AFRICAN AMERICAN TEACHERS’ PERCEPTIONS
OF SPECIAL EDUCATION REFERRAL

By
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by

Tarcha Folston Rentz
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This qualitative study examines African American elementary teachers’ perceptions of special education referral and particularly the referral of African American students. This investigation describes teachers’ experiences with referral for subjective disabilities (i.e., mental retardation, emotional disturbances, learning disabilities) and not gifted and talented programs. Using phenomenological research methods, 15 interviews were conducted with 5 African American elementary teachers who taught at schools where 25% to 50% of the student population was African American. The study participants were male and female teachers who had taught at least 3 years and had been a part of a School Study Team and/or initiated special education referral. The two main questions that guided this study were (a) how do African American teachers perceive special education referral and (b) how do African American teachers experience the referral of African American students?
Findings suggest that the teachers experienced similar positive and negative feelings about referral. Wanting special education referral to be helpful for students, teachers questioned whether teachers were referring students for an actual disability or because of a cultural difference. Teachers preferred the referral process to be one of maintaining students in general education by identifying their strengths and weaknesses and developing appropriate interventions and strategies to enhance and motivate students. They contended that the referral process is detrimental to African American students who often receive pull-out services in special education resource rooms. Teachers proposed that African American students can be maintained in general education with proper supports in place.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Background

Despite the academic and social gains of African Americans over the past 40 years, African American children continue to lag academically behind their White counterparts (Artiles, Harry, Reschly & Chinn, 2002; Hoffman, Llagas & Synder, 2003). For example, although African American students made reading gains since the 1970s, their reading performance in 1999 remained lower than their White counterparts. More specifically, African American students’ average scores among 9 year-olds were 16% below Whites’ scores (a gap of 35 points), among 13 year-olds they were 11% below Whites’ scores (a gap of 29 points) and among 17 year-olds they were 10% below Whites’ scores (a gap of 31 points)” (Hoffman et al., 2003, p. 48). Similar differences were found when comparing math performance for African American and White students (Hoffman et al., 2003).

Academic differences between White students and African American students continue throughout their school years. For example, high school students who seek entry into United States colleges and universities take the American College Test (ACT) and/or Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT). Students whose composite scores are below 19 on the ACT are likely to need remedial courses before taking courses for college credit. In 2001, African American students’ average composite score (16.9) was lower than average composite scores of other racial/ethnic groups (Hoffman et al., 2003). In the same year...
African American students scored lower than any other ethnic/racial group on the SAT. On average, African American students “scored 96 points lower than White students on the verbal section . . . and they scored 105 points lower than White students on the mathematics section” of the SAT (Hoffman et al., 2003, p. 62).

African American students have higher grade retention (Hoffman et al., 2003), higher suspension/expulsion rates (Townsend, 2000), lower standardized test scores in reading and math, and higher dropout rates than their White counterparts (Hoffman et al., 2003). In 1998, 71% of kindergarteners from African American families were more likely to have one or more “risk factors” than their White counterparts (Hoffman et al., 2003). In the following year, compared to 9% of Whites, 18% of African American students had repeated at least one grade (Hoffman et al., 2003). Thirty-five percent of African American students in grades 7 to 12 had been expelled or suspended in their school careers compared to 15% of White students (Hoffman et al., 2003). Compared to 7% of Whites, 13% of African Americans ages 16 to 24 had not earned a diploma or General Educational Development (GED) credential (Hoffman et al., 2003).

Added to African American students’ academic issues, they are often taught by teachers who misunderstand them. In classrooms where the educators are often White, female, and middle class, they experience cultural dissonance between home and school (Villegas, 1988); teachers’ expectations are unfamiliar to them (Harry & Anderson, 1994). Cultural mismatching and incongruence between teachers and African American students can limit or enhance the academic success of students depending on how the teacher perceives differences (Ross, Kamman, & Coady, in press). Ross and her colleagues further explained that students’ actions can be implicitly perceived as abnormal when they differ in significant ways from the teachers’ culture. Harry and
Anderson (1994) purported that instead of building on students’ cultural repertoires, “teachers typically aim to extinguish and replace these behaviors with conduct more acceptable to them and to move quickly to find the deficit in those children who prove less malleable to conformity” (pp. 610-611).

Teachers’ knowledge and acceptance of cultural difference influence their perceptions and expectations of African American students (Ross et al., in press). Pugach and Seidl (1998) suggested that teachers are more likely to misinterpret students’ behavior and development and label it negatively when they do not share a common set of experiences or common language with their students. Hoffman et al. (2003) disclosed that lower percentages of teachers reported African American kindergartners were on task, eager to learn, and paying attention “often or very often” as compared to White or Asian first time kindergarteners. Similarly, in a study of prospective teachers’ perspectives on the teachability of students from various ethnic groups, Tettegah (1997) noted that teachers consistently rated White and Asian American students higher than Hispanic and African American students on cognitive and motivational measures.

The academic challenges of African American students as well as general education teachers’ perceptions and beliefs regarding these students are reflected in special education identification rates. African American students are often labeled disabled and/or “at-risk” and are overrepresented in special education (Artiles, Harry, Reschly, & Chinn, 2002; Coutinho, Oswald, & Best, 2002; Office of Special Education Programs [OSEP], 2005; Hoffman et al., 2003). To illustrate, in the 2001-2002 school year, the proportion of African American students served by the Individuals with Disabilities Education (IDEA) Act was higher than the proportions of Whites, Hispanics, and Asian/Pacific Islander (OSEP, 2005). Nationally, Black children represented 15% of
the resident population ages 6 to 21, yet they were overrepresented in specific learning
disabilities (18%), mental retardation (34%), and emotional disturbance (28%) categories
(OSEP, 2005). In the same school year, Blacks were 21% of Florida’s school population and overrepresented in the same categories 24%, 49%, and 39%, respectively (OSEP, 2005).

When teachers are uncertain about how to meet the needs of students, they often seek help through special education referral. Relying on local and classroom norms, teachers make decisions concerning whether a student’s behavior is cause for alarm (Bocian, Beebe, MacMillian, & Gresham, 1999). Zigmond (1993) explained, “The referral is a signal that the teacher has reached the limits of his or her tolerance of individual differences, is no longer optimistic about his or her capacity to deal effectively with a particular student in the context of the larger group, and no longer perceives that the student is teachable by him or herself’’ (pp. 262-263). He or she initiates the referral process believing that he or she has exhausted all of his or her resources (Logan, Hansen, Niemnen, & Wright, 2001). Through the referral process, the referring teacher hopes to receive confirmation of a “problem” and/or insight into the child’s strengths and weaknesses (Donovan & Cross, 2002).

Various examinations of referral and the overrepresentation of African American students have resulted in the banning of IQ tests and discriminatory practices, yet little change has occurred (Hosp & Reschly, 2003). Missing from the referral and overrepresentation research are the voices of African American teachers. Scholars contend that African American teachers can assist their colleagues in making appropriate judgments concerning the academic placements of African American students (Delpit, 1995; Foster, 1990, 1993; Irvine, 1989; King, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Patton, 1998;
Sexton, Lobman, Constans, Synder & Ernest, 1997). Having African American teachers is not the cure-all, or a guarantee, that all African American students will be successful, but these teachers have “a deeper reservoir of skills and abilities on which to draw” as they have more commonalities with their students’ experiences (Ladson-Billings, 2001, p. 81).

In addition to being role models for students, Ewing (1995) suggested that African American teachers impact schools in several positive ways including their ability to

- Foster improved cross-cultural understanding and diverse cultural tolerance.
- Understand cultural diversity so as not to label a disability inappropriately.
- Provide non-African American teachers with relevant on-site collaboration that will promote more successful learning environments.
- Provide a positive school climate that meets the academic, social, and emotional needs of minority students.
- Provide on-site conversations about culturally relevant curriculum matters (e.g., textbook adoptions, real life experiences, community involvement, policy and program issues).

Studies suggest that there is a correlation between the percentage of African American teachers and African American students’ academic and social performance and placement. In their investigation of 174 United States school districts with a minimum enrollment of 15,000 students of which 1% were black, Meier, Stewart, and England (1989) examined equal educational opportunities. Meier et al. (1989) stated, “In every case, blacks are overrepresented in every category with a negative connotation and underrepresented in every category with a positive connotation” (Meier et al., 1989, p. 107). Meier and his colleagues (1989) noted the more African American teachers in a school district, the lower the ratio of African American students suspended, expelled,
served in special education classes, and dropping out of school. On the other hand, the more African American teachers in a school district, the higher the ratio of African American students who were served in honors and gifted programs and who graduated from high school with diplomas.

In a similar vein, Serwatka and Deering (1995) studied 67 Florida school districts and found that 58 of 67 Florida school districts had African American students overrepresented in emotionally handicapped (EH) classes. Noting several correlations, they found that as the percentage of African American teachers increased at the elementary and secondary levels, the overrepresentation of African American students in EH programs decreased. The researchers disclosed, “School districts that had higher disproportionate representation of African American students in specific learning disability classes tended to have higher overrepresentation of African American students in EH classes” (Serwatka & Deering, 1995, p. 499). They found a similar correlation in school districts with greater underrepresentation in gifted and talented programs; such districts also had higher overrepresentation of African Americans in EH classes. The current study seeks to shed some light on why such correlations exist.

**Purpose of the Study**

Research literature describing the special education referral process is overwhelmingly presented from a White middle class perspective. The lack of literature describing African American teachers’ perceptions and experiences with special education referral, and particularly the referral of African American students, led to my interest in African American elementary teachers’ perceptions of special education referral. Irvine (2002) stated,
Researchers often ignore or devalue the culturally specific pedagogy and teaching beliefs of African American teachers; that is the culturally specific ways in which African American teachers see themselves... as part of the solution. This oversight in the research is a serious issue because it leaves the perspectives and voices of African American teachers and the African American community silenced, marginalized, and invisible. (p. 140)

To meet the academic and social needs of African American students, the voices of African American teachers must be heard. As Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) stated, “Without authentic voices of people of color it is doubtful we can say or know anything useful about education in their communities” (p. 8). In a similar vein, Patton (1998) stated, “A system is needed in special education that nurtures, develops, and allows for the voices of African American knowledge producers to be heard, confirmed, and affirmed. Their voices will more closely represent those who are studied, tested, identified, labeled, and placed in special education programs—often at levels well beyond accepted rates” (p. 30).

The purpose of this study is to add authentic voices of African American teachers to the teacher discourse and research literature regarding special education referral. More specifically, this study investigates African American teachers’ perceptions and experiences regarding special education referral of African American students. This study centers on two questions: (a) “How do African American elementary teachers perceive special education referral?” and (b) “How do African American teachers experience the referral of African American students to special education classes?” These questions are meant to explore African American teachers’ experiences and perceptions of African American students with and without disabilities, as well as their experiences with the special education referral process. This study focuses on referral of students to disability categories, and not the referral of students to gifted and talented programs. In
an effort to understand special education referral from a diverse perspective, this investigation seeks to evoke the voices of African American teachers.

Chapter 2 describes how special education referral and the referral of African American students have been addressed in the professional literature, focusing on the history of African American students in United States public schools, teacher beliefs and efficacy, and the special education referral process. Chapter 3 includes a brief introduction to phenomenology, defining characteristics of phenomenology, a subjectivity statement, as well as the methods used in this study. Chapter 4 presents the findings or descriptions of special education referral from African American teachers’ perspectives. The textural and structural descriptions of two key informants (i.e., David and Rebecca), and the group’s textural and structural descriptions are presented. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the essence of special education referral. Finally, Chapter 5 presents a discussion of the key findings, connections and differences between the findings and the professional literature in this area, implications for practice and future research, and a presentation of the limitations of this study.
The classroom teacher has a powerful influence on the referral process. Ultimately “it is the classroom teacher who makes the comparison [between what is acceptable and unacceptable] and decides whether referral is appropriate” (Donovan & Cross, 2002, p. 227). Only students who are “referred” are given full and individual evaluation mandated by law. After considering all of the data (e.g., teacher observations, prereferral interventions, psychoeducational assessment results) placed before them, the multidisciplinary team determines if the student is eligible or ineligible for special education services. Typically, multidisciplinary teams consist of a regular (general) education teacher, special educators, parents, guidance counselor, and a school administrator. The multidisciplinary team (e.g., School Study Team [SST], Student Study Team [SST]) decides whether the student will receive special education services, where the student will receive special education services and for how long. Ysseldyke, Vanderwood, and Shriner (1997) revealed that over 70% of those students referred to special education are placed. Clearly, an important predictor of special education eligibility is the classroom teachers’ referral of the student for assessment or intervention (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Hosp & Reschly, 2003; Ysseldyke & Algozzine, 1983).

**Overview of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to add the voices and experiences of African American teachers to the research literature by examining African American teachers’
perceptions of special education referral. Another purpose of this study was to discover how African American teachers experience the referral of African American students to special education programs. The study addressed the following questions: (a) “How do African American elementary teachers perceive special education referral?” and, (b) “How do African American teachers experience the referral of African American students to special education classes?” By interviewing teachers using open-ended questions (about their past, present, and future experience with special education referral), the study attempted to disclose the perception of African American teachers.

**Introduction**

This chapter provides a review of literature related to the overrepresentation of African American students in Special Education and the influence of teachers’ perceptions on the referral process. The review consists of (a) an overview of the overrepresentation of African Americans in Special Education, (b) an overview of the literature on teacher beliefs, and (c) a review of the literature regarding influence of teachers’ perceptions on the referral process.

**Overrepresentation of African Americans in Special Education**

In the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision, the United States Supreme Court declared the claim of separate but equal schools to be unconstitutional. With this ruling came the desegregation of public schools. Black teachers and students from previously segregated schools faced new challenges. When schools in the South eventually desegregated, the African American community quickly recognized a dismantling of many “all-Black” schools (Etheridge, 1979; Foster, 1997; Siddle-Walker, 1996). Rather than have White students integrate newly built all-Black schools, most all-Black schools were forced to close and Black students were assigned to existing “White”
schools (Foster, 1997). In addition, Black administrators and Black teachers were removed from their positions at all-Black schools and assigned to previously all-White schools in low numbers (Etheridge, 1979; Foster, 1997). Black teachers often had more academic training and years of teaching service than their White counterparts, yet White teachers had more employment opportunities (Foster, 1997). In addition to staff and faculty changes, Black teachers and students were challenged to adjust their behaviors and beliefs to the expectations and culture of White schools (Foster, 1997; Irvine, 1990; Watkins, Lewis, & Chou, 2001).

As a result of desegregation, White teachers had the responsibility of teaching, interacting with, and motivating Black students. The previous inequities of segregation and the unwillingness and unpreparedness of White teachers to accept and teach black students led to other forms of segregation within integrated schools (Artiles & Trent, 1994). A teacher from Foster’s (1997) study stated,

> The teachers made it clear that Blacks were not welcome. In the classroom, the White teachers would put the Black kids on one side of the room and the White kids on the other side. This is so that they wouldn’t touch or mingle. (p. xxxiv)

Noticing academic and social differences between White students and Black students, teachers intentionally and unintentionally “contributed to the establishment of special education classrooms that would enroll disproportionate numbers of Black students” (Artiles & Trent, 1994, p. 417).

Later, Lloyd Dunn (1968) was the first to address the overrepresentation of children of color with mental retardation in special education classrooms. In comparison to the student population found in general education classrooms, Dunn (1968) noted that 60% to 80% of the students taught by special educators were children of color (Dunn, 1968). Since Dunn, many researchers have examined the overrepresentation of minority
students in special education. Overrepresentation in special education occurs when a group’s (e.g., African American) membership in the program or a given disability category is proportionately larger than its resident population (National Alliance of Black School Educators [NABSE] & ILIAD Project, 2002). For example, previous researchers and studies often focused on statistics indicating that the percentage of African American students enrolled in special education was significantly higher than the percentage of African American students in the overall, school age population (Artiles et al., 2002; Artiles & Trent, 1994; Chinn & Hughes, 1987; Harry & Anderson, 1994, Hosp & Reschley, 2002, 2003; Oswald, Coutinho, Best & Singh, 1999; Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002). Evidence has shown that the overrepresentation of African American students in special education remains prevalent today (OSEP, 2005; Appendix F).

During the 2001-2002 school year the proportion of African American students served by IDEA was higher than the proportion of Whites, Hispanics, and Asian/Pacific Islander (OSEP, 2005). Nationally representing 15% of the resident population, Black children ages 6 to 21 were overrepresented in specific learning disabilities (18%), mental retardation (34%), and emotional disturbance (28%) categories (OSEP, 2005). In the same school year, representing 21% of Florida’s school population, Black children were overrepresented in the same categories 24%, 49%, and 39%, respectively (OSEP, 2005).

The current research literature reveals several contributing factors to the overrepresentation of African American students in special education. These factors include

- The educational system’s inability to educate African American students.
- Discrepancies in the referral and placement process.
- Overreliance on intelligence tests.
- Lack of access to appropriate forms of instruction in general education.
- Inadequate resources and underqualified teachers. (NABSE & ILIAD Project, 2002)
All these factors influence whether students are referred for special education services and labeled with a disability.

Historically, the segregation and integration of racial and ethnic groups has been instrumental in the development of public schools in the United States. Between 1875 and 1914 “public schools were transformed from a minor social institution that largely catered to the middle class, to one that was available to all levels of society, legally compelling all children to attend” (Hoffman, 1975, p. 416). Soon after the serious enforcement of compulsory school attendance, educators were speaking of separate schools and separate classes to accommodate students they defined as “unmanageable or mentally deficient” (Hoffman, p. 416). Special education and gifted and talented programs in public schools were established, corresponding to the ideology that education was the solution to social and economic progress (Cohen, 1970). During the 1920s many schools placed Italian, Polish, and southern Black children in special classes for the purpose of “social adjustment” (Thomas, 1986, p. 10). To handle the greater cultural diversity these pupils brought into schools, social adjustment classes were used to help them assimilate into the dominant culture (Thomas, 1986).

At a critical time (e.g., Civil Rights movement, War on Poverty initiative, and the Coleman Report), Dunn (1968) publicly voiced his concern with the effectiveness of self-contained special education classes for children with mild mental retardation, and a need for educational alternatives in general and special education classrooms. He asserted that 60% to 80% of the students placed in classes for the mildly retarded were from “low status backgrounds” (Dunn, 1968, p. 6). Dunn believed that a better solution was needed to provide better outcomes for these students. He suggested that homogenous groupings of students with mild learning problems was harmful, and that these students could learn
more from being in the general education classroom with supports from special educators.

Dunn (1968) pointed out that removal of slow learning students from general education was done to remove pressure from general education teachers at the expense of the students. In concluding his article, Dunn stated,

The conscience of special educators needs to rub up against morality. In large measure we have been at the mercy of the general education establishment in that we accept problem pupils who have been referred out of the regular grades. In this way, we contribute to the delinquency of the general educations since we remove the pupils that are problems for them and thus reduce their need to deal with individual differences. The *entente* of mutual delusion between general and special education that special class placement will be advantageous to slow learning children of poor parents can no longer be tolerated. We must face the reality—we are asked to take children others cannot teach, and a large percentage of these are from ethnically and/or economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Thus much of special education will continue to be a sham of dreams unless we immerse ourselves into the total environment of our children from inadequate homes and backgrounds and insist on a comprehensive ecological push—with a quality educational program as part of it. This is hardly compatible with our prevalent practice of expediency in which we employ many untrained and less than master teachers to increase the number of special day classes in response to the pressures of waiting lists. Because of these pressures from the school system, we have been guilty of fostering quantity with little regard for quality of special education instruction. Our first responsibility is to have an abiding commitment to the less fortunate children we aim to serve. Our honor, integrity, and honesty should no longer be subverted and rationalized by what we hope and may believe we are doing for these children—hopes and beliefs which have little basis in reality. (p. 20)

Also in the 1960s, educators adopted the theory that the culture of African American students was inherently inferior, and therefore, the students needed exposure to “good” (e.g., Euro-American) culture (Bolima, 2004). Cultural deficit (also known as deprivation) theorists suggested that African American students were not born inferior but possessed a culture that caused them to be socially, emotionally, and cognitively delayed (Bolima, 2004). Engelmann and Bereiter (1966) (as cited in Bolima, 2004) stated, “Until dealt with, these cultural differences, would make it ‘impossible for’
culturally deprived students ‘to progress in academic areas’” (para 4). Schools operating under the cultural deprivation theory believed special classes and ungraded classes would assist teachers in coping with students exhibiting academic deficits and behaviors different from the norm.

Later, cultural deprivation theory was discounted by cultural discontinuity theory, which argued that differences between the home culture of African American students and the school culture explained their academic and social challenges (Irvine, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1994). According to cultural discontinuity theory, when there is a cultural mismatch between teachers and students, behaviors are often misinterpreted because the teacher and the student are not aware that they are using equally important, but different codes (Irvine; Ladson-Billings).

Eight years after Dunn’s article, PL 94-142, also known as “The Education for All Handicapped Children Act,” was passed in 1975. This act was passed into law for the following reasons:

- To ensure that all children with disabilities have free appropriate public special education and related services designed to specifically meet their unique needs.
- To protect the rights of students with disabilities and their parents.
- To assist states and localities in providing a free and appropriate public education to all children with disabilities.
- To assess and assure the effectiveness of the special education and related services for all children with disabilities. (OSEP, 2005)

As amended in 1990, PL 94-142 became commonly referred to as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

Regulations governing assessment and decision making for children and youth with disabilities were put into law by the 1977 Protection in Evaluation Procedures
Provisions (PEP). Influenced by previous consent decrees that settled class action court cases, PEP required: “(1) a comprehensive, individualized evaluation; (2) nondiscrimination regarding ethnic and cultural minorities; (3) consideration of multiple domains of behavior and not just a single measure such as IQ; and (4) decision making by a team of professionals with the participation of parents” (Donovan & Cross, 2002, p. 214). Under PEP regulations, all students with potential disabilities would be considered for special education services, while those students who appeared to have learning and/or behavior differences due to cultural differences were determined ineligible for special education services (Donovan & Cross, 2002). These regulations changed in 1999 when the regulations for IDEA 1997 were published as Procedures for Evaluation and Determination of Eligibility (PEDE) (Donovan & Cross, 2002).

Historically, the goal of IDEA had been to provide an equal opportunity for students with disabilities to have a public, free, and appropriate education like that of students in general education. The 1997 amendments to the IDEA placed more emphasis on curriculum and objectives to address students’ educational outcomes. The integration of PEDE, other IDEA (1997, 1999) regulations and Individual Educational Program (IEP) regulations required the following:

- Participation of someone who can interpret instructional implications based on evaluation results.
- A statement of the student’s current educational performance level and how the disability will impact his success in the general education curriculum.
- Inclusion of all students in state and district-wide assessment, including modifications and accommodations that the student may need.
- Measurable, annual and short-term goals and objectives. (Donovan & Cross, 2002)
- A general education teacher as a mandatory member of the IEP team. (Special Education & Rehabilitative Services, 1999)
The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, which is the reauthorization of IDEA 1997, continues to support the mandatory requirement of a regular education teacher in the referral and IEP process.

Since the desegregation of public schools in the United States, laws have been enacted to ensure that all students receive a free and appropriate public education, yet the segregation of African American students continues. Theories (i.e., unpreparedness of teachers, low teacher expectations, and cultural deficit theory) influenced by beliefs about race and culture have attempted to explain why African American students are not faring well in schools. Specifically, these theories have resulted in the overrepresentation of African American students in special education programs and disability categories.

In contrast to these theories, other researchers disclosed that African American students are neither genetically inferior or a part of an inferior culture, but they experience cultural discontinuity in schools (Irvine, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1994). The cultural mismatch between African American students and White teachers often result in African American students and African American culture being misunderstood and largely unrecognized.

As members of SSTs, general education teachers make judgments about which African American students’ behaviors are appropriate and inappropriate. In addition to assessments, teachers’ judgments determine the types of help African American students receive. Knowing the origin of beliefs (also known as judgments or perceptions), how teachers’ beliefs develop, and the use of teacher beliefs is pertinent to understanding why some teachers refer African American students.
Teacher Beliefs: An Introduction

Teachers’ beliefs allow them to make sense of their worlds by defining the teaching task and organizing knowledge and information for retrieval in the teaching process (Nespor, 1987). In fact, a teacher’s beliefs may have more influence on what goes on in a classroom and between a teacher and his or her students than teacher knowledge and/or training (Nespor). Nevertheless, researchers reveal that there is no consensus on a definition for teacher beliefs (Eisenhart, Shrum, Harding, & Cuthbert, 1988; Kagan, 1992; Pajares, 1992).

Concepts of teacher beliefs have been used in various ways, from general terms to specifically shared ideas to individualistic perceptions (Kagan, 1992). Kagan defined teacher belief as “a particularly provocative form of personal knowledge that is generally defined as pre- or in-service teachers’ implicit assumptions about students, learning, classrooms, and the subject matter to be taught” (pp. 65-66). In addition to having multiple definitions, the term “teacher beliefs” is not consistently used in the research literature (Eisenhart et al., 1988; Fang, 1996; Pajares, 1996). The term is interchanged with teachers’ private views (Buchmann, 1987), theories (Fang, 1996), perceptions (Bahr & Fuchs, 1991; Uhlenberg & Brown, 2002), personal epistemologies (Gordon, 1990), perspectives (McLeskey, Waldron, & So, 2001) or orientations (Kagan, 1992).

In his review of teacher beliefs, Pajares (1992) explained that defining beliefs is at best a game of player’s choice. They travel in disguise and often under the alias of: attitudes, values, judgments, axioms, opinions, ideology, perceptions, conceptions, conceptual systems, preconceptions, dispositions, implicit theories, personal theories, internal mental processes, action strategies, rule of practice, practical principles, perspectives, repertoires of understanding, and social strategy, to name but a few that can be found in the literature. (p. 309)
Most teachers are apprehensive about publicly expressing their beliefs because what teachers know and believe about teaching is often implicit and invisible (Kagan, 1992). Kagan suggested that asking students about their teaching philosophies is often ineffective or counterproductive. Furthermore, beliefs are difficult to change, and when they do, the change occurs over time and as a last alternative to one’s deeply rooted values and judgments (Nespor, 1987; Pajares, 1992).

Researchers struggle with the distinction between knowledge and beliefs (Buchmann, 1987; Fang, 1996; Pajares, 1992). Evidence suggests that beliefs are a form of knowledge (Fang, 1996; Nespor, 1987; Pajares, 1992). Kagan (1992) further explained that

a teacher’s knowledge of his or her profession is situated in three important ways: in context (it is related to specific groups of students), in content (it is related to particular academic material taught) and in person (it is embedded within the teacher’s unique belief system). (p. 74)

Teachers may have similar knowledge, but their thought processes and expectations of students cause teachers to practice differently (Calderhead & Robson, 1991; Kagan, 1992; Pajares, 1992; Semmel, Abernathy, Butera, & Lesar, 1991). The nature of teaching and the teacher’s work is an often ill-defined and entangled domain wherein entities are diverse, partially overlapping, and connections are incomplete or unclear (Nespor, 1987).

Beliefs are created through the process of cultural transmission (Pajares, 1992). Drawing from Melville Herskovits’s *Cultural Anthropology* (1963) and *Man and His Works* (1956), Van Fleet (1979) suggested that the cultural transmission process consists of enculturation, education, and schooling. Enculturation is a learning process that occurs throughout a person’s life, consisting of the training he or she receives from others and the implicit assimilation of elements from his or her culture (Van Fleet). Through
observation, imitation of others and the transmission of elements of culture, individuals are implicitly and explicitly taught what is “normal” and “abnormal” behavior (Ross, Kamman & Coady, in press). Formal and informal educations are used to bring behaviors in line with specific cultural requirements (Van Fleet, 1979). Van Fleet further explained that schooling uses specific learning and teaching processes outside the home in specific places, at definite times, and by prepared persons.

**Formal and Informal Teacher Education**

Similar to the process of cultural transmission, teaching involves teacher enculturation, teacher education, and teacher schooling (Van Fleet, 1979). Like their students, teachers do not enter classrooms or colleges of education as blank slates upon which to write. Teacher enculturation occurs early for teachers. Nimmo and Smith (1994) suggest that teacher enculturation is comprised of teacher socialization and teacher development. Teachers are presented with images of teaching through both formal and informal knowledge (Calderhead & Robson, 1991; Lortie, 2002). Like Van Fleet’s (1979) 8-year-old niece playing school, teachers have watched teachers, heard others talk of teachers, and been exposed to teachers throughout their lives. Teacher socialization occurs before and after entering the classroom. Teachers’ different life perspectives, colleagues, and work culture form their images of teaching (Zeichner & Gore, 1986). Whether positive or negative, these images form a teacher.

Research suggests that “student teachers have spent thousands of hours in an apprenticeship of observation (Lortie, 2002) leading to the development of a body of values, commitments, orientations, and practices” (Calderhead & Robson, 1991, p. 1). Apprenticeship observations by preservice and inservice teachers help form images of good and bad teaching. In addition, these images influence their decisions to become
teachers and the type of teacher they wish to become (Calderhead & Robson, 1991; Fang, 1996; Lortie, 2002).

According to Nimmo and Smith (1994) teacher development is a multi-faceted process that is often nonlinear and unique. They suggest that it involves teachers’ backgrounds interacting with various dispositions and situations that produce personal and professional development and growth (Nimmo & Smith, 1994). Through formal teacher education, teachers begin to understand the behaviors, thoughts and feelings of teaching (Van Fleet, 1979).

Most people are aware of the formal teacher education that occurs in colleges of education and teacher education institutions, but few are aware of the teacher education that occurs in schools, during conferences, and outside of school when teachers advise each other at social events (Van Fleet, 1979). Cooperating teachers fill the role of teacher educators for pre-service teachers during field placements, and in-service teachers often have peer teachers to orient them to the specifics of school culture (Irvine, 1990; Ishler, Edens, & Berry, 1996; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Teachers inform other teachers regarding students’ behaviors and what school policies must be followed.

Van Fleet (1979) reported that teacher education “includes directed learning experiences that aim to bring teacher behavior in line with specific requirements sanctioned by the school culture” (p. 283), revealing school context and educational policy as key factors in influencing teacher beliefs and actions. In the teacher education process, people who want to teach are often removed from the public school environment to be “instructed in the profession and mythology, in making practical implements, and in proper etiquette and social relations among professionals. Trainees participate in work settings and mock battles. When finished, they are ceremonially certified and returned to
the public school” (Van Fleet, p. 284). These teachers are expected to utilize the skills and strategies from years of schooling to maximize the academic and social potentials of their diverse students.

**Function of Teacher Beliefs**

Nespor (1987) conveyed, “Beliefs perform the function of framing or defining the task at hand” (p. 322); however, teachers’ knowledge and action are not necessarily a function of their beliefs. After following seven preservice teachers during a year, Calderhead and Robson (1991) reported that preservice teachers may possess teacher knowledge, consisting of formal knowledge of theories, pedagogy, and strategies, but not utilize this knowledge in their actual classrooms or interactions with certain students. Similarly, in their 4-year study of teacher beliefs and conceptions about reading, Duffy and Anderson (1984) reported that teachers provided distinct reading theories outside the classroom, but the teachers’ actual instructional practice was governed by changes in grade level and/or changes in the ability levels of the students being taught in the class. In a similar vein, surveying 381 regular and special education teachers, Semmel and colleagues (1991) revealed that teachers’ beliefs do not necessarily appear in their actions. They found that general education teachers believed that students with mild disabilities had a basic right to be included in general education classrooms, but they preferred pull-out programs and felt inclusion would have a negative impact on students with and without disabilities.

**Recalled Images Shaping Teachers’ Beliefs and Practices**

For a teacher to solve a certain problem, he or she has to develop a mental model or image of the problem, as well as possible solutions (Calderhead & Robson, 1991; Nespor, 1987). The emotions, feelings, moods, and subjective qualities that often
envelope beliefs are important to facilitating memory (Nespor). Nespor conveyed that affection serves the purposes of facilitating recall, providing cohesion to the pieces of the memory, and constructing and reconstructing the memory processes. Calderhead and Robson (1991) stated “being able to recall images, and to adapt and manipulate these images in reflecting about action in a particular context is possibly an important task of teaching” (p. 3).

Studies have revealed the influence of teachers’ recalled images of their cooperating teachers and/or mentor teachers on their perceptions of good or bad teaching (Calderhead & Robson, 1991; Lee, 2002; McCray, Sindelar, Kilgore, & Neal, 2002; Mitchell, 1998; Walker, 2001). In McCray and her colleagues’ (2002) study of African American teachers’ decision to become teachers, participants’ images of effective teachers were reflective of the impact of a recalled image of a teacher from a book:

[Marva Collins’s] expectations and methods were very inspirational because she had students in her classroom that were labeled mentally retarded. She was told that they were not able to learn. But she didn’t let that stigmatize the way she taught them, and she had great expectations for them. In the end, one girl in particular ended up graduating from college summa cum laude. That’s the kind of teacher I want to be. (p. 282)

Similarly, African American teacher Beverly Cokerham disclosed that her field experience and cooperating teacher had the greatest influence on her evolution as a teacher (Lee, 2002). Calderhead and Robson (1991) suggested that recalling the images of past teachers who were perceived as unsympathetic, intolerant, impatient teachers who frequently shouted and were generally distant from children shaped teachers’ beliefs and practice into becoming what they desired as students and/or their teachers lacked.

Teacher beliefs can be defined as teachers’ implicit assumptions about teaching, students and subject matter. In research literature various terms (e.g., perceptions,
judgments, assumptions, theories) are used for teacher beliefs. Teacher beliefs are
developed by formal education and life experiences (before and after entering the
teaching profession). They inform teachers’ teaching practices and images of teaching.
In addition, teachers’ beliefs inform teachers’ visions of who they are able and willing to
teach. Using their perceptions, teachers determine what is academically and socially
appropriate for students. When students do not match teachers’ perceptions of “normal,”
teachers are likely to refer them.

Teachers’ Perceptions about Special Education Referral

Influence of Teachers’ Perceptions

Referral research suggests that teacher perceptions are pertinent to the referral
process (Abidin & Robinson, 2002; Giesbrecht & Routh, 1979; Kauffman, Swan &
Wood, 1980; Kelly, Bullock, & Dykes, 1977). In a study representing three elementary
schools, Abidin and Robinson asked 30 teachers to identify three students from their
classrooms who they would refer for psychoeducational assessment. They found that
teachers’ perceptions were based on observed behaviors of students and not demographic
characteristics. Abidin and Robinson found that teachers’ judgments about the presence
of behavioral problems and students’ academic competence were the best predictors of
special education referral. Racial bias, socioeconomic bias, and teaching stress were not
significant in the study.

In a similar vein, Gresham, MacMillan, and Bocian (1998) investigated 60
teachers on School Study Teams (SSTs) and reported data suggesting that
classification decisions are being made in public schools based on the child’s
perceived educational needs by school study team members rather than scores
obtained from intelligence and achievement tests and the extent these scores meet
some arbitrary criteria for the presence of a mild disability. (p. 189)
Gresham and his colleagues (1998) found low levels of agreement with the Office of Special Education Programs’ (OSEP) definitions of mild disability groups. These teachers relied on their individual judgments and did not give great weight to psychological assessment.

Geisbrecht and Routh (1979) examined 104 elementary teachers’ responses to artificially constructed cumulative folders. They reported that teachers perceived students to more likely need special education assistance if cumulative folders included negative teacher comments. Teachers in the study were more likely to suggest referral for Black children whose parents were less educated. In cumulative files with more negative teacher comments, students were more likely recommended for behavioral help than students without comments.

In an examination of the referral and placement process, Argulewicz and Sanchez (1983) found that if placements were based only on teachers’ perceptions, the representation of minority students in special education would be higher (Argulewicz & Sanchez). The researchers contended that psychoeducational evaluation conducted by special education services often served as a moderator for special education placement. Ysseldyke, Algozzine, Ritchey, and Graden (1982) examined 20 videotaped placement team meetings. They observed that “a good deal of the information (83%) presented at the team meetings was irrelevant to final placement decisions made by the placement team” (p. 42). According to the researchers, SST members used assessment data to confirm or justify previously made assumptions about students and did not use specific criteria in making their decisions. In addition, the more information that was provided to the placement team, the greater the likelihood of the student being identified for special education services. Ysseldyke and his colleagues (1982) concluded that eligibility
decisions are made independent of tests supporting or contradicting teachers’ perceptions.

Teachers’ perceptions are instrumental in determining what children are appropriate for special education referral. With the exception of keeping larger numbers of minority students out of special education, assessment appears less significant than teachers’ perceptions in the referral process. As members of the SSTs, teachers influence other teachers in their judgments of which students need special education services and placement. Not only do teachers consider other teachers’ judgments in referral decisions, but they also ponder how outside resources should be utilized.

**Teacher Perceptions of Outside Resources**

Research suggests that teachers’ perceptions of outside resources influence their decisions to refer students (Waldron, McLeskey, Skiba, Jancaus, & Schultmeyer, 1998; Wilton, Cooper, & Glynn, 1987; Winfield, 1986). Wilton et al. (1987) investigated the personal and professional characteristics of general education teachers who had referred or would refer struggling students in their classrooms. All of the teachers in the study had at least one student who would qualify for special education referral. The researchers concluded that referring teachers more likely had previous and better access to the school psychologists. These teachers believed that school policy encouraged referrals.

Similarly, in a study of 24 high and low referring elementary teachers, Waldron and her colleagues (1998) found that high referring teachers often used outside resources to confirm or disconfirm their suspicions of a disability. Waldron et al. revealed that low referring teachers used information from previous teachers and consultants to obtain additional ideas on how to assist students and adapt curriculum. They concluded that the goal of low referring teachers was to “exhaust all options” (p. 37). Teachers who
perceived they had options available to them and were able to use them appeared less likely to refer.

In their investigation of student and classroom factors that placed students at risk of referral, Skiba, McLeskey, Waldron, Grizzle, and Bartley (1993) found the classroom referral rates to be significantly related to the use of a variety of management strategies. Low referring teachers had higher rates of intervention and used a variety of strategies to address inappropriate classroom behavior (Skiba et al.). Added to this, Waldron et al. (1998) interviewed 24 high and low referring teachers on their perceptions of the students they referred, and the criteria and resources they used to make referral decisions. The researchers reported that low referring teachers implemented 50% more interventions than high referring teachers. In contrast, high referring teachers provided little detail regarding the interventions previously implemented for students. They found that flexible grouping patterns were utilized in the low referring teachers’ classroom to accommodate students’ diverse needs. High referring teachers were less flexible in their classroom groupings, placing students having difficulties in already existing groups or looking for out-of-class alternatives (Waldron et al., 1998).

In a study of 24 general education elementary teachers’ perceptions of Student Support Teams (SSTs) and the students they brought to SST for referral, Logan et al. (2001) reported that teachers believed that they and their colleagues had done all they could to help the referred student and that the sole purpose of the SST was to test students and place them in special education. Students with whom teachers had not been successful or who required too much time to teach or manage were sent to the SST. In the teachers’ minds, special education provided what general education could not. Teachers
often cited special education as the place for students to receive small group instruction and 1:1 teaching.

Logan et al. (2001) reported that teachers did not want fellow teachers to think they had not done their job by not referring students. The teachers viewed the referral process with the SST as difficult, time consuming, frustrating and threatening (Logan et al.). They wanted the process to move quickly, considering that they documented their actions, contacted the parents, and sought help from the special education teacher. Added to their anxiety was the fear that administrators were covertly evaluating teachers during the referral process (Logan et al.).

In a similar vein, Christenson, Ysseldyke, and Algozzine (1982) examined 52 Minnesota and Florida general and special education teachers’ list of barriers to and factors facilitating the referral process. Seventy-seven percent of the teachers noted barriers to referral. Christenson et al. found organizational factors, availability of services, and “hassle” (e.g., paperwork, meetings, time, scheduling meetings) as the most reported barriers to referral. Teachers in their study often noted their skepticism about the payoff of referral.

Teachers’ perceptions assist them in determining which resources are appropriate for students. Low referring teachers believe they have resources available to assist them with students who are difficult to teach. These teachers tend to use a variety of strategies and interventions to maintain students in general education. They refer for the purposes of developing appropriate strategies and general education classroom environments to meet the needs of students. In contrast, high referring teachers perceive that all of their resources are exhausted with the exception of special education. These teachers have few strategies and interventions, and are reluctant about changing the general education
classroom and/or curriculum to appropriately help students. Teachers who often refer students use the process to remove students from general education. They also have difficulty envisioning success with students who are difficult to teach.

**Influence of Teachers’ Self-Efficacy**

Research suggests that decisions to refer students are influenced by teachers’ beliefs in their abilities to effectively instruct students. Bandura (1993) stated, “Among the mechanisms or agency, none is more central or pervasive than people’s beliefs about their capabilities to exercise control over their own level of functioning and over events that affect their lives” (p. 118). Teacher education programs attempt to build teaching efficacy by providing teachers with diverse teaching methods and strategies as well as proper field experiences. Teaching efficacy is the belief that various teaching strategies, pedagogy, and curriculum are effective and bring about success for students (Bandura, 1993). Researchers revealed that many teachers might possess teacher efficacy, but lack self-efficacy.

Examining teacher efficacy and self-efficacy is critical to understanding why some students are successful in school and others are not (Jordan, Kircaali-Iftar, & Diamond, 1993; Podell & Soodak, 1993; Soodak, Podell & Lehman, 1998). “The task of creating environments conducive to learning rests heavily on the talents and self-efficacy of teachers” (Bandura, 1993, p. 140). Teacher self-efficacy is the belief in one’s ability to motivate, promote learning and create an environment where even the most difficult students excel academically and socially (Bandura). According to Bandura, “Efficacy beliefs influence how people feel, think, motivate themselves and behave” (p. 118). Teachers with high self-efficacy visualize success scenarios that serve as guides and motivation for performance (Bandura). Having high expectations of students, these
teachers demand better performance from students and give students praise. In contrast, teachers who doubt their self-efficacy visualize failure and the possibility of things going wrong (Bandura). They are likely to accept poor performance from students for whom they have low expectations and are less likely to praise poor performing students when they perform well.

Teachers’ self-efficacy influences their beliefs and expectations of learners, and therefore their decision to refer (Jordan et al., 1993, 1997). Jordan and her colleagues (1997) examined nine elementary teachers and their third grade students’ conversational reactions during an academic lesson. The researchers categorized the teachers’ beliefs as either “interventionist” (preventive) or “pathognomic” (restorative). Teachers who possessed pathognomic (restorative) beliefs assumed that problems largely resided within the child, and the responsibility of the teacher was to have the child assessed for confirmation. These teachers possessed little belief in their ability to provide academic and/or social success for the students who were struggling and/or “at-risk.” In contrast, teachers with high self-efficacy possessed interventionist (preventive) beliefs. They attempted prereferral interventions and requested assessment for the purpose of pinpointing possible strategies to change the classroom environment as well as instruction. Jordan et al. (1997) revealed that teachers with high personal efficacy engaged in more academic interactions and exhibited greater use of various strategies to extend students’ thinking. Using higher levels of cognitive extension, teachers with high self-efficacy interacted more positively with typically achieving students, students with disabilities and students labeled “at-risk.”

Researchers found that teachers with low personal efficacy often sought nonteacher based solutions for problems with students, and blamed the homes of students
or the students themselves for the academic and/or social problems (Jordan et al., 1993, 1997; Soodak & Podell, 1994). In their study of 110 elementary teachers’ decisions with difficult to teach students, Soodak and Podell (1994) reported that teachers with low personal efficacy wanted other professionals to fix their problems with difficult to teach students rather than attempting to develop effective strategies. The researchers contend that teachers’ personal efficacy influenced the type of personal responsibility teachers accepted for difficult to teach students. Teachers with low personal efficacy were reluctant to ask for help and prone to seek professional assessment for students. They perceived special education as the logical place for students that were difficult to teach (Podell & Soodak).

In another study, Podell and Soodak (1993) investigated 192 general and special educators’ judgments of referral, using case studies describing a student with a learning disability and/or behavior problem. They found that general education teachers with greater personal efficacy were more likely to perceive general education as more appropriate for students with a learning disability and/or behavior problem. Teachers with high self-efficacy preferred collaboration with other professionals to develop diverse strategies and skills to provide success for students (Soodak et al., 1998).

In a similar vein, Soodak and her colleagues (1998) surveyed 188 general educators’ responses to including students with disabilities in their classrooms. They discovered that collaboration with other teachers and development of differentiated teaching practices appeared to reduce teachers’ anxiety and increase receptivity toward inclusion of students “at-risk” and/or with disabilities (Podell & Soodak, 1993; Soodak et al., 1998).
Similarly in a study of 26 elementary general education teachers, Jordan and her colleagues (1993) reported that teachers with high personal efficacy preferred cooperative consults rather than pull-out programs that removed students from the general education classroom. High personal efficacy teachers were confident in being able to create positive student outcomes. The researchers concluded that teachers with “restorative” beliefs (low personal efficacy) viewed “problems” within students, the parents and others outside the classroom as being more influential on students’ social and academic outcomes.

In a study of teacher beliefs about academically “at-risk” students, Winfield (1986) categorized ways that teachers conceptualized four teacher behaviors for dealing with students who were struggling: (a) tutors; (b) general contractors; (c) custodians; and (d) referral agents. The tutors were the teachers who indicated it was their responsibility to improve all students’ reading, even the lowest reading group. Teachers who expressed that remedial instruction was needed for students, but the responsibility for instruction should be given to another, were categorized as general contractors. Custodians were teachers who conveyed concern for supporting low achieving students in the general education classroom, but also expressed that nothing or little could be done for the struggling students. Referral agents had a similar attitude as the custodians; however, referral agents shifted the responsibility of maintenance to other teachers and specialists.

Smart, Wilton, and Keeling (1980) compared general education teachers who referred students to special education (SC) and general education teachers who had students who qualified for special education classes, but had not referred these students (NR). NR teachers strongly believed in the benefit of mainstream classes for low ability students, and in their personal ability to accommodate students with special needs.
Higher proportions of low achievers were reported in the classrooms of NR teachers. In contrast, mainstreaming did not seem important to SC teachers, who were older, had more teaching experience, but were not as qualified as the NR teachers.

When teachers cannot visualize success scenarios for students, they are likely to refer those whom they perceive cannot be helped. Teachers with high self-efficacy visualize success with students, even the students that are challenging. These teachers use outside resources to help students remain in the general education classroom. They utilize outside resources to gain various strategies and interventions to appropriately change the general education classroom environment and curriculum for students who are struggling.

In contrast, teachers with low self-efficacy are likely to use outside resources to confirm their suspicions of a “problem.” They believe that students’ problems reside within the student and/or student’s family. These teachers see themselves as not having appropriate resources or the ability to teach students whose behaviors are different from the “norm” they envision. In addition, teachers with low self-efficacy are challenged with identifying the specific problems they have with students.

**Teachers’ Perceptions of the “Problem”**

When teachers refer students they often provide vague reasons for referral. Anderson, Cronin, and Miller (1986) examined the referral reasons for 269 students with learning disabilities from four elementary schools. The researchers found that referral statements tended to be general and unclear about the particular concerns. Forty-two percent of the referrals were nonspecific academic referrals, and 41% percent of the referrals were both academic and behavioral (Anderson et al., 1986). Seventeen percent of the referrals focused solely on student behavior. In a similar vein, Pugach (1985)
studied 39 elementary and junior high classroom teachers. She found that what teachers said as the reason for referral often did not match what they wrote on paper.

Using actual referrals, Christenson, Ysseldyke, Wang, and Algozzine (1983) investigated teachers’ specific reasons for referring students. Teachers in the study attributed 97% of elementary students’ difficulties to nonteacher and nonschool causes. Within-student characteristics (e.g., birth deficits, potential; 61.7%) and home causes (e.g., family difficulties; 35.6%) were most often cited (Christenson et al., 1983).

Hutton (1985) reviewed referral information on 215 students from five different school districts referred to school psychologists. Most of the referrals reported behaviors that were described as conduct and personality disorders (Hutton). Hutton reported seven frequently stated reasons for referral:

- Poor peer relationships
- Frequent displays of frustration
- Performance below academic expectations
- Shy and withdrawn behavior
- Disruptive behavior
- Fighting
- Refusal to work
- Short attention span.

Hutton (1985) found that poor peer relationships was reported as the number one reason for referral. Kindergarten to third-grade teachers most often cited fighting as their reason for referral.

Referring teachers who have low self-efficacy struggle to identify students’ problems. These teachers often provide unclear, general, and/or nonacademic reasons for referring students. They are likely to believe that the referred students’ academic and/or social issues are out of their control and that the problems reside in the student or students’ family. These teachers are less likely to appreciate and respect students’
differences. General education teachers who have few positive experiences with African Americans are more likely to misinterpret African American behavior and the influence of African American culture in their classrooms.

**Influence of Teachers’ Views of Behavioral and Cultural Differences on Referral**

Research suggests that teachers’ acceptance and perceptions of behavior influence their decision to refer students. McIntyre (1990) studied 88 teachers from 11 public schools and found that teachers with strict classroom standards were more likely to refer students with low aggressive behaviors than teachers with more lax classroom standards. In contrast, the students with high aggressive behaviors were less likely referred by stricter teachers than lax teachers. The students labeled learning disabled were typically viewed as having low aggressive behaviors in comparison to students labeled emotionally disturbed (McIntyre).

Kelly, Bullock and Dykes (1977) investigated 2,664 regular education teachers’ perceptions of the behavior levels of their students in 13 Florida school districts. They found that teacher perceptions of behavioral disorders gradually increased between grades K-5. In addition, for every White student perceived to have a behavioral disorder, approximately two Black students were perceived to have a behavioral disorder in grades K-7 (Kelly et al.). Researchers revealed that “in general, White teachers perceived more Black students as exhibiting behavioral disorders when contrasted with the perceptions of Black teachers” (Kelly et al., p. 317).

Additional research suggests that referral may be influenced by students and teachers’ racial and cultural similarities and differences. Tomlinson, Acker, Canter, and Lindborg (1977) studied the gender and minority status of 355 students referred for psychological services “in relation to the frequency of referral, type of problem, and
nature of subsequent psychological services” (p. 456). Noting a significantly higher percentage of the minority population being referred for psychological services, the researchers found no difference with respect to the type (e.g., academic or behavior) of problem for which students were referred. Tomlinson et al. found that psychologists significantly more often contacted majority parents and provided them with suggestions for helping their children. In contrast, the researchers noted that the parents of minority students were less likely contacted by the psychologists and more often recommended for special education resource services and placement.

In a 3-year ethnographic study of African American families in the special education referral process, Harry, Klinger, and Hart (2005) found "stark discrepancy between school personnel's views of Black families and the views developed through research interviews and home visits" (p. 104). In most cases school personnel had not visited students' homes and had made negative assumptions about families based on unfounded evidence. Harry and her colleagues observed conferences in which teachers, from various racial groups including African American, treated African American parents and caregivers respectfully and disrespectfully. Educators in the study by Harry et al. ignored parent/caregiver's comments and questions, tended to respond to parents/caregivers with sarcasm, and overused educational jargon during meetings.

In a study of White and Black parents, teachers, psychologists, and educational diagnosticians, Kaufman et al. (1980) examined the perceptions of problem behaviors of 194 White and Black children labeled emotionally disturbed. They found that Black parents often perceived their children differently than the teachers. Teachers’ perceptions more often agreed with White parents than Black parents. The researchers did not record
the race of the teachers, but disclosed that between 75% to 80% of the teachers in the study were White and 25% were Black (Kaufman et al.).

More pointedly, using constructed case histories to study 199 teachers, Tobias, Cole, Zibrin and Bodlakova (1982) investigated the influence of students’ race and teachers’ race on special education referral. The researchers purported no difference in referral recommendations based on students’ ethnic background; however, they revealed that teachers were less likely to refer students whose backgrounds were identical to their own. Researchers concluded that teachers who were familiar or had identical backgrounds to minority students were more aware of students’ culture and perceived certain behaviors as acceptable based on this knowledge (Tobias et al.).

Investigating the impact of race and social behavior on teacher recommendations for referral, Pernell (1984) examined questionnaire responses of 275 secondary teachers. He found that Black teachers identified other races for referral before their own. Black teachers in the study often predicted higher levels of social adjustment and reading for all students than White students.

Similarly, in a study of Black teachers and White teachers’ perceptions of possible causes and potential solutions to the achievement gap between White students and Black students, Uhlenberg and Brown (2002) surveyed 26 Black, 25 White and 2 multi-racial teachers. Researchers found that “issues that are based on making racial distinctions or that are perceived to affect Black students more than White students tend to produce perceptual disparities between Black teachers and White teachers” (Uhlenberg & Brown, p. 519). Black teachers in the study viewed teachers with low expectations for Black students, teachers not meeting the instructional needs of Black students, and teachers acting in a racist manner (whether they meant to or not) as
significant factors in the achievement gap (Uhlenberg & Brown). The authors found that Black teachers perceived factors such as Black students misbehaving, lacking effort and lacking potential, as less significant factors. In contrast to other teachers in the study, Black teachers believed Black parents’ level of education, income, and parenting techniques were less significant contributing factors for the achievement gap between Black and White students (Uhlenberg & Brown). Black teachers in the study perceived “more parental outreach and education, more mentoring programs, recruiting more Black teachers, and better classroom instruction as relatively useful and effective solutions to the achievement gap” (Uhlenberg & Brown, p. 516).

In an attempt to replicate their previous study, Tobias, Zibrin, and Menell (1983) studied 320 teachers’ responses to an adapted case history that investigated the influence of student gender and ethnicity and the gender, ethnicity and teaching level of the teacher on referral. They failed to replicate the findings of their earlier study where teachers referred fewer students of their own race. Tobias et al. (1983) found that recommendations for referral were influenced by teachers’ ethnicity and teaching level rather than students’ gender or race.

Similarly, Washington (1982), using interviews and descriptive evidence with in-service teachers, and identified six positive and six negative student characteristics as important in the school context. Teachers were asked to assign two students from their classrooms to each of the characteristics. She found that Black teachers viewed Black boys, Black girls, and White boys more negatively than positively. Washington reported that, with the exception of academic competency, “teachers tended to designate pupils of their own race to negative characteristics” (p. 71). Two possible explanations are provided. One, students’ academic strengths are more uniformly evaluated. Two, teachers
are more sensitive to and/or aware of normative traits in their race and are therefore better able to discriminate between students of their race who fall below the norm (Washington).

In a similar vein, Bahr and Fuchs (1991) investigated whether teachers’ perceptions of difficult to teach students of 40 classroom teachers were racially based. They found that both White and Black general education teachers rated Black students as more appropriate for referral than White students. Both groups of teachers perceived the classroom behaviors of White and Black students to be the same. The researchers noted that behavior did not appear to be the basis for more Black students being referred. Teachers in the study appeared to be more concerned about students’ work issues than behavior. Bahr and Fuchs concluded that the teachers perceived Black students as weaker students and in need of specialized instruction.

General education teachers are more likely to refer African American students to special education than White students. These referrals are generally based on the general education teachers’ perceptions of appropriate and inappropriate behavior. White teachers’ perceptions are often similar to perceptions of White parents and in contrast to the perceptions’ of African American parents and African American teachers. African American parents and teachers are less likely to refer African American children and have them removed from general education. African American teachers are often familiar with the experiences of African American students and are more likely to have high social and academic expectations for them.

**Conclusion**

Legislation such as Brown v. the Board of Education and PL-94-142 opened the doors for African American students to receive an equal, free, and appropriate public
education. With the eventual integration of public schools, White educators were given the responsibility of educating African American students in racially and academically mixed classrooms (Foster, 1990, 1997). These educators perceived academic and social differences in African American students. Researchers asserted that educators’ willingness to work with and perceptions of African Americans have led to the overrepresentation of African Americans in special education and disability categories (Artiles & Trent, 1994).

Using their individual perceptions and cultural experiences, teachers judge which students are teachable and “normal” in the general education classroom (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Ross et al., in press). Students who do not match teachers’ “norm” are perceived to have a deficit. Researchers suggest that general education teachers’ perceptions of African American students’ behaviors influence SSTs more than psychological assessments (Abidin & Robinson, 2002; Giesbrecht & Routh, 1979; Gresham et al., 1998). Teachers’ perceptions are developed before and after they enter the classroom, and influence how they view teaching and students (Fang, 1992; Kagan, 1992; Nespor, 1987; Van Fleet, 1979). Teachers visualize the types of teachers they wish to become and the students they are able and willing to teach (Calderhead & Robson, 1991; Nespor, 1987).

Teachers’ beliefs in their abilities to teach African American students influence whether they refer students (Jordan et al., 1993; Logan et al., 2001; Podell & Soodak, 1993; Smart et al., 1980; Soodak et al., 1998; Winfield, 1986). Teachers who believe in their ability to teach African American students, even the most challenging ones, are less likely to refer them (Jordan et al., 1993; Podell & Soodak, 1993; Soodak et al., 1998). These teachers use outside resources (i.e., special education referral, parents, and other
teachers) to change the general education classroom and curriculum to accommodate students who are struggling (Skiba et al., 1993; Waldron et al., 1998).

Teachers who believe they cannot teach African American students who are struggling are likely to refer them (Jordan et al., 1993; Podell & Soodak, 1993; Soodak et al., 1998). They tend to be less flexible in their grouping of students and provide little changes to their teaching and curriculum to accommodate students (Waldron et al., 1998). These teachers use outside resources to confirm problems within students and remove students from the general education classroom (Jordan et al., 1993; Podell & Soodak, 1993; Logan et al., 2001; Soodak et al., 1998).

This investigation adds the voices of African American teachers whose perceptions are largely missing from the special education referral research (Irvine 2002; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Patton, 1998). Past research has often been presented from the perspective of White teachers (Graham, 1992) who are often unfamiliar with African American culture and its influence on academic and social interactions between the teacher and African American student (Irvine, 1990, 2002).

The teachers in this study are more likely to have a cultural match to African American students. Because their life experiences are more similar to African American students and families, they are less likely to misinterpret African American students’ behaviors. By examining African American teachers’ perceptions of special education referral, we can come closer to learning how African American teachers make sense of their worlds. Understanding how these teachers make sense of their worlds will add multicultural voices to the special education referral discourse.
CHAPTER 3
RESEARCH METHODS

The purpose of this study is to examine the phenomenon of special education referral from the perspective of African American elementary teachers. The guiding questions for this study are (a) “How do African American elementary teachers perceive special education referral,” and, even more specifically, (b) “How do African American teachers experience the referral of African American students to special education classes?” Using phenomenological methodology, I want to understand how African American elementary teachers make sense of special education referral. This chapter begins with a brief description of the phenomenological research approach. I will present the defining characteristics of a phenomenological study and what it offers to this investigation. The chapter describes my experiences related to special education referral. What follows are a description of participant recruitment and selection process, and specific information about each of the participants. The chapter concludes with a presentation of data collection and analysis procedures.

Introduction to Phenomenology

In qualitative research, it is important for the researcher to consider and reflect on his or her assumptions about knowledge (Crotty, 1998). These assumptions are inherent in the theoretical perspective and methodology that has been chosen (Crotty). The philosophical stance that lies underneath the chosen methodology “provides a context for the process and grounds its logic and criteria” (Crotty, p. 7). Interpretivism is the
underlying philosophical stance in phenomenology. The interpretivist approach “looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world” (Crotty, p. 67). Phenomenology is one kind of interpretive research.

Phenomenology is grounded in the epistemological assumption that the world is made up of phenomena and experiences (Crotty, 1998; Husserl, 1931; Moustakas, 1994). Miller and Crabtree (1999) suggest that phenomenology “seeks to understand the lived experience of individuals and their intentions within their ‘lifeworld’” (p. 28). In search of essences, the researcher asks questions such as “what is it like to have a certain experience” and “what is the essence of the particular experience” (Miller & Crabtree). This is accomplished by an investigator bracketing his or her preconceived ideas, and entering into the participant’s lifeworld and using the self as an experiencing interpreter (Miller & Crabtree).

Perceived through physical senses, experiences are the initial focus of a phenomenological study (Husserl, 1964). The researcher seeks to understand the phenomenon by observing physical manifestations and experiences of the phenomenon in order to describe “a new meaning, or fuller meaning, or renewed meaning” of the experience (Crotty, 1998, p. 82). By reflecting on all of the possible meanings of the experience, the researcher comes to know and fully describe all aspects of the experience identifying essential characteristics that surpass specific incidences (Moustakas, 1994).

Experiences often influence perceptions and perceptions experiences. Considered the primary source of knowledge in phenomenology, perceptions are different from experience in that perceptions are mental processes involving thoughts and reflections, and based on various assumptions and/or beliefs. Moustakas (1994) noted that “with every perception we experience the thing perceived as one-sided ‘adumbration’ while at
the same time apprehending and experiencing the thing as a whole object” (p. 53). One or multiple perceptions enhance the possibilities of knowing and experiencing (Moustakas, 1994). New perceptions make possible the addition of new knowledge. Each perception adds to the experience. Observing each angle of the object allows various perceptions (horizons) to emerge.

The epistemology of phenomenology is both objective and subjective. Phenomenology is objective in the sense that phenomenological research is focused on seeing the object from a fresh, unbiased perspective free from prior experiences with the phenomenon (Husserl, 1964). After focusing on the experiences of the phenomenon from multiple points of view, the researcher conducts a subjective activity of reflecting on possible meanings of the experience. Phenomenology is subjective in that the laborious process of developing the essence of an experience occurs in the mind of the researcher (Moustakas, 1994; van Kaam, 1966). Approaching the phenomena from both objective and subjective perspectives enables the researcher to arrive at universal aspects of the experience (Husserl, 1964).

Intentionality lies at the heart of phenomenology (Crotty, 1998). By intentionally laying aside preconceived ideas and prevailing understandings of the phenomena, researchers can revisit the experience anew and witness the possibilities of new meaning or authenticate and enhance former meaning (Crotty, 1998). The presumption is that there are ‘things themselves’ (objects) to visit in our experience (Crotty, 1998, p. 79). When the investigator intentionally focuses on the phenomenon and reflects on its meaning, he or she is able to describe the universal truths, or essences of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).
Like many other theoretical frameworks, phenomenology has evolved over time (Crotty, 1998; Schwandt, 2001). Husserl (1931), van Kaam (1966) and Moustakas (1994) described Transcendental Phenomenology as the search for universal truths of experiences that form a single objective reality that is shared by all people. This universal truth is considered objective and the essence of the phenomenon (Husserl, 1931, 1964; Moustakas, 1994). Modern researchers (Seidman, 1991; Worthen & McNeill, 1996) in the United States are interested in viewing phenomena through the lenses of others. These multiple truths created from viewing the phenomenon from different perspectives (Schwandt, 2001) form essences. Descriptions of universal truths of experience (objective phenomenology) have evolved to characteristics of the experience as situated within the context of the participants being studied (subjectivist phenomenology) (Crotty, 1998).

The evolution of phenomenology is pertinent to this study. I believe that there is an essence of special education referral rooted within the context of the individual and group of African American elementary teachers being studied. This study would not be a true representation of the essence of special education referral that Husserl refers to. The culture and ethnicity of the participants are relevant to this study. From this study, multiple truths will be created by viewing special education referral from diverse perspectives. Following the approach of phenomenology, this study seeks to describe the phenomenon of special education referral from the perspective of teachers who are often silenced in the literature. By providing African American teachers the opportunity to describe how they perceive special education referral, a diverse view and dialogue of special education referral will be created.
The ultimate goal of phenomenological research is to thoroughly describe all aspects of the experience in as much detail as possible (Husserl, 1931, Moustakas, 1994). Using careful and intense study, phenomenology endeavors to “go back to the things themselves” (Crotty, 1998, p. 59) to experience phenomenon from a fresh perspective free from bias and judgments, from as many perspectives as possible (Crotty, 1998; Moustakas, 1994). Intentionally setting aside, as best we can, the prevailing understanding of special education referral and revisiting special education referral allows opportunities to verify or enhance former meaning or derive new meaning for special education referral (Crotty, 1998). This intentionality is essential to experiencing the object, special education referral, from the vantage points of the subjects, African American teachers.

**Subjectivity Statement**

Various subjectivities make up a researcher’s autobiography and, to know which subjectivities are engaged in the research, researchers develop subjectivity statements (Glesne, 1999). The subjectivity statement candidly discloses the experiences of the researcher. This disclosure reveals who I am in relationship to what I am learning from the research and what I may be preventing myself from learning (Glesne, 1999). As an African American researcher engaging in a phenomenological study of African American teachers’ perceptions of special education referral, I have many life experiences that are bracketed in order to examine the phenomenon from an unbiased and fresh unadulterated perspective (Crotty, 1998). I am a middle-class female who has lived in the state where the data was collected for most of my life.

My interest in African American teachers’ perceptions of special education referral originates from my experiences as an African American student and a teacher.
After more than 12 hours of labor, my earth days began on Friday, February 18, 1972. Doctors told my young parents (ages 21 and 17) that their first child, a daughter, had suffered multiple seizures immediately after delivery and may have developmental problems in the future. Thankfully, my parents sought a second opinion, finding a doctor who told them that there was nothing wrong with their first born other than she had been allowed to stay inside of her mother too long. I entered a world that was rapidly changing for African Americans. The establishment of affirmative action programs and social programs such as Head Start, public housing, Medicaid, and other programs during the late 1960s and early 1970s suggested that the United States was ready to acknowledge its wrongs and mistreatment of poor people and people of color.

My mother, a graduate of the last segregated class of Lincoln High School, and my father, one of the first to integrate Newberry High School, imparted their dream of academic, social, and political empowerment for the African American community to their only daughter. My earliest memories are that of school, church, and service. Public schooling began with Head Start and elementary school in a small rural community. By my seventh birthday, my father entered the Christian ministry, which provided me the opportunity to speak candidly and sing before congregations on special occasions, as well as serve those in the community.

In the seventh grade, my family and I moved from one small town to another. With the move came a new neighborhood and new school. For the first time we lived in a neighborhood where we were the “only” persons of color. In the midst of our move to the new school, my school records were misplaced. Neither my parents nor I were aware of the mishap or my placement in a remedial reading class, until my report came home with an “A” and the comments “reading below grade level.” Immediately my father went to
the school to inquire about the mistake. It was revealed that my school records never arrived from the previous school, and that I had been arbitrarily placed in a classroom. I was quickly placed in an on-grade-level reading class. In eighth grade, I became an “A” student in advanced placement courses. I suppose this placement would be considered today’s gifted and talented programs. During the next years, it quickly became apparent that I would become one of the “first, only, and few”: one of six African Americans to be accepted in the International Baccalaureate Program at Eastside High School, and the first female in my family to complete a bachelor’s degree.

As an alumnus of the University of Florida, my father was not too thrilled about his daughter attending Florida State University as an undergraduate, but the experience would forever change my life. My junior year, I blindly entered Dr. William Jones’ “Race, Racism, and Institutions” class. Dr. Jones spoke of marginalization, racism, institutionalized racism, power, blaming the victim, praxis, and hegemony. Having come from an emerging middle class, immediately I became intrigued by this man who many believed to be radical and fanatical. By the end of the semester, I had changed majors to sociology, American history, and Black studies. For the first time, I began to question the many privileges based on race and class that many others and I had taken for granted. After graduation, I needed a job and decided to enter into teaching temporarily. Teaching would forever change my life. I taught in the Alachua County public school system for 5 years, entering the field of special education through an alternative certification in middle grades social science.

As an African American middle school special education teacher and a graduate student, I became sensitive to the disproportionate numbers of my students who were African American. Initially, I believed that the overrepresentation of African American
students in special education was an isolated occurrence, until later reading data that explained it as national trend. During my 5 years of teaching, my class sizes fluctuated from 8 students to 27 students, often with one or no aide. Even more troubling to me was the inappropriate instruction and mislabeling of students who were falling behind their peers in general education. I remember thinking during Individual Education Program (IEP) meetings, “I don’t observe the issues you’re having with this student,” and often volunteering my help to the newly mainstreamed students and general education teachers, while some of my special education colleagues predicted automatic failure. Rarely was a student mainstreamed without one or more teachers angrily questioning another’s rationale for wanting to expose students with disabilities to the possibilities of a general education curriculum and environment. Feeling like a trader, I began to question my expectations of students and my ability to provide individualized instruction. Did my colleagues and I have low expectations of our African American students? What were we providing students with disabilities that was so “special” that it could only be provided in certain classrooms on one side of the school, closest to the parking lot?

During the week of ninth grade registration, one of my eighth grade students questioned me about the benefits of special education. “You all never teach anything new. We learn the same thing every year. It’s just switched around. How are we going to be able to work with letters [variables in algebra] if you all never give us a chance?” she asked. My conscience was pricked by her words.

**Methods**

The methods selected and utilized for this study were aligned with the assumptions of transcendental phenomenology and guided specifically by the work of Moustakas (1994) and van Kaam (1966). This section describes the strategies used to
recruit participants and to collect and analyze data. The rationale for the choices made is also presented.

Participants

Selection criteria. Purposeful and homogenous sampling was used (Glesne, 1999) and participants met several criteria. They were African American elementary teachers, with at least 3 years of teaching experience, who had referred a child to special education and/or had been a part of a School Study Team. All of the teachers who participated in the study taught in elementary schools during the 2004-2005 school year.

The race of the participants is important because the purpose of the study is to convey perspectives and provide voice to an underrepresented group in educational research (i.e., African American teachers). The minimum of 3 years of teaching experience was important, as teachers who have taught at least 3 years are certified, have completed some beginning teacher induction, and have been observed and evaluated by their school principals. To develop in-depth descriptions of special education referral, it was necessary for teacher participants to have experienced referring a child to special education or been a part of a School Study Team. Elementary teachers were selected because most children referred to special education are in elementary school. To ensure that teacher participants had experience teaching diverse learners, teachers were selected from schools that had African American student populations from 25% to 50%.

Twenty-one invitations to participate in this study were sent to African American elementary teachers at seven schools in a small urban community. Eight teachers returned signed informed consent forms, but only five teachers met the study criteria. Using the five participants’ perspectives of special education referral, “info-rich cases, in-depth understanding” are presented (Glesne, 1999, p. 29).
**Selection procedures.** After receiving IRB approval, I contacted the School Board to obtain study approval. My contact person at the school board sent my study information (Appendix A) to elementary principals who had African American teachers on staff and whose African American student population met the criteria for the study. Seven out of 14 principals gave me approval to contact their teachers. After meeting with the principals or designated contact persons at interested schools, I took packets and/or truck-mailed a study packet consisting of consent letter (Appendix B), demographic survey (Appendix D), and a study flier (Appendix A) to the 21 African American teachers in the seven schools. The study flier was added to address a low initial response. After several phone calls, e-mails, reminders, visits, and resending packets, 5 of 7 teacher respondents were selected based upon study criteria. Selected teachers were contacted to schedule an informed consent meeting and first interview. Those who did not meet the study criteria were called and thanked for their interest in the study.

**Demographic information.** Demographic information is summarized in Table 3-1. Participants had 4 to 32 years of teaching experience. The highest educational level attained for these teachers ranged from a bachelors degree to a doctorate. All had been part of a school study team and, with the exception of one teacher, had initiated a referral to special education. Three teachers had referred African American students while two had not. Unlike the general teaching population, the majority of the participants were male.

**Data Collection**

Data collection consisted of participant interviews. The specific strategies for data collection follow.
Table 3-1. Participant demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Paul</th>
<th>David</th>
<th>Rebecca</th>
<th>Sarah</th>
<th>Michael</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Been apart of a school study team?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of referrals of in the past 5 years.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of referrals of African American students in the past 5 years.</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of years teaching</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current annual household income</td>
<td>Above $50,000</td>
<td>$30,000-$40,000</td>
<td>Above $50,000</td>
<td>Less than $30,000</td>
<td>$40,000-50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family household income growing up</td>
<td>Above $40,000</td>
<td>$20,000-$40,000</td>
<td>$10,000-$20,000</td>
<td>$20,000-$40,000</td>
<td>$10,000-$20,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School experience (elementary, high school, college)</td>
<td>All Black, historically Black</td>
<td>Predominantly Black, White middle class, historically Black</td>
<td>All Black, predominantly White</td>
<td>Predominantly White, historically Black</td>
<td>Equally mixed, predominantly White</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participant interviews. In a phenomenological study, the methods selected for data collection should focus on the participant’s perceptions (Moustakas, 1994; Seidman, 1991). Typically in phenomenological research multiple, semi-structured, and interactive interviews are used to gather data (Moustakas, 1994, Seidman, 1991). With proper interview structuring, researchers reduce researcher bias as well as leading participants’ description of the experience (Seidman). Utilizing open-ended comments and questions the researcher elicits participants’ descriptions of the experience (Seidman). Using Seidman’s interview model, three interviews per participant were conducted in the current study.

In addition to the interviews, multiple meetings with each participant allowed me to establish rapport and trust necessary for in-depth descriptions (Seidman, 1991). Most of the interviews were scheduled no more than 2 weeks apart, and none occurred on the same day (Seidman). In line with Seidman’s 60-minute interview duration, the interview duration for each interview was between 30 to 70 minutes. Importantly, busy teachers were given reasonable time to talk about their experiences, but not so much that they or the researcher became inattentive or tired. Due to the teachers’ schedules and my availability, the data collection process occurred from January through May of 2005.

The purpose of interview one was to establish the context of the participants’ experience with the phenomenon (special education referral). The first interview (Appendix C) asked them to reconstruct early life experiences with families, friends, school, the African American community, and work as each related to special education (Siedman, 1991). Because I am examining the African American experience of special education referral, participants were asked to describe their communities and family as
they grew up, as well as African American students in their schools. I wanted to know what special education referral meant to these teachers before they became teachers.

Second interviews (Appendix C) began with a brief member check using the words of the participant the researcher summarized from interview one. Participants were then given the opportunity to agree or disagree with my synopsis of interview one. The second interview asked participants to describe special education referral currently. Participants were asked what they currently do in their classrooms with students they would refer, and to talk about their interactions with students, parents, and other school staff as these relate to special education referral.

Beginning with another member check, the third and final interview (Appendix C) was centered on the meaning of special education referral and, more pointedly, the referral of African American students. During this interview, teachers were asked the following questions: “How should special education referral affect your African American students?”, “What changes do you expect when they are referred?”, “If you could design the steps for special education referral, what would they look like?”

Reflection on the meaning of referral encourages participants to reflect on the meaning their experience holds for them and how their experiences, past and present, influence their understanding regarding what should happen in the future with special education referral (Seidman, 1991).

To make the interviews convenient and comfortable for the teachers, interviews were scheduled according to the teachers’ availability and location. The majority of the teachers asked to be interviewed after school on their school’s campus. I met teachers in their classrooms, teacher lounges, conference rooms, and offices. One teacher decided to
come to my home during the early evening hours. Meeting at the end of the school day eliminated distractions from students and coworkers.

All interviews were audiotape recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. After the transcriptions were complete, the researcher took the transcriptions and listened to the audio recordings to conduct a side-by-side check for accuracy. After doing my own check for accuracy, each participant was sent a copy of his or her transcripts for the purpose of adding comments or making corrections to elaborate on his or her experience with special education referral (Appendix E).

**Defining Characteristics of Phenomenology**

Epoche is a process through which the researcher actively sets aside or brackets all assumptions, bias, understandings, and experiences related to the phenomenon being studied (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher begins his or her research by identifying all assumptions, life and personal experiences, and describing them in written form for the purpose of ignoring them for the duration of the research (Moustakas, 1994). By bracketing or setting aside the researchers' preconceived notions, special education referral is revisited from a fresh unadulterated perspective free from bias from as many vantage points as possible to describe the phenomenon as fully as possible (Crotty, 1998). The participants in this study were the direct experiencers of special education referral and as a result of epoche, I am present to it only through their descriptions (Giorgi, 1985). I have presented a subjectivity statement and bracketed my assumptions and experiences to describe the phenomenon, special education referral, through a fresh and unbiased lens. Despite my experiences and notions, I remained focus on what is before me.
After collecting the data, the researcher progresses to the next stage of phenomenological research, phenomenological reduction (Moustakas, 1994). During this stage the transcribed interviews are examined for themes. Each participant’s transcribed interview is examined for all aspects of their experience that are unique to special education referral (phenomenon). Statements that are irrelevant to special education referral or that are repetitive are eliminated. Using the participants’ words, relevant themes are identified and a reduction of the data occurs. The experiences are developed into relevant and invariant themes from which individual textural descriptions are developed. Invariant themes and meaning units illustrate lack of variance in the data. They are "unique qualities of an experiences, those that stand out" (Moustakas, 1994, p.128). At the core of the data shared ideas (essence) can be found amongst participants. The textural descriptions are descriptions of the observable characteristics of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Individual textural descriptions are combined to develop a composite textural description of special education referral.

After phenomenological reduction is complete, the researcher returns to the original data to conduct imaginative variation. During imaginative variation, structural descriptions of the phenomenon are developed. The structures of the experience are the meaning and causes of the textural description (Moustakas, 1994). The relationship of texture and structure is that both the appearance and the hidden come together to create full understanding of the essences of a phenomenon and experience (Moustakas, 1994, p. 79).

In this phase, the researcher focuses on meaning and essences rather than empirical data (Moustakas, 1994) using a procedure known as free fantasy variation. Free fantasy variation is a reflective phase in which the researcher examines and reflects on
many possibilities, giving full and detailed description to the search for essences (Moustakas, 1994). Possibilities imagined are “structures of time, space, materiality, causality, and relationship to self and others” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 99). Thus, by using the information provided by the participants, and unbiased ideas that come from free fantasy variation, individual structural descriptions for each participant are formed (Husserl, 1931; Moustakas, 1994). The individual structural descriptions are combined to create a composite structural description that is representative across participants. Finally, the textural and structural composite descriptions are combined to construct the essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

**Data Analysis**

I began analysis with analyzing first the data of two key participants, David and Rebecca, followed by the three other participants. First, I open coded each participant’s three interviews. From the open codes, I developed horizons for the experience. Each participant’s transcripts were examined line by line for words, phrases, and statements significant to the special education referral experience (invariant meaning units), and then placed in themed categories. Next, the invariant meaning units and themes were synthesized together to form one textural description (descriptive summary) of the experience of special education referral. Actual data from the participant’s transcriptions were used as examples.

After reflecting on each participant’s textural descriptions, I developed structural descriptions (interpretative summaries) for each participant using free fantasy. Free fantasy is a written expansion of the participant’s textural description through my eyes, while continuing in Epoche. Next, I combined all of the participants’ textural descriptions to develop a group textural description. From the group’s textural
description, the group’s structural description was developed. During the final phase of analysis, I integrated the verbatim descriptive summaries and the interpretative summaries to form the groups’ synthesis textural-structural description of special education referral.

**Trustworthiness of the Study**

Validity in qualitative research can be defined as verification that the findings, bound to a particular context, are truthful and accurate (Borkan, 1999). I chose the term trustworthiness because it not only emphasizes trustfulness of my interpretation, but also affirmation of the data by my colleagues and the participants being studied (Glesne, 1999). Several steps were taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings. Using a subjectivity statement, I clarified my biases. In addition to the subjectivity statement, I remained in epoche by journaling my personal reflections and experiences during each phase of the investigation. During member checking, study participants were given the original transcripts for the purposes of ensuring clarity and adding any relevant information. With the exception of one participant, none of the participants made changes or additions to their transcripts. As a part of the member checking, participants were also given their textural and structural descriptions to review for accuracy.

External auditing occurred through biweekly meetings with my professor for the purposes of reflection and critique of my writing, the research process, and data analysis. Peer reviewing and debriefing took place at the beginning and end of the data collection and analysis. I presented my work and talked with doctoral students about the challenges of data collection, the analysis and arriving at findings.
CHAPTER 4
FINDINGS

This chapter highlights the descriptions of two key participants, David and Rebecca (all of the names of participants are pseudonyms), followed by the group’s description of special education referral. David and Rebecca were chosen to be key participants because of their diverse experiences with special education referral, as well as the richness of their special education referral description. David, a special education teacher, had a childhood friend and a cousin who were referred and placed in special education. He and his childhood friend attended the same schools but experienced school differently. As a special education teacher, David observed his cousin’s educational decline and eventual withdrawal from school. When referrals occur in his school, he is generally the teacher who is given the primary responsibility for the referred students’ academic and social progress. Rebecca, a general education teacher, experienced her daughter being referred to special education; therefore, she has experienced the roles of teacher and parent of a referred student. At the time of the study, Rebecca’s daughter was preparing to graduate from high school with honors.

In this chapter the key participants’ textural and structural descriptions are presented. After David and Rebecca’s descriptions, composite textural and structural descriptions, which include the voices of all participants, are presented. To respond to the primary research questions, the chapter concludes with a description of the essence of special education referral from the perspective of the African American elementary teachers in this study.
David

Textural Description

Early experience with referral

David recalled his early experience of special education. He remembered one of his childhood friends, an African American male, who was regularly pulled out of class in elementary school. David “didn’t really know what he was getting pulled out of class for.” Eventually, he found out that his friend was labeled emotionally handicapped and was on medication. He said, “I can remember he was the only kid that I went to school with that had a label.” David recalled that other Black students stayed in class together. This friend would get pulled out of class right before lunch and a couple of additional times a week. David and the other students would ask, “Why can’t we go to speech,” not realizing that it was a part of a special education program. “We just thought he was getting privileges that we weren’t getting,” David concluded.

When David and his peers transitioned to middle school, they recognized their classmate as “different” when they rarely saw him during the school day. Eventually, someone stated that David’s friend had a “skill-pack.” David explained, “Back then, skill-packs was an indication that he was behind.” David pointed out that later in high school, his friend would be placed on the “wang.” He reported, “At GHS we had this thing we used to call “wang” where, like all the ESE kids went. You don’t hang out with them, and you never really see them.” David’s friend was unique in the eyes of his peers, “a celebrity type, an athlete and real popular amongst the girls so everybody of course wanted to be cool with him.” He and David have remained friends.

Before becoming a teacher, David presumed the students in special education were retarded. Thinking the students in special education had “a real big problem,” he
and his peers made comments like, “Oh they need to get a check and their mental capacity is shot.” In hindsight, David wished he had “504 accommodations like all the extra time on tests.” He has noticed that the students at his current school ask to come to his classroom, unaware of the referral process or that he is the special education teacher. David suggested that if children need help “they should get it as early as possible, when it’s not so much attention brought to the situation.” He purported that “when kids are old enough to understand, it’s [being referred] actually depressing.” In elementary school they are too young to understand the referral process “or they’re just having too much fun in life to know, but every year [they] get older, things get a little bit more serious and I think that’s when they realize, [they are different].”

The “bittersweet” of the referral process

David described the referral process as “bittersweet.” According to him, in an effort to achieve a “perfect class,” general education teachers remove students who are different or stand out from the rest of the class. The general education teacher get [s] them out because they’re causing your [her] reading group to go a little bit slower . . . for the ESE teachers . . . it’s bitter . . . for the regular ed teachers that can dump on the ESE teachers, it’s sweet because they don’t have to put up with it.

He perceived that regular education teachers make few adjustments in their teaching style or lesson plans for students who are struggling.

David contended that referral becomes inevitable for those who do not match the “norm.” He explained, “once you get into the referral process, most likely they are going to find some kind of, you know . . . disability.” He noted,

If 100 students are referred, 60 of them will qualify for something. Once they get you . . . in for speech and language, if you qualify in speech and language eventually that kid ends up . . . in for math, spelling . . . then the whole academic setting.
David observed that at the end of the school year students are often staffed for speech and language,

then all of the sudden when the school year starts back because they didn’t score this on the FCAT or placement test . . . they’re [general education teachers] calling for another IEP meeting saying, “Oh these kids need small group instruction in reading or math or writing.”

Students that were doing well after being referred are caught by the referral process and removed from general education.

David noted experiences where

a referral might have started a year before and this kid, you know, is doing well and they figure well this kid qualifies for SLD, they place the kid on consult, by time the kid gets two referrals oh he needs to get ESE minutes.

He attested that referral becomes an easy way out for general education teachers. David explained, “How much easier is it to teach a class with no behavior problems, it’s great. You’re never having to redirect the student.” In the end the referral process often becomes more bitter than sweet for the referred student, who is removed from general education to special education where he or she receives inappropriate behavioral models and instruction.

**Elements influencing the referral process**

David recognized teacher tolerance, guidance counselor support, and “bogus” interventions as major factors influencing the referral process. According to David, referral starts with a teacher not wanting to deal with “inappropriate behavior.” Teachers have different levels of tolerance and they give different definitions of a “normal student.” David explained that the general education teachers’ definition of a normal student is as soon as they come in, [they] do what they are asked to do the first time, you don’t have to redirect them, you don’t have to go slow . . . everything is done at normal speed and you don’t have to worry about this kid not understanding this and understanding that.
David revealed that for some teachers a problem 2 days in a row is a cause for referral. David purported, “If you’re not normal for some reason, you know, whichever, whatever normal may mean, you know it gives the teacher an opportunity to get you removed from that class.” Teachers can be intolerant of students due to current academic or social performance, and due to family history. David reported teachers many times saying, “Oh, I had his sister or I had his brother and . . . I’m not going to put up with that from him.”

David preferred the referral process to be “an effort to keep a kid out of ESE,” but he has observed referral meetings being used to push students into ESE. He revealed, “The guidance counselors and all play a big part you know with these kids getting . . . once they get referred getting put into ESE.” He recalled sitting in meetings and hearing “parents be persuaded into signing, you know, the documents, you know to get their kids into ESE.” According to David, guidance counselors informed the parents, who are often poor, of possible economic benefits (i.e., a disability check) they could receive because of the child’s label. After the teacher and guidance counselor explain the referral, the referral process does not sound serious. David observed,

ESE gets smoothed over as, you know they [students] get extra time on their tests, you know, even the FCAT, you know they [students] get questions read aloud, even on the FCAT if they [students] need it, you know, they [teachers] can write for them [students] on the FCAT, if they [students] need it.

To a trusting parent, ESE sounds as if their child “is just getting an edge.”

David revealed, as a part of the School Study Team, members (e.g., general education teachers, special education teacher, school administrator, school district representative, guidance counselor, and school psychologists) are faced with the dilemma of using referral to maintain students in general education with supports and resources or remove students from the general education classroom. David illustrated,
If a teacher is coming to her [guidance counselor] saying, “You know, [David] he’s tearing up my class. I can’t have him in there, Ok we’ll refer him for EH.”

Ok, you totally refer him so at the same time are you going to put everything out on the table with his parents and tell them, “Well you know maybe you can do this, maybe this will work,” or are you going to set up some type of bogus interventions to make sure this process works?

He pointed out that interventions are developed solely by the general education teacher or with the help of the guidance counselor. David reported that he has seen interventions implemented as well as merely written down on paper. According to him, “Bogus interventions are set up to make the whole process work.” Teachers “cook up referrals based on just about anything.” During a previous referral meeting David recalled,

The regular ed teacher kept referring back to the intervention that was written . . . she kept saying, “Well let me see the folder so I can remember.” You’ve only got one referral in your class, if you’re really going forth with these [interventions], it’s something you’re going to recall easily in your mind.

Plans for interventions were written up, but they often were not implemented.

**Parents’ understanding of the referral process**

David perceived parents as lacking understanding of the referral process and its implications, being nonparticipatory and unempowered, and motivated by money during the referral process. According to David, “Parents are just kind of taking trust in the school . . . to make sure their kids’ education is, you know, taken in their best interest.” Parents do not understand what referral and placement mean. David admitted, “Working in the school system doesn’t help you understand it. Depending on who’s putting this information across to them, they [parents] may develop limited understanding.” Unaware of the referral process and its long-term effects “parents come in here and don’t ask one question and will tell you, ‘Well, just give me everything you need me to sign.’”
David detected differences in the referral experience when referring African American students versus White students. At the two elementary schools in which David has taught, “the majority of White kids [were] on consult services and the Black kids are the ones receiving the minutes (in a special education class).” David described attending meetings for students he did not know and hearing things that made him think, “If it was my brother, or my sister I’d say hold on what’s going on here, but you know, when it’s another student and not your relation and you’re really part of this team, you know it’s just not my role.”

In contrast, “White parents think of, you know, different ways they can help their kid out.” David observed that the involved parents who volunteer at school and are a part of PTA catch on to the process quickly and ask for clarification. A lot of Black parents do not understand. David suggested that before a child receives ESE services, parents should be educated about the short-term and long-term implications of referral, “even if you have to go to the house, the home, or wherever, to have a meeting with them.” Before parents sign any papers, they should “realize that your [their] kid may never get out of this process and the way they’re going to feel you know in 11th grade if they don’t drop out.”

David alleged that a lot of students are borderline ESE and can do without ESE services if their parents support and push them. Often parents do not show up to the meetings “so then it’s like a 10-day process, and then whatever the committee wanted to happen, happens and the parent has no say about it and don’t even really . . . technically don’t even know about it.” When parents are not involved in their children’s school, they are often unaware of their academic and social progress. David illustrated, if
I sit at this table and I say, [David] he’s reading at a start level or 1.5 and he’s in the third grade and he’s doing this and he’s doing that, the only thing you’re [the parent] thinking is “Oh no, he’s so behind, I’ve got to get him some help,” never mind you know whatever you’ve tried.

On several occasions David observed Black parents “sitting over there and they are just like, ‘Ok whatever you can do to help’ and at the end they [parents] ask, ‘Uh, is there any paper I can [sign to] . . . get financial benefits or something for this?’” David grappled with who should help parents understand their decision regarding whether they should support referral. Whose position is it to explain, “Ok, if you get this ball rolling downhill, it may never stop and it may hit something that totally tears up your kid’s life. How can that be explained to a parent?” David questioned.

**Structural Description**

**Student perceptions of referral and teacher perceptions of referral**

David’s childhood perceptions of referral differed from the perceptions he developed as a teacher. His childhood friend was the only person David knew that had a special education label. He noticed and did not understand why his friend, an African American male, was pulled out of their general education classroom. His friend seemed happy to go with the special education teacher and always returned with treats, pencils, or stickers. David and his classmates wanted to go with him to the place that made him so happy and gave him such wonderful things. “Why can’t we go to speech?” David and his classmates asked. They did not know he was in special education. They thought, “He was getting special privileges.”

When the transition to middle school occurred, David and his peers realized there were differences between themselves and their classmate. They rode with him on the bus each day, but never saw him during the school day. “Where did their classmate spend his
day?” they wondered. As time passed, the secret was exposed when someone saw the classmate carrying a “skill-pack”. Everyone in middle school knew what a skill-pack meant. It meant you were slow, behind, or lacking something. To be caught with a skill-pack was embarrassing and a secret that no one wanted others to know. David’s school day separation from his childhood friend continued into high school, when everyone knew this friend was on the “wang.” Most schools have a “wang,” the area where the portables and/or classrooms are closest to the parking lot and/or away from the general education population. General education students quickly learn to shun the “wang,” and the students with disabilities were encouraged to stay “in their own area.”

With the exception of his friend and before becoming a teacher, David thought students referred to special education must really have something wrong with them. In college, David found little difference between himself and students with disabilities. As an athlete, he met teammates who had disabilities and benefitted from accommodations he wished he had.

David contended that referral becomes inevitable for those who do not match the norm, and typically results in the segregation of those students. Once the referral process is initiated, the student is bound to receive a label. In David’s mind, if a student is evaluated, the chances of being labeled and eventually removed from general education become high.

In the beginning, the referral process appears minimal, but the consequences become greater with time. For example, David pointed out that students may start out being referred for speech and language, but they often continue to be referred for other subject areas until they are eventually removed from the general education setting. Students are quickly and easily placed into more restrictive settings rather than supported
in the general education classroom. Referred students are allowed few lapses in academics and/or behavior. If a referred student does well for a while and then has a lapse in academics and/or behavior, that student is quickly moved for more of the day to a special education classroom.

**Teachers’ use of referral**

In David’s mind, referral is an easy way out for general education teachers who do not want challenging behaviors or struggling students in their classrooms. These teachers want classrooms with “normal” students who do what is requested the first time, grasp concepts and ideas quickly, and do not need redirection. Students who do not match the “norm” quickly provide reason for referral. The referral process often starts with a teacher’s refusal to deal with what he or she considers inappropriate behavior. Not only are teachers intolerant of students’ inappropriate behavior and poor academic performance, but they are also intolerant of families. Teachers sometimes hold grudges or reflect on encounters with parents or older siblings when dealing with a current student.

David would like for special education referral to be a genuine effort to keep students out of special education, but he has experienced it to be a push to remove students from general education. Once the referral process starts, there appears to be no turning back. In most situations, the general education teacher and guidance counselor collaboratively work to have the student removed from the general education classroom and placed elsewhere.

While in the general education setting, some students receive collaborative consultation. These students are often White and have parent support and involvement. Black students are more likely to be pulled from general education and provided increased time in the special education classroom.
During the meetings for referral, parents are often persuaded to sign documents for referral and placement. When the teacher and/or guidance counselor explains referral, it does not seem serious or harmful. Parents are told their child will receive extra help, more time, assistance on FCAT, and/or assignments read or written for them. Parents leave meetings with the impression that eventually the child will catch up with his or her classmates. Parents who are uninformed or uninvolved are often trusting of teachers and schools. They rely on the teacher and school to do what is academically and socially beneficial for their child.

School Study Team members are faced with the dilemma of maintaining referred students in general education with supports and resources, or having students removed from general education. A frustrated teacher who is having daily issues with a student often views removal from her class as the only alternative. She has spoken with the guidance counselor about her concerns, and the strategies and interventions she has tried to no avail, and she concludes that there is nothing to do but refer the student.

Teachers who are determined to have a student removed from their classrooms can easily make it happen. The interventions developed by the School Study Team become a formality. Often they are identified with little thought given to the student’s needs. Simply words on a page, they are generic rather than tailored to a particular student. David suggested that if a teacher were serious about helping a student, the interventions would be diverse, genuine, and applicable to the student’s needs.

**Role of parents in the referral process**

Part of David’s experience of the referral process for African American students involves the important role of parents. In general, parents fail to understand the process. They trust the school to do what is best and do not ask questions or know what questions
to ask. David explained that even parents who work in the school system fail to understand referral and placement. Depending on who is presenting the referral and placement information, parents may develop a limited or no understanding of its short-term or long-term effects.

When White parents participate in referral meetings, teachers and administrators tend to identify with their concerns and desires. White parents tend to think of ways to help their children succeed. They are quick to catch on to the referral process, and do not hesitate to ask for clarification. These meeting typically result in their children receiving collaborative consultation services.

In contrast, African American parents tend to be less involved with schools and their children’s academics. David observed that they are often uninformed, uninvolved, and unempowered. There is often a disconnect between the school and African American parents’ concerns and desires. African American parents do not come to the referral meetings with suggestions for how to help their children succeed. Uninformed about the referral process, African American parents tend to be unaware of the short-term and long-term implications. Referrals for African American students typically result in placement in a special education class and eventually full-time placement. David stressed that before parents sign any papers, they should consider that their child may never return to general education, and how they will feel in high school when they realize their academic and social opportunities are limited. He recognized a necessity for active involvement and the empowerment of parents in their children’s academic and social futures. David alleged that many students are “borderline” and can do without special education services if they have parent involvement and support. By not attending referral
meetings, parents release their power and influence to schools, who decide on the placement and type of services their children will receive.

Rebecca

Textural Description

Use of referral

Rebecca described special education referral as a collaborative effort to help students. She reported that special education referral “help[s] us [teachers] help the students to gain the services they need to support them throughout their educational life.” Teachers, with the help of parents, “recognize the learning level, strengths, and weaknesses or deficiencies of the student” as a result of the process. Like a doctor, the teacher notes the areas of concern in order to refer the student for the appropriate services. “The teacher is there . . . to watch, to observe, to do different interventions, and then to help to write a prescription for what the child needs to help them to be successful in a learning environment.”

Rebecca considered several things before referring an African American student to special education. She stated that she tries to make a referral for students who she believes will be helped as a result of the process. In her decision-making, Rebecca disclosed that she takes some direction “from professionals that are there to analyze the student’s progress and determine what their needs may be.” However, “Before I refer a student, I would like to see how much they are able to do their work, to what level, how much they can achieve if given the opportunity to strive for higher standards of production and learning, and achievement.” Rebecca also makes her decision from “talking with the parents, watching the kid, taking documentation of how their work habits and their study habits are.” She notes what kind of learner the student is, what strategies work and do not
work with the student, how much information the student retains and how well he or she does on tests. Rebecca also examines African American students’ interactions with other students, and their academic and social level in comparison to where they should be.

As an African American teacher she disclosed that she felt bad about the use of referral for African American students to special education. “It is very, very, very, very embarrassing for me within my own self” seeing so many African American students referred for special education. “I know that some of them [African Americans students] are really nice sweet kids, they just come with like a little attitude” which leads them to being referred. Rebecca continued, “To send them down for referral because they didn’t do what I said when I said do it and they have an attitude, I don’t think that’s something you send the kids down to be referred for.”

In cases where an African American student is being referred to special education, Rebecca said she wanted to learn more about the student. Rebecca wanted to “see if I can extend the learning and see how far they can go . . . give them some enriching activities to see if they can handle any of it . . . try to see . . . what’s the highest level I can take them and get a positive response.” Her objective was to avoid placing African American students in “an ESE class and have the work watered down and do the bare basic minimum and they sit around all day doing nothing.” From her perspective, teaching students basic concepts is a necessity, but “do not get stuck on the basics.” Rebecca wanted African American students to remain challenged and motivated.

“Good” and “bad” referral process

Rebecca had mixed feelings about the referral process. She experienced the process from the roles of teacher initiating referral, teacher on School Study Team, and parent of a child being referred. She expressed that her referral experiences have been
both “good” and “bad.” Having the parents and professionals work together to determine the needs and appropriate interventions was helpful to Rebecca:

I felt good about the parents and the professionals being there and everyone putting in their opinion and documenting what they felt was needed. Finding out what the student’s medical or psychological needs were and what interventions were tried was beneficial. Everybody seems to have some information that you could put together.

However, she noted several issues that have made the experience difficult. One, Rebecca revealed that “Sometimes the little goals we put down are so minimal that it’s like, that’s what we would have done anyway so where’s the challenge here to move them up.” The goal becomes keeping the students happy without really challenging them. When the student whines, the challenges stop, “but yet, you know, it [testing] shows that they have the ability, but they do have a learning deficit.” Two, she disclosed, “the meetings are so long.” Everyone is allowed to talk without getting directly to the point. “Meetings, meetings in the morning, in the am in the pm, everyone’s talking, you know, long winded.”

In addition to the minimal goals and long meetings, Rebecca revealed a concern about “people like parents trying to manipulate the system to get additional stuff when the kid really doesn’t need it. It gets to be a power struggle. What I can do or what I can get. Which is great if you need it.” Four, in her experience Rebecca found that “Parents don’t a lot of times, know the gaps that we teachers see, they don’t know where most of the class is now in their learning process versus where your kid is and they don’t know the range.” She conveyed that parents often compare their children to themselves when they were their age and in a particular grade level: “They can’t fathom that the first graders are reading what they call second-grade material now until they come here and actually see it and process it. They really don’t quite understand the level that kids are reading at these days.”
Rebecca noted that the referral process generated a variety of feelings for her as a teacher and a parent of a child who has been referred. These feelings included fear, depression, expectation, intimidation, and confusion. Rebecca revealed in her experience as a teacher with “bad” special education referral, “It gets to be what am I going to write on this sheet. Something I know I can cover or something I think he really, really needs that would challenge him.” Fear sets in because “if you write more, something challenging, then you’re called on the carpet for not having reached a goal.” The rules and procedures “put more fear in the process than support to really help the kid. All “t’s” must be crossed, and all “i’s” dotted in fear of being sued or losing your job.”

As a parent, she struggled with similar emotions when her daughter was referred. “I felt bad. I’m a teacher, and she’s being referred. I was very depressed.” Later Rebecca agreed to have her daughter tested to find out what was going on. She reported, “But it was a hard question to say, ‘yes, let’s do it [test her].’ That was very, very hard.” Once she agreed to the referral process, “the time frame from being referred to being tested is a long one and uh, you kind of don’t know what path to take so you’re constantly up and down, ‘what should I do,’ ‘what do you need’, ‘can they do it,’ ‘can they not do it,’ ‘is there a problem,’ or ‘no problem at all.’” Not knowing what to do, Rebecca questioned, “Should I help her with her homework or should I, you know, should she be able to do it on her own. We were confused.” In hindsight, the referral of Rebecca’s daughter became a “good” experience because she became aware of her daughter’s academic strengths and weaknesses as well as appropriate strategies and interventions to help her.

**Reasons for referral**

Reflecting on her experiences with School Study Teams and referrals, Rebecca noted several reasons for referring students to special education: (a) behavior issues; (b)
academic problems; (c) lack of parent involvement; and (d) difference in mannerisms.

Rebecca disclosed that if she were to refer,

it would be because they’re [students] definitely lacking some skills and even though we’ve tried different interventions, they still don’t seem to grasp it. Referral would not occur until I had extinguished various types of teaching strategies for the point in time, the student’s age frame and grade level.

Rebecca purported that African American students struggle academically because they “just don’t know what to do because they just didn’t listen or they didn’t understand the directions, or the directions weren’t presented in a manner that they could understand and then work with, independently.”

In Rebecca’s experience with School Study Teams and referral, student behavior plays a significant role in placement. The behavior issues may stem from “not doing well in class.” She noted that students who are referred for behavior issues do not stop misbehaving even when asked to. Rebecca disclosed, “For a lot of students, if they did not have a behavior issue, which could be the signs of a learning disability, they wouldn’t be referred. For some of them, they are just having a behavior problem.” She purported that for many African American children “if they in any way show out [explicitly misbehave] or have a behavior problem, and are lacking just a little bit in their school work, that behavior issue is going to catapult them right into the referral list.”

Rebecca observed problems not only in the classroom, but also between home and school. She revealed, “There are issues between home and school with things you can do at school, and things you do at home.” Rebecca revealed, “I see a lot of students that are being referred that are indeed the ones that bring behavior from home to school.” Many of these students have behavior cards. She pointed out “You have a class of 25 and 5 walk into the room with these cards, and they are all Black.” At the end of the day the
students with behavior cards report to the behavior resource teacher (BRT) to assess how well they did for the day. The severe cases are then walked to the buses in a single file line. “When they walk them down, it may be 10 or 15 of our [African American] students in that line . . . of behavior kids.”

Rebecca conveyed, “It just seems to be strange and it hasn’t just happened, it’s been like that for years. Each year you see the same students and you know, African American students, still in the BRT office, in [in-]school suspension, in [out of] school suspension, being suspended, etc.” The severe behaviors are those involving hitting or tagging others “just their way of saying hi or whatever,” talking back to the teacher, voicing that they are not going to do something and not doing it. Rebecca remarked, “A lot of them may have said something in a rude way. They may be used to saying it that way, at home, so why would it be a problem here.”

The number of times a student goes to the BRT is documented, as well as who goes and why they go to the BRT. Rebecca disclosed that their information goes on a report to the school board “and it’s our [Black] kids, our kids, our kids.” When the student spends time at the BRT office, the student cannot get his homework or schoolwork done and “this [school] is the only place [he is] going to get it done.” Students then fall into “the well let’s refer them to ESE because they haven’t done anything.” Rebecca noted, “around this time of the year (spring) the line [to the bus] gets longer.”

Rebecca believed that parent involvement is important to the referral process. In her mind, without parent involvement teachers inappropriately address the needs of African American students. Rebecca purported that for some students, a push and additional supports from teachers and family may be all they need to move ahead
academically and socially. She believed that “there just needs to be something else in place with parents to be involved.” Teachers and parents should have the opportunity to work on intensive behavior modification before making referrals to special education. Some kids need parental support and help getting work done.”

Rebecca also believed that parents’ expectations play a significant role in the placement of students. She perceived that parents initially think referral helps students, but “after a while they may notice that the student has less work to do and that keeps them sort of pacified.” Parents who have high expectations for their child “ask that they not be pulled out [of general education] and be kept in the classroom with the rest of the students so they can be exposed to the same material in the sequence that it is brought forth in that grade level.” These parents are aware of how referral influences their child’s academic and social futures. As time passes, students “get to the high school level and [they’re] faced with a special diploma, no diploma, regular diploma, or university ready diploma, it [referral and placement] becomes the concern.” By high school the student “has been in that cycle and . . . it’s hard to pull them out.”

In addition to problems between home and school and lack of parent involvement, teachers’ abilities to understand students influences whether students are referred. Rebecca believed that many teachers do not possess the skills to relate to or handle some of their students. She pointed to “the teacher lacking the strategies, the motivation, or support that causes students to act out. As a result of the students’ acting out, the teachers and others say, ‘Well let’s refer them.’” Rebecca further revealed, “Some children are used to different mannerisms and their teachers have some mannerisms that they don’t seem to respond to.” For example, “Some kids are used to certain kinds of words or actions to let you know that [certain behaviors or words] really means this or not. Some
of them are used to being yelled at and then when you don’t, they are like, ‘Oh I got [you]’ and the student feels empowered”.

Added to students’ different mannerisms, African American students bring neighborhood situations that many teachers do not understand. For example, a student may have had a fight in the neighborhood, which is carried on to the school bus and then into school. “Everyone in the school doesn’t understand it, what’s going on.” When he arrives at school he carries the anger and frustration into the classroom setting where his or her education and that of his or her peers are placed in jeopardy. Using his or her judgment the teacher determines whether the student’s behavior is cause for alarm.

**Consequences of referral on teachers and African American students**

Rebecca perceives special education referral to have helped some African American students, but for many others it “has been a determent to their educational growth.” She believes that referred students work less than other students in the general education classroom, and that the students are academically losing out because work is made easy for them. As a result the students produce lower quality work and look for the “easy way out. They won’t go over and beyond because they know they can get by with doing less. The kid loses because they don’t try to push hard to strive for excellence.”

During their school careers, students are expected to have skills that will enable them to join the military, enroll in college, or obtain a job. Rebecca purported, “The kids [referred students] don’t have them [skills] because they’ve taken the least amount of work as possible. The ESE classrooms are filled with our [Black] students.” Special education is “just a cycle that doesn’t help them in the end.” According to Rebecca, once African American students are referred, they get caught in a cycle of watered-down curriculum that is “detrimental to their progress as they go throughout the educational
levels.” She disclosed “that we just have too many students in that cycle that really don’t need to be there.” Once parents are educated on what they can do to help students and develop collaboration with schools, then the “expectations need to be raised, [for African American students] not lowered . . . according to what is expected.”

Rebecca believed that African American students must be encouraged to strive for excellence early. “It’s hard to just start doing it all of the sudden.” She observed that when students are referred they feel ‘Oh, but I’m special, I’m ESE I can’t do that.” They use the idea of being in special education as their reason for why they cannot do higher-level reading or higher-level math. Rebecca suggests, “In actuality they could if they tried, and they had the support, and they didn’t take the ‘I can’t because’ attitude." When it is determined that the student has a learning disability and needs help learning basic skills, then the question becomes “Why would you want them to do more, or try to do more, what makes you think they can do it?” The achievement gap between students with disabilities and students without disabilities becomes wider and wider. Rebecca disclosed, as a teacher

you’re working on their basic addition with the group instead of moving on to algebraic equations. If you don’t sometimes tell them, ‘this might be difficult for you’ and just give it to them, sometimes a lot of them will do it and move on.

According to Rebecca, referral has its benefits and can initiate positive change. Referral of students helps teachers realize “how they [students] learn best.” Teachers are made aware of students’ learning styles, strengths and weaknesses, and the tasks and assignments that are easy and difficult for them. Rebecca suggested that from the referral process teachers learn “how to make adjustments and accommodations to compensate for, you know, other skills they may or may not have.” The teacher and parents are able to work together to help support the student. Rebecca pointed out, as a result of the
referral process “we’ve [teachers] had to do more faculty, professional development on
the topic of management of behavior and working with ESE students and understanding
what their needs may be.”

In Rebecca’s mind, referral should impact African American students in positive
ways. As a result of referral, African American students’ potentials should be maximized.
Teachers should feel they are “helping the student and not hindering them by referring
them.” Rebecca believed that students should move from “surface level understanding to
a more in depth understanding” of concepts. African American students should be
provided with various strategies and opportunities to enhance their learning, “not be
given watered down curriculum or no curriculum or haphazard curriculum or if you’re in
third-grade, first-grade curriculum.” The accommodations given to students should “help
them to learn and to stay, you know, in tune with the classroom or the grade level” so
they make academic and social progress. According to Rebecca, referral should help the
student “stay at or above, but not always working below the rest of the class.” When
referral is done in conjunction with parent participation, the process is made easier;
however, when it is left solely to the teacher who has other students with special needs,
the process does not work well.

General education and special education collaboration to help students

Rebecca believed that “for the most part, it’s possible to keep referred students
within the classroom [general education]” by bringing in the special education teacher to
assist the classroom teacher with accommodations. In her mind, general education and
special education “need to work together . . . almost in the same classroom because what
the homeroom [general education] teacher is expecting the kid to do when they go to
special ed doesn’t necessarily happen.” General education is expecting special education
to take the general education curriculum and teach it using accommodations at a slower pace. Rebecca noted that special education “may do a couple of chapters and the teacher [general education] has done 30 and they [general education] are expecting that the kids were exposed to all of it and it doesn’t happen.”

In Rebecca’s mind, general education and special education teachers should collaborate throughout the entire school year to appropriately support each other’s work. Rebecca suggested that general education and special education teachers meet weekly to go over what chapters we’re [they’re] going to be working on, what strategies we’re [they’re] going to use with these students, what do you expect them to know, what are they expected to know, and let the parents know where they are.

She revealed that teachers do not have time to collaborate during the school day. Rebecca suggested that teachers be paid to meet after school. Teachers should “get stipends for an hour where they can talk together and develop the plan for the week for the student.” She found that when teachers and/or parents do not meet for “weeks and weeks at a time, everybody kind of gets off level.”

**Structural Description**

**Purpose of referral**

Rebecca does not make referrals for students who she thinks will not be helped by being referred. She believes that all students can be successful if given appropriate supports. Before referring a student, Rebecca closely examines the work the student is able to do and provides opportunities for the student to maximize his or her potential. Rebecca revealed that before she refers a student, she wants the opportunity to observe the student’s strengths and challenge the student to take advantage of opportunities to enhance his or her learning and achievement. She believes that some students only need teachers and families to collaborate to enhance their social and academic well-being.
Rebecca views special education as the place where students should be provided the support and opportunities to maximize their potentials. Their differences are appreciated and seen as “normal.” Students are provided the best resources and personnel to meet individual needs, which may be emotional, academic, or physical. Special education referral helps students to receive life-long support. It helps teachers and parents collaborate to determine students’ strengths and weaknesses. The role of the group, similar to that of well-trained doctors, is to diagnose and solve the student’s problem. The teacher plays a major role in the examination process, having observed the child and used various strategies that have failed to produce the desired results.

Rebecca believes that some teachers lack the strategies to help students who are struggling in school, particularly those with behavior challenges. Referring these students appears to them to be the only way to get help for the student and relief for the teacher. After dealing with the problem behavior for a period of time, some teachers lack the motivation or support to help the struggling student, who, out of frustration begins to act out in class. Having gathered support from others, the teacher throws up his or her hands and cries out, “Refer him!”

**How the referral system should work**

In Rebecca’s mind, referral of students should not occur until all resources and interventions are exhausted. Through the referral, the teacher will become aware of a possible underlying problem of which she was unaware. The problem could be within the student or within the teacher and/or classroom. As a result of the referral process, the teacher will be provided with insight into how to redirect or support the child. Rebecca described two phases of referral: informal referral and formal referral. Informal referral occurs before formal referral, and begins with observations by the teacher.
whether the child’s classroom performance (i.e., academic and/or behavioral) is cause for a referral. After she has decided that the child’s performance is cause for alarm or too much for her to successfully address, she speaks with the school guidance counselor. The teacher and the guidance counselor discuss the student of concern and set a time for the guidance counselor to come into the classroom to observe the student.

After the guidance counselor observes the student, the teacher meets with the guidance counselor again and possibly the principal, parents, and other relevant individuals. At this point they discuss accommodations and interventions to help the student achieve the academic and behavioral success expected at his or her grade and age level. With the agreement of the interested parties, teachers return to the classroom to implement the suggestions and plans for the student. If the teacher continues to see little or no progress, the teacher has the option of meeting with the SST and the parents, and decides whether to make a formal referral. During the formal referral, testing occurs. The student is given a battery of tests to confirm suspected deficiencies or underlying issues and a determination is made as to whether the child should be labeled and receive special education services.

**Pitfalls of the referral process**

Although she has strong beliefs about how the system should work, Rebecca describes referral as both a positive and frustrating experience. A positive aspect is that teachers, parents, administrators, and other professionals work together to provide the best learning opportunity and environment for the student. Everyone provides his or her perspective about the child’s performance in and outside of school. The student’s medical and psychological information, along with the failed interventions, are discussed in hopes
of getting him or her the appropriate help. Teachers who had been frustrated by a problem they were not able to previously identify are given a name and label.

A troubling aspect of referral is that everyone has an opinion about the student’s problem, often resulting in a lengthy process. Rebecca revealed that there are several meetings where everyone continuously talks without getting to the issue at hand, “How can we in general education best help this student?” When goals are finally developed for the student, they are often unchallenging, providing no opportunity for academic and/or social growth. She reported goals being implemented to keep students content rather than challenge students to maximize their potentials. Through the referral process, tests reveal that the student has a disability; however, in an attempt to keep him happy, goals are written that do not challenge him.

Another difficult aspect of referral is the power struggle that can arise between parents and educators. Rebecca disclosed that informed of possible services and assistance available to students with disabilities, parents makes requests that they do not necessarily need. In addition, parents have a difficult time understanding the educational gaps educators see. She pointed out that parents are not in the classroom and are unable to compare their child’s performance with the other students in the class. Uninformed parents often compare themselves to their children when they were their age and grade level: “When I was a kid I could not read as well as Mike.” But it was over 20 years ago since some parents were in third grade. It is difficult for parents to understand the academic or behavioral gaps their children may be experiencing in comparison to their peers.

It is no surprise that referral elicits feelings of fear, depression, intimidation, and confusion for teachers, parents, and students. If a teacher documents that she will cover
three-digit addition and subtraction with a student, she is expected to meet the goal or face possible scrutiny from the administration and parents. Rebecca revealed that teachers experience a tension between writing goals that are convenient for the teacher or goals that help and challenge students. She purported that fear sets in because you do not want to appear to be a bad teacher. Rebecca disclosed that teachers fear developing goals that are in-depth and challenging because of the possible consequences of not meeting goals. In her mind, the rules and procedures of the referral process invoke fear and intimidation rather than help for the students. Teachers could help students more if the fear of not reaching goals and being fired or sued was not so dominant in the process.

**Reasons teachers refer students**

Rebecca pointed to teaching style and academic issues, behavioral challenges, and cultural differences as reasons why teachers refer students. She was concerned about the numbers of African American students who are swiftly swept out of general education to special education classrooms when they show signs of a problem. Rebecca believed that if sincere efforts were made to include African American parents in the educational process and to provide African American students with additional strategies, accommodations, and modifications, African American students would excel in general education, rather than waste away in special education.

Rebecca had concerns about the overrepresentation of African Americans in special education, particularly the number of African American boys labeled learning disabled and/or emotionally handicapped. She did not want to see the majority of the special education classrooms filled with African American students and particularly African American boys. Rebecca believed there should be balance in the numbers of African American students served in special education programs in comparison to their
representation in the school population. She wanted African American students to have the most appropriate educational environment and questioned, “Why are there not more African Americans students in gifted programs? Are African American children more disabled than gifted?”

Rebecca disclosed that many children are referred because of teaching style and/or academic challenges. She reported that African American students are less likely to respond to the teacher’s teaching style. The student is either inattentive to instruction or does not comprehend the curriculum to a level of independence. Rebecca reported that when African American students leave the classroom they do not know how to complete the assignments and are less likely to have the resources at home to assist them in their understanding. She purported that teachers do not present the assignments in a manner that the African American student can understand and work with appropriately. Often these teachers struggle to teach ethnically and racially diverse students.

Some students misbehave because they are not doing well in school. They lack academic skills and are challenged to complete assignments with few supports at home and/or in school. Other behavior problems stem from home and neighborhood issues. Rebecca pointed out that many students who are referred bring “inappropriate behaviors” from home to school. Students also have family and neighborhood challenges over which they have no control. Once students arrive at school, they may have difficulty turning off home and neighborhood issues in order to focus on school responsibilities.

Rebecca revealed that many students who have not mastered the skill of turning off the home and neighborhood issues have behavior cards and are in the referral process. At Rebecca’s school, all of the students with behavior cards are African American. At the end of the school day, all of the children with behavior cards report to the BRT’s office
where their performance is assessed. Rebecca purported that every year African American students are continuously contained in the BRT office. In addition to the BRT office, African American students, are in [in-]school suspension, in [out of] school suspension, and being suspended. When the school day is over the students are marched to their buses in a single file line. School year after school year it has been the same, a line of Black children escorted to the bus.

Rebecca noted that teacher perceptions of differences were important to the referral process and particularly the referral of African American students. She believed that the teachers and African American students are culturally and socially disconnected. Most teachers operate from a White perspective in contrast to their student population that is increasingly ethnically and racially diverse. Teachers struggle with identifying with their students’ lives. Rebecca explained that she is a teacher who knows the backgrounds of African American children, but is sometimes surprised by their neighborhood and family situations. She revealed that she forgets that students do not live in ideal home situations where both parents work, children and parents respect each other, and there are desks, supplies, and a computer to complete assignments. Recognizing and appreciating individual differences, Rebecca builds upon students’ strengths.

Rebecca cited that cultural mismatching between the teachers and students often results in teachers not wanting to teach African American students. Many teachers are not prepared for the culture African American students bring to the classroom. Rebecca disclosed that most African American students are accustomed to certain mannerisms of which their teachers are unaware. She reported that teachers with a sweet and soft tone of voice have difficulties managing and teaching African American students, who often respond better to authoritative behavior management. According to Rebecca, a power
struggle begins when the African American student does not respond to his or her teacher’s method of behavior management.

According to Rebecca, a teacher’s ability to tolerate and/or manage behavior influences whether a student is referred. The students with “severe” behaviors, who are often African American, are sent to the BRT’s office. Rebecca defined “severe” behaviors as hitting or tagging others, talking back to the teacher, and defiance. The teacher may perceive that the student behaved in a rude way, but Rebecca points out that the student may have simply behaved as he or she would at home. She discloses that when a student is sent to the BRT’s office, every visit is documented and reported to the school board. While students are in the BRT’s office, they miss instruction, assignments, and examples of positive behavior, as well as possible help from their teacher. After a period of time, students fall further behind their peers academically. Rebecca purported that often school is the place where students have the resources and supports available to complete their assignments and homework. Removal of students from their general education classroom becomes detrimental to their academic and social growth.

Significance of parent involvement

Rebecca identified parent involvement as the missing link for African American students’ academic and social success. In her mind, teachers and schools should willingly invite parents to spend time in their child’s classroom. These visits would allow parents to observe their child and the teacher’s interaction, as well as the instruction, resources, and teaching strategies used. Rebecca suggested that teachers can train parents to use strategies and instructional resources at home. She explained that many parents believe that teachers have the sole responsibility of educating children. This belief is detrimental to the academic and social success of many African American students, who are often
academically behind the average White student, and do not receive continued academic review and practice at home. Early parent, student, and teacher communication and training on school and academic expectations would result in fewer referrals to special education.

The outcome of referral is strongly influenced by parent expectations. Rebecca perceives that parents initially think that referral is going to help students. Soon the parent may notice that their child has less work, which they may view as positive (e.g., less stress, more free time) or a negative (e.g., less or no challenge, too much free time) for others. Rebecca reported that often African American parents are unaware of the school’s expectation of how parents will provide academic support to their children. Often they leave the educational responsibilities to the teacher. Not understanding the long-term educational and social outcomes of referral, these parents are unaware of the consequences of special education referral. Other parents who are aware of the consequences request for their children to remain in the general education classroom where they are exposed to the general education curriculum and general education peers. Rebecca revealed as time goes on the child gets to the high school level and is faced with the decision of pursuing a special diploma, no diploma, regular diploma, or university ready diploma referral and placement becomes the concern. In elementary and middle school the referral placement appeared to be a blessing, but by high school, when students have been in the cycle of special education placement for years, it is difficult to pull them out.

**A collaborative approach to help students**

Rebecca concluded that by bringing the special education teacher into the general education classroom it is possible to keep students who would be referred in the general
education classroom. She suggested that the general education and special education teachers work together to provide necessary supports in the same classroom. As it is now, general education teachers expect special education teachers to teach the same curriculum as general education at a slower pace; however, this does not happen in special education because of the various levels and needs of students.

When special education teachers and general education teachers collaborate on curriculum and strategies, all students as well as the teachers benefit. They are able to discuss appropriate strategies and curriculum for students, what is expected of each teacher, what they expect students to know, and they can collaborate to form proactive communication with parents. Rebecca suggested that general education and special education teachers receive stipends that will encourage them to meet and develop weekly lesson plans for students. She cautioned that when teachers do not consistently and collaboratively meet, students’ needs are often inappropriately addressed. Through consistent teacher collaboration, students have multiple teachers, and referred students are provided with role models of positive behavior and grade level academic success in the general education classroom.

**Composite Textural Description (All Participants)**

All of the teachers in this study wanted special education referral to be a collaborative effort to help students. Many hoped that the process would reveal where the student was performing academically and how best to help the student. In deciding whether to refer, they considered whether referral would “be something that will definitely help the child move forward” (Rebecca).

When describing the referral process, teachers in the study noted students being referred for the sole benefit of the referring teacher. Teachers suggested in an effort to
achieve a “perfect class,” general education teachers remove students who are different
or stand out from the rest of the class. The general education teacher

gets[s] them out because they’re causing [her] reading group to go a little bit
slower . . . for the ESE teachers . . . it’s bitter . . . for the regular education
teachers that can dump on the ESE teachers, it’s sweet because they don’t have to
put up with it. (David)

General educators make few changes in their teaching style or lesson plans to
accommodate students who are struggling. There is little teacher collaboration to help the
student remain in general education.

Participants noted that African American teachers performed the role of
advocates for African American students during the referral process. Michael revealed
when going into the referral meeting, "I want to know now, who is on the process, IEP,
the individual education plan team and who are we looking at for special placement."
He emphasized, "It's my job to go in and make sure that I'm on everyone of those,
especially the African American students." Michael reported, "In the past teachers would
sign for students to be tested without parents or people of color being there." He
determined that "it should be that we're [African American teachers] standing up for the
African American students so you kind of did that [attend meetings for referral] and
almost felt like an obligation that you had to be there for them." Sarah disclosed incidents
where she reported breaches of confidentiality to her school's principal. She highlighted a
conversation a SST member had with her, "[She] discussed how she thought this child
should have been retained and everybody was walking by." In Sarah's mind, all of the
students' records should be secure. However Sarah noted that "there are some children,
you know from different backgrounds and if you were not to see them in the special ed
classroom, you would never know that they were in there." Other students are "always,
always talked about." Teachers talk publicly about "[students] having a problem that day or if something went wrong in one of the meetings."

In his experience with SSTs, Paul reported teachers resisting his optimistic perceptions of African American students being referred: “Oh you’ve got . . . thinking I’m nuts . . . in your class she’s this, she’s this . . . and you know how it is. Teachers just go on and on, feeding on the negatives, nothing positive about the child.” Once the student is placed in special education, the general education teacher feels “they’re out of my hair and I don’t have the total responsibility for them to get the basic core stuff in these classes” (Paul).

The teachers in this study stressed the importance of teachers knowing their African American students. Rebecca believed "[school] faculty could use some training on how to work with African American kids." The training would help the faculty "understand some of the things they [African American students] may say that aren't really anything to refer them about." Michael questioned, "How are you going to teach somebody if you've never been in their community before? So how are you going to understand, how are you going to understand the people if you've never been in their community?" David pointed out, "If you live in Dove Place and you never travel over to talk to your kids or visit your kids or see what your kids are living like in Highland Lake, you never know, I mean you don't know what they go through there."

When describing the referral process, teachers focused on the duration, goals and interventions generated. Teachers noted that academic referrals tend to take longer and the teacher “still has to kind of work with that child until all this [referral process] is finished and sometimes it takes a year or more” (Paul). The referral process consists of
“meetings, meetings in the morning, in the am in the pm, everyone’s talking, you know, long winded” (Rebecca).

In addition to the length of the process, teachers were concerned about the goals and interventions for students being referred. Teachers viewed the goals and interventions as minimal, bogus, and superficial. During the referral process, “sometimes the little goals we put down are so minimal that it’s like, that’s what we would have done anyway so where’s the challenge here to move them up” (Rebecca). The goal becomes keeping the student happy without really challenging him or her. When the student whines, the challenges stop, “but yet, you know, it [testing] shows that they have the ability, but they do have a learning deficit” (Rebecca).

Teachers attested to seeing interventions that were just written down on paper. David purported, “Bogus interventions are set up to make the whole process work,” and teachers “cook up referrals based on just about anything.” The participants alleged that teachers know what to check and questions to ask to get the results they want. Teachers “put down some meager kinds of things, expectations, academic little goals, and that’s about it; most of those things are superficial anyway” (Paul). David recalled an instance during a referral meeting when

the regular ed teacher kept referring back to the interventions that was written . . . she kept saying, “Well let me see the folder so I can remember.” You’ve only got one referral in your class, if you’re really going forth with these [interventions] it’s something you’re going to recall easily in your mind.

Teachers cautioned that interventions are written up, but often are not implemented.

All the teachers noted academics as their primary reason for referral. When they are a part of SSTs, all of the teachers try to make sure that students are not being referred for “nit-picking” behavior (Sarah). They questioned whether the reason for referral is behavioral or genuinely academic. All of the teachers believed that African American
students are referred primarily because of behavior and teacher intolerance. Paul explained, “Most of our [Black] children get in those programs, the special ed programs because of that behavior element, they’re refusing to do, can’t tell me what to do, who do you think you are, I don’t have to do it.” Rebecca elaborated, “To send them [African American children] down to referral because they didn’t do what I said when I said do it and they have an attitude, I don’t think that’s something you send the kids down to be referred for.” Paul hypothesized that African American children cannot be easily “broken.” He argued,

I don’t care how bad you talk to them and how you treat them, you don’t break them. You can push me down, you can shove me here, I’m not going to do it. Some people say, they [African American children] are emotionally disturbed, something’s wrong with them because they’re not responding to normal kinds of comments or commands. Our children do act loud, talk loud and won’t do nothing,

but this does not mean they are incapable of learning or that they have emotional disabilities.

Teachers believed that parental involvement was pertinent to the referral process and student outcomes. The students with more parent involvement are less likely to have their records openly discussed. Sarah pointed out, "These are some of the children that their parents are on the PTA or they are always there constantly volunteering." The "parents you have never seen that you wouldn't recognize if they came to you on the street. Those tend to be the children that all of their personal information is talked about on the sidewalk."

When parents are uninvolved they are likely to believe whatever the school says. Most parents do not want a referral and placement, but "most say well the school thinks it's right, this paper that they took the test that they took shows uh, that it's right, then it
must be right.” Michael acknowledged, "we send our child thinking the school is going to
do it all for us so we just really need to be seen more." Sarah believed showing up to
meetings is not enough. Parents "need to make sure that they fully understand what their
disability is and what strategies are going to be used."

Referral is not an easy process. She disclosed, "I see a lot of the teachers, they try
to explain as much as they can, but still they walk out of there with a stack of papers."
Being an African American teacher, "they [parents] tend to be more open with me and
tend to sit down and ask . . . ask what they need to ask." Paul suggested "not placing
blame on something the parents have done, and stressing this is something that's
happened and that this kid can learn." He contended, "If we just sit and help them
[parents], not just say, well he has learning disabilities and we put him in this class"
parents do not become overwhelmed.

Some teachers are not able or do not have the skills to relate to or handle some of
the African American students. “Some children are used to different mannerisms and
their teachers have some mannerisms that they don’t seem to respond to” (Rebecca). For
example, “Some kids are used to certain kinds of words or actions to let you know that
really means this or not. Some of them are used to being yelled at and then when you
don’t, they are like, Oh I got . . . . the student feels empowered” (Rebecca).

The participants suggested that some teachers are more tolerant of some students
than others. Teachers “really seem to lose patience when dealing with African American
students for some reason. We take so much time out to talk about other cultures, but we
don’t really look into how to deal with African Americans” (Sarah). Diversity training is
available for ESOL, but

we really don’t have a place for our identity or . . . special qualities that make our
community shine. I know that a lot of teachers don’t really take the time and
really do that, to instill pride in their [African American] community in their
[African American] ethnic background like they do some of the other cultures. (Sarah)

The differences between African American culture and Caucasian cultures are “really brushed under the rug” (Sarah).

Teachers in this study perceived that special education referral helped some African Americans but has become detrimental to many others. Teachers believed that referred African American students work less because they are less challenged. African American students “won’t go over and beyond because they know they can get by with doing less” (Rebecca). They start to feel they do not have to do as much or more than other students: “I’m special. I’m ESE; I can’t do that” (Rebecca). African American students who are referred seem to conclude, “I don’t have to do much for those who know that they are capable of doing more; we go there [to special education] we do this” (Paul).

All of the teachers hoped that the African American students referred to special education would return to general education having made academic progress and having achieved enhanced self-confidence. However, the teachers noted little difference between the students’ performance prior to referral and after referral. Michael remarked,

Their scores seem to stay low from what I’ve seen. Even after they left elementary school for middle school to high school, you know, what’s the difference. With all of that and what we’ve spent money wise, how many went to college, how many became successful?

Referral should “help students stay at or above, but not always working below the rest of the [general education] class” (Rebecca). The teachers suggested that there are large numbers of African American students who are referred to special education and never return to general education. When it is noticed they can perform at level or above, I don’t think there’s any effort to quickly get them back into a regular setting. How can one get out of the program once in, is that built into the whole educational plan, you know, and I don’t hear that. (Paul)
The teachers in this study wanted special education referral to appropriately meet the needs of students who are struggling. They had hopes for the process not only revealing students’ weaknesses, but also their strengths and how to maximize them. In deciding to refer or not, the teachers considered whether referral would benefit the student. They questioned whether the student’s academic and social self would be nurtured. Despite their hopes, the teachers perceived referral as benefitting the referring teacher more than the student. The teachers believed that general education teachers are seeking a “perfect class,” one with few behavior and/or academic challenges (David). The students in a perfect class listen well, follow directions, respect others, complete their assignments independently, and require little redirection. Students who distort the picture of the “perfect class” by being different from the majority of their peers are quickly noticed and monitored for possible referral to special education and removal from general education (David). Little change is required on the part of the general education teacher, who is often frustrated and determined to have the student removed.

The determination to have the student removed sometimes causes tension with other teachers who are a part of the SST. The teachers in this study described SST meetings where referring teachers resisted hearing positive feedback or perceptions about the referred student from other team members. The frustrated referring teacher tends to focus on negatives qualities. In the end, the general education teacher is relieved to have the referred student removed from his or her class and responsibility, but the special education teacher feels overwhelmed as his or her student case load and responsibility increases.
Teachers identified themselves and African American teachers in general as advocates for African American students during the special education referral process. Michael wanted to know which students were being referred and believed he or another African American should be present at referrals involving African American students. Historically, African American students were tested and placed in special education with no representation of an African American parent or African American teacher.

Sarah reported situations where teachers discussed confidential matters of African American students publicly (e.g., sidewalks, parking lots, teacher lounges). Troubled by teachers disregard of students' privacy, Sarah reported the incidences to her principal. Sarah wanted all the students' records secure, whether their parents were involved with the school or not.

As a member of the SST, Paul elaborated on teachers' resistance to his positive perceptions of referred students. The disagreements centered around Paul's positive experiences with the referred student and the referring teachers' negative experiences with the student. Paul reported that referring teachers tended to focus only on students' negative behavior and/or negative encounters with students' families. He explained that he did not have the problems in his class that the other SST members were having. As the lone advocate for the student, Paul disclosed being perceived as "nuts" for seeing the student positively.

Teachers believed that "knowing" African American students and their communities was pertinent to their academic and social success. Several teachers believed that educators needed professional development to assist them in working with and understanding African American behaviors. This understanding would help faculty realize that certain behaviors are not cause for referral. Teachers questioned teachers'
ability to teach African American students without knowing their communities. This "knowing" goes beyond what is written on paper or discussed amongst teachers. It involves visiting the communities of the African American students they serve, interacting with African American parents and having resources (e.g. churches, community service groups, sororities, fraternities) that are important to the lives of African American students. In their minds, teachers' understanding of African American students is limited when they have not visited and spent time "knowing" their communities. In addition to community visits, trainings should allow educators to critically reflect on their perceptions and expectations of African American students and the African American community.

Three of the teachers describe the referral process as long, taking as much as a year to complete, and superficial. Academic referrals are often a longer process than behavioral referrals. While the teacher waits for a final analysis of the referral process, she is expected to continue to work with the student despite academic or social challenges. The referral meetings occur before and after school and entail extensive discussion. The participants reveal that teachers have a difficult time getting to the heart of the student’s issues. During the referral process, the teacher and guidance counselors develop goals and interventions to assist in assessing the referred students’ abilities and progress.

Teachers in this study viewed the goals and interventions as minimal, bogus and/or superficial. They revealed that teachers write down goals that they know can be easily implemented or that they will not be “called on the carpet” for later (Rebecca). Little thought is put into how the goals and interventions will help the referred student. The referring teacher focuses on keeping the referred student happy. When the student
whines or complains about the work, the assignments and tasks are made easier even though the student is capable of doing more. Once the goals and interventions are written, few teachers consistently implement them.

All the teachers in this study noted academics as their primary reason for referral. They recognized that some children struggled in the general education setting and needed small group and individualized instruction. After exhausting all resources (e.g., other teachers, parents, administrators) the teachers used referral as a last resort. All the teachers purported waiting as long as possible to be sure nothing else could be done to help the student. Teachers questioned whether referrals were genuine. When the teachers in this study were a part of SSTs, they carefully listened and observed others to be sure students were being appropriately and fairly identified. Teachers did not like referral meetings where teachers were close-minded to insights about the child and focused on “nit-picking” behaviors or students’ “little attitudes” (Sarah).

Teachers in this study believed that parental involvement was pertinent to the referral process for African American students. Students of White parents who are often more involved than Black parents are less likely to have their academic and/or social issues publicly discussed. Sarah revealed that students of parents who are uninvolved in schools are likely to have their personal information discussed on sidewalks, lounges, and parking lots. Teachers reported that uninvolved parents are likely to believe the perspectives of SSTs because they are unaware of the consequences of referral. Teachers in this study noted that most parents believe that the school is totally responsible for their child's education. In these teachers' minds, not only should African American parents attend referral meetings, but they must empower themselves with the knowledge of the consequences of referral. Instead of blaming parents, teachers should assist parents
through the difficulty of referral, clarify the child’s disability or related issues, and provide strategies to be used at home to support students.

The teachers stated that African American students are primarily referred because of behavior issues and lack of teacher tolerance. All of the teachers acknowledged that teaching African American children can be challenging. They contend that African American children can have a “little attitude” where they talk loud and refuse to do something (Paul). In their minds, referring a student with a “little attitude” makes little sense (Rebecca). The teachers surmised that African American children have “different mannerisms” to which many teachers do not know how to respond (Rebecca). For example, some students are accustomed to being spoken to firmly, and when teachers make a quiet request, the students perceive the teacher as insincere and perhaps weak. Eventually, the teacher’s tolerance drops and he or she loses her patience with the African American student.

All of the teachers in this study criticized the lack of discussion about how to meet the needs of African American students and their families. Teachers noted that a lot of teachers do not take “time . . . to instill pride” in the African American student’s community and ethnic background “like they do some other cultures” (Sarah). The cultural conflicts between African American culture and Caucasian culture are often ignored and viewed as unimportant.

Four of the teachers perceived special education referral as often being “crippling” to African American students’ academic and social progress (Rebecca). Teachers believed that referred students received less work, and work that did not challenge them to excel. They suggested that African American students are capable of doing excellent work, but the special education label often stigmatizes them. When given
assignments, many of these students inform teachers, “I can’t do that because I’m in ESE” (Paul). Believing that they cannot achieve, African American students produce the bare minimum. Teachers in this study posed that when African American students are given challenging grade level work without being told of the difficulty, they often complete assignments with little or no protest.

Wanting to see enhanced academic growth and self-confidence in African American students, teachers questioned the benefit of special education referral. Many of the referred African American students make “little or no progress,” and when they do make academic and/or social gains, “little or no effort” is made to return the student to the general education classroom (Michael). Teachers noted that low test scores and below grade-level academic performances follow referred African American students throughout their educational careers. Most of the teachers in this study questioned, “with all the money spent money wise,” the numbers of students who enter college and are successful as a result of being referred. (Michael) Although many meetings occur to get students referred to and placed in special education, little discussion or planning takes place to get students out.

**Essence**

This is the summary of the essence of special education referral as it applies to the African American teachers in this study. In this investigation special education referral refers to the process elementary teachers use to receive special education help and services for struggling students that are suspected of having a disability (e.g., learning disability, emotional disability, mental retardation). Essential components of the experience of special education referral include appropriateness of referral, consequences of referral, parental influence on referral, and “good” and “bad” referral.
Appropriateness of Referral

Teachers want to be sure that referral is appropriate for students. Not wanting to confuse cultural differences with disabilities, they tend to wait a little longer than other teachers before referring students. Participants welcome the challenge of working with students who are academically and/or socially struggling. They collect work samples and provide students with challenging work and diverse strategies in hopes of improving their academic and social achievement. Teachers use observations and tests for the purpose of knowing students’ strengths and determining appropriate instructional strategies. Participants not only rely on themselves to assess students but also on parents and other teachers. In their minds, special education referral is utilized when all other resources to help the students succeed are exhausted.

When considering special education referral, teachers attended to goals and interventions. The goals and interventions ensure where and how students are helped. Teachers recognized the importance of having an array of strategies and interventions in working with students who are struggling. They attributed many of the social and academic problems that teachers have with African American students to a lack of skill, strategies, and interventions on the part of teachers. Some teachers suggested that teachers do not have the time or do not wish to help struggling students. Many of the teachers viewed the goals and interventions developed for referred students as minimal. They questioned whether goals and interventions are actually implemented. The teachers perceived that often goals and interventions are written as a formality with the sole intention of having students removed from general education.

Participants also commented on teachers’ reasons for referring students. They noted that referrals were made due to academic and behavior concerns. When describing
their reasons for referral, all of the teachers cited academics (e.g., weak basic skills, processing issues, performing below grade level expectations) as their primary cause for referral. The number of African American students referred because of behavior disturbed teachers. In their minds, many of the behavior issues could be dealt with if the referring teacher had diverse management skills and would utilize African American parents and teachers as a resource. They questioned whether teachers were perceiving deficits or responding to cultural differences.

The segregation of African American students into special education classrooms frustrated teachers. They contended that the majority of the African American students are placed in special education classrooms because of their “little attitudes.” If they did not have “little attitudes” the general education teacher would be willing to work with many of the academic challenges. The teachers noted that teaching African American children can be challenging, but admonished that their difference in mannerisms should not be seen as deficits. In their minds, referral of African American students should be for genuine academic reasons and not because a teacher refuses or does not know how to appreciate social and/or cultural differences.

Consequences of Referral

Teachers questioned the benefit of special education referral. They believed special education referrals often stunted students’ learning and self-esteem, and they voiced a strong concern about the impact on African American students. Teachers observed that students who were referred for help tended to regress academically and emotionally. General education teachers expect special education teachers to teach the general education curriculum at a slower pace; however, this does not happen. Instead, the participants reported that referred students received unchallenging and watered-down
curriculum. Three of the teachers suggested that students were better off remaining in the general education classroom rather than being pulled out for special education services.

Most of the teachers viewed special education referral as a crutch for African American students. Once referred, the students view themselves as incapable of producing quality work and obtaining grade-level academic success; other teachers tend to assume this view. With each school year, expectations and requirements increase with little academic and/or social growth for referred students. The teachers hypothesized that African American students produce at the level that teachers expect. Little effort is made to return students back to the general education classroom. Years of low expectations produce students who are academically and socially unprepared for the challenges of life.

**Parental Influence on Referral**

The teachers pointed to the importance of parent involvement in ensuring that students are helped as a result of the referral process. They noted differences between the services students received based on the involvement of the parent. Caucasian parents tend to be more involved with schools than African American parents. Teachers viewed Caucasian students benefitting from their parents being connected to schools. Parents who volunteer at school and/or develop a relationship with the teacher are more likely to receive cooperative consult services for their child rather than having their child pulled out of general education for special education services.

Participants noted that the student’s personal information and academic records are held in confidence. Only the members of the SST are aware that the student is being referred. The student’s problems are not openly discussed on school sidewalks or teacher lounges. Teachers also noticed that parents who come to meetings with questions and ideas to help students are treated differently. The teachers contended that educators
should focus less on parents signing papers and more on helping parents develop strategies and interventions that can be used to help students at home.

Participants warned that African American parents’ alienation from schools puts African American students at-risk of removal from opportunities where their potentials can be enhanced and maximized. Participants revealed that often when parents do not attend SST meetings, teachers assume parents do not “care” about their children. If African American parents attend the SST meeting, they often ask few questions. Teachers purported that both scenarios are challenging to the referral process because the parents hand over their power and influence to the SST to decide how and where their child will be appropriately served. In addition to privately addressing African American parents’ questions and concerns, participants revealed that they perform the role of advocate for African American students by challenging educators to consider African American students’ perspectives and assisting teachers who have problems with African American students.

“Good” and “Bad” Referrals

Teachers in this study reported definitions of “good” and “bad” special education referral processes. In these teachers’ minds, the referral process is a “good” process when teachers are open to support and suggestions from parents and other teachers. The referring teacher welcomes and uses perspectives that are different from his or her own to help students. In “good” referrals, educators are willing to connect with students’ families and communities. With the help of other educators the referring teacher visits the home and community of the referred student. Participants believed that referring teachers should know the students and the people who are important to them. Often these teachers try numerous strategies and interventions to help students. Teachers believed
that home and community visits as well as the utilization of African American teachers as a resource are signs of teachers’ efforts and sincerity in working with African American students. They noted that when teachers feel supported by parents and other teachers, the referral process is helpful for both the student and teacher.

In contrast, in “bad” referrals the referring teacher refuses to hear diverse perspectives about the student, the student’s family and the student’s community. Participants reported SST meetings where their perspectives of African American students are often challenged and ignored by the referring teacher. When other SST members focus on positive interactions with the student, the referring teacher struggles to see beyond the student’s weaknesses and the teacher’s negative encounters with the student’s family. During these meetings, SST members do most of the talking and the parents ask few questions. In addition, teachers noted that in “bad” referrals no matter what strategies or interventions are implemented, referring teachers view special education referral and placement as the only option.
This investigation addressed two research questions: “How do African American elementary teachers perceive special education referral?” and “How do African American teachers experience the referral of African American students to special education classes?” The teachers in this study were African American elementary teachers who had been part of a School Study Team used in the special education referral process, and/or had initiated a special education referral. Even though all of the teachers were African American, they varied in teaching experience, referrals initiated, and personal experience with referral. This chapter will discuss the findings from this study, and place this information within the context of previous research. The limitations of this study will then be presented, followed by a discussion of implications for research and practice.

Key Findings

In addressing the main research questions, I found that all of the teachers attended to the same aspects of special education referral (student learning, parent involvement, and “good and “bad” referrals). The emphasis the teachers placed on each aspect was very similar, with minor variations influenced by teachers’ values and prior experiences. With the exception of one teacher, the teachers viewed special education referral more negatively than positively, particularly for African American students.
Student Learning

All of the teachers focused on student learning when describing special education referral. They wanted students to have the best environments for academic and emotional growth, and questioned whether special education referral was appropriate or in the best interest of African American students. A majority of the teachers addressed the short-term and long-term impact of special education referral. In the short-term, special education referral seemed helpful for students. On the other hand, in an examination of the long-term, teachers noted African American students who had low self-confidence and little or no improved academic skill. Teachers attributed students’ poor progress to watered-down curriculum for students with disabilities and low expectations of general and special education teachers.

Connected to students’ learning, teachers attended to the development of goals and interventions when describing special education referral. They purported that, whether intentionally or unintentionally, general education teachers developed goals and interventions that set students up to fail and have them removed from the general education classrooms. Teachers reported that minimal goals and interventions were written to protect teachers’ jobs and prevent possible lawsuits from parents. Referring teachers grappled with the decision of writing goals and developing interventions that would benefit the referred student, or developing goals and interventions that they could realistically complete in addition to meeting the needs of the other students in the class.

Recognizing that academic and social demands would increase in the academic futures of referred students, teachers in this study wanted African American students to be challenged early in their academic careers to produce quality work. They perceived that quality work could not be produced suddenly, and that African American students
needed frequent and early models for practice. In their minds, general education provided
the best opportunity for students to be exposed to challenging work and high
expectations. These expectations not only prepared students to address academic
challenges, but also life’s challenges. If and when students were removed from the
general education classroom for special education services, the teachers wanted to be
assured of their quick return.

Some of the teachers who participated in this investigation regularly collaborated
with other teachers to discuss what could be done to help referred students remain in the
general education classroom. With the collaboration of the general education and special
education teachers, the teachers believed students could receive special education
services in the general education classroom. In their minds, this collaboration produced a
shared responsibility for students’ learning and growth.

**Parent Involvement**

Perceiving special education referral as detrimental to African American students,
teachers in the study noted parent involvement as the missing component in providing
African American students with the academic and emotional support they need to be
successful. In their minds, if African American parents continue to be uninvolved and
unempowered in schools, African American students will continue to be overrepresented
in special education classrooms. They had notions for reaching out to African American
parents and helping them participate assertively and effectively with educators.

The teachers stated that many African American parents are unaware of what
special education referral means in the short and long terms and are afraid to ask
questions. Teachers purported that when there is no parent involvement or the parents are
not actively involved in the referral process, the fate of African American students is left
in the hands of the SST. Generally, using their personal experiences and beliefs, the SSTs make referral and placement decisions with little or no knowledge of parents’ wishes.

Teachers in this study disclosed that they performed the role of advocate on the behalf of African American students in the school SSTs. Recognizing that few people on the SST understand African American culture and especially that of African Americans from low economic backgrounds, these teachers attempted to broaden the perspectives of their fellow teachers and administrators. All of the teachers admonished that in order to meet the needs of African American students, teachers in their schools need to “know” their African American students, families and communities.

“Good” and “Bad” Referral

Teachers possessed diverse feelings about the referral process. The teachers viewed the referral process as long and time consuming. Teachers reported that the referral process can last an entire school year or more, and during the wait time teachers and parents are expected to continue to support the referred student. The waiting is frustrating for everyone involved. The referring teacher continues to attempt to meet the needs of the referred student, as well as his or her other students. The parents are at home struggling with how to help or if they should help, and the referred student continues to struggle.

Teachers also highlighted that often referral meetings were unfocused. The referring teacher perceives that the referred student has academic and/or social difficulties and is challenged with providing the SST with the evidence of the problem. In addition to the referring teacher, each member of the SST presents his or her perspective of the issue at hand. As SST members present their diverse perspectives, the conversations about how to help the referred student are often vague and lengthy.
Teachers reported that SSTs discuss the referred students’ past school years, previous teachers, and family situations. A majority of the teachers interviewed disclosed that a teacher’s positive and negative relationships with the parents and siblings of referred students are also discussed in SST meetings. Such conversations are often negative and place responsibility for students’ difficulties on the students’ family or the students themselves.

Despite the challenges of referral, the process was insightful to teachers because students’ strengths and weaknesses were revealed. In addition, teachers received definitive strategies and interventions for helping students. As a result of the referral process, teachers were provided with a label for the referred students’ academic and/or social behavior. Teachers in this study disclosed that labeling of the problem allowed them to appropriately adjust their teaching and behavior management to meet the needs of students.

Overall, teachers in this study were apprehensive about referring students for special education placement. They viewed special education referral and placement as detrimental and a crutch for African American students. Most of the teachers suggested that the general education classroom with supports added was the most appropriate place for students. But on the other hand, all of the teachers revealed that they referred or would have referred students because of academic reasons and to obtain the help they could not provide in the general education classroom.

**Connections to the Existing Literature**

This study has similarities and differences with previous research findings. Teachers in this study highlighted that White students who were referred often received collaborative consultation, in contrast to African American students who generally
received pull-outs, and eventual full-time placement in special education resource rooms. Jordan and her colleagues (1993) noted that teachers who possessed high self-efficacy preferred collaborative consultation services for students with whom they were confident they could create positive outcomes.

Teachers in this study suggested that differences in services for White students and African American students may be attributed to teachers and administrators identifying with the academic and social needs of White parents. They disclosed that in addition to having similar cultural experiences and expectations, White parents are often more involved with school administrators and teachers. Teachers believed that when parents are involved with schools (e.g., serve as volunteers, attend parent conferences) teachers and administrators are more likely to identify with White parent’s needs and expectations. In contrast, teachers and administrators who are less likely to have met and/or identified with African American parents form their own judgments of African American students and parents.

Teachers in this study cited behavior as the reason most African American students are referred to special education and removed from general education classrooms. Teachers noted that referring teachers were more tolerant of students with academic challenges than those with behavioral challenges. This study supports the work of Abidin and Robinson (2002), which found that teachers were more likely to refer students with behavioral problems. Teachers in this investigation disclosed that general education teachers were often not tolerant of the “little attitudes” and behaviors that were often exhibited by the referred African American students.

In addition to behavior, teachers in this investigation reported that the cultural differences of African American students are often misunderstood and wrongly
misinterpreted as deficits. Similar to the investigation of Christenson et al. (1983), which found that teachers attributed students’ difficulties to within-student characteristics (61.7%) and students’ home situation (35.6%), teachers in this study pointed to home and community situations that force students into “survival mode.” Conflicts within the family and/or neighborhood spill over into the classroom causing difficulty for the student who is expected to focus on his or her work. Teachers disclosed that teachers and administrators are uncertain about how to address African American students’ academic and social challenges. From the referring teacher’s perspective, the students’ challenges overshadow their academic and/or social strengths.

Similar to previous research of African American teachers (Foster, 1990, 1993, 1997; Siddle-Walker, 1996; Irvine, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2000), the teachers in this study saw themselves in the roles of protector of and advocate for African American students. Teachers believed that African American teacher representation was needed at meetings involving African American students. Teachers had heard of SST meetings for African American students where no African American parents or African American teachers were present. With African American parents often unempowered in the referral process, teachers in this study viewed African American teachers as being important in challenging their colleagues to examine their teaching practices and perspectives about African American students.

The teachers in this investigation noted that SSTs do not provide African American parents a clear picture of the consequences of special education referral. Parents leave referral meetings thinking their child will catch up with his or her classmates and eventually return to the general education classroom. They are surprised to find out years later that their child has remained below grade level. The teachers in this
study proposed that teachers inform parents of the short- and long-term consequences of special education referral and particularly of the possibility of the referred student never meeting grade level and teacher expectations.

This study makes several contributions to the existing literature. This investigation provides African American perspectives of special education referral and its impact on African American students. In addition to candidly revealing the consequences of special education referral, this study discloses African American teachers’ positive and negative experiences with SSTs. This investigation also reports African American teachers’ perceptions of why African American students are removed from general education and overrepresented in special education. Added to these contributions, this study shows the academic and social challenges teachers, parents, and students face when they differently view their worlds.

**Limitations**

Several limitations of this investigation have the potential of influencing the validity of the findings. These limitations include the following: (a) limitations of the analysis method, (b) willingness of participants to participate in the study, and (c) the adoption of inclusion in the schools of three of the teachers.

**Limitations of Phenomenology**

One the major assumptions in phenomenological research is that the essence is representative of all similar phenomena and experiences of the participants (Husserl, 1964; Moustakas, 1994). Because the goal of phenomenology is to find the commonality among participants, unique qualities of individual teachers are lost. This has implications regarding the generalizability of the research findings. The perception presented in this study is a shared perspective of five teachers and not all African
American teachers. Yet, within the commonalities of the teachers there are diverse experiences and values that comprise their perception of special education referral and particularly the referral of African American children.

**Willingness of Participants**

I expected that more teachers would want to participate in this investigation. Twenty-one invitations were mailed to teachers; however, only nine responded. Three teachers informed me that other responsibilities would not allow them to participate in the study, and one teacher did not participate because she did not meet the teaching experience requirement for the study. Five teachers were selected for the study.

A small and homogenous sample allowed me to develop the participants’ collective and in-depth descriptions of special education referral; however, the addition of more participants would have added to the study’s breadth. This study is not a true representation of the current teaching population, which is predominantly female. Of the five teachers selected for the investigation, three are male. Most of the current research on special education referral describes the experiences of female teachers. In this study, the descriptions of special education referral and particularly the referral of African American students are primarily from male participants.

**Inclusion Schools**

Some of the teachers in the study were teaching in schools that had adopted inclusion models. These teachers often compared their experiences before inclusion with their current experience in an inclusive school. In interviews 2 and 3, I refocused participants on the referral process rather than the current way of serving students in inclusive settings. These teachers had positive experiences with inclusion that overshadowed the referral process. For example, teachers viewed referral as a potential
helping tool for students and teachers, but removal to special education classrooms was no longer an option, and therefore general education and special education teachers worked together to serve all students. Other teachers in the study reflected on their experiences with the traditional referral process, while these teachers compared and contrasted traditional referral and the current referral process in inclusive schools. The teachers therefore, had fundamentally different experiences on which to base their views of referral. The teachers who had positive experiences with inclusion talked about referral differently from those who only experienced traditional special education referral.

Implications for Research

The description of special education referral presented through this research has shed some light on how African American teachers perceive special education referral, and particularly the referral of African American children. Even though this investigation has given voice to African American teachers, further research is needed. The study reflects the perceptions of five African American elementary teachers from a university community in north central Florida. To increase the breadth of special education referral research, future studies should include larger sample sizes and African American teachers from diverse school districts.

Little research has compared African American male teachers and African American female teachers’ perspectives of special education referral. Future research should compare African American female teachers and African American male teachers’ perceptions of special education referral and particularly the referral of African American males. Past research suggests that male teachers are less likely to refer students than
female teachers (McIntyre, 1988). Examining these findings is particularly important in connection to the referral of African American males. Research literature reveals that African American males are more likely to be referred to special education and placed in special resource rooms than any other group (Harry & Anderson, 1994; Townsend, 2000).

African Americans are only one of many different racial and ethnic groups whose voices are underrepresented in research literature. Future research should include the voices of such groups. Native American and Latino American students are also overrepresented in special education (OSEP, 2005). Students from these groups also experience a cultural disconnect in schools. Like African American teachers, Native American teachers and Latino American teachers are more likely to identify with students from their racial and ethnic groups. Yet, their voices are also silent in much of the mainstream special education research literature. To appropriately meet the needs and enhance the education of these students, the voices of Native American and Latino American teachers are pertinent.

In this study teachers were asked to describe their experience with referral. Future research might use various data collection methods such as observations of African American teachers during SST meetings and the referral process. Various data collection methods enhance the trustworthiness of the data and provide diverse perspectives of the phenomenon (Glesne, 1999). Through the use of multiple data collection methods, researchers can examine the congruence of African American teachers’ beliefs and practices, as well as explore the role of culture in the referral process from diverse vantage points.
Implications for Practice

Prior data reported that over 70% of the students referred for special education are found eligible for special education services (Ysseldyke et al., 1997). The current findings and prior research suggest that some teachers view the referral process as a way of getting students removed from general education classrooms (Christenson et al., 1982; Logan et al., 2001; Waldron et al., 1998). In contrast, the referral process could be used as an opportunity for developing a toolbox of strategies, interventions, and perspectives to help lay a stronger academic and social foundation for the struggling student.

SSTs should be a place where teachers feel safe to express their student and teaching concerns as well as receive the resources needed to help themselves and students. Referring teachers need help in constructively pinpointing their problems with referred students and in developing goals and interventions that challenge and enable students to succeed. Administrators can help SSTs by providing opportunities for teachers to collaborate and critically assess their emotional and teaching needs, as well as the needs of students and students’ families. In the case of African American students, this is especially important because this study and prior research suggest that generally teachers do not identify with and are not sensitive to the needs and attributes of these students (Irvine, 1990; Kaufman et al., 1980; Thompson, 2004; Uhlenberg & Brown, 2002; Washington, 1982).

All of the teachers in this study attended to teachers’ tolerance of African American students, and most suggested that cultural sensitivity training was needed for teachers and administrators. Teachers reported that cultural sensitivity is largely ignored when dealing with African American students, but embraced when discussing ESOL students. They noted that teachers often lost their patience with African American
students and were ignorant of African American culture and its contributions. To assist
teachers in working with African American students and their families, opportunities for
dialogue are needed in collaborative and supportive teacher learning communities.

The study also points to the importance of candid dialogue with parents. Teachers
in this study perceived that the special education referral meeting was organized so that
parents would sign paperwork and ask few questions. They reported that parents are often
intimidated by the referral process and need assistance in developing questions for the
SST. Teachers noted that parents can be overwhelmed when hearing that their child is
below grade level or displaying inappropriate behaviors. In a panicked and defeated state
the parent signs papers without being fully aware of the meaning of referral, placement,
or disability. Thus, candid dialogues would assist parents and teachers in developing
skills and strategies to help students as well as empower parents to become influential
advocates for their children.

Teachers in this study believed it is important for teachers to “know” their
African American students and communities as well as for African Americans parents to
“know” their child’s educators. In their minds, this “knowing” meant visiting the homes
and communities of the children they teach, as well as involving themselves in the things
that are important to students. Teachers disclosed that as a result of parents and teachers
“knowing” each other better, they can develop appreciative and supportive communities
for students.

Teachers noted that parents trust school personnel to care for their children and do
what is in their best interest. Irvine (2002) found “that caring . . . under girds and explains
many of the actions of dedicated and committed Black teachers” (p. 34). Ross et al. (in
press) further explained that communicating care requires being open-minded, while
appreciating and respecting other cultures. Caring is not limited to African American teachers, but is demonstrated by all teachers who choose to dedicate themselves to the needs of African American students, by becoming “other-mothers” and preparing students to challenge and resist oppression and racism (Irvine, 2002).

Another way for teachers to express “care” for their students is to have open dialogues with parents about the consequences of special education referral. Teachers suggested that having up-front conversations would prevent parents and students from becoming disillusioned in the later school years. Toliver (1993), an East Harlem junior high teacher for over 25 years, explained the importance of caring:

Students like Xavier are easily missed. Their brilliance is almost buried under the problems they are having in their environments and at home. They often appear to be unwilling to learn or hopeless to teach, and many slip “through the cracks” of the educational system, never reaching or seeing their potential. Only a caring teacher can bring out their true intelligence and vitality. (p. 36)

Like Toliver, teachers in this study dedicated themselves to maximizing the potentials of the many Xaviers, who struggle to meet the expectations and challenges of general education and whose brilliance has yet to be discovered.
## APPENDIX A

AFRICAN AMERICANS AGES 6-21 SERVED UNDER IDEA 2001-2002

Table A-1. Percentage of students served by disability and ethnicity in the United States

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disability</th>
<th>American Indian/Alaska Native</th>
<th>Asian/Pacific Islander</th>
<th>Black (non-Hispanic)</th>
<th>White (non-Hispanic)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Specific learning disabilities</td>
<td>1.47</td>
<td>1.56</td>
<td>18.72</td>
<td>18.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech/language impairments</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>2.58</td>
<td>15.92</td>
<td>14.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental retardation</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>1.73</td>
<td>34.08</td>
<td>12.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional disturbance</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>28.23</td>
<td>9.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple disabilities</td>
<td>1.30</td>
<td>2.28</td>
<td>19.81</td>
<td>13.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hearing impairments</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>4.65</td>
<td>16.36</td>
<td>20.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orthopedic impairments</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>14.46</td>
<td>15.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other health impairments</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>1.43</td>
<td>14.92</td>
<td>8.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual impairments</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>17.34</td>
<td>16.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autism</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>4.76</td>
<td>17.19</td>
<td>9.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deaf/blindness</td>
<td>1.86</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>13.54</td>
<td>18.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traumatic brain injury</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td>2.25</td>
<td>18.38</td>
<td>11.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developmental delay</td>
<td>1.95</td>
<td>2.55</td>
<td>22.74</td>
<td>8.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All disabilities</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>1.87</td>
<td>20.28</td>
<td>15.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resident population</td>
<td>.99</td>
<td>3.95</td>
<td>15.12</td>
<td>16.60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Office of Special Education Programs, 2005*

Table A-2. Percentage of students served by disability and ethnicity in the State of Florida during the 2001-2002 school year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exceptional educational program</th>
<th>White non-Hispanic</th>
<th>Black non-Hispanic</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotionally disturbed</td>
<td>49.28</td>
<td>39.81</td>
<td>10.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific learning disabled</td>
<td>55.41</td>
<td>24.95</td>
<td>18.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental retardation</td>
<td>35.54</td>
<td>49.20</td>
<td>14.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech impaired</td>
<td>57.24</td>
<td>26.47</td>
<td>14.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deaf/Hard of hearing</td>
<td>50.26</td>
<td>25.15</td>
<td>22.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traumatic brain injury</td>
<td>56.88</td>
<td>26.25</td>
<td>16.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orthopedically impaired</td>
<td>59.84</td>
<td>20.84</td>
<td>17.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All disabilities</td>
<td>53.18</td>
<td>29.42</td>
<td>16.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School population</td>
<td>56.45</td>
<td>21.65</td>
<td>19.64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Office of Special Education Programs, 2005*
APPENDIX B
RECRUITMENT LETTER

Department of Special Education
P.O. Box 117050
College of Education
University of Florida

November 2004

Dear Teacher:

I’m an African American doctoral student at the University of Florida in the Department of Special Education. The purpose of this letter is to secure your consent to participate in a study of the experiences of African American elementary teachers with the referral of African American students to special education. By agreeing to participate, you consent to completing three in-depth interviews about your experiences as an educator, perceptions of teaching African American children, and special education referral. I’m looking for ten (10) African American elementary teachers who would agree to be interviewed and participate in member checking for the (6) month study period. I’m asking your consent for the following:

1. To be interviewed individually by me three times during November 2004-January 2005. The interviews will last approximately 90 minutes each. They will be audio taped and transcribed by a graduate student. You do not have to answer any question you do not wish to answer. To protect your identity, a pseudonym will be used in place of your name. During the study, the interview tapes will be kept locked in my file cabinet. I will destroy the tapes and transcriptions at the end of the study.

2. To participate in 2 informal meetings (at the beginning and near the end of the study) for the purposes of building rapport and asking questions you may have for the researcher.

3. To complete a demographic survey that asks about your referral experience in the past 5 years, level of education, annual household income growing up, and the schools you previously attended. To ensure your anonymity a pseudonym will be used for your name on any documents or copies you submit.

4. To participate in member checking during the data analysis to ensure that I’ve fully captured your experience. This will involve reviewing your interview transcripts that I will send to you, and making corrections or additional comments to elaborate your experience. Do not edit for grammatical corrections.

5. To review my final analysis for accuracy.
Your identity will be kept confidential to the extent provided by the law. I do not perceive that there are any risks for your participation in this study. Teachers tend to enjoy talking about their teaching experiences. There will be no compensation for participation in this study. You are free to withdraw your consent to participate and to discontinue participation in the study at any time without prejudice.

Please sign and return to me this copy of the letter. A second copy is enclosed for your records. If you have any questions or concerns about the study or the procedures for data collection, please contact me (392-0701, ext. 262 or trentz@ufl.edu) or my advisor, Dr. James McLeskey (392-0701, ext. 278 or mcleskey@coe.ufl.edu). If you have any questions about the rights of research participants, you can contact the University of Florida Institutional Review Board Office, P.O. Box 112250, UF, Gainesville, FL 32611.

Sincerely,

Tarcha Rentz, Principal Investigator
Doctoral Student

I have read the procedure above for the study of African American elementary teachers’ perspectives of special education referral of African American students. I agree to participate in the procedure, and I have received a copy of this description.

____________________________  ____________
Signature of participant       Date
APPENDIX C
DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

Name:

Please answer all questions to the best of your ability.

1. How many years have you taught? ______________
2. In the past 5 years, how many students have you referred to special education?
3. How many of those students were African American?
4. How many were male?
5. How many were female?
6. What’s your annual household income?
   a. Less than $30,000
   b. $30,000 - $40,000
   c. $40,000 - $50,000
   d. Above $50,000
7. What’s your highest level of education?
   a. Bachelors
   b. Masters
   c. Specialists
   d. Doctorate
8. List your teacher certification area(s):
9. Growing up, what was your family’s annual household income?
   a. Less than $10,000
   b. $10,000 - $20,000
   c. $20,000 - $40,000
   d. Above $40,000
10. The community in which you grew up could be described as ________
    a. Rural
    b. Large Urban
    c. Small Urban
    d. Suburban
11. Describe the elementary school(s) you attended.
12. Was the high school you graduated from
   a. Public
   b. Private
   c. Other

13. Describe the high school from which you graduated.

14. What was the size of your graduating class?
   a. Under 50 students
   b. 51-100 students
   c. 101-200 students
   d. Larger than 200 students

15. Describe the colleges/universities you attended.
   a. Predominantly White
   b. Historically Black
   c. Equally Mixed
Dear Interested Teacher,

I am a former middle school teacher and a current doctoral candidate at the University of Florida. I would like to invite you to participate in an interview based study that is focused on learning what you think is important in elementary education and special education referral. If you agree to be involved in the study, you will be asked to participate in three interviews, each lasting no more than 90 minutes. The interviews will be scheduled at your convenience and will be conducted at a location that is most comfortable for you.

If you are interested in participating please read and sign the attached informed consent form and mail it using the envelope included.

Thank you for your consideration,

Tanya F. Rentz

Figure D-1. Front and back cover of the recruitment brochure for African American teacher participants
Purpose:

While much has been written regarding special education referral and African American representation in special education, notably absent from this discourse is the voice of African American people. This study investigates how African American elementary teachers experience special education referral. The guiding research questions for this study are “How do African American elementary teachers perceive special education referral?” and “How do African American teachers experience the referral of African American students to special education classrooms?” This study will refine and extend the current knowledge on special education referral and teacher beliefs by including the voices of African American teachers in mainstream research.

Benefits:

By participating in this study you will:

- Contribute to a better understanding of what special education referral means to teachers.
- Provide an African American perspective to educational discourse.

Participant Requirements:

- African American elementary teacher
- At least 3 years of teaching experience
- Has initiated special education referral and/or been a part of a school study team for special education placement.

Contact Information

Tarcha F. Rentz, M.Ed.

University of Florida
Department of Special Education
G-315 Norman Hall
P.O. Box 117050
Gainesville, FL 32611-7050

Phone: (352) 379-9610
Mobile: (352) 339-6228
E-mail: trentz@ufl.edu

Figure D-2. Inside of the recruitment brochure for African American teacher participants
APPENDIX E
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview 1: Life histories and past experiences that have influenced the conceptualization of special education referral of African American student

I am interested in learning how you experience special education referral. I’m going to ask about your past experiences that have influenced your conception of special education referral, excluding your experiences from the current school year beginning in August 2004.

1. Tell me about the community and family you grew up in.
2. Describe the African American students from your school? Your community?
3. What does referral mean to you?
   - What do you want to see in referral?
   - What don’t you want to see in referral?
4. Describe your experiences with referral?
   - What kind of referral have you initiated in the past?
   - Were your experiences good or bad?
5. How has special education referral affected you?
6. How has special education referral affected the African American students?
7. What feelings were generated by the referral experience?
8. What thoughts stood out for you?
9. Have you shared all that is significant with reference to special education referral?

Interview 2: Current perceptions of the referral of African American students to special education.

During the previous interview we discussed your past experiences with special education referral. For this interview I would like to focus on your present experiences with referral. Before we begin, I would like to review what we talked about at our previous meeting.

Now lets discuss your current experiences with referral.

1. Describe one of your African American students who you would or have referred to special education recently? What is he/she like? Describe his/her family.
2. Describe the current process for referring a student to special education?
3. What feelings are generated by the experience of special education referral?
4. How do you determine if an African American student should be referred to special education?
5. How has referral affected your African American students? What changes do you associate with his/her referral to special education?
6. What feelings were generated by the experience with referral?
7. What thoughts stand out for you?
8. Is there any thing else you’d like to add?

Interview 3: Representation of African American students in Special Education

In the first two interviews we discussed your past experiences with referral and your current experiences with referral. Today I would like to focus on what special education referral means to you in light of our previous discussions.

1. What’s your teaching philosophy for teaching African American students and how is it connected to referral?
2. How should special education referral affect you as an African American teacher? What changes do you expect from referral?
3. How should special education referral affect your African American students? What changes do you expect from him/her being referred?
4. What feelings should be generated by the referral experience?
5. Let’s review what the components of special education referral would look like to be sure I clearly understand
6. What should or can be done to help general education and special education teachers in the referring of African American students?
7. Describe what elementary teachers need to be successful with African American students who are being referred to special education.
8. Have you been involved in a discussion of special education referral of African American students before these interviews?
9. Is there any thing else you would like to share?
Date ________________

Dear ________________

Thank you for meeting with me in an extended interview and sharing your experiences with special education referral of African American students. I appreciate your willingness to share your unique and personal thoughts, feelings, events, and situations.

I have enclosed a transcript of your interview. Would you please review the entire document? Be sure to ask yourself if this interview has fully captured your experience with special education referral of African American students. After reviewing the transcript of the interview, you may realize that an important experience(s) was neglected. Please feel free to add comments, with the enclosed red pen, that would further elaborate your experience(s), or if you prefer we can arrange to meet again and tape record your additions or corrections. Please do not edit for grammatical corrections. The way you told your story is what is critical.

When you have reviewed the verbatim transcript and have had an opportunity to make changes and additions, please return the transcript in the stamped, addressed envelope.

I have greatly valued your participation in this research study and your willingness to share your experiences. If you have any questions or concerns, do not hesitate to call me.

With warm regards,

Tarcha Rentz
REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Tarcha Folston Rentz was born in Gainesville, Florida, on February 18, 1972. She is a graduate of Eastside High School in Gainesville, Florida. Tarcha received her Bachelor of Arts in history and a Bachelor of Science in sociology from Florida State University. While teaching in a middle school, she received her Master of Education degree from the University of Florida. She currently lives in Gainesville, Florida.