess implicit biases. Implicit biases have been detected in many

domains in American society and have affected decisions regarding medical treatment (Green et al., 2007), police officers' shooting behavior (Correll et al., 2002), and guilt or innocence of a defendant (Rachlinski et al., 2009; Levinson et al., 2010).

Table 1.1

Development of Implicit Biases

Sources of Implicit Bias	Characteristics
1. Past Experiences	Positive or negative; developmental, largely forgotten; social learning
2. Affective Experiences	Emotional reactions; may trigger fear or other negative emotions
3. Cultural Biases	Stereotypes; may be influenced by societal appraisals

Note: Adapted from Sources of implicit attitudes by Rudman, 2004, *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 13(2), p. 80-83.

Implicit Bias and African Americans

Implicit bias towards African Americans remains prevalent and has an undeniable impact on the way they may be treated by members of our society (Nosek, Greenwald, & Banaji, 2007). The following research demonstrates how the pervasiveness of implicit bias of African Americans is manifested across different social settings. For example, studies have revealed that non-black physicians show implicit bias when they favor Caucasian patients over African American patients which may influence their diagnostic and clinical decisions regarding African American patients (Green et al., 2007). In a study that examined implicit bias and its negative affect on African Americans using a video game simulation, White participants had the propensity to shoot African American perpetrators more frequently and quickly than Caucasian perpetrators (Correll et al., 2002). Research also suggested that trial judges and potential jurors are not always impartial and their implicit biases may impact their decision to decide if an African American defendant is innocent or guilty (Levinson et al., 2010; Rachlinski et al., 2009).

Additionally, judges rendered harsher sentences in court for African American defendants than for Caucasian defendants committing the same crimes (Rachlinski et al., 2009).

Measurement of Implicit Bias

In the above research, most of the investigators used the Implicit Association Test (IAT) as the tool to uncover implicit bias. The IAT was created in 1998 by Greenwald, McGhee, and Schwartz and is a reaction time measure. It measures strengths of automatic associations between concepts (Greenwald, Nosek, & Banaji, 2003). For example, respondents may be asked to sort words or pictures into groups representing two concept dimensions such as black vs. white and good vs. bad. The strength of the association between concepts is determined by the respondent's speed in sorting items under two different conditions, with faster responses in one condition indicating a stronger association. The larger the performance difference, the stronger the implicit association or bias for a particular person (Blair, Steiner, & Havranek, 2011). Associations between concepts may also include attitudes, stereotypes, self-esteem, and self-concepts.

The IAT can show an individual's implicit preference for a particular racial or ethnic group which may distort his or her treatment and evaluation of others. The IAT is a widely used instrument in social psychology that supports the existence of implicit bias as a phenomenon in the real world. Since its development, the IAT has generated much scholarly attention and has been cited in over 800 articles and 300 published articles (Azar, 2008). Moreover, millions of people have taken the computerized IAT online. Although the IAT has been proven to be a valid measure of implicit consumer social

cognition and has a greater predictive value than self-reports particularly when looking at interracial and intergroup behavior, its validity and reliability are still debated (Brunel, Tietje, & Greenwald, 2004).

In sum, implicit bias is demonstrated by many people in our society. Therefore, most of us including teachers and school administrators are not exempt from exhibiting implicit bias. Research has indicated teachers and school administrators in our educational system may make biased decisions particularly when they initiate special education referrals for African American students (Abidin & Robinson, 2002; Raffaele, Mendez, & Knoff, 2003; Wald & Losen, 2003). Their biased decision making may influence African American students' being overrepresented in special education programs.

Disproportionality in Special Education Programs

African American students have been overrepresented in special education programs (e.g., referrals, identification, and placement) for several decades (Blanchett, 2009; Rocque, 2010; Skiba et al., 2011). Disproportionality or overrepresentation occurs when the percentage of African American students is higher in a category than their proportion in the total school population. Research has consistently documented that African American students are more likely than their Caucasian peers to be referred for special education services and overrepresented in special education programs (Echevarria et al., 2004; Harry & Klingner, 2006; Kunjufu, 2004). The literature supporting the overrepresentation of African Americans in special education programs is highlighted in the following section.

African American students are referred, identified, and placed in special education programs more than any other ethnic group (Blanchett, 2006). Most special education referrals are initiated by a classroom teacher when he or she suspects a student is having academic problems and/or behavioral concerns (Knotek, 2003). There are a number of factors which influence a teacher's decision to refer a student for special education. These factors may include but are not limited to teachers' perceptions of student behaviors and unconscious racial bias and stereotypes (Losen & Orfield, 2002). It is important to examine teacher judgment and decision making because most of their referrals eventually lead to students' being placement in special education programs (Feinberg & Shapiro, 2009).

The 30th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the IDEA Act, 2008 (2011) revealed the following trends: African American students ages 6-21 were 2.75 times more likely to be identified with intellectual disabilities and 2.28 times more likely to be labeled with emotional disabilities than their same age peers in all other racial/ethnic groups combined. Once identified, these students are placed in special education programs at an alarming rate when compared to that of their peers. For example, while African Americans only make up 15% of the K-12 school population, they constitute approximately 32% of the students placed in special education programs (US Department of Commerce, 2010).

All students receiving special education services are given individualized education programs that specify services, some of which may be provided in the general education classroom but some of which will likely be provided in another environment. The number of services required to be delivered outside of the general education

classroom drives the student's placement. Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Gallini, Simmons, & Feggins-Azziz (2006) maintained that even when identified with the same disability as their Caucasian peers, African American students are more likely placed in restrictive educational settings or underrepresented in the general education setting. Students identified with emotional and intellectual disabilities are often placed in segregated classrooms that are restrictive and permanent in nature (Cartledge, 2005; Ferri & Connor, 2005; Rueda et. al., 2008). Moreover, Fierros and Conroy (2002) found that 33% of African American students with disabilities received services in more restrictive settings, e.g., separate classrooms, compared to only 16% of Caucasian children with disabilities. Stated differently, African American students with emotional disabilities were 1.2 times more likely to be taught in self-contained classrooms than were their Caucasian peers, those African American students with intellectual disabilities were 1.5 times more likely to be taught in a self-contained classroom than their Caucasian peers were, and African American students with learning disabilities were 3.2 times more likely to be taught in self-contained classrooms than were their Caucasian peers (Skiba et al., 2006).

Disproportionality in special education programs may result in African American students' being misidentified. When a student is misidentified, there are dire consequences because oftentimes these students are served in more restrictive settings, stigmatized, instructed at a slower pace, and subjected to lower expectations in a less rigorous curriculum. Compounding this problem is that once African American students are identified and placed in special education programs, they are less likely to return to the general education setting (Blanchett, 2006). Also, while special education services benefit thousands of African American students, the educational outcomes for these

students are bleak. Blanchett (2006) maintained that African American students receiving special education have the lowest graduation rates, highest dropout rates, lower rates of academic performance, less preparation for the workforce, and high unemployment rates.

In summary, based on the previously discussed research findings, African American students continue to be referred for special education services at disturbing rates much higher than those of Caucasian students. Additionally, African American students are identified and placed in special education more often than their Caucasian peers are. These findings have been persistent for close to 40 years (Hosp & Reschly, 2004). It is also important to note that African American males with disabilities are disproportionately referred for disciplinary actions (Skiba, Horner, Chung, Rausch, May, & Tobin (2011).

Teacher Bias in Special Educational Referrals

Although Losen and Orfield (2002) have suggested that unconscious racial bias influenced special education referrals, there is little evidence to support their claim. Previous studies have shown that teacher bias in special education programs exists but have not specifically determined if this bias is implicit or explicit. Regardless, bias of either type can cloud the decision making process especially when there is a lack of objectivity. The following literature illustrates teacher bias in the special education referral process.

Special Education Referral Process.

The special education referral process generally encompasses four stages: pre-referral, referral, assessment, and eligibility (Klingner & Harry, 2006). This study will

focus on the pre-referral stage which begins with a referral most often made by a general education teacher after a student exhibits academic and/or behavioral difficulties.

Teacher referrals are made based on observing how students behave in classrooms and the traits they exhibit (VanDerHeyden, Witt, & Naquin, 2003). When observing students, teachers may expect them to behave and perform academically according to their prescribed expectations and standards which may be based on their personal perceptions and ideas. Teacher expectations lead to possible bias and subjectivity which could increase the likelihood of an African American student being referred for special education services (Cartledge & Dukes, 2009).

Knotek (2003) has suggested that bias in the referral process is a cause for disparities of African American students in special education. Researchers have found that minority students were referred more often than nonminority students and that teachers had a tendency to refer African American students for entirely behavioral rather than academic problems (Gottlieb, Gottlieb, & Trongone, 1991). Harry and Klingner (2006) identified inconsistencies in the conferencing phase of the special education referral process that may contribute to disproportionality. They noted that the rates of special education referrals differed by the race and ethnicity of the teacher, the disproportionate weight given the opinion of the referring teacher at the case conference, and the weak emphasis on pre-referral interventions. VanDerHeyden et al. (2003) indicated that the teacher's reason for referral is usually the most important factor in placing students in special education programs. In their study, they examined the validity of the Problem Validation Screening process that provides objective data for MDT meetings where consideration is being given to teacher referral of a student for

assessment and possible placement in special education. The manner in which the student is perceived by the teacher can determine if he or she will be referred for special education services.

Multidisciplinary Team (MDT).

The MDT is a collaborative, problem-solving team which comes together after a student has been referred for academic and/or behavior difficulties in the general education setting (Klingner & Harry, 2006; Burns, Vanderwood & Ruby, 2005). The MDT is also known by a variety of names including Child Study Team, Student Intervention Team, Student Assistance Team, Teacher Assistance Team, Prereferral Intervention Team, or Student Support Team. MDTs were mandated in the Education for All Handicapped Education Act of 1975 as a way to reduce inappropriate discriminatory referrals and placement rates of minority students in special education (Friend & Bursuck, 2006). Since that time, many schools across the nation have adopted some form of an MDT as their delivery model during the pre-referral process.

MDT Goals.

In addition to reducing the number of inappropriate referrals and placements in special education, the MDT suggests interventions for students within the general education setting (Buck, Polloway, Smith-Thomas, & Cook, 2003). The interventions are implemented prior to a student being referred for special education services. The MDT collaborates with and supports general educators to help them increase their skills and abilities to address the needs of their students (Bay, Bryan, & O'Connor, 1994). Overall, the goals of the MDT are preventative in nature and most teams address student concerns by intervening, supporting, and maintaining students in the general education classroom.

MDT Members.

Although MDT members may vary depending on the team and state and/or district requirements, most teams consist of a variety of individuals who should be familiar with the referred student. MDT members typically include the student's parents or legal guardian and general education teacher and sometimes include a special education teacher, school administrator, school psychologist, guidance counselor, speech therapist and/or school social worker, and the child if appropriate (Klingner & Harry, 2006). Regardless of the makeup of the MDT, in order for teams to be effective, members must be actively engaged in improving student outcomes by generating and helping teachers implement interventions to address the learning and behavioral difficulties of students referred to the MDT (Fuchs et al., 1990; Kovaleski, Gickling, Morrow, & Swank, 1999).

MDT Process.

During the pre-referral stage, a MDT considers a student's referral and determines which interventions are needed to help the student while he or she remains in the general education setting. The general educator provides background information regarding the problem(s) exhibited by the student and the MDT works together to develop possible interventions. If a student continues to experience difficulty after interventions are implemented, the student may be referred for an assessment to determine possible eligibility for special education services. One of the most important predictors of future special education eligibility include referral for assessment or intervention because most students referred for special education are eventually placed in special education programs (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Eidle, Truscott, Meyers, & Boyd, 1998).

MDT Decision Making.

The decision making process of the MDT is fraught with challenges (Kaiser & Woodman, 1985; Mehan, Hartwick, & Meihls, 1986; Moore, Fifield, Spira, & Scarlato, 1989). At times, decisions concerning students were made ahead of time based on other factors than test scores (Ysseldyke, Algozzine, Richey, & Graden, 1982). Decisions were also frequently made without receiving consensus, and some team members felt threatened by other team members who they perceived had more power (Gutkin & Nemeth, 1997). In his ethnographic study, Knotek (2003) raised doubts about the objectivity of prereferral teams and the decision making processes of the Student Support Teams (SSTs) also known as MDTs. Overall, teacher concerns were more negative than other team members. The SSTs were vulnerable to individual bias, group bias, and other social influences. Bias was most likely to occur when the SSTs were discussing students with behavior problems or those from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds. Social power and influence were reflected in the opinions adopted as group consensus. The input of high-status team members strongly influenced the perspectives and decisions of the whole team, while alternative and minority opinions put forth by low-status members received little attention and had small likelihood of influencing the group's decision. The author concluded that this tendency, though difficult to measure directly, may be contributing to the overrepresentation of African American students in special education. The results of the study also supported confirmatory bias which was strongly linked to a teacher's initial judgment and later eligibility decisions. Confirmatory bias is defined by O'Reilly, Northcraft, and Sabers (1989) as "the tendency

of an evaluator to agree with the ‘preliminary hypothesis’ of a teacher or referral team despite the lack of substantial evidence to support these findings” (p.71).

It appears implicit bias was present in Knotek’s study. The SST members’ unconscious thoughts and perceptions about African American students from low SES families or students who displayed behavior problems were evident. They viewed these students negatively because they lived in trailers and some were being raised by their grandmothers. The SST allowed implicit bias to taint their view of the students’ problems and decisions concerning intervention strategies. They also had a lower expectation of the students’ academic performance because of their low SES.

My study, which is similar to Knotek’s research, will differ slightly in that I will interview the MDT members individually which will allow me to gather more detailed and accurate information without participants’ feeling intimidated or threatened. When selecting the school for my study, SES is not a criterion. However, SES may later become a factor during data analysis.

Teacher Referral Decisions.

At times, bias is a determining factor in teacher referral decisions. For example, in Prieto and Zucker’s (1981) study, participants read identical vignettes with the race and gender of the student being manipulated. Findings suggested there were no effects for gender, but, overall, African American students were more likely referred for special education than Caucasian students were. They noted that both general and special education teachers were more willing to refer minority students for special education. Ysseldyke, Algozzine, Richey, and Graden (1982) analyzed videotapes of placement teams. The researchers found that decisions concerning the students were often made

ahead of time and placement decisions were based on student race and SES. Bahr, Fuchs, Stecker, and Fuchs (1991) explored whether teachers' perceptions of difficult to teach students were racially biased. Results indicated racial bias was a factor in referring decisions. African American students who were perceived as difficult to teach students were more likely referred for special education services. In all of these studies, referral decisions were unrelated to discrepancies in students' ability and achievement. Instead, minority students were referred for special education services based on their race and SES as well as a teacher's perception which could have been influenced by implicit bias.

In sum, although most of the previously presented literature (e.g., teacher bias in special education referrals, special education referral process, and teacher referral decisions) is dated, the research is still relevant. The research indicates that race may be an influencing factor on teacher recommendations for special education services (Van Acker, 2006; McIntyre & Pernell, 1985; Tobias, Cole, Zibrin, & Bodlakova, 1982). Teachers are also more likely to refer students to special education who are not of their own ethnic group than students who share their ethnicity (Thrasher, 1997). The reason(s) for special education referral should be based on unbiased information. However, oftentimes, the information is based on teacher bias particularly when African American students are referred. Teacher bias, whether explicit or implicit, is sometimes influenced by perception, stereotypes, and a lack of cultural awareness.

Response to Intervention.

Research has shifted to other areas in special education such as response to intervention (RTI). RTI is a problem-solving approach that schools can use as one eligibility criterion for students with specific learning disabilities. RTI was included in

the statute and regulations of the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) in 2004. The essential components of RTI include universal screening, multi-tiered interventions, progress monitoring, and fidelity of implementation. RTI also involves evaluating routinely collected data on student progress to make important educational decisions such as whether a student may need to be referred for special education services (Batsche et al., 2005). Proponents of the RTI model believe there is a strong possibility that RTI will help reduce disproportionality in special education programs by minimizing inappropriate referrals through data-based decision making (VanDerHeyden & Witt, 2005; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003), providing supplemental intensive instruction through evidence-based interventions prior to evaluation (Xu & Drame, 2008), and focusing on culturally responsive educational practices (Klingner & Edwards, 2006) therefore, resulting in a more accurate identification of students with disabilities.

Conclusion

Disproportionality is a complex phenomenon that has impacted African American students in special education programs for decades. Disproportionality is more troublesome when African American students are misdiagnosed or misidentified, especially since only 27 percent of these students receive a high school diploma (Lewin, 2012). Researchers have examined several probable causes of disproportionality ranging from poverty-related issues to teacher bias in the referral process. Teachers, like many of us, possess implicit and explicit biases that may play powerful roles in how they perceive, judge, and treat their students. Teachers may not be aware of the unconscious thoughts, perceptions, and stereotypes that influence their judgment and treatment of African

American students. They also may be viewing these students through a narrow mainstream lens on which they have based their “standard” of behavior and academic success. The teachers’ deficit views coupled with their lack of diversity and cultural understanding and tolerance may lead to implicit bias. This may increase their likelihood of referring African American students for special education. However, the effective implementation of an RTI model may result in minimizing the number of African American students being misidentified for special education placement.

Since the teacher is usually the person who initiates a student’s referral for special education services and is an important member of the MDT, his or her subjective opinions which may be based on implicit bias can influence decisions made by the MDT. When implicit bias is unwittingly introduced into the MDT’s decision making process, this may result in higher referrals and placement of African America students into special education (Abidin & Robinson, 2002). Therefore, there is a need to examine how implicit bias impacts the decisions made by the MDT in the special education referral process. Although implicit bias has also been identified as one potential source of disproportionality (Knotek, 2003), the existing literature is limited. This study will expand the existing research in this area. Participants will be interviewed rather than be given the IAT as has been used in many previous studies. Open-ended interviewing will allow the researcher to pursue in-depth information concerning the phenomenon through the lived experiences of MDT members.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

Chapter Three describes the applicability of qualitative research methodology for the study. The rationale for using a qualitative interview study design, theoretical framework, data gathering procedures, study population and selection, and sampling identification are also discussed in this chapter. Moreover, specific research instrumentation, factors affecting internal and external validity, data coding, data analysis, and the qualitative analytic software as well as issues associated with participant confidentiality are presented in this chapter.

Rationale for Qualitative Approach

An interview study design was used in this study because it is the most appropriate approach to obtain thick, rich, data utilizing a qualitative investigational perspective (Creswell, 2007). Since the researcher sought to explore perceived student characteristics or behaviors that impact the multidisciplinary team (MDT) members' decision making when referring African American students to receive special education services, the interview study design allowed the researcher to examine the experiences of MDT members in a close and detailed manner (DeMarrais & Lapan, 2004). The responses of participants to semi-structured interview questions were recorded and transcribed to capture the lived experiences of the MDT members from an elementary school in South Carolina. This study explored the significant influences of implicit bias

on MDT members' decision making when referring African American students for special education services. To achieve this, qualitative research provided the framework to explore, define, and understand the social and psychological phenomena of organizations as well as the social settings of individuals (Berg, 2004).

Qualitative research provided an appropriate strategy for inquiry by positioning the researcher within the study to collect data on participants. Giorgi stated that "Qualitative research, in the most comprehensive sense, refers live experiences that belong to a single person" (Giorgi, 1997, p. 236). This focuses upon an issue and brings personal value to the study (Osborne, 1994). Qualitative researchers provide high quality research which focuses on issues with real importance. This contributes to the body of knowledge on a particular subject which allows generalizations for a wider range of audience (Lewis-Beck, Bryman, & Liao, 2004). Moreover, qualitative research should have no bias present. Bracketing or epoche is a method to assist in the elimination of researcher bias. A bracketing interview attempts to identify the researcher's assumptions, bias, and beliefs that may impede, interfere, or possibly affect the understanding and responses of the participants to the questions (DeMarrais & Lapan, 2004).

Qualitative research explores the structures of experience and consciousness from an individual perspective (Brunzina, 2000; Karlsson, 1993). Qualitative research is pragmatic, interpretive, and grounded in the lived experiences of people. Creswell and Plano (2007) stated that qualitative inquiry is used to study an issue through one or more perspectives within a bounded system over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information such as observation, interview, audiovisual material, and documents. The data are analyzed and the researcher reports

the findings, descriptively. This research study followed the idea of qualitative studies in order to understand and explore the impact of student factors on the decision making of participants through their lived experiences. The objective of the research effort was to examine the invariant themes and patterns of decision making evidenced within the context of specific settings, forming the lived experiences of MDT members. The qualitative research approach assisted in addressing the prospective and existing need for framing the empirical nature of MDT members' decision making by exploring the lived experiences of MDT members (Kleiman, 2004).

Quantitative methods are useful for describing relationships between variables to establish correlations but are of limited utility in defining causation or accounting for diverse human interactions in complex social settings (Cronbach, 1975). A quantitative approach is inappropriate to address the research questions in the study because of the need for context-specific knowledge to understand the issue of multidisciplinary team members' decision making (Gilstrap, 2007). Quantitative research does not adequately capture the insights of participants' experiences, limited by narrowly constructed variables and requires pervasive access to the research sites.

Various qualitative methods such as ethnography, grounded theory, and action research were considered but were more normative in design and inadequately addressed the research's intended focus of the need for a context sensitive basis of understanding for multidisciplinary team members' decision making (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Ethnography presents difficulty in gaining access to the research venue and is very costly to conduct (Spradley & McCurdy, 1972). The research questions rendered the grounded theory approach inappropriate because the purpose of the research is not to generate an

alternative theory to decision making (Berg, 2004). Action research subjects the study to potential researcher bias and anecdotal data and requires unrestricted access to the research participants (Berg, 2001).

Theoretical Framework

This study was positioned within the theoretical framework of critical race theory (CRT). CRT emerged in the 1970s out of legal studies. Since the mid-1990s, CRT has expanded into the field of education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). CRT is concerned with racial subordination, prejudice, inequality, and the entrenchment of race within our society (Graham, Brown-Jeffy, Aronson, & Stephens, 2011). CRT recognizes the complex relationships and intersections that reside within race. In education, CRT has examined the various ways in which educational institutions manifest, reinforce, and perpetuate the subordination of minorities. According to Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), using CRT as a conceptual framework could be “applied to our understanding of educational inequity” (p.55).

In this study, the CRT tenet “whiteness as property” was used as a tool to analyze and interpret the data. According to Harris (1993), whiteness as property articulates the ways whiteness is accorded benefits and privileges similar to other forms of property. Whiteness provides material and symbolic privileges to whites and is present in our educational systems. Furthermore, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) maintained that whiteness becomes the ultimate property value that whites leverage to perpetuate their system of educational advantages and privileges. The whiteness as property principle provided context for understanding how MDT members negatively perceived and labeled African American students and their families because they did not conform to White

middle-class norms. Their negative perceptions and stereotypes were rooted in implicit biases. MDT members' implicit biases impacted their referral decisions which may result in a disproportionate number of African Americans students' being referred for special education services.

Several researchers have examined racial inequalities in education through a CRT lens (Perez Huber, 2010; Reynolds, 2010; Howard, 2008; Sullivan, 2006). Sullivan (2006) used CRT as a framework for discussing unconscious habits that perpetuate White privilege. Sullivan maintained that white privilege operates as a complex set of largely unconscious habits, subtly but powerfully shaping human thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and practices. Unconscious habits are powerful because they are unseen and often operate undetected. Moreover, Sullivan (2006) suggested that unconscious habits are formed through interactions with social structures and are resistant to change. In discussing the challenge of accessing unconscious thoughts and examining unconscious habits, Sullivan suggested that we must not "write off" unconscious habits as being inaccessible; otherwise, we create a "self-fulfilling" situation that becomes impossible to change (p. 7).

Reynolds (2010) conducted a qualitative study with African American parents. The investigation focused on the parents' engagement practices in the education of their children. Data collection methods included interviews and a focus group discussion with 16 African American middle class parents whose children attended middle school. Participants reported incidents of disparate treatment that they perceived to be indicative of racial attitudes and beliefs school officials embraced. Subtle acts of racism were manifested through microaggressions when parents communicated with school

administrators. These exchanges prompted parents to have frank conversations with their sons concerning stereotypes non-African Americans have about African American males and perceptions school administrators have about African American families. CRT proved to be an optimal tool to use in the examination of the experiences of African American parents and their sons.

CRT was the conceptual framework for a study conducted by Howard (2008) who examined the disenfranchisement and underachievement of African American males in PreK-12 schools. Counterstorytelling was used to highlight how African American males believed race and racism played as factors in their school experiences. Results indicated participants were well aware of how race shaped the manner in which they were viewed by their teachers and school administrators. The participants fought to eradicate negative racial stereotypes about African American males. The difficult obstacles that many African American males sought to overcome in order to become academically successful were also discussed in the study. CRT illuminated the voices of African American males and enabled a discourse about race, class, and gender of African American male underachievement.

CRT is viewed as a powerful element in education because it provides critical researchers with a lens not offered by many other theoretical frameworks (Perez Huber, 2010). According to Perez Huber, CRT allowed researchers to examine multiple forms of oppression, how oppression can intersect within the lives of people of color, and how these interactions manifest in our daily lives to facilitate our education. Perez Huber (2010) used Latina/o Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) as a framework to investigate the intersectionality in the educational experiences of 20 undocumented Chicana college

students in California. The study revealed there was an intersection between racism, nativism, class, and gender. The students in the study indicated that they were perceived as a threat to the United States and its “native” citizens. For example, participants recalled classroom discussions where undocumented immigrants were perceived as a threat because they took away jobs and money that “native” citizens should have received.

Chicana college students’ undocumented status proved to be detrimental to them in the United States for a number of reasons. First of all, their parents earned low wages despite having obtained degrees and acquired professional experience in their home countries. Secondly, college opportunities were limited for them because they were not eligible for state or federal financial aid programs. Lastly, Americans held negative misconceptions about them. They believed that the undocumented immigrants came to the United States to have their babies in order to receive benefits and their actions are criminal. For some students, these perceptions affected their education. Perez Huber believed the findings illuminated the power of racist nativism ideologies which are rooted in white supremacy and how it can be transmitted to Latina/o youth before they become aware of a racial group identity.

Sample Selection

The target population for this study was comprised of an ethnically diverse group of MDT members from an elementary school in South Carolina. Purposeful sampling was used to select the participants for this study. Berg articulated, “When developing a purposive sample, researchers use their special knowledge or expertise about some group to select subjects who represent this population” (2001, p. 32). The participants were

assessed according to their expertise and their appropriateness to represent the population for the study (Cassell & Symon, 2004). The assessment was based upon the potential for the research participants to provide valuable information on the concept of decision making on the referral of an African American student for special education services because of their personal lived experience. The lived experience was based on the involvement of the MDT members in decision making (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). The participant sample was identified by the researcher and school administrator. The selected participants must have served on the MDT during the current school year. The MDT team was comprised of at least one of the following professionals: general education teacher, special education teacher, school administrator or lead education agency designee, and other professionals such as guidance counselor, speech language pathologist, or school psychologist. Creswell (2003) emphasized that it is critical to gather participants purposefully to ensure that these participants will help the researcher understand the research questions.

Selected School

The elementary school selected for the study is a non-Title I school with a student population of 631 students. Approximately 72% of the students are African American and 28% are students of other ethnicities. The school was selected because although the majority of its students are African American, currently, disproportionality does not exist. However, the lack of disproportionality does not have a bearing on whether or not implicit bias impacted the decisions made by the MDT. The selected school is close to being classified as a Title I school because approximately 67.59% of the students receive

free/reduced lunch. In order for a school to be classified as a Title I school, at least 70% of the students must receive free/reduced lunch.

The school uses a four tiered response to intervention protocol before referring a student for special education services. There are 90 students receiving special education services at the school and 71 of those students are African American. Out of the 71 African American students receiving special education services, 19 are females and 52 are males. This supports researchers claim that African American males are more likely to be identified for special education compared with females (Coutinho & Oswald, 2005; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 2001). Also, approximately 95% of the African American students in special education receive free/reduced lunch.

There are 34 teachers at the school; 95% of them are Caucasian and 5% are African American. The school is located in an upper middle class neighborhood. However, fewer than 5% of the children who live in the neighborhood actually attend the school. The majority of these students are Caucasian. The remaining students, who are mostly African American, are bused in from lower income neighborhoods in the surrounding area.

Participant Descriptions

In the current study, the selected elementary school refers to its MDT as the School Intervention Team. Team members included an interventionist, school administrator, speech language pathologist, curriculum resource teacher/school testing coordinator, general education teacher, two guidance counselors, and a special education teacher. Approximately, 62% of the participants were Caucasian and 38% were African American. Two of the eight team members did not have teaching experience, and only

one participant was a male. The mean number of years of participation on a MDT team was 10.4 years. The speech language pathologist and special education teacher only serve on the MDT when the team suspects a student has a speech or special education issue. Table 3.1 provides demographic data about the participants in this research study. Data collected from the interviews have been included to allow the participants' voices and experiences to emerge. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant, but other characteristics of the participants have not been altered.

Table 3.1

Background Information on the Participants

Participant	Role on the MDT	Years of Teaching	Years on the MDT	Race
Kelly J.	Interventionist	12 Years	2 Years	African American
Benjamin O.	School Administrator/ liaison between RTI and SIT	5 ½ Years	10 Years	Caucasian
Susan P.	Elementary Guidance Counselor	Never Taught	20 Years	Caucasian
Vanessa A.	General Education Teacher	2 Years	2 Years	Caucasian
Iris T.	Curriculum Resource Teacher/School Testing Coordinator	21 Years	29 Years	Caucasian
Julie H.	Speech Language Pathologist	Never Taught	11 Years	African American
Paula C.	Special Education Teacher	27 Years	8 Years	Caucasian
Tina O.	Guidance Counselor	9 Years	18 months	African American

Method of Inquiry

The research strategy used semi-structured one-on-one interviews of eight MDT members. All the interviews were conducted face-to-face, recorded, and transcribed to ensure accuracy of participant responses (Kvale, 1973; Kvale, 1983; Kvale, 1996). Kvale (1983) defined a qualitative interview as “An interview, whose purpose is to gather description of the life-world of the interviewee with respect to the interpretation of meaning of the described phenomena” (p. 174). Interviews can be very lengthy. Hence, the use of semi-structured questions can assist in developing a structure for content analysis to promote generalization of the findings of Cassell and Symon (2004) who stated “The qualitative research interview is ideally suited to examining topics in which different levels of meaning need to be explored” (p. 21).

The interview protocol for this study (Appendix A) was developed with consideration to the research questions and theoretical framework; it was also designed to elicit participant narratives based on their experiences related to their participation on the MDT. Specifically, it includes prompts to understand why the team members referred African American students for special education services and what influenced their decision to make these referrals. The interview protocol was reviewed by a team of professionals including a professor in special education, three special educators, and two general education teachers. The interview protocol was revised to reflect the feedback and suggestions provided by the team of reviewers.

Informed Consent

Gaining the trust and support of research participants is critical to informed and ethical academic inquiry and research (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). All participants

signed an Informed Consent Form (Appendix B) before scheduling interviews and participating in the research process. The purpose of the informed consent letter was to introduce the research effort, provide a description of the study procedures and how the results will be used, articulate the purpose and scope of the study, request voluntary participation by the recipients, and provide researcher contact information. Participants signed the consent forms manually. Consent forms will be in a lock undisclosed location for a minimum of three years to maintain confidentiality. After the minimum time, the consent forms, transcribed interviews, and other paper-based information will be discarded through the process of shredding. Personal assurances of a committed participation, prompt scheduling of the interviews, and personal contact will diminish attrition, non-responsiveness, and will ensure adequate participation of participants to achieve thematic saturation. Data saturation occurred when the information received from participants was repeated and the researcher was no longer hearing new information. This was the point when data collection ceased.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality refers to the treatment of information that a participant will disclose in a relationship of trust, with the expectation that the information will not be divulged to others without permission from the participant. The informed consent letter articulated the procedural steps to maintain privacy, confidentiality, and the non-attribution of individual responses. The informed consent letter declared that the participant's background information will remain confidential and will not be released without prior expressed personal approval. Restricted access based upon a need-to-know protects and secures participant information to maintain confidentiality, and anonymity

and to ensure that all responses are secure from inappropriate disclosure to enhance reliability and validity of provided data. All participants signed and returned the letter of consent before participating in the study. All responses are secured in a locked repository and will be maintained for three years after the conclusion of the research. All research data will be destroyed after three years, with destruction conducted by shredding and deletion of files. Participants were informed of the audio tapes that were used in the interviews as a means to gather more detailed information. Additionally, to ensure participants' anonymity, the researcher assigned each participant a pseudonym for data reporting purposes.

Data Collection

Many factors were involved in the consideration of appropriate research methods for data collection and instrumentation (Anderson & Kanuka, 2003; Church & Waclawski, 1998; De Vellis, 2003; Miles & Perez Huberman, 1994). The factors included the need for data from subject matter experts based upon lived experiences, access to a representative population, and varied perspectives from diverse participants. Creswell (2002) identified observations, interviews, documents, and audio-visual materials as forms of data collection. The use of unstructured observational data in different venues as a participant observer or non-participant observer is not available and precludes the opportunity to take field notes or to record data to inform the research. The most appropriate and available data collection method to achieve data validity and reliability in the target population frame is the semi-structured interview (Elliott, 2005). Therefore, face-to-face interviews using semi-structured questions provided the most appropriate instrument to understand the central phenomenon of MDT members' decision

making because most of the emphasis is on the role of the researcher to elicit and represent an interpretive relationship of the world (Hiller & DiLuzio, 2004).

Face-to-face interviews in qualitative research have advantages and disadvantages (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). The advantages include direct contact by the researcher with the research participants, a commonly accepted protocol for valid qualitative research, the costs associated with data collection involving recording of interviews and transcription of results, and the generation of a large volume of research data from the transcribed interviews (Creswell, 2002). The disadvantages include time to collect data, less access to research participants, and difficulty in replication of the research. Furthermore, face-to-face interviews provide the opportunity to observe the nuanced responses of non-verbal communications.

Following the initial email contact, a follow-up message was sent to provide options for days and times to meet for the one-on-one interviews. After participants provided their choice of preferred meeting day and time, the researcher emailed them once more to confirm the interview appointment and to provide more information about the interview and types of questions to be asked. The interviews were conducted in a private room within the school to ensure that the confidentiality and privacy of the participants were maintained. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and one hour. All interviews were electronically recorded by audio tape and the results were transcribed to ensure accuracy. Each participant was provided with a compact disc of the recorded interview and a copy of the transcription, within a week of the date of the interview. This gave them an opportunity to review, append, comment, or modify the original responses to the question prior to using the information as a basis of data analysis.

Validity and Reliability

The qualitative concepts of validity and reliability will be addressed to establish trustworthiness and rigor of the research methodologies used in the study. According to Patton (2001), validity and reliability are two factors that any qualitative researcher should be concerned about while designing a study, analyzing results, and judging the quality of the study. Creswell (2002) defined validity as the ability of the researcher to “Draw meaningful and justifiable inferences from scores about the sample or population” (p. 651). Essentially, validity determines whether the research truly measures that which it was intended to measure or how truthful the research results are. There are two types of validity, internal and external. Each type of validity has potential threats that can undermine the use of the research data (Golafshani, 2003).

Internal validity may be threatened by the passage of time between the beginning of the research and the conclusion without demonstrable progress, participants changing during the process of data collection, or a biased selection of the research population. Measures were incorporated in the research to protect against potential internal threats to validity by gathering recommendations from the school administrator in choosing participants who have lived experiences regarding MDT members’ decision making. A number of features were used to encourage the participants to remain engaged throughout the research process to include timely personal and courteous telephone contacts, emails, and letters by the researcher.

The research was conducted in a timely fashion in order to obviate any threats to data becoming irrelevant. The collection of data was anonymous and confidential preventing the potential for any undue influence by any one research participant. The

confidential and anonymous collection of data assisted in establishing trust with each research participant. Informed consent, confidentiality, and the protection of all recorded interviews using a pseudonym to identify participants was maintained. This provided the means to maintain internal validity and establish credibility based upon integrity (Hoepfl, 1997).

Credibility was also established by regular member checking. All participants had the opportunity to terminate the interview at any point and to confirm the accuracy of each recorded interview after being transcribed. Confirmation by the participants ensured that statements provide tacit assumptions of authenticity, objectivity, and accuracy to substantiate validity and reliability (Roberts & Priest, 2006). Frequent peer debriefing further established credibility in the study. Three impartial peers reviewed the data and confirmed thematic categories. Two of the peer reviewers were colleagues with earned doctoral degrees and the other peer reviewer was a retired social worker. The use of peer reviewers allowed me to be honest when evaluating the data and gave me different perspectives on how to organize thematic categories.

Neuman (2003) defined external validity as “the ability to generalize experimental findings to events and settings outside the experiment itself” (p. 255). Issues that affect the ability to draw correct inference from the sample data to other persons and settings can threaten external validity. Threats to external validity relate to applying the research findings to other contexts and situations. The use of subject matter experts assisted in promoting external validity. Expertise and agreement can frame the essential elements of tacit knowledge and mitigate challenges to external validity. Collection of data from participants in various and distinct domains assists in establishing external validity of the

research findings for this study (Priest, 2002). Transferability was enhanced by thoroughly providing thick vivid descriptions of the research context and the assumptions that were central to the research.

Joppe (2000) defined reliability as “The extent to which results are consistent over time and an accurate representation of the total population under study is referred to as reliability and if the results of a study can be reproduced under a similar methodology, then the research instrument is considered to be reliable” (p. 1). Reliability is based on the assumption of replicability or repeatability. In qualitative research, dependability closely corresponds to reliability. An audit trail was used to establish reliability within the study. Each step in the research process was reported in detail, thereby enabling a future researcher to replicate the study.

Data Analysis

The interviews were conducted face-to-face, recorded, and transcribed to ensure accuracy and verifiability. The interviews were evaluated for content analysis using NVivo 9 qualitative software to identify significant elements, manifested themes, and exploration of emergent attributes to assess whether implicit bias existed in the MDT members’ decision to refer an African American student for special education. Moreover, student characteristics or behaviors were explored to understand their impact on MDT members’ decision making when referring African American students to receive special education services. The objective was to identify the manifest content for the elements that are physically present and countable from the interviews. The combined sources of research data were appropriate to the research design and strategy to obtain valid and reliable empirical information.

Moustakas (1994) identified a modification of the van Kaam (1959) method of analysis. This will be carried out for this study. The steps for analyzing the data from each participant's interview are as follows:

Listing and Preliminary Grouping.

The first step of the modified van Kaam method was the "listing and preliminary grouping" of the shared responses of the MDT members as participants of the study. This step is also known as the "horizontalization" process wherein the researcher noted all perceptions and experiences vital to the phenomenon being discovered (Moustakas, 1994, p. 120).

Reduction and Elimination.

The "reduction and elimination" process was composed of two queries to identify whether or not the responses of the interviewed participants can be included or eliminated. Moustakas (1994) suggested inquiry into the following:

- (a) Does it contain a moment of the experience that is a necessary and sufficient, constituent for understanding?
 - (b) Is it possible to abstract and label it? If so, it is a horizon of the experience.
- Expression not meeting the above requirements is eliminated. Overlapping, repetitive, and vague expressions are also eliminated or presented in more descriptive terms. The horizons that remain are the invariant constituents of the experience. (pp. 102-103)

The researcher analyzed the full transcription of each participant using the questions proposed by Moustakas. During this stage, the researcher also decided which parts of the interviews were to be incorporated, given that they were purposeful enough to be carried

out to the next stages of the analysis. Meanwhile, the experiences known to be unnecessary of meanings were eliminated early on.

Clustering and Thematizing.

The important perceptions and experiences or invariant constituents established from the second step of the method were then gathered and clustered together to form thematic labels. The clustered and thematized constituents are then termed as the "core themes of the experiences" (Moustakas, 1994, pp. 120-121). In this third step of the modified van Kaam method, the researcher identified main themes and several other invariant constituents which are all considered vital when answering and addressing the two research questions of the study.

Final Identification of Invariant Constituents.

In order for the researcher to corroborate the invariant constituents and four main themes which all apply and relate to the research questions of the study, the following questions were suggested by Moustakas (1994):

- 1) Are they expressed explicitly in the complete transcription?
- 2) Are they compatible if not explicitly expressed?
- 3) If they are not explicit or compatible, they are not relevant to the participant's experience and should be deleted. (pp. 120-121)

This was also completed by manually checking and auditing, one by one, the clustered and thematized experiences against the original interview transcripts.

Individual Textural Descriptions.

The researcher employed the validated invariant constituents and main themes from the previous step to create the individual textural descriptions of the eight

participants (Moustakas, 1994). By using the computer software program of NVivo 9, the summarized individual textural descriptions were then arranged by the researcher. According to Moustakas, the individual textural descriptions of the lived experiences of the participants merge both the invariant constituents and themes collected. For this step, verbatim information was extracted from each of the participant's interview transcripts as they directly related to the interview questions of the study. Only excerpts of participants' information that was relevant to the study were included.

Individual Structural Descriptions.

The established individual structural descriptions provided a vital report of the eight participants' knowledge, experiences, and perceptions on the processes of the MDT to determine if implicit bias impacted their decision to refer an African American student for special education services as well as other factors that may explain the disproportionate number of African Americans in special education programs. The individual structural descriptions were gathered from and based on the previous step or the individual textural descriptions.

Individual Composite Descriptions.

Moustakas (1994) explained this process as "an integration of individual structural into a group or universal description" (pp. 180-181). This is performed by "incorporating the formed invariant constituents and themes" (pp. 121). The researcher then will be able to create meaningful descriptions and actualities. The data presented in this step were gathered from both the individual and structural descriptions discussed in the previous steps. Additionally, the researcher combined both the composite textural and structural descriptions in this last step. Moustakas then accorded the seventh process

wherein the "composite description of the meanings and essences of the experience, [are formed] representing the group as a whole" (p. 108).

The seven steps were used for this qualitative study in order to ensure that the participants interviewed were able to express their lived experiences and that these data were understood and interpreted accordingly. They also allowed the development of a composite description of meaning and essence of experiences representing the population in order to draw generalizations which helped achieve the goals of the study.

Ethical Considerations

Measures were taken to decrease the potential for harm to participants of the study, although complete freedom of harm cannot be guaranteed. I was honest with the participants by informing them of the risks of participating in the study and measures that will be taken to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Overall, potential risks associated with participation in the study are unlikely and of low risk. The researcher in the study received human subjects training from the University of South Carolina's internal Review Board (IRB). The IRB approved the exempt study (see Appendix C). Participants in the study signed consent forms and pseudonyms were used to protect their identity. Member checking allowed participants to ensure the accuracy of data.

Role of the Researcher

In the current study, the research questions, methodology, and assumptions were influenced by existing research as well as the researcher's professional and personal background. The focus of my study stemmed from my experiences as a special education teacher after I started realizing that some of my students were initially referred and subsequently deemed eligible for special education services because of factors that had little to do with their behavioral, emotional, or academic difficulties. As a special

educator, I have participated in several individualized education program (IEP) meetings where students who had been previously diagnosed as having a learning and/or emotional disability were being discussed by the team to determine the best placement option for them. As I sat in the IEP meetings, I was surprised to hear the reasons some of these students were initially referred for special education services. Some of the reasons given by the referring general education teacher were hard to believe. For example, one teacher said she referred a student because he was stubborn and at times non-compliant with following directives. Another teacher referred a student because he was a “know it all” and often disrupted other students after he finished his work early. What was even more unsettling was the fact that the MDT confirmed the teachers’ initial concerns which resulted in students being diagnosed as having a disability and thus, deemed eligible for special education services.

Once these students were placed in my classroom which was a self-contained environment, the problems documented by the referring teacher were not evident or the behaviors exhibited were typical of students in their age group. Also, once placed in my classroom, the majority of these students remained in special education throughout their years in school. My background with participation on a MDT also provided context to understanding the decision making processes of the team.

Currently, I am a special educator at the school where the study took place. This is my first year working at the school and I have not participated on the MDT. I only know my co-workers interviewed for the study by name and do not have a personal relationship with any of them. As the primary research instrument, I maintained flexibility and subjectivity throughout the study. This was accomplished by rigorous

self-monitoring and self-evaluation through the use of a reflective journal and by keeping a detailed audit trail throughout the research.

Summary

The purpose of the qualitative interview study was to explore the experiences of MDT members' decision making to understand implicit biases which may contribute to the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education programs. The objective was to identify salient characteristics, behaviors, and attributes that influence the MDT members' decision making. The research was conducted by recording and transcribing face-to-face interviews using semi-structured questioning of a diverse population of eight MDT members with the results triangulated by manifest content analysis using the NVivo 9 qualitative analysis software program to assess emergent themes (DeMarrais & Lapan, 2004; Risjord, Dunbar, & Maloney, 2002). Chapter Three focused on the research's methodological design and appropriateness, theoretical framework, definition of the research population and sampling frame, data collection approaches, issues associated with internal and external validity, and data analysis techniques. Chapter Four presents the findings of the research.

CHAPTER FOUR

Findings

Although racial disproportionality in special education programs has existed over three decades with various contributing factors, there is little research evidence that explores the impact implicit bias may have on the phenomenon. The qualitative interview study described in this dissertation presents the lived experiences of eight multidisciplinary team (MDT) members to determine whether implicit bias impacted their decision to refer an African American student for special education services.

The qualitative research interview seeks to describe the meanings of central themes in the life of the participants. The main task in interviewing is to understand the meaning of what the interviewees say (Kvale, 1996). The desire to explore implicit bias, but in the context of the lived experiences of MDT members, serves as the basis for the following research questions:

1. Does implicit bias exist in the multidisciplinary team members' decision to refer an African American student for special education?
2. What student characteristics or behaviors impact the multidisciplinary team members decision making when referring African American students to receive special education services?

Qualitative methods that drew from narrative inquiry and analysis were used to collect data through one-on-one interviews with eight MDT members. The data were analyzed using the modified van Kaam method and NVivo 9 qualitative analysis

software. The Critical Race Theory tenet, “Whiteness as property,” was also used as an analytical tool to describe and represent the experiences of African American students and their families. MDT members seemingly felt that their beliefs and value systems were superior to the students and their parents. When they did not conform to the MDT members White middle class norms, stereotypical thinking and implicit biases surfaced among the MDT members.

The clustered groupings developed the emergent core themes in relation to the phenomenon. Comparison and review of the participants’ interview transcripts validated the invariant constituents. The individual textural and individual structural descriptions (see Appendices D and E) for each participant’s transcript were developed. The individual composite descriptions (see Appendix F) for the phenomenon were developed based upon the individual textural structured descriptions and core themes of the data. Analysis was completed when a saturation of data occurred and further analysis resulted in redundant data. The major findings will be summarized in Chapter 5.

Clustering and Thematizing

Data clustering and thematizing involved grouping the data into core themes by the researcher. The four major core themes and several other significant experiences also known as invariant constituents (Moustakas, 1994) emerged as the data were analyzed. The four themes are: 1) academic and behavioral factors, 2) race or ethnicity plays no role, 3) academic delays and behavioral problems, and 4) lack of stimulation and motivation.

Themes 1 and 2.

The first and second themes answer the first research question: Does implicit bias exist in the MDT members' decision to refer an African American student for special education services? The researcher found that the participants believe implicit bias does not exist in their decision to refer an African American student for special education services. However, academic and behavioral factors play major roles in their referral decisions. They also believe that ethnicity or race does not play a role in their decision making. The researcher deduced from three invariant constituents, including the main themes, which can be found in Table 4.1. The first and second main themes both received the highest number of responses from seven out of the eight participants or 88% of the total sample population. It must be noted that only the responses that received two and above occurrences will be discussed in this section, those that received just one response or 13% can be seen in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1

Existence/lack of existence of implicit bias in the MDT members' decision to refer an African American student for special education

Invariant Constituents	# of occurrences	% of occurrences
Academic and behavioral factors play major roles in the MDT members' decision when making referrals	7	88%
Ethnicity or race does not play a role in the MDT members' decision when making referrals	7	88%
Implicit bias exists as there are times when African American students are easily referred to special education programs	1	13%

Overall, the first theme, academic and behavioral factors, plays major parts in the MDT members' referral decisions and are considered to be one of the four most significant findings of the study. The theme pertains to the MDT members' beliefs and experiences that the decision to refer students to special education programs mainly stems from their academic and behavioral issues. The participants share the following:

Kelly J. says her major reason for referring students for special education, whether they are African Americans or other ethnicities, is due to their academic issues which are sometimes affected by the behavior they present as well:

Academic issues are the main reason but they also are referred to the SIT team for behavior. The guidance counselor and the psychologist and sometimes the social worker are involved depending on the severity of the case.

Kelly J. further states that although the reason for referrals depends on the student's grade level, behavior remains a major reason for referrals.

Susan P. says her decision to refer a student is mainly based on the academics and behavioral issues of the student. She went on to explain,

One is mostly academics. Teachers are concerned about a child's academic progress. That's probably the majority but then there's the behavioral issues that could include anything from the child's not participating in class and doesn't speak and is withdrawn to they are hyperactive and can't stay seated or keep their mouth closed to they are angry. We can't work with them because they are angry, that can of stuff. Those kids usually have academic problems of course. So, it gets messy in there. Sometimes we don't know if the academics are stemming from the behavioral issues or if the behavioral issues are stemming from the

academic issues. I think people sometimes jump too quickly to the academic issues causing the behavioral issues. I think too many educators make that mistake.

Susan P. clarified “that can of stuff” to mean when a student is so upset, he or she refuses to comply with any adult directives even after being asked to comply several times. She makes a valid point when she says teachers sometimes are quick to assume a student’s academic difficulties are causing their behavioral issues. They should not confuse behavior problems and academic underachievement. I personally feel there is a difference between academic difficulties and behavior problems. Teachers need to be able to distinguish clearly between the two variables. A student may be experiencing behavioral issues that may not impact him or her academically but may affect other areas in their life.

Paula C. and Julie H. both state that children who are struggling academically are the ones who are referred for special education services. Paula C. specifically mentions that when a “student is reading or writing or doing math a year or two below their grade level,” academic problems are evident. Julie H. states, “The main concern that I have seen over the past 11 years is academic issues, whether a student is on grade level. I have also seen a lot of students being referred for behavior problems.” Iris T. also mentions that based on her experience, most African American students are referred to special education because of their academic and behavioral issues and the MDT follows stringent guidelines upon referral:

If it is academic, it is because they are not being successful in the classroom and usually the teacher thinks they are behind their average peers. Further

clarification from Iris T. concerning the aforementioned statement, “the teacher thinks they are behind their average peers” reveals that she intended to say that teachers must have documentation (e.g., test scores, student work samples, etc.) to show that the students are behind their average peers. Iris T. further explained that “for kids with behavior problems, they are wreaking havoc in the classroom.” When defining wreaking havoc, Iris T. says “they are disruptive, bothering other students until they don’t get their work done. Sometimes being disrespectful to their teachers or other people in the classroom. A lot of time they are displaying aggressive behavior towards other kids.” She also states, “Well, if it is academic, it goes through an RTI meeting. They have to have documentation of interventions, Tier 1 and 2 interventions, how much you talked to the parent. If it is behavioral, sometimes you will have a behavior chart and contacts with parents. They have to have their documentation in order. They have to have something to show. They can’t just come in and say I am having this issue with a student.

The meanings and interpretations teachers assign to African-American students' behavioral presentations are often derived from a deficit perspective. This perspective may lead teachers to perceive African American students as discipline problems and as incapable of performing to high academic standards (Maholmes & Brown, 2002). Definitions and expectations of appropriate behavior are culturally influenced, and conflicts are likely to occur when teachers and students come from different cultural backgrounds (Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, & Curran, 2004). Therefore, when a teacher starts to label a child’s behavior as disruptive, aggressive, or disrespectful, he or she should be able to clearly define and determine by whose standards the child is being

labeled. Is it based on their value system? Not to do so, in my opinion, demonstrates bias because in today's diverse classrooms, sometimes cultural differences can be mistaken for student problem behaviors. Also, misinterpreting the behaviors of culturally and linguistically diverse students can result in teachers' being unprepared to meet their educational needs which could influence the teachers' decision to refer the students for special education (Voltz, Brazil, & Scott, 2003). The combination of interpreting behaviors through singular cultural lens and instructional quality contributes to disproportionality in special education and discipline (Harry & Klingner, 2006; Klingner, Artiles, et. al., 2005).

The second theme that emerged from the first research question was ethnicity or race does not play a role in the MDT members' decision to refer an African American student to special education. The theme indicates the participants' belief that the ethnicity of the student does not affect their behavioral and academic abilities. Benjamin O. says an African American student is not different from students of other ethnicities. He feels they are able to interact and do what they have to do just like the rest of the students in the school:

I don't see any difference in ability between white or black. At our school, I see a difference in I think expectations, parental expectations and their support at home (African American students). The parent may indeed say you are going to get your homework done and that's all she says. The kids are left to their own devices to either do the homework or not. The parent does not go back to check on things. I think all of our children are equally motivated but discipline and behavior is disproportionate because of the composition of our school. We have

more referrals for black children than we do for white children. Socially I think there are some gaps between particularly our white and black males but I don't see it being a problem in this school.

During the interview, I noticed that Benjamin O. appeared guarded with his comments. He seemed to proceed with caution when answering questions and for the most part, gave pretty generic responses to the questions. He was unaware of his deficit thinking which certainly manifested itself during the interview. He assumes that African American parents don't value education. If educators erroneously believe that poor African American parents don't value education, they are not accepting any responsibility to address the inequities in education.

Julie H. also believes that African American students essentially have the same general abilities as other students from different ethnicities:

Socially, I think they are the same. I think motivation can be the same if the parents are involved. I think behavior and ability are the same. Blacks have the same ability as other ethnicities if they have support or a positive outlook on education. Julie H. clarified saying that a positive outlook means that education is important to the parents.

I was surprised by Julie H.'s seemingly insensitivity and misunderstanding of African American culture because she is of the same ethnicity. Her use of contingencies to support deficit thinking is tantamount to implicit bias. Julie H. is further suggesting that the majority of African American students' academic success is their parents' responsibility which supports deficit thinking. Both Benjamin O. and Julie H.'s comments reflect their feelings that African American parents' values are inferior to

those held by the normative White middle class population which perpetuates “whiteness as property.”

Paula C. adds that overall, African American students and students of other ethnicities do not differ and are just “pretty much the same”:

I think that African American students and students of other ethnicities are pretty much the same. In all my 27 years of teaching, I’ve never met a child who didn’t want to learn. I think that when you see behaviors in a child, it would behoove you to get to know the child so that you can understand that there may be outside causes for the frustration. It may be the academic delays that are the frustrations. Sometimes they don’t feel an attachment because they haven’t been anywhere long enough to feel like they belong. I think that as teachers it is our jobs to make children feel wanted and welcomed. They have to feel like an important part of the classroom. That if they are not there, that would be a bad thing. Once they have some ownership in their learning and feel like they belong in their classroom, I have found that most of those behaviors dissipate. I taught 3rd grade for nine years and that is how we ran our classroom. The children were very much good citizens in the classroom. The social skills today are not perhaps what I was taught when I was growing up but the school needs to help them understand what those social skills are and expectations have to be high. If the expectations are high, children will rise to those expectations.

Unlike Benjamin O. and Julie H., Paula C. did not focus on the perceived shortcomings of African American parents but shifted responsibility to the teacher. In doing so, I feel that Paula C. has recognized the importance of empowering students to achieve by

creating a sense of social belonging which is a basic human motivation (MacDonald & Leary, 2005). Studies have shown that students who experience school as a place where they have a sense of purpose and community are more motivated academically, are absent less often, engage in fewer disruptive behavior, and have higher achievement than students who do not have that sense of belonging (Battistich & Hom, 1997). Therefore, as echoed by Paula C., it is important that educators understand what impact students' sense of belonging may have on their academic success.

Theme 3.

The third theme emerged from the second research question: What student characteristics or behaviors impact the MDT members' decision making when referring African American students to receive special education services? The researcher discovered that academic delays and behavioral problems were student characteristics or behaviors which impacted the MDT decision making when referring African American students for special education services. The researcher deduced from four invariant constituents, including the main theme, which is illustrated in Table 4.2. The third theme received the highest number of responses with five occurrences out of the eight participants or 63% of the total sample population. Again, it must be noted that only the responses that received two and above occurrences will be discussed in this section. Responses that received just one response or 13% can be seen in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2

Student characteristics or behaviors that impact the MDT members' decision making when referring African American students to receive special education services

Invariant Constituents	# of occurrences	% of occurrences
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Academic Delays and Behavioral Problems	5	63%
Attention issues of the students when dealing with the MDT members	1	13%
Social gaps between the white and African American males in school	1	13%
Delay in learning because of the African American students' constant transfer from one school to another	1	13%

Overall, the third theme, academic delays and behavioral problems is considered as one of the four main findings of the study. This theme pertains to the participants' belief that the academic delays and behavioral problems exhibited by African American students leads to their negative academic performance and problem behaviors in school, which impacts the MDT's decision to refer them for special education programs.

Kelly J. maintains that most of the children referred this school year, have had focusing issues:

For the ones that I have had meetings on, most of the children that have been referred for special education service even with academic issues, but behavior is usually a problem too. Most of the kids have some type of attention issue this year.

Kelly J.'s use of non-legal language and vague terminology when discussing children referred for special education was disconcerting. I cannot ignore the fact that Kelly J.'s position as the curriculum resource teacher should have allowed her to respond with more specificity when discussing reasons that students are referred to special education.

Iris T. said the children who are struggling academically, are having a difficult time with reading and writing:

If it is academic, it is generally kids who are struggling with reading at an early age, struggling with writing, especially in our kindergarten and first grade classrooms. They are not making any progress. Kids who don't know their letter sounds, kids who don't know their name, can't spell their name by a certain time of the year.

Iris T. seems to be intimating that parents should assume total responsibility for their children's academic failures. She believes that it is not the teacher's fault for the students' academic woes which again perpetuates a deficit perspective. The "deficit" model focuses on the student and/or his or her parents as the major problem for his or her academic underachievement. This leads me to ask, what does Iris T. feel are her responsibilities as a teacher?

Paula C. said she is concerned about the students with the academic delays which cause them to become frustrated. She maintains:

The characteristics that we see most often are academic delays, huge academic delays. Depending on the grade level of the child, the frustration level of the child is increased dramatically and he or she might be exhibiting some acting out behaviors that probably are not related to acting out at all but just frustration of not being able to do the work and not knowing what to do about it.

Some participants attributed the African American students' academic delays and behavioral problems to insufficiency in motivation from their homes and family members. They seem to have ignored the other possible causes of students' academic difficulties and behavioral problems such as the instructional practices in the classroom. Instead, they are using a deficit model that blames students and parents for their own

problems (Garcia & Guerra, 2004). The participants' deficit perspectives stem from their implicit biases regarding the ability and motivation of systematically marginalized people.

According to Susan P., deficiency in the students' motivation from home indeed negatively interferes with their ability to learn at school which may result in their referral to special education by the MDT. She strongly maintains:

I do believe that when there is deprivation in the home of an African American student during the first four years of his or her life, this impedes the child's ability to learn.

Susan P. believes deprivation exists when there is a "lack of stimulation in the home." In her attempt to clarify what she meant by deprivation, Susan P. further demonstrated implicit bias. Susan P. recalled visiting the homes of two African American students some years ago:

Some of the African American kids are coming from homes that may lack stimulation. Years ago I visited the home of a child who was being referred for special education. When I entered the home, the only light came from the TV. The only actual light in the house was from the kitchen ceiling. I thought to myself there's no way children can do homework in this house. There's no way they can study in this house. So I think one of the biggest causes is a lack of stimulation and exposure for a lot of African American kids especially in the first three years when their brains are wiring so rapidly. I also went out to visit with a K4 teacher after 1 pm. Mom was asleep on the couch. All of the windows were blocked with blankets and quilts. It was pitch dark, with the exception of the

television being on. There was a toddler in the playpen at 1:30 in a pitch dark house with mom passed out. That mom did a lot of partying that night because there was an older sibling who told me so. And those kids, she had three boys all together and all three of them ended up in resource. I can't help but think the lack of stimulus and deprivation figures in to what some of our children are experiencing.

While interviewing Susan P., she seemed genuinely concerned about the plight of African American students. However, her comments contradicted her concerns. Susan P.'s depiction of the African American students' homes that she visited, were characterized by more deficit-oriented beliefs and assumptions as well as implicit bias. Her comments were based on the "whiteness as property" tenet that holds White middle class norms as superior to African American cultural norms. Susan P.'s responses focused on three areas, inadequate light sources in the home, lack of stimulation in the home, and possible drug or alcohol use by a parent. During a home visit, Susan P. noticed that the family had only one ceiling light on and light filtering from the television. She assumed that these lighting conditions were the norm in the home and that they would prevent a child from completing his or her homework or studying. Susan P.'s assumptions are not based on facts but project stereotypical thinking as related to the African American student's home environment. Based on her observations of this family's home, she surmises that the children in the home are not being stimulated. Again, Susan P. is making blatant assumptions about this family. Even more disturbing, during a visit to another student's home, Susan P. also made unsubstantiated assumptions about the parent. She said mom was passed out and claimed an older sibling told her that the mom had been out partying

the night before. Susan P. does not know that what the child told her was factual. She was quick to believe the child's explanation concerning his mom without much thought. Susan P. further exacerbated the matter by insinuating mom was passed out because she consumed alcohol or drugs the night before. Although drug sales are more visible in low socioeconomic status neighborhoods, drug use is equally distributed across the poor, middle class, and wealthy communities (Saxe, Kadushin, Tighe, Rindskopf, & Beveridge, 2001). Alcohol abuse is far more prevalent among wealthy people than among poor people (Diala, Muntaner, & Walrath, 2004; Galea, Ahern, Tracy, & Vlahov, 2007). In other words, considering alcohol and illicit drugs together, wealthy people are more likely than poor people to be substance abusers.

Vanessa A. says students are greatly affected by the issues occurring in their homes and that the MDT observes these kinds of problems:

I know a lot of kids bring in a lot of stuff happening at home and that really affects the way they behave or their focusing problems in the classroom. Also, parents who aren't involved or they don't look out for their kids and give their children the impression that school is unimportant. So, the kids don't see it as a big importance either.

Vanessa A.'s deficit thinking is shown when she, like Benjamin O. and Julie H., assumes African American parents aren't involved in their children's education and don't value education. She supports the popular assumption that low-income African American families do not value education in the same ways that their middle and upper class White counterparts do.

Iris T. maintains that African American students are affected by their issues at home which impact their academics and behaviors in school:

I think issues going on in the home have a huge influence on African American students. Schools are expected to do a lot for these children: feed them, talk to them about everything from sex to emotional issues. We are becoming their surrogate parents and I think a lot of these kids do not have supervision at home and they are exposed to things that children have no business being exposed to at a very young age and it hurts them. I think school is the last thing on most of their priority list. They are more concerned with eating, whether mom is coming home or not, or if someone is going to beat somebody up. School is way down their list of priorities. And they are usually not surrounded by people who make it their priority. So, all of that plays into it. Also, some African American parents have several children so it's hard for them to devote sufficient time to all of them.

Iris T. also seemed fixated on the perceived deficits in the homes of African American students. She believes there's no supervision and parents are more concerned with meeting their family's basic needs than the educational needs of their children. Iris T. also suggests that domestic violence occurs in African American homes and sometimes there is inconsistency in adult caretakers in the home. Iris T.'s comments are especially troublesome because she is clearly speculating and concluding negative stereotypes and assumptions that are baseless. Again, African American parents are being blamed for their children's academic and behavioral problems. Low-income African American families' supposed disinterest in, lack of motivation for, and disengagement from the children's education is misleading. Studies have shown since the late 1970s that low-

income families have the same attitudes about the value of education as their wealthier counterparts (Compton-Lilly, 2003; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Leichter, 1978). While it is true that low-income parents are less likely to attend school functions or volunteer in their children’s classrooms (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005), there is no indication that this is because they care less about education.

Theme 4.

The fourth theme also emerged from the second research question. Specifically, it emerged as a result of the following question which pertains to the second research question: According to the Office of Civil Rights, African American students are referred and subsequently placed in special education programs more than other students. Why do you think this is happening? The participant responses indicate that lack of stimulation and motivation from African American homes to support their children academically and socially is one of the reasons why the disparity exists. The researcher deduced from three invariant constituents (including the main theme) which can be found in Table 4.3. The fourth theme received the highest number of responses with five occurrences out of the eight participants or 63% of the total sample population.

Table 4.3

Other factors that MDT members perceive contribute to the disproportionality

Invariant Constituents	# of occurrences	% of occurrences
Lack of stimulation and motivation from African American homes to support their children academically and socially	5	63%
Not enough African American teachers who can understand the culture and behaviors of the African American students	4	50%

Large population of African American students in the school thus the reason for disproportionate representation in special education programs	2	25%
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Overall, the fourth and last theme, lack of stimulation and motivation from African American homes to support their children academically and socially, is also considered one of the four most significant findings of the study. The theme pertains to the experience and perception of most of the MDT participants that the lack of motivation and support from African American homes to the children is one of the contributing factors of disproportionality. Iris T. says that based on her experience, African American students' performance and behaviors are affected by problems and issues present in their homes especially lack of stimulation and motivation:

For the academic part of it, my experience has been a lot of our African American kids, both males and females, who come from single parent families are just not prepared when they come here. They have spent so much time at home taking care of the kids, feeding kids, and taking care of other things at home, there's been no stimulation as far as verbal stimulation, and a lot if our kids come here never have seen a book. I mean there's not one book in their house. They come to kindergarten not knowing their letters or colors. They don't know their numbers; they don't know their last name. When you come to school that far behind from day one, if you are not of average intelligence, you will have a hard time catching up and a lot of our African American kids come totally unprepared. No one has talked to them and no one has read to them. When you have a large class with kids of varying abilities, it is hard to give those kids the attention that they need to help them catch up but I also think that kids who have academic

difficulty early on start figuring out pretty quickly that they are not like everybody else and they get angry which could lead to behavioral issues. But I think the main thing is they just come to school not prepared. There's just too many other things going on in their lives.

Iris T.'s comments about single African American parent homes were the most deficit-oriented among the MDT members. They also reeked of implicit bias. Iris T. openly voiced her views concerning African American students from single parent homes. For example, she believes these students are not ready for school because they have spent so much time taking care of adult responsibilities. She also assumes African American students are not being stimulated by their single parents who don't talk or read to them which is hard to believe. Iris T.'s assumptions are based on the preconceived notions and implicit biases that she has about single African American parents. She suggests that it is difficult for teachers to devote sufficient attention to African American students who are having academic difficulties and that these students know they "are not like everyone else." Again, Iris T. is using deficit-based language. Iris T. also seems to imply that African American students, who are reared by single parents, limit teachers' ability to effectively teach them. Yet, she fails to realize that teachers and administrators expect all students regardless of their ethnicity, to conform to the largely based white or European American cultural norms that govern their classrooms (Alexander, 2010). Even more disturbing is Iris T.'s belief that African American students raised by single parents are destined to fail academically due to their single parents' inability to parent them effectively.

Paula C. says there is a problem that stems from the homes of African American students which affects their performance:

I really don't know the answer for that except that in many years of teaching, I have noticed that a lot of African American families move around a lot whether it is through their jobs or their families or whatever their needs, a lot of times these children are in multiple schools. Their parents are concerned with where they are going to stay so they have little time to interact with their children or give them things like books or educational games that will help them in school.

Paula C. reported that African American students' academic performance is adversely impacted due to frequent relocation. Research indicates that students, regardless of race or ethnicity, who are transferring from one school to another on a frequent basis, suffer negative effects on their learning (Fowler-Finn, 2001; Kerbow, 1996). Just like Iris T., Paula C. assumes African American parents are so consumed with meeting their families' basic needs that they don't have time to stimulate their children sufficiently by even providing educational books and games at home. Again, this a way of blaming parents for their children's academic problems.

Tina S. adds another factor which stems from the lack of parental involvement that later on affects African American students:

A bunch of factors should be considered including lack of parental involvement and lifestyle issues. Some African American parents are single and have several children which limit their time. So, when they have a child who is experiencing problems in school, they have little time to worry about the issue. They have other things on their minds that they see as more important. Some of them may

have a disability themselves and don't know how to help. The lifestyle issues include incarcerated family members (mostly dads), violent family members (dads or boyfriends), and different people coming in and out of their homes such as mom's boyfriends. Some of these parents just don't care. Everyone wants to put all of the blame on the teachers but the parents must assume their role because everyone must work together as a community to help the student.

Tina S. also blames single parents for their children's poor academic performance. She believes because they have multiple children, they don't have much time to devote to their children's education. Her deficit perspective focuses on the shortcomings of single parents while ignoring their strengths. Tina S. goes a step further to suggest some of these parents may have a disability themselves which further hinders their ability to participate in their children's schooling. She also discusses other lifestyle factors that she assumes contributes to the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education. The lifestyle factors discussed promote stereotypes of low-income African American families. While Tina S. blames African American parents for not making their children's education a priority, she seems to recognize the importance of teachers and parents working collaboratively to help improve students' academic performance.

The second invariant constituent which followed the fourth main theme, received four responses out of the eight participants or 50% of the overall sample population, indicates there are not enough African American teachers who can understand the culture and behaviors of the African American students. Iris T. says that at her school majority of the teachers are white and as a result they are having a difficult time understanding the

vast population of African American students especially in terms of culture and background:

I think that in a lot schools even like this one when the majority of our kids are African Americans, you have a majority of white teachers and I think they try to understand and relate but it is hard to. Particularly, if you are coming from a middle or upper middle class situation and you are dealing with kids who aren't. It's not that you don't try to get it; it's just hard for you to relate to them.

Iris T. mentions there is a cultural mismatch between teachers and students at her school. Her concerns are valid because African American student populations continue to increase in schools (Lewis, 2006) that are comprised of predominantly White middle class teachers (Landsman & Lewis, 2006). Iris T. feels the cultural misunderstanding or lack of awareness of the White teachers may contribute to overrepresentation of African American students in special education programs. I agree that cultural mismatch not only proves problematic for teachers but students of color as well.

Julie H. also maintains that most of the time, Caucasian teachers do not understand and cannot relate to their African American students. Furthermore, she was the only MDT member who believes that bias against African American males from some Caucasian teachers contributes to the problem:

There are a lot of white teachers at this school educating a lot of African American students from low income families. The white teachers do not understand these students because they can't relate to them in a cultural way. They are not familiar with the way the live or act. Some teachers are accustomed to teaching only certain types of students and when they are at a school where the

students are of a different culture, they have a hard time relating and that could be a reason they refer a lot of students. I think it could be number of things such as white teachers not knowing how to teach African American students. I think they may need more differentiated instruction that focus on their learning styles.

Unfortunately, there aren't a lot of black male teachers and they don't have role models. I think it could be bias against African American males because some teachers especially white teachers believe black males are aggressive, hard to teach, and unmotivated. They also believe poor African American students have little aspirations in life and most of them will end up dead or in jail.

Julie H.'s views about cultural mismatch were similar to Iris T.'s. She seems concerned about the impact that cultural mismatch may have on African American students. Since most White teachers come from middle class backgrounds, they have little experience with African American children especially those from poor areas. Most often, the White teachers are not familiar with their culture, family dynamics, or home life. Because differences like these appear to have implications for student achievement, cultural mismatch can result in poor academic performance among culturally diverse African American students. Ignoring cultural differences can perpetuate a deficit perspective by trying to fix culturally diverse students and make them conform to the mainstream practices of the classroom.

The third invariant constituent which followed the fourth main theme, received two responses out of the eight participants, or 25% of the overall sample population, shows there is a large population of African American students in the school thus the reason for disproportionate representation in special education programs. Benjamin O.

agrees that because of the makeup of the school's student body, which is predominately African American, more African American students will be referred for special education services.

The purpose of Chapter Four, known as the findings section, was to provide an in-depth report and investigation on the qualitative interviews from the eight target participants. The data findings accounted the new meanings and results established from the interviews of the participants and at the same time through the extensive method employed, the modified van Kaam method by Moustakas (1994). The researcher reported an in-depth analysis, discussion, and exploration of the qualitative interviews with the eight MDT members. The researcher, through the data findings, formed new meanings and results by logically and thoroughly following the seven extensive steps of the modified van Kaam method by Moustakas (1994). The researcher also uncovered four main themes which all address the research questions of the study.

CHAPTER FIVE

Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Overview of Study Findings

The purpose of this qualitative interview study was to explore the processes of MDT members to determine if implicit bias impacted their decision to refer an African American student for special education services. In-depth one-on-one interviews using semi-structured questions were conducted with eight MDT members from an elementary school in South Carolina serving students in grades PK-5. The study explored the lived experiences of the MDT members to identify student characteristics and behaviors which impact their decision making when referring African American students for special education services. Existing research on the processes of the MDT is limited and has not focused on implicit bias as a probable cause of disproportionality.

This study extended the research by exploring the impact implicit bias may have on the MDT's decision making processes. Four key themes emerged from this study: 1) academic and behavioral factors, 2) race or ethnicity plays no role, 3) academic delays and behavioral problems, and 4) lack of stimulation and motivation. This chapter presents an opportunity to summarize the findings which may guide practice and further thought about the referral decisions made by the MDT as well as their purpose and future direction in special education. In addition to summarizing the findings, the researcher

will provide recommendations for practice and future study, and discuss the limitations of the study.

Summary of Findings

The critical race theory (CRT) “Whiteness as property” tenet was used as a framework to analyze and interpret data gleaned from this study. When applied to the data, CRT assisted me in exploring how racial inequities are produced, reproduced, and maintained within our schools. CRT does not simply treat race as a variable, but rather works to understand how race and bias intersect with gender and class as structural and institutional factors that impact the everyday experiences of African Americans.

Whiteness as property attempts to identify, analyze, and transform the structural aspects of education that maintain subordinate and racial positions in and out of the classroom.

The data from this study show that “Whiteness as property” was prevalent in the way both Caucasian and African American participants viewed the African American students and their families. MDT members repeatedly referred to White middle-class norms both explicitly and implicitly when discussing African American students and their families. When the students and their families failed to conform to the MDT members’ norms, cultural stereotypes and misunderstandings surfaced. Additionally, all of the participants’ comments were laced with implicit biases and deficit language. Hence, data suggest that implicit bias may exist in the multidisciplinary team (MDT) members’ decision to refer an African American student for special education.

Participants failed to comment on those aspects of the students’ life experiences and family that make them unique and resilient. Instead, they focused on perceived student deficits and made negative, stereotypical assumptions, and counterproductive

statements about their parents and home environments based on White middle-class norms. Participants attributed students' academic delays and behavioral problems on their parents, backgrounds, and the challenges they face outside of school. The MDT members' implicit biases were influenced by a number of factors including but not limited to cultural deficit thinking, negative cultural stereotypes, a cultural mismatch between teacher and student, and misinterpretation of cultural communication styles. The interrelated factors shown in Figure 1 are reflective of the CRT where the educational inequities of African American students continue to persist and be supported by schools.

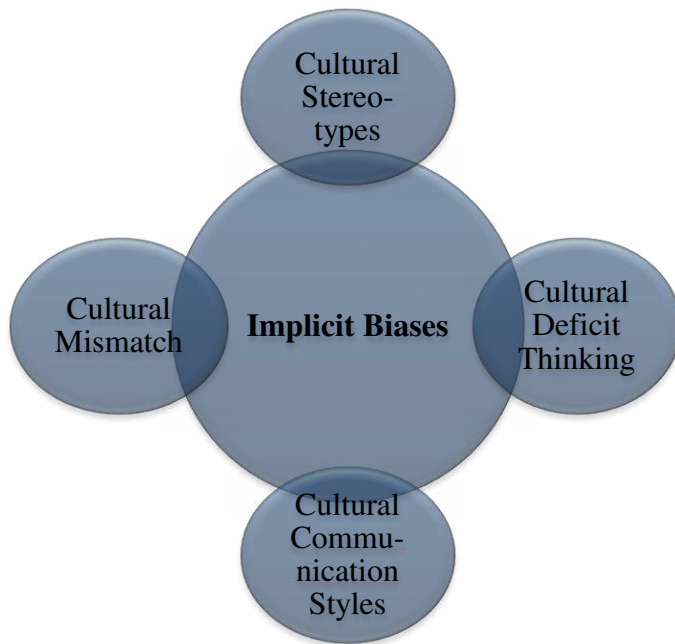


Figure 5.1 *Interrelated Factors that Influence Participants' Implicit Biases*

Cultural Deficit Thinking.

Cultural deficit thinking permeates schools and those who work in schools mirror these beliefs. Teachers, who hold negative, stereotypical views and perceptions about African American students and blame them or their parents for their lack of educational success, are demonstrating cultural deficit thinking (Ford & Grantham, 2003). This was

demonstrated by the MDT members who quickly shirked their responsibility as teachers and placed the blame for students' academic underachievement on their parents. The participants did not use language to articulate how or what specific disability exists. Instead, they attributed students' academic and behavioral performance to outside family and cultural deficits. They contended that African American students lacked the readiness to learn, their parents had no interest in their education, and their family's lifestyle hindered their learning. Educators with a deficit perspective have counterproductive views and biases against the cultural language styles, appearance, and behavior of African American students. They perceive these cultural differences as deficiencies which resulted in the misdiagnoses of African American students for special education services (Hillard, 1980).

Educators also have a tendency to lower the expectations (academically and behaviorally) for minority students (Ford & Grantham, 2003). When students sense this, they may underperform or behave in the manner in which the teacher expects them to behave which may result in a referral to special education (Gardner & Miranda, 2001). Overall, cultural deficit thinking perpetuates behavior that differs from the Caucasian middle class norms and teachers use these differences as a way to label a student as disabled (Hillard, 1980). Additionally, minority students viewed as unteachable or threatening (Harry & Anderson, 1995; Kunjufu, 1985) were referred for special education services based solely on subjective information influenced by cultural beliefs, norms, and biases.

Cultural Stereotypes.

MDT members' implicit biases are attributed to cultural stereotypes that they hold

against African American students. Graham and Lowery (2004) define stereotypes as “culturally shared beliefs, both positive and negative, about the characteristics and behaviors of particular groups” (p. 484). Some of the stereotypes shared by participants in regard to poor African American parents include: they do not value education; they have too many children and don’t devote sufficient time stimulating them; their home life is filled with conflict, they can’t meet their children’s educational needs, and they are drug and/or alcohol users. Stereotypes are based on mass media, or ideas passed on by parents, peers, and other members of society. The media’s portrayal of African American males often consists of negative images with them being depicted as violent criminals who should be feared and avoided at all costs (Monroe, 2005). When teachers consciously or unconsciously believe these stereotypes, they may treat and react to their African American male students accordingly and believe they do not fit the school norms (Casella, 2003). African American students who refuse to conform to the school’s standards and behavior may be labeled as troublemakers, deviant, dangerous, or non-compliant. These labels may contribute to their being referred for special education services. Participants’ stereotypes were not just limited to African American students but also included their parents.

The plight of African American students is made worse by the higher rate of teacher-child conflict. The students are often misconstrued or stereotyped by their teachers as impulsive and risk-seeking, and as those with the most problems in subjects such as reading and mathematics (Vasquez, 2005). In fact, Kunjufu (2005) discovered that most of the time, African American students are considered cute by their teachers, up until they entered second and third grade, when they became viewed as undisciplined and

disorderly. When other students' physical aggression is just considered as means of expression, with African American students, this is often misconstrued as their having disruptive disorders like attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (Kunjufu, 2005). By the time these students reach middle school, they are labeled as violent and having a disability.

Cultural Mismatch.

The majority of teachers in the United States school system are Caucasian, middle class, women (Ladson-Billings, 2001; Feistritzer, 2011; Zumwalt & Craig, 2005). Most of these teachers were raised in Caucasian neighborhoods and attended predominantly Caucasian colleges and universities (Howard, 1999). However, student populations are increasingly made up of African American students (Lewis, 2006). Similarly, the study school has a predominantly African American student body with over 90% of the teachers being Caucasian. Teachers and school administrators expect all students regardless of race or ethnicity to conform to the classroom learning, practices, behaviors, and expectations that embody mainstream European American cultural values (Alexander, 2010). Yet, most ethnic minority students are reared in households that maintain cultural values and norms that do not reflect a mainstream ideology and may conflict with the teacher's expectations (Gay, 2000; Nieto, 2001). This cultural discontinuity is intensified because African American students find it difficult and undesirable to abide by a set of behaviors that do not reflect their ethnic culture (Boykin, Tyler, Watkins-Lewis, & Kizzie, 2006). When African American students don't conform to the mainstream classroom practices and behaviors, this leads to misconceptions and preconceived notions concerning their learning abilities and in some cases results in their being referred for psychological evaluation (Baker, 2005).

Delpit (1996) noted that different cultures have different perceptions on the nature of knowledge and authority as well as different views on the culturally appropriate ways for children to interact with adults and others so that they can learn. The MDT members seemed unfamiliar with the cultural differences and the unique cultural practices, behaviors, and attitudes that exist in African American students and their families. Their lack of awareness may result in over-representation of African American students in special education programs. Ladner and Hammons (2001) reported that school districts with more Caucasian teachers had a greater rate of minority students enrolled in special education programs. Additionally, teachers had a tendency to refer students who were not of their ethnic group (Thrasher, 1997; Tobias, Cole, Zibrin, & Bodlakova, 1982). The vast majority of the students referred are African American males who come from low socioeconomic households (Noguera, 2003).

Cultural Communication Styles.

One specific aspect of cultural mismatch is in terms of how African American students communicate based on how they were socialized in their cultures and how this is perceived by their teachers who are from another culture. Although African American students and their teachers speak the same language, it may be perceived and interpreted differently by the teachers due to their different cultural backgrounds. One MDT member was vague when describing students as being disrespectful to their teachers and others in the classroom. She may have misinterpreted the students' behavior as disrespectful when indeed it was not. When teachers misinterpret African American students' style of communication, special education referral and identification may occur. For example, Sherwin and Schmidt (2000) maintained that teachers may perceive African

American students' communication style as aggressive which could result in a student being misidentified as having an emotional disability (Sherwin & Schmidt, 2003). Furthermore, African American males often engage in over-lapping speech in which they may interrupt their teachers' conversations or attempt to finish their teachers' sentences. Their use of over-lapping speech may be perceived by their teachers as disrespectful (Cartledge & Kourea, 2008).

Several MDT members reported African students' behavior in non-specific terms. They indicated these students were hyper, unfocused, disruptive, etc. According to Boykin (2001), African American students use physical movement, various facial expressions, and various vocal inflection, pitch, and tone. The differences in body language and activity levels in the classroom can often be perceived as defiance, hyperactivity, or other problems because of different behavioral expectations of teachers regarding normal classroom behavior (Hale-Benson, 1986; Muhammad, 2003). African American males often have high energy levels and use expressive body language which indicate they are vevistic (Boykin, 2001). Vevistic students are described as being off-task, having poor attention span, lacking in organization skills, and appearing to have passive aggressive behavior (Boykin, 2001). According to Vasquez (2005), these behaviors are similar to characteristics teachers use to refer students to special education.

In conclusion, very few of the MDT members made positive comments about the African American students. Comments were focused on the perceived deficits of the students and their parents. They believed the students' family environments and neighborhood contexts contributed to their coming to school unprepared or unable to focus. Additionally, MDT members saw family composition as an issue for students and

later associated this with students' academic deficits. The participants appeared so grounded in their implicit biases and deficit thinking that they refused to see or were unable to recognize the positives in the students' lives. They did not acknowledge their roles and responsibilities for student learning and shifted the blame of students' lack of educational success to the students and their families, by referring to negative stereotypes and assumptions regarding them.

The MDT members believed they were genuinely concerned about the students but were totally oblivious to their implicit biases which appear to be deeply embedded within them. They had no idea that they were using deficit language that inhibited them from valuing the knowledge that African American students bring to the classroom. Compounding the problem was their stereotypical views and cultural misunderstandings or indifference regarding African Americans. Their implicit biases and deficit thinking impacted the way they viewed African American students and their decision making when referring them for special education services even though the school had implemented a four tier RTI process where the MDT did not become involved until tier three.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this study may help school administrators and teachers to critically examine their practices. Hopefully, the findings will enable them to develop a culturally responsive pedagogy. The culturally responsive teaching will enable educators to be sensitive to the unique differences in the culture and practices of the African American students and families that they serve. Culturally responsive teaching is a pedagogy that recognizes the importance of including students' cultural references in all aspects of learning (Ladson-Billings, 1994) by focusing on their background, interests,

and experiences. There are three interrelated dimensions of culturally responsive pedagogy. The dimensions include the following:

1. Institutional – reflects the administration and school’s values, policies, and procedures that impact on the delivery of services to students from diverse backgrounds. Community involvement in which families and communities are expected to find ways to become involved in the school is also a part of this dimension.
2. Personal – refers to cognitive and emotional processes in which teachers and staff must engage. Teacher self-reflection is a vital part of the personal dimension. Teachers and staff must critically examine their own biases, stereotypes, and beliefs toward themselves, students, families, and communities. They must affirm any attitudes that they have towards students because of their ethnicity, language, or culture. Additionally, teachers must explore their personal histories and experiences as well as the past and current experiences of their students and families. In order for teachers to know their students’ families and communities, they need to actually visit their home environments (Gay, 2002; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).
3. Instructional – includes materials, strategies, and activities. Teachers should use instructional materials that are culturally supportive of their students.

Culturally responsive teaching rejects the deficit based thinking that some teachers may hold about culturally diverse students. It operates from the standpoint of identifying, nurturing, and utilizing student strengths. In order to motivate students and their families, educators must recognize, and respect them and view their diversity as rich resources and

opportunities instead of conflict and misunderstanding. Teachers must understand that differences are not deficits. In addition to adopting a culturally responsive pedagogy, schools must also provide their staff with professional development activities that focus on cultural responsiveness and culturally mediated instruction.

Limitations

The use of interviews as a data collection method raised limitations within this study. The nature of this study required the participants to respond honestly during the interview process. There was no guarantee that despite being told their anonymity would be protected that participants answered with complete honesty. Interviewing only eight MDT members also limited the ability to generalize the results. Hence, generalizability of findings is limited to the specific school being studied. Further, this study was limited by my ability as a qualitative researcher to minimize bias due to personal background and preconceptions.

Recommendations for Future Research

There appears to be a significant gap in the research literature regarding implicit bias and the decision making processes of the MDT. Therefore, research needs to be expanded to broaden the understanding of this phenomenon. When considering replication of this study, there are three recommendations that would enhance the effectiveness of the study. This study utilized one-on-one interviews as the research methodology. However, in order to understand fully the impact implicit bias has on the MDT members' decision making process, further investigation using focus groups would be beneficial. Focus groups would allow the participants to speak freely while engaging

in open dialogue. Focus groups will also promote honest and spontaneous answers that are most valuable to researchers.

In the current study, there was only one primary data collection method. Future research might use multiple sources of data collection to enhance trustworthiness of the data and provide diverse perspectives of the phenomenon (Glesne, 1999). These methods may include but are not limited to observations of MDT meetings and the administration of the Implicit Association Test (IAT). Observing the MDT meetings will enable researchers to gather additional data and experience the decision making process first hand. The observations could also allow researchers to better evaluate the decision making process of the MDT. To investigate further the impact implicit bias has on the decision making processes of the MDT, it would also be helpful to use the IAT. The IAT would uncover hidden unconscious biases that MDT members have against certain groups of people based on their race. The simple on-line test might help researchers fully understand the hidden biases that influence the perception, judgment, and action of MDT members. Lastly, this study focused on one school and eight MDT members. In order to gain a broader perspective of implicit bias, additional schools and participants are recommended.

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APPENDIX A – INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me. Before we get started, I'd like to discuss a few things with you. The purpose of this interview is to gain a better understanding of the decision making processes of the multidisciplinary team (MDT). The interview should last approximately 45 minutes to one hour. I will be taking notes during the interview and I would like to record the interview for data collection purposes. The recording is confidential, the tape will be destroyed after it is transcribed, and you will not be identified in any way. You will be assigned a pseudonym for identifying purposes. If at any time you do not feel comfortable being recorded, please let me know and we can turn the recorder off. Do you have any questions before we get started?

Introduction

- What is your role on the MDT?
- Have you ever taught? If so, how long?
- What is your current position?

Multidisciplinary Team (MDT)

- How long have you served on the MDT?
- How did you become a member?
- What is the purpose of the MDT?
- What type of training did you receive before becoming a member of the MDT?
- Have you ever referred a student to the MDT? If so, what prompted your decision to refer the student?
- Who makes up your team?
- What are their roles and responsibilities?
- Are parents involved? If so, can you describe your experiences with parents who participated in the MDT?

Pre-Referral Process

RQ1: Does implicit bias exist in the multidisciplinary team members' decision to refer an African American student for special education?

- In your experience, what are the main reasons why students are referred for special education services? or Can you share some experiences/stories that might serve as examples of what you have seen?
- What information is gathered when referring a student for special education services?
- What type of interventions have referring teachers implemented in their classroom before referring a student for special education services?
- There may be some teachers in elementary schools who tend to make more referrals than their colleagues. Why do you think this is so?

RQ2: What student characteristics or behaviors impact the multidisciplinary team members decision making when referring African American students to receive special education services?

- Describe the characteristics of students referred for special education services in this school.
- According to the Office of Civil Rights, African American students are referred and subsequently placed in special education programs more often than other students. Why do you think this is happening|?
- What do you see as contributing factors to student problems in the classroom? Please Explain.
- In general, do you feel African American students have greater academic and/or behavioral needs than students of other ethnicities? Why or why not?
- How do you perceive the social skills, motivation, behavior, and ability of African American students? How about students of other ethnicities?

APPENDIX B – INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Project Title: Exploration of the Decision Making Processes of the Multidisciplinary Team Members When Referring African American Students for Special Education Services

Principal Investigator: Tia Fletcher

Introduction

The purpose of the study you are being asked to participate in is to gain a better understanding of the decision making processes of the multidisciplinary team (MDT). You are being asked to participate because you are a member of the MDT.

Richland County School District One is neither sponsoring nor conducting this research. I am conducting this study for my dissertation. The knowledge gained from this study may be used to enhance the decision making processes of the MDT and hopefully expand future research in the development of effective referral practices and tools needed to assess students more objectively. The information that I collect from you will not be used in any way that reflects on you personally. What you say to me will be held in confidence. Your name will not be used in the study. You will be assigned a pseudonym for data reporting purposes. The results of this study may be presented at meetings or in publications; however, again, your identity will not be disclosed.

Your participation is voluntary and there is no penalty for not participating. Also, you can discontinue your participation at any time. You have the option to ask that the digital recorder be turned off at any time during the interview. If you desire additional information concerning the research, you may contact Tia Fletcher at (803) 402-2250 or at tiawashington@hotmail.com.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please sign below.

By signing you voluntarily agree to participate in this study. You verify that the purposes of the study have been explained to you, and that your name, the name of your school district, or school will not be used in any analyses or report of data. You also grant permission to be quoted in reports that are written about this study, provided that your name is not used in these reports. You will receive a copy of this signed consent form for your records.

Full Name (please print) _____ Date _____

Signature _____

APPENDIX C – IRB EXEMPT



OFFICE OF RESEARCH COMPLIANCE

September 30, 2014

Twana (Tia) Fletcher
College of Education
Educational Studies / Special Education
Wardlaw
Columbia, SC 29208

Re: **Pro00029167**

Study Title: *Exploration of Implicit Bias on Multidisciplinary Team Members When Referring African American Students for Special Education Services*

FYI: University of South Carolina Assurance number: FWA 00000404 / IRB Registration number: 00000240

Dear Mrs. Twana (Tia) Fletcher:

In accordance with 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2), the referenced study received an exemption from Human Research Subject Regulations on **10/28/2013**. No further action or Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight is required, as long as the project remains the same. However, you must inform this office of any changes in procedures involving human subjects. Changes to the current research protocol could result in a reclassification of the study and further review by the IRB.

Because this project was determined to be exempt from further IRB oversight, consent document(s), if applicable, are not stamped with an expiration date.

Research related records should be retained for a minimum of three years after termination of the study.

The Office of Research Compliance is an administrative office that supports the USC Institutional Review Board. If you have questions, please contact Arlene McWhorter at arlenem@sc.edu or (803) 777-7095.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Lisa M. Johnson".

Lisa M. Johnson
IRB Manager

APPENDIX D – INDIVIDUAL TEXTURAL DESCRIPTION

This information was extracted precisely from each of the participant's interview transcripts as they directly related to the interview questions of the study. Only excerpts of participants' information that was relevant to the study were included. The following text is the presentation of the thematic textural descriptions:

Kelly J.

Kelly J. believes her main reason for referring students for special education, whether they are African American or some other ethnicity, is their academic issues which are sometimes affected by their behavior as well. She states, "Academic that's the main reason but they also are referred to the SIT team for behavior. The guidance counselor and the psychologist and sometimes the social worker are involved depending on the severity of the case." Kelly J. also believes that African American students are not different than the other ethnicities. She says, "I don't think it's any different of any of the others. I think socially for the most part, the kids are able to interact and do what they suppose to do amongst their peers. I think what happens is umm (pause) sometimes the issues within our group is umm (pause) the children kind of tend to make the other kids feel different. Umm, but socially I think they are fine."

Kelly J. says that the students' attention issues in this particular school year, mainly their ways of reasoning and dealing with the teachers, impact the decision making of the multidisciplinary members. She says, "For the ones that I have had meetings on, most of the children that have been referred for special education service even with

academic issues, but behavior is usually a problem too. Most of the kids have some type of attention issue this year. For the cases that I have had this year there has always been focus or environmental, like the child speak and write and talk the way that is done in his environment. So, if the family does not speak correctly, the child does not speak correctly and speaking coincides with reading and writing and the student is just not able to separate that when they get to school. So, even if you try to correct them, it's like my mom says it that way. You know but that's what I think this year umm, most of the ones this year attention has been like a big issue and if they can't and if they can't pay attention and focus, they get behind and the parents don't want to address the attention issues."

Kelly J. believes that one factor that may contribute to the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education programs is the lack of African American teachers in this particular school who can better understand the culture and needs of the African American students. She says, "Well, as it pertains to this school, I think that we do not have enough African American teachers who understand the culture and behaviors of our African American students. That's my opinion on that one. However, I will say that sometimes our African American parents don't make it any better for their child because they come up and do things to make the hole deeper for their child. So, umm I think that there needs to be a balance especially in a school where the majority of the population is African American. We need more African American teachers because regardless of what whoever says, we understand them and they understand us and that makes a difference. I can tell a child not to talk so loudly and it will be received differently by an African American child when told by a white teacher

because that's just the way it is. I'm sorry that it's like that but that's just the way it is."

Kelly J. also believes another reason for disproportionality is because the majority of their school population is African American. However, Kelly J. states, "So, umm I think that there needs to be a balance especially in a school where the majority of the population is African American."

Benjamin O.

Benjamin O. believes that the school follows strict and formal instructions when referring students for special education thus implicit bias is not present. He states, "they have a speech or hearing problem, they have academic problems; they have behavioral problems or the parent suspects there is something is wrong but they don't know is going on. Sometimes the parent requests an evaluation. We have had a couple of prescriptions from doctor's evaluations which we do not recognize. Well, when we get to the SIT team or initial evaluation team, we have all of the Response to Intervention (RTI) data. We have all of the student's test and academic data. Umm, Dominie, STAR, PASS, MAP, RAVENS, all that's there. If behavioral, we have anecdotal, the discipline file, umm, permanent records, umm, any police reports if applicable. We have vision and hearing screenings if those are done. It depends on what kind of meeting is being held."

Benjamin O. also believes that African American kids are no different the others; they are able to interact and do what they have to do just like the rest of the kids. He states "African American students, I don't see any difference in ability between white or black. At our school, I see a difference in I think expectations, parental expectations, and their support at home (African American students). The parent may indeed say you are going get your homework done and that's all she said. The kids are left to their own devices to

either do the homework or not. The parent does not go back to check on things. Umm, I think all of our children are equally motivated but discipline and behavior is disproportionate because of the composition of our school. We have more referrals for black children than we do for white children.

Benjamin O. believes social gaps between the white and black males in school are present but do not necessarily make up the decision making of the MDT members. He says, “Umm, I think all of our children are equally motivated (sighs) but discipline and behavior is disproportionate because of the composition of our school. We have more referrals for black children than we do for white children. Umm, socially I think there are some gaps between particularly our white and black males. Umm, but I don’t see it being a problem in this school.”

Benjamin O. believes that the central reason why there is disproportionate representation in special education programs at his school is the presence of more black students than white students in the school population. Additionally, he states, “Characteristics (pause) would be most of the children referred and even placed are children that have average IQs. Umm but their achievement is not matching that. There’s a 20 to 25 point discrepancy between IQ and achievement scores but umm that’s what we see the most umm I don’t think socioeconomic status necessarily played into that but I think there are more black students than white students referred because of the makeup of our school which is primarily African American. So, I don’t see poverty or anything like that as a necessary indicator, I don’t think so.”

Susan P.

Susan P. believes that their decision to refer a student is based mostly on the academics and behavioral issues of the students. She maintains, “One is mostly academics. They are concerned about a child’s academic progress. That’s probably the majority but then there’s the behavioral issues that could include anything from the child’s not participating in class and doesn’t speak and is withdrawn to they are hyperactive and can’t stay seated or keep their mouth closed to they are angry. We can’t work with them because they are angry, that can of stuff. Those kids usually have academic problems of course. So, it gets messy in there. Umm, sometimes we don’t know if the academics are stemming from the behavioral issues or if the behavioral issues are stemming from the academic issues. I think people sometimes jump too quickly to the academic issues causing the behavioral issues. I think too many educators make that mistake.”

Susan P. also believes that there is no difference in the abilities of the various ethnicities. She says, “I think there’s a span of behaviors in all ethnicities. There’s certainly no difference in ability although there are many people who think there is. Susan P. believes that the deficiency in the students’ motivation as an effect of their problems at home indeed affect the children’s performances at school and thus pushes them to be referred to special education by the MDT members. She says, “I do believe that when there is deprivation in the home of an African American student during the first four years of his or her life, this impedes the child’s ability to learn.” If you are not experiencing stimulation during the first three years studies have shown the wiring, the synapses in the brain are lacking. This is true with language. Language is a big hold up

for our boys who experience poverty. The vocabulary of our kids in poverty regardless of race is about 4 or 5 hundred words when they come to school.

Susan P. believes that one major factor of having a disproportionate representation of African American children in special education is the lack of stimulation from their homes. She maintains, “Some of the African American kids are coming from homes that umm may lack stimulation. Years ago I visited the home of a child who was being referred for special education. When I entered the home, the only light came from the TV. The only actual light in the house was from the kitchen ceiling. I thought to myself there’s no way children can do homework in this house. There’s no way they can study in this house. So I think one of the biggest causes is a lack of simulation and exposure for a lot of African American kids especially in that first three years when their brains are wiring so rapidly. I also went out to visit with a K4 teacher after 11. Mom was asleep on the couch. All of the windows were blocked with blankets and quilts. It was pitch dark, with the exception of the TV being on. There was a toddler in the playpen at 1:30 in a pitch dark house with mom passed out. That mom did a lot of partying that night because they was an older sibling who told me so. And those kids, she had three boys all together and all three of them ended up in resource. I can’t help but think the lack of stimulus and deprivation figures in to what some of our children are experiencing.”

Vanessa A.

Vanessa A. believes that the school and its MDT members use and follow a strict checklist upon the students’ referral to special education in order to ensure they are making the right decision to meet the students’ needs. She states: “We have a checklist

that we might use. We talk to guidance counselor beforehand to be prepared and what we need to bring in the SIT. So, we are prepared with our data and everything. Umm, we show work that they have done or umm, some of their test scores maybe because they kind of fluctuate if they were focusing one day or if they weren't." Vanessa A. also believes that based on experience, all students with different ethnicities are the same, they are involved and motivated. She says: "In my classroom, I think they are all the same. I have a variety of ethnicities in my classroom and the parents are involved and motivated."

Vanessa A. believes that students are greatly affected by the events occurring in their homes. She maintains: "I know a lot of kids bring in a lot of stuff happening at home and that really affects the way they behave or their focusing problems in the classroom. Also, parents who aren't involved or they don't look out for their kids and give their children the impression that school is unimportant. So, the kids don't see it as a big importance either." Vanessa A. also believes that African American students may be dealing with issues and problems at home but students of other ethnicities are also dealing with their share of problems at home. She says: "That's a tough one. Umm, maybe there's something they are dealing with at home but other races might be dealing with it as well. So, I'm not really sure."

Iris T.

Iris T. believes that from her experience, most African American students are referred to special education because of their academic and behavioral issues; they also follow a strict process in doing so. She states: "If it is academic, it is because they are not being successful in the classroom and usually the teacher thinks they are behind their

average peers. For kids with behavior problems, they are wreaking havoc in the classroom. Well, if it is academic, it goes through an RTI meeting. They have to have documentation of interventions, Tier 1 and 2 interventions, how much you talked to the parent. If it is behavioral, sometimes you will have a behavior chart and contacts with parents. They have to have their documentation in order. They have to have something to show. They can't just come in and say I am having this issue with a student.” Iris T. also believes there are many differences between African American students and students of other ethnicities but in the end explained that “ability wise, they are just the same as anybody else.” She maintains: “A lot of African American kids are social; they want to talk to people. They enjoy hanging out with their friends. I notice that a lot of them are a lot louder than other ethnicities. I think that's just a cultural thing. I think a lot of them are highly motivated to be somebody in the world. I think a lot of them want to have a lot of money and want people to know who they are. They might not go about that the same way I would but in my experience with them, these kids are much more motivated than poverty stricken redneck white students.”

Iris T. believes that African American students are greatly affected by issues at home which impact their academics and behaviors in school. She states: “I think issues going on in the home have a huge influence on African American students. Schools are expected to do a lot for these children: feed them, talk to them about everything from sex to emotional issues. We are becoming their surrogate parents and I think a lot of these kids do not have supervision at home and they are exposed to things that children have no business being exposed to at a very young age and it hurts them. I think school is the last thing on most of their priority list. They are more concerned with eating, whether mom is

coming home or not, or if someone is going to beat somebody up. School is way down their list of priorities. And they are not surrounded by people who make it their priority. So, all of that plays into it. Also, some African American parents have several children so it's hard for them to devote sufficient time to all of them."

Iris T. further explains: For the academic part of it, my experience has been a lot of our kids that come from single parent families, African American males and females, are just not prepared when they come here. They have spent so much time at home taking care of their siblings, feeding kids, and taking care of other things at home, there's been no stimulation as far as verbal stimulation, and a lot of our kids that come here have never seen a book. I mean there's not one book in their house. They come to kindergarten not knowing their letters or colors. They don't know their numbers; they don't know their last name. When you come to school that far behind from day one, if you are not of average intelligence, you will have a hard time catching up and a lot of our African American kids come totally unprepared." Iris T. also believes that at her school, majority of the teachers are white and as a result, they are having a difficult time understanding the vast population of African American students in terms of culture and background. She says: "I think that in a lot schools even like this one, when the majority of our kids are African Americans, you have a majority of white teachers and I think they try to understand and relate but it is hard to. Particularly, if you are coming from a middle or upper middle class situation and you are dealing with kids who aren't. It's not that you don't try to get it; it's just hard for you to relate to them. After reading Framework for Poverty and seeing how single parents from African American families treat their sons like an adult at a young age and give them a lot responsibility, they don't

understand that when they come to school that they are not in charge, somebody else is. I think a lot of African American boys in particular have trouble with that.”

Julie H.

Julie H. believes that both academic and behavioral issues are the main factors for student referrals and no ethnicity issues were mentioned. She says: “The main concern that I have seen over the past 11 years are academic issues, whether a student is not on grade level. I have also seen a lot students been referred for behavior problems.

Behavior problems consist of the student being a distraction during instruction or hindering the other children from learning. Also, aggressive behavior that is repeated.”

Julie H. believes that African American students essentially have the same general abilities as students of other ethnicities. She states: “Socially, I think they are the same. I think motivation can be the same if the parents are involved. I think behavior and ability are the same. Blacks have the same ability as other ethnicities if they have support or a positive outlook on education.”

Julie H. maintains that some factors that contribute to problems in the classroom for African American students include issues with hyperactivity, their inability to conform to classroom rules and expectations, and problems at home. She states: “Well, most of them are African American males and the African American females referrals are increasing as well. Usually they may be slow learners or a behavior problem. They also may be hyper. Teachers expect the children to sit still all day at their desks without much moving. When these students get antsy and start moving about, some teachers label them as being hyper. Home life especially if there are problems at home, poverty, again the style of teaching, and classroom management contributes to problems in the classroom

and student learning. I think a lack of differentiated instruction or even individual or small group instruction are contributors.”

Julie H. further believes that most of the time, White teachers do not understand and cannot relate to their African American students which may contribute to the disproportionate number of referrals to special education. She says: “For example, there are a lot of white teachers at this school educating a lot of African American students from low income families. The white teachers do not understand these students because they can’t relate to them in a cultural way. They are not familiar with the way they live or act. Some teachers are accustomed to teaching only certain types of students and when they are at a school where the students are of a different culture, they have a hard time relating and that could be a reason they refer a lot of students.”

Paula C.

Paula C. believes that special education referrals are mainly based on students’ academic performance. She says:” Generally speaking a child who is struggling academically and by that I mean they are reading or writing or doing math a year or two years below their grade level. If their MAP scores reflect this, any assessments that are given to them and their class work. A child becomes frustrated when they can’t do their work and that’s not the purpose of school. We want children to be successful. Generally if a child is academic delayed and they’ve tried remediation and they have not caught up or they have attended a number of schools prior to coming here. After a certain amount of time in the different tiers and the child is still struggling then we need to look at other things. That’s when special education is introduced.” Paula C. also believes that overall, African American students and students of other ethnicities do not differ and are just

“pretty much the same”. She states: “I think that African American students and students of other ethnicities are pretty much the same. In all my 27 years of teaching, I’ve never met a child who didn’t want to learn. I think that when you see behaviors in a child, it would behoove you to get to know the child so that you can understand that there may be outside causes for the frustration. It may be the academic delays that are the frustrations. Sometimes they don’t feel an attachment because they haven’t been anywhere long enough to feel like they belong. I think then when the child feels wanted. I think that as teachers it is our jobs to make children feel wanted and welcomed. They have to feel an important part of the classroom.”

Paula C. maintains that African American students are referred and subsequently placed in special education services more often than other students because based on her many years of teaching, African American students are transient and have to attend different schools which may affect their learning and ability to acquire knowledge in school. She says: “I really don’t know the answer for that except that in many years of teaching, I have noticed that a lot of African American families move around a lot whether it is through their jobs or their families or whatever their needs, a lot of times these children are in multiple schools. When you go to 4 or 5 different schools by the time you are in second grade, you have missed a lot of learning and it is hard to fill those gaps. With our latest socioeconomic issues for the past 4 or 5 years, it is even more pronounced.”

Tina S.

Tina S. believes that there are times when African American students are easily referred once they become argumentative and are assumed distractible. She states: “Most

of them are African American boys with perceived low academics. Sometimes they are bright students but because a teacher can't relate to them, they perceive this is the student struggling academically. A lot of these African American boys are referred because of ADHD issues including an inability to focus. Just because an African American student is argumentative and easily distractible, they may be referred to the SIT." Tina S. also believes the lack of support from the parents affects children in school and these children may end up being referred for special education. She states: "A bunch of factors should be considered including lack of parental involvement and lifestyle issues. Some African American parents are single and have several children which limit their time. So, when they have a child who is experiencing problems in school, they have little time to worry about the issue. They have other things on their minds that they see as more important. Some of them may have a disability themselves and don't know how to help." Tina S. also mentions one other factor that contributes to the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education is the teachers' inability to connect to their students because of their different cultural backgrounds. She says: "All of the factors I mentioned earlier as well as teachers' inability to relate to students who are of a different culture than they are. When you have a predominantly African American student body and mostly white teachers, the students will experience problems."

APPENDIX E – INDIVIDUAL STRUCTURAL DESCRIPTIONS

The individual structured descriptions for each participant are as follows:

Kelly J.

Kelly J. believes that her main reason for referring all students for special education, regardless of his or her ethnicity, is their academic issues which are sometimes affected by their behavior as well. Kelly J. also feels that African American students are not different than students of other ethnicities. Kelly J. believes that the students' attention issues in this particular school year, mainly their ways of reasoning and dealing with the teacher, impact the decision making processes of the MDT members. Kelly J. maintains that one main factor that contributes to the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education programs is the lack of African American teachers in his particular school who can better understand the culture and needs of their African American students.

Benjamin O.

Benjamin O. says the school follows strict and formal instructions when referring students for special education. The stringent guidelines may leave little room for implicit bias among MDT members. Benjamin O. also believes that African American kids are no different the others; they are able to interact and do what they have to do just like the rest of the kids. Benjamin O. believes there are social gaps between the white and black males in this school but do not necessarily impact the decision making of the MDT members. Benjamin O. feels that the central reason as to why there is a disproportionate

number of African American students in special education programs is the presence of more black students than white students in their school population.

Susan P.

Susan P. believes that the MDT's decision to refer a student is based mostly on the students' academic and behavioral issues. Susan P. also believes there's no difference in the abilities of students from various ethnicities. Susan P. feels the lack of stimulation in students' homes maybe one factor having an impact on the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education programs. Susan P. also believes that the deficiency in the students' motivation as an effect of their problems at home indeed impact their performance at school. This may result in them being referred to special education by the MDT members.

Vanessa A.

Vanessa A. says the school and MDT members use and follow a detailed checklist before referring a student for special education services to ensure the student indeed needs special education services. Vanessa A. believes that African American students are greatly affected by issues that are present in their homes. She also believes students of other ethnicities are dealing with problems in their homes as well. Therefore, she can't explain why African American students are referred and subsequently placed in special education programs more than other students.

Iris T.

Iris T. believes that from her experience, most African American students are referred to special education because of their academic and behavioral issues; they also follow a strict process in doing so. Iris T. also believes that there are some social and

communication differences between African American students and students of other ethnicities. However, feel that overall, they are just the same as anybody else when it comes to ability. Iris T. feels that African American students' performance and behavior are affected by problems and issues present in their homes. Iris T. maintains that at her school, majority of the teachers are white and as a result, they are having a difficult time in understanding the vast population of African American students in terms of culture and background.

Julie H.

Julie H. believes that both academic and behavioral issues are the main factors for student referrals and no ethnicity issues were mentioned. Julie H. believes that African American students essentially have the same general abilities as the other ethnicities. Julie H. believes that most African American students have home life problems that greatly affect their education and behavior at school. Julie H. believes that the White teachers do not understand and cannot relate to their African American students most of the time. This may contribute to the disproportionate number of African American students in special education programs.

Paula C.

Paula C. believes that special education referrals are mainly based on the academic performance and behavioral presentation of students. Paula C. also believes that overall, African American students and other ethnicities do not differ and are just "pretty much the same". Paula C. says that based on her many years of teaching, African American students move and transfer to several schools which may affect their learning

and ability to acquire knowledge in school. Paula C. also feels that African American students' performance at school is impacted by problems they experience at home.

Tina S.

Tina S. believes that there are times when African American students are easily referred once they become argumentative and are assumed distractible. Tina S. believes that the lack of parental support and lifestyles issues in their homes negatively affect children at school and may result in them being referred for special education. Tina S. also believes that another factor that contributes to the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education is the teachers' inability to connect to their students because of their cultural backgrounds.

APPENDIX F – INDIVIDUAL COMPOSITE DESCRIPTIONS

A composite description of the meanings and essences of the experience, representing the group as a whole, was developed from the individual and structural descriptions. The individual composite descriptions are below:

Does implicit bias exist in the MDT members' decision to refer an African American student for special education?

Kelly J. portrayed the first main theme as: Implicit bias does not exist in the MDT members' decision; academic and behavioral factors play major parts in their referrals. She shares: "Academic that's the main reason but they also are referred to the SIT team for behavior. The guidance counselor and the psychologist and sometimes the social worker are involved depending on the severity of the case." Benjamin O. adds that the school follows strict and formal instruction and referrals are made based on the needs of the students: "They have a speech or hearing problem, they have academic problems; they have behavioral problems or the parent suspects there is something is wrong but they don't know what is going on. Sometimes the parent requests an evaluation. We have had a couple of prescriptions from doctor's which we do not recognize." Susan P. emphasizes that the MDT's decision is based mostly on the academic and behavioral issues of the students in school: "One is mostly academics. They are concerned about a child's academic progress. That's probably the majority but then there's the behavioral issues that could include anything from the child's not participating in class and doesn't

speak and is withdrawn to they are hyperactive and can't stay seated or keep their mouth closed to they are angry." Meanwhile, Vanessa A. mentions that the school and its members follow a strict checklist upon the students' referral: "We have a checklist that we might use. We talk to guidance counselor beforehand to be prepared and what we need to bring in the SIT. So, we are prepared with our data and everything."

Iris T. says that from her experience, most African American students are referred to special education because of their academic and behavioral issues: "If it is academic, it is because they are not being successful in the classroom and usually the teacher thinks they are behind their average peers. For kids with behavior problems, they are wreaking havoc in the classroom." Julie H. adds that both academic and behavioral issues are the main factors for student referrals and did not mention ethnicity as an issue during the interview: "The main concern that I have seen over the past 11 years is academic issue whether a student is not on grade level. I have also seen a lot students been referred for behavior problems. Behavior problems consist of the student being a distraction during instruction or hindering the other children from learning. Also, aggressive behavior that is repeated." Lastly, Paula C. believes that a special education referral is mainly based on the academic performance and behavioral presentation of students with strict procedures: "The teacher gathers of the data that they have on the student such as class work, tests, reading rates, any kind of district assessments that have been done or any type of state assessments that have been done."

Kelly J.'s response pertains to the second theme that: "Implicit bias does not exist in the MDT members' decision and ethnicity or race does not play a role." She states: "I don't think it's any different of any of the others. I think socially for the most part, the

kids are able to interact and do what they suppose to do amongst their peers. I think what happens is umm (pause) sometimes the issue within our group is umm the children kind of tend to make the other kids feel different. Umm, but socially I think they are fine."

Benjamin O. believes that there is no difference seen in the students: "African American students, I don't see any difference in ability between white or black. At our school, I see a difference in I think expectations, parental expectations and their support at home

(African American students)." Benjamin O. adds: "I think there's a span of behaviors in

all ethnicities. There's certainly no difference in ability although there are many people

who think there is." Vanessa A. then pointed out that: "In my classroom I think they are

all the same. I have a variety of ethnicities in my classroom and the parents are involved

and motivated." Iris T. defends the African American students by proclaiming that:

"They might not go about that the same way I would but in my experience with them,

these kids are much more motivated than poverty stricken redneck white students." Julie

H. then adds: "Socially, I think they are the same. I think motivation can be the same if

the parents are involved. I think behavior and ability are the same. Blacks have the same

ability as other ethnicities if they have support or a positive outlook on education."

Lastly, Paula C. simply declares: "I think that African American students and students of

other ethnicities are pretty much the same."

What student characteristics or behaviors impact the multidisciplinary team members' decision making when referring African American students to receive special education services?

Susan P. describes the third theme as: "Insufficiency in motivation from the homes and family members of African American students that affect and impede their

academic abilities", he stated: "I do believe there is a problem when African American students have been sitting in a pitch black dark room for the first four years of their lives, that kind of deprivation does impede their ability. If you are not experiencing stimulation that first three years studies have shown the wiring, the synapses are lacking." Vanessa A. truly believes that the African American students' behaviors and performance in school are largely affected by their issues at home: "I know a lot of kids bring in a lot of stuff happening at home and that really affects the way they behave or their focusing problems in the classroom. Also, parents who aren't involved or they don't look out for their kids and school doesn't matter to them so they show it as a big importance in their lives. So, the kids don't see it as a big importance either." Iris T. adds that African American students are affected by their problems personally and more so at home thus impact their academic performance and overall behaviors in school: "I think issues going on in the home have a huge influence on African American students. Schools are expected to do a lot for these children: feed them, talk to them about everything from sex to emotional issues. We are becoming their surrogate parents and I think a lot of these kids do not have supervision at home and they are exposed to things that children have no business being exposed to at a very young age and it hurts them. I think school is the last thing on most of their priority list. They are more concerned with eating, whether mom is coming home or not, or if someone is going to beat somebody up. School is way down their list of priorities." Julie H. also shares that: "Home life especially if there are problems at home, poverty, again the style of teaching, and classroom management contributes to problems in the classroom and student learning. I think a lack of differentiated instruction or even individual or small group instructions are contributors."

Lastly, Tina S. states that there are many different factors that should be considered:

"Including lack of parental involvement and lifestyle issues. Some African American parents are single and have several children which limit their time. So, when they have a child who is experiencing problems in school, they have little time to worry about the issue. They have other things on their minds that they see as more important."

What other factors that MDT members perceive contribute to the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education programs?

Most participants indicated that there is a: "Lack of stimulation and motivation from African American homes to support their children academically and socially".

Susan P. explains that one major factor of having a disproportionate representation of African American children for special education is the lack of stimulation and support from their own homes: "Some of the African American kids are coming from homes that umm may lack stimulation." Vanessa A. provides a safe but truthful answer with:

"Umm, maybe there's something they are dealing with at home but other races might be dealing with it as well. So, I'm not really sure." Iris T. highlighted the lack of

preparedness of the African American students in terms of their education: "For the academic part of it, my experience has been a lot of our kids that come from single parent families, African American males and females are just not prepared when they come

here." Paula C. shares a personal experience with: "I really don't know the answer for that except that in many years of teaching, I have noticed that a lot of African American families move around a lot whether it is through their jobs or their families or whatever their needs, a lot of times these children are in multiple schools." Lastly, Tina S. says that another factor comes from the lack of parental involvement and later on affects the

students: "A bunch of factors should be considered including lack of parental involvement and lifestyle issues. Some African American parents are single and have several children which limit their time. So, when they have a child who is experiencing problems in school, they have little time to worry about the issue. They have other things on their minds that they see as more important. Some of them may have a disability themselves and don't know how to help."

The second most essential experience was that there is: "Not enough African American teachers who can understand the culture and behaviors of the African American students." Kelly J. admits: "Well, as it pertains to this school, I think that we do not enough African American teachers who understand the culture and behaviors of our African American students. That's my opinion on that one." Iris T. echoes this sentiment with: "I think that in a lot schools even like this one when the majority of our kids are African Americans, you have a majority of white teachers and I think they try to understand and relate but it is hard to. Particularly, if you are coming from a middle or upper middle class situation and you are dealing with kids who aren't. It's not that you don't try to get it, it's just hard for you to relate to them." Julie H. gave an example by sharing that: "For example, there are a lot of white teachers at this school educating a lot of African American students from low income families. The white teachers do not understand these students because they can't relate to them in a cultural way. They are not familiar with the way the live or act. Some teachers are accustomed to teaching only certain types of students and when they are at a school where the students are of a different culture, they have a hard time relating and that could be a reason they refer a lot of students." Tina S. emphasizes that another factor was: "All of the factors I mentioned

earlier as well as teachers' inability to relate to students who are of a different culture than they are. When you have a predominantly African American student body and mostly white teachers, the students will experience problems."

The third most essential experience that emerged was that there is a: "Large population of African American students in the school thus the reason for disproportionate representation in special education programs." Kelly J. suggests that: "I think that there needs to be a balance especially in a school where the majority of the population is African American." Benjamin O. also feels: "I think there are more black students than white students referred because of the makeup of our school which is primarily African American. So, I don't see poverty or anything like that as a necessary indicator, I don't think so."