Secondary African American Students’ Perceptions of their Experiences in Special Education Programs: A Qualitative Interview Study

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This dissertation titled
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Abstract

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Secondary African American Students’ Perceptions of their Experiences in Special Education Programs: A Qualitative Interview Study

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This study explored how nine African American students in secondary-level special education placements perceived their school experiences and the benefits, challenges, and detriments associated with their placements and accompanying disability labels. In examining the experiences of these students, the study focused on the students’ interactions with others in the school environment: teachers, peers, counselors, and administrators.

The study used the qualitative method of in-depth interviewing to collect data—an approach that incorporated a sequence of three interviews with each student. Participating students attended one of three high schools in an urban district in the Midwestern United States. Respectively the schools had low, medium, and high percentages of students on Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). Three participants came from each of the schools. They met the following criteria: (1) they were African American, (2) they were juniors or seniors, (3) they carried a diagnosis of learning disabilities or mild cognitive impairment, and (4) they had received special education services for at least three years. With transcribed interviews as the source of data, qualitative analysis involved several steps: (1) inductive coding, (2) development of case-
specific profiles for participants and schools, (3) organization of codes to identify categories and patterns in the data, and (4) identification of emergent themes through a process of postulating and then testing these potential explanatory patterns.

This process of data analysis substantiated two emergent themes. The first is captured in the following statement: “students’ journeys from general education to special education had three predictable milestones.” And the second is captured in the following statement: “special education was a dead-end.” With respect to the first theme, three sub-themes described predictable milestones: (1) placement in special education, (2) initial reaction to placement, and (3) longer-term responses to placement in a special education program. The second theme explored the connections between students’ academic experiences in special education programs and their experiences with the stigmas and other detrimental outcomes that are associated with disability labels and special education placement.

Overall the themes suggested that, in most cases, students found the negative consequences of their placements in special education programs to outweigh the benefits they experienced. These benefits included interactions with responsive teachers and, in a few cases, instructional pacing that better met their needs. The negative consequences included the experience of being stigmatized by peers, making limited academic progress because of a slow-pace curriculum, and confronting barriers to their effort to return to general education placements even after learning and/or behavior problems had been resolved.
One subtheme that has not appeared frequently in previous literature pointed to the contribution of traumatic life events to patterns of academic and behavioral difficulty that led school personnel to identify and place the African American participants into special education programs. According to participants, their schools did not investigate these life events in trying to account for the students’ changed behavior and performance, but readily attributed these changes to disabilities such as emotional disturbance and specific learning disability.
To my husband Brandan Craft, mother Diane Vickers, my father Terry Felton, my brother David Vickers, my sisters Casey Vickers and Rebecca Barnes-Felton, my nephews Jackson and Jordan Vickers, my family and friends who have supported me on my journey and the students who shared their amazing stories.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Background of the Study

For reasons based in history, a disproportionate percentage of African Americans and other students of color live in poverty, receive education in inadequate urban schools, and come from families whose experience of education typically has also been in substandard schools (Blanchett, 2006, 2009; Connor, 2009; Fierros & Conroy, 2002). This combination of circumstances results in what some researchers call “double jeopardy” (Blanchett, 2006, 2009; Connor, 2009; Fierros & Conroy, 2002).

Despite the fact that many students of color still experience “double jeopardy” defined in this way, the Brown vs. Board of Education decision did provide the legal grounds for assuring that students of color receive an equitable education within the public school system. Before this Supreme Court decision was rendered, parents and other advocates had limited basis for asking school systems to provide appropriate educational services to students of color and other previously disadvantaged students, such as those with disabilities (Connor, 2009; Losen & Orfield, 2002; Moore, Henfield, & Owens, 2008). Nevertheless, parents and other advocates continued to be concerned that people with disabilities were viewed negatively and often treated unfairly in their communities (Martin, Martin, & Terman, 1996). This circumstance caused them to work hard to make sure the needs of students and adult community members with disabilities were addressed (Martin et al., 1996).

Because the ruling in Brown vs. Board of Education defined education as a right rather than a privilege, it allowed parents and other advocates to insist that students be
taught in desegregated settings and receive other services to meet their needs. Although the decision originally applied to African American students, parents of students with disabilities and advocates for those students used its provisions to push for the improvement of educational services for children and adolescents with disabilities (Unnamed Department of Education, 2008). In the late 1960, for example, many advocates lobbied Congress in an effort to promote legislation that would protect the civil rights of people with disabilities. Their persistence led to the passage of several relevant laws such as the Architectural Barriers Act of 1968, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975. These and other related laws give people with disabilities full access to education, transportation, technology, employment, and other life experiences enjoyed by people who do not have disabilities.

Among these laws, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, which was reauthorized in 2004 as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), focused on educational opportunities for children with disabilities, namely the provision of “a free appropriate public education” that meets their needs in the “Least Restrictive Environment” (LRE) (Midwestern State Department of Education, 2008). An appropriate public education for each individual is specified in his or her Individualized Education Program (IEP), a document that identifies learning objectives and specialized instruction designed to enable each student to achieve those objectives (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

The IEP is usually developed by professional educators, with rather cursory input from parents and, in some cases, students (Midwestern State Department of Education,
2008). These members of the IEP team may or may not be well positioned to determine the services that will actually confer benefits to individual students. Nevertheless, because the IEP is intended to confer benefits, the way each student experiences its provisions is germane to the determination of its appropriateness and effectiveness.

Educators, however, typically do not know whether or not students experience the special education they receive under their IEPs as beneficial. In fact, even the legislators who framed PL 94-142, which later was reauthorized as IDEA, understood that, while services might provide benefits, the disability label represented a stigma (Gentry, 2009; Gold & Richard, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2009; Zimmerman, Prater, & Talbert, 1988). The “least restrictive environment” and “appropriate education” provisions of the original legislation were intended to establish criteria for assuring that students who bore the stigma of the disability label actually needed (and subsequently received) the services to which the label entitled them (Blanchett, 2006, 2009; Gentry, 2009; Losen & Orfield, 2002; U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

Currently, many educators simply assume that special education services provide students with what they need in order to be successful. But limited evidence addresses the question of whether or not the services are sufficiently effective to justify the use of the disability label (Blanchett, 2006, 2009; Connor, 2009; Gentry, 2009; Losen & Orfield, 2002). Furthermore, very few studies have examined students’ perceptions of the costs and benefits of being identified as disabled in order to receive special services under an IEP.
The question of whether or not special education represents a benefit not only implicates equity toward individuals, but it also implicates equity toward subgroups of students. Since the passage of Public Law 94-142 (and its reauthorization as IDEA), schools have used the disability label to identify more students from some subgroups in the U.S. population than from other subgroups (Connor, 2009; Ferri & Connor, 2005; Losen & Orfield, 2002).

Notably, over the last 20 years, the percentage of African American students identified as having disabilities and subsequently placed into special education programs has increased steadily (Feggins-Azziz, Gallini, Simmons & Skiba, 2006; Losen & Orfield 2002). According to Kunjufu (2001), “there has been a 42% increase in special education placement over the past decade. African American students are 17% of the children in public school, but represent almost 40% of children placed in special education” (p.43). This circumstance has led some researchers to consider whether or not the placement of African American students into special education programs necessarily constitutes a benefit for those students or instead represents unnecessary labeling and containment (Blanchett, 2006, 2009; Ferri & Connor, 2005; Losen & Orfield, 2002).

From the vantage of these scholars as well as others, the overrepresentation of students of color in special education programs is a serious problem because the services that the students receive may not benefit them, while at the same time the disability label may harm them. Researchers, for example, have identified several circumstances associated with special education placement that may be detrimental: segregated classrooms, limited engagement with the general education curriculum, and slow-paced
and often boring instruction (Connor, 2009; Feggins-Azziz et al., 2006; Losen & Orfield 2002; Moore, Henfield, & Owens, 2008).

**African American students’ special education placement.** According to some researchers, many African American students are inappropriately referred for and placed in special education programs (e.g., Dykes, 2008; Losen & Orfield, 2002; Peterz, 1999). Researchers who focus on the overrepresentation, misdiagnosis, and misplacement of African-American and other minority students in special education classrooms have discovered that school districts typically provide no explanation for placing large numbers of such students into these classrooms (Blanchett, 2006, 2009; Connor, 2009; Dykes, 2008; Losen & Orfield, 2002; Peterz, 1999). Furthermore neither local, state, nor federal agencies provide any mechanisms for holding districts accountable for the practice of placing disproportionate numbers of African American and other diverse students into special education classrooms (Blanchett, 2006, 2009; Connor, 2009; Dykes, 2008; Gentry, 2009; Losen & Orfield, 2002; Peterz, 1999).

In the absence of explanations and accountability mechanisms, the logical assumption is that biases—in the processes for generating special education referrals, assessment tools, and procedures for determining eligibility—represent a major set of causal factors contributing to the over-representation of African American and other diverse students in special education placements (Cullen & Shaw, 2000; Dukes & Prater, 1991; Dykes, 2008; Losen & Orfield, 2002; Peterz, 1999). Peterz (1999) agreed in part with this logic, arguing that overrepresentation and misplacement of African American students into special education programs was likely to result from “current testing and
placement practices, insufficient parental knowledge of special education rights and responsibilities, and the need for cultural diversity training for teachers” (p. 2). He saw bias operating in two ways: (1) testing and placement practices often embed biases and (2) teachers who are unfamiliar with diverse population groups often misread the behaviors they observe among students from these groups.

Researchers who document the overrepresentation of students of color in special education programs suggest that further investigation of the potentially discriminatory practices of teachers and schools might be needed. In some cases, for example, students may be placed into special education programs even though they do not need special services (Blanchett, 2006; Fierros & Conroy, 2002). When students are misdiagnosed and inappropriately segregated into special education settings, their school experience may be affected adversely. For example, a slow-paced curriculum and reduced interactions with high-achieving peers might limit such students’ opportunities for passing graduation tests, attending college, or pursuing a professional career.

Segregation. Not only are some African-American and other diverse students wrongly identified, but once identified, such students tend to be segregated from their general-education peers. Feggins-Azziz and associates (2006), for example, found that, among students with disabilities, African Americans were more likely than European Americans to be educated in restrictive environments; and, conversely, European American students were more likely than African American students to be educated in inclusive settings (Feggins-Azziz et al., 2006). In fact, the practice of separating African American students into more restrictive environments instead of educating them in the
least restrictive environment has been identified as a form of “re-segregation” by some researchers (Blanchett, 2009; Ferri & Connor, 2005). According to these researchers, re-segregation limits opportunities for African American students to be educated with their peers, excludes them from the general education curriculum, keeps them from fully reaching their academic potential, and decreases the skill levels they eventually attain (Blanchett, 2009; Ferri & Connor, 2005).

Some studies have also shown different consequences of special education placement for White students with disabilities as compared to African American and other diverse students with disabilities. According to Ferri and Connor (2005), for example, students of color are less likely than their White counterparts to be exposed to general education once they have been identified as disabled, and they tend to adjust less well than White students to the special education setting. Connor (2009), for example, found that African American students with disabilities typically spent more of their time in school in segregated special education placements than White students do; some, in fact, spent their entire day in separate classrooms (Connor, 2009). White students with disabilities, by contrast, spent less of their time in school in segregated settings (Connor, 2009).

As these researchers reported, the special education experience tended to represent a lesser degree of confinement for White students than for students of color because White students were typically guaranteed access to additional support, received some of their instruction through the general education curriculum, and were granted more accommodations to help them deal with high stakes tests (Ferri & Connor, 2005).
Connor (2009) noted, moreover, that while educators seemed to know that exclusion and
confinement often characterized the special education received by students of color, they
rarely took action to remedy the situation.

**Teacher expectations.** Not only do students’ actual placements in special
education have the potential to influence their school experience in positive and negative
ways, so too do teachers’ beliefs about whether or not students have the ability to handle
instruction in general education classrooms (Smith, 2006). Notably, a fairly robust
literature on teacher expectations shows that the way students perceive their academic
success in school is linked to teachers’ expectations for their performance (Cotton, 1989;
Harris, Rosenthal & Snodgrass, 1986). Teacher expectations are defined as ideas,
assumptions, or thoughts that support teachers’ predictions about students’ future
researchers Rosenthal and Jacobson concluded on the basis of their groundbreaking 1968
study that “students’ intellectual development is largely a response to what teachers
expect and how those expectations are communicated” (p.1).

As these and other researchers have shown, teacher expectations often lead to
self-fulfilling prophecies, which have the potential to affect students’ performance
substantially because such prophecies contribute to changes in students’ engagement with
academic instruction (Cotton, 1989; Harris et al., 1986; Rist, 1970: Weinstein, 2002).
According to these researchers, teachers’ expectations influence what students think
about their own efficacy, and their self-efficacy beliefs then cause them to match their
performance to the level of performance that teachers expect of them (Cotton, 1989;
Crawford, 2007; Harris et al., 1986; Harbor & Jussim, 2005; Rist, 1970; Weinstein; 2002). In other words, if a teacher’s low expectations lead a student to underestimate his or her efficacy, the student will tend to perform below his or her potential (Gentry, 2009; Good, 1981; Guskey, 1982; Weinstein, 2002). Similarly, if a teacher’s expectations for academic performance bolster or augment a student’s beliefs about his or her efficacy, then the student is likely to perform better even than aptitude test scores suggest that he or she might (Guskey, 1982; Weinstein, 2002).

Another line of inquiry regarding teacher expectations focuses on the extent to which teachers’ perspectives about students become solidified. Good and Brophy’s research, for example, focused on the sustained effect of teachers’ expectations for students’ performance (Good & Brophy, 2003). The “sustaining expectation effect” that these researchers described occurs when a teacher has a fixed expectation about a student’s academic potential, communicates that expectation to the student, refuses to change that expectation even in face of contradictory evidence, and thereby leaves the student with little option but to behave in ways that match up with the expectation (Good & Brophy, 2003). In some cases in which a “sustaining expectation effect” is operant, the teacher’s behavior is subtle, but in other cases observers can detect obvious differences in how the teacher treats particular students.

For example, in some of the studies that Good and Brophy summarized in their 2003 book, researchers discovered that teachers gave students whom they thought of as low achievers less time to answer questions and fewer opportunities to contribute to class discussions than they gave to other students. In addition, some studies also found that
teachers tended to answer questions for supposed “low-achievers” rather than requiring these students to supply answers on their own. Furthermore, studies in this line of inquiry also showed that purported “low achievers” were often seated the furthest away from their teachers; and they received less eye contact, commentary, and social interaction from their teachers than other students received (Good & Brophy, 2003). The teachers also provided these “low achievers” with inadequate curricular materials, criticized their accomplishments, and provided them with less formative feedback than they gave to other students (Good & Brophy, 2003). Interestingly, despite what the researchers observed, the teachers said they were unaware that they were treating students differently.

As this discussion suggests, teachers’ expectations affect how students experience school. Such dynamics have frequently been observed in general education classrooms (Harbor & Jussim, 2005; Smith, 2006). Although they have rarely been documented in special education classrooms (Zimmerman et al., 1988), some writers offer the conjecture that such dynamics may also be present to some degree in such settings (Smith, 2006). This conjecture is supported to some extent by studies showing that teachers who feel unprepared to work effectively with special education students also have a difficult time gauging these students’ actual capabilities (Zimmerman et al., 1988), and, unfortunately, not all teachers in self-contained special education classrooms or resource rooms are well-prepared (Crawford, 2007; Zimmerman et al., 1988).

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1 Much of the research reported by Good and Brophy (2003) took place in the 1980s and 1990s. More recent research does exist, however, and continues to confirm findings about the deleterious consequences of teachers’ low expectations for students’ performance (e.g., Demanet & Van Houtte, 2012; Riley & Ungerleider, 2012).
Parents’ expectations. In addition to the literature on the impact of teachers’ expectations on students’ achievement, there is also a fairly robust literature about the impact of parents’ expectations on their children’s achievement. Several recent studies illustrate the general consensus that this research literature supports. Researchers have found that when parents have higher expectations, students tend to have higher levels of academic achievement. These students typically earn higher grades, perform better on standardized tests, and persist longer in school than those whose parents hold lower expectations for academic performance (Davis-Kean & Sexton, 2010; Xu, Kushnnaear & Mudrey-Camino, 2010; Yamamoto & Holloway, 2010). According to Yamamoto and Holloway (2010), parents who hold high expectations for their children can buffer the negative influence of teachers’ low expectations.

Several researchers have found that race and ethnicity, educational attainment, and socioeconomic status (SES) all influence the expectations that parents hold for their children (Davis-Kean & Sexton, 2010; Xu et al., 2010; Yamamoto & Holloway, 2010). Among these influences, parents’ educational attainment is a particularly powerful predictor (Davis-Kean & Sexton, 2010; Xu et al., 2010; Yamamoto & Holloway, 2010). Parents who are highly educated themselves tend to understand better than their less well-educated counterparts how to provide the types of supports to their children that translate into higher academic achievement (Davis-Kean & Sexton, 2010; Xu et al., 2010; Yamamoto & Holloway, 2010). Because the educational attainment of parents is related to their socioeconomic status, moreover, better educated parents can access more
resources to support their children’s education than can other parents (Davis-Kean & Sexton, 2010).

Yamamoto and Holloway’s (2010) research on the effect parents’ expectations have on student achievement produced similar results. They found that the level of parents’ expectations varied depending on the parents’ ethnic and racial background. Their study showed that parents from marginalized groups, such as African Americans and Hispanics, were less likely than White counterparts to believe that their children’s previous achievement would be a reasonable predictor of their children’s future achievement. In other words, they were more willing than White parents to acknowledge that their children’s achievement could be improved or harmed depending on circumstance. These researchers also found that parents’ own experiences with educators had an effect on the extent to which they were willing to trust educators’ judgments about their children’s abilities. Notably, levels of mistrust were highest among African American parents from low SES backgrounds. This study also showed that parents’ feelings of efficacy regarding the ability to help their children achieve academic success played a major role in their children’s performance. Those parents from low SES, African American, and immigrant groups who also had limited access to resources and therefore low self-efficacy tended to underestimate their children’s abilities.

Whereas the research consistently demonstrates the impact of parents’ educational attainment and SES on their expectations for their children’s achievement, the research on the impact of race is mixed. Several researchers found that, once SES has been controlled, African American parents tend to hold higher expectations for their children
than White parents hold for theirs (Alexander, Entwisle & Bedinger, 1994; Davis-Kean, 2004; Glick & White 2004; Hao & Bonstead-Burns, 1998; Yamamoto & Holloway, 2010). In some cases, these researchers also have found that parents who hold high expectations for their children positively influence their children’s achievement regardless of their own educational attainment and race (Alexander et al., 1994; Davis-Kean, 2004).

Taken as a whole, the research on parents’ expectations suggests that children can reach high levels of academic achievement if their parents hold high expectations for them and communicate to their children the belief that they will succeed in school. This general trend holds for White and African American parents, but tends to be mediated by SES. Parents from low-SES backgrounds often mistrust schools because of their own negative experiences with them, and they have a hard time, therefore, working in partnership with their children’s teachers on behalf of the children’s school success.

**Students’ perception of their educational experiences.** As the people who are the direct recipients of school services, students have a critical role to play in helping practitioners, researchers, and policy makers understand the nature and impact of the schooling experience (Carpenter & McConkey, 2012; Cushman & Rogers, 2008). According to these researchers, listening to the voices of students is important because their voices allow researchers to gain insights about how to improve school climate and teacher-student relationships as well as providing feedback relevant to policy. Listening to students’ perceptions can help determine why certain unproductive dynamics can and do arise within school cultures (Carpenter & McConkey, 2012; Cushman & Rogers,
These determinations, then, can help education researchers and reformers design more productive ways for teachers and principals to interact with students, especially those who pose special challenges.

Although only a limited number of studies actually investigate students’ perceptions of their school experiences, some research does indicate that, when given the opportunity, students are able to communicate clearly about the character of those experiences (Angell, Stoner, & Fulk, 2010; Carpenter & McConkey, 2012; Cushman & Rogers, 2008; Defur & Korinek, 2010; Lewis & Kim, 2008). At the same time, some studies show that students generally believe their perceptions of the school experience to be irrelevant because these perceptions tend to remain undocumented and are typically overlooked by educators; rarely, from their vantage, are their perceptions used to improve what is happening in their schools (Angell et al., 2010; Carpenter & McConkey, 2012; Defur & Korinek, 2010).

**African American students’ views about their educational experiences.** Some researchers have found that African American students’ educational experiences influence how these students view school (Connor, 2009; Cushman & Rogers, 2009; Kritsonis & Norfleet, 2006). Kritsonis and Norfleet’s (2006) research, for example, showed that African American students in general education classrooms viewed their education as important when their teachers believed they were capable, cared about their success, held them accountable, and were available to assist them when they did not understand their school work. According to these researchers, African American students who had positive experiences in school felt connected to their learning (Kritsonis &
Norfleet, 2006). Other studies have shown that such students maintain productive relationships with their teachers and are able to communicate about the types of coursework that they find engaging (e.g., Howard, 2001).

Some studies have reported that, by contrast, when African American students are disengaged from the school experience, they tend to become frustrated and disruptive, and they begin to doubt their own abilities (e.g., Howard, 2001). Some research also has shown that students feel disengaged when the learning environment is teacher-centered rather than student-centered, when racism or discrimination is present in the classroom culture, when lessons lack cultural relevance, and when teachers do not seek to build relationships with the African American students in their classrooms (Howard, 2001; Neal et al, 2003).

Lewis and Kim’s (2008) research provided an interesting perspective on African American students in low performing schools where the school climate had produced an environment of low expectations. Their study showed that, even though the students were enrolled in low performing schools, they still valued the opportunity to receive a high-quality education. For example, when asked, these students were able to distinguish between “good teachers” and “bad teachers.” Most of the students identified as “good teachers” those who included them in the learning process, allowed them to ask questions, and helped them when they did not understand a concept. In contrast, they identified as “bad teachers” those who frequently meted out discipline indiscriminately and did not answer their questions or address their concerns.
Students with disabilities’ perceptions of their school experiences. Similar findings also come from the few extant studies documenting what students with disabilities think about their school experiences. In these studies, students have reported that, even though they have disabilities, they want their teachers to recognize them as capable learners (DeFur & Korinek, 2010). Some research has also shown that students with disabilities believe that race and social class dynamics in their schools play a role in determining how they and others in their schools view their special education placements (Connor, 2009; Ferri & Connor, 2005).

In research conducted by DeFur and Korinek (2010), for example, students with disabilities expressed the desire to be treated like “normal” students. They discussed their preference for teachers who trust their learning abilities and understand that they are capable of communicating about the types of educational supports they need. The students who were surveyed in the study, in fact, reported that they wanted teachers and others to recognize their individual needs but not to let awareness of their needs contribute to lowered expectations for their performance (DeFur & Korinek, 2010).

According to some research, African American students with disabilities believe that their schooling experience—both in the special education classroom and in the inclusion classroom—differs from the experience of White students with disabilities (Chavous-Sellers, Schmeelk-Cone, Bernat, Caldwell, Kohn-Woods & Zimmerman, 2003; Connor, 2009; Mickelson, 1990). In fact, their academic achievement and racial identity seem to relate to how low-performing African American students view their educational experience (Chavous-Sellers et. al., 2003; Mickelson, 1990). Chavous-Sellers and her
colleagues, for example, found that when African American students were identified as “at risk,” they began to devalue education because they saw educational attainment as having limited significance for their futures (Chavous-Sellers et. al., 2003, Mickelson, 1990). In contrast, higher-performing African American students were more optimistic about the possibilities that schooling offered (Chavous-Sellers et. al., 2003; Mickelson, 1990). Connor’s (2009) study of African American and Latino students with disabilities provided similar insights.

In fact, Connor’s is one of the only studies to examine diverse students’ experiences of their placement in special education programs. Although the study provided useful insights, its focus was on certain issues only. In particular, the study focused on the impact of race and class dynamics on the ways students with learning disabilities (LD) viewed their educational experiences. It did not investigate the extent to which the African American students who participated in the study viewed what they had learned in the LD program as important to their academic growth or ultimately as beneficial to them. My study, by contrast, will focus on African American special education students’ perceptions of their school experience, especially as that experience relates to educators’, family members’, and their own expectations for their performance and the actual benefits to and limitations of their growth and development.

**Statement of the Problem**

As discussed above, special education placement may or may not confer benefits to students. In fact, placement into special education programs and segregation resulting from such placement may actually limit students’ opportunities and depress their
academic achievement. Some research—for example research on the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education—supports this possibility. This research addresses the issue indirectly, however. Additional research, particularly research focusing on the perspectives and experiences of students who are placed in special education programs, also seems important to an understanding of the sense in which such placements benefit students and the sense in which they disadvantage them. To date, very few such studies of this type have been published (cf. Connor, 2009).

The purpose of this study was to explore how African American students in secondary-level special education placements perceive their school experiences. This purpose addressed Howard’s (2001) concern: “if the programs, practices, and policies rendered within the framework of the places called schools are delivered with students’ best interest in mind, we must ask why their voices and viewpoints are so blatantly omitted” (p. 132). In addition to exploring the sense in which these students experience their special education placements as beneficial or exclusionary and disadvantageous, the study also sought to investigate how these students experience their interactions with others in the school environment: teachers, peers, counselors, and administrators. These aims are articulated in the research questions listed below:

1. How do African American special education students perceive their high school experience?

2. In what ways do African American special education students see their special education as beneficial and in what ways do they see it as harmful?
3. How do African American special education students experience their interactions with others in the high school environment: teachers, peers, counselors, and administrators?

**Significance**

The study is significant in terms of practice and policy as well as in terms of my own personal experience. I discuss each of these aspects of the study’s significance in the sections below.

**Significance for practice.** Findings from the study have the potential to affect the practices of teachers, administrators, and parents. With respect to teachers, the findings might influence the intervention strategies they use before, during, and after students are referred for special education. Notably, because my research reveals that special education placements for African American students may not be beneficial for many such students, general education teachers would be well advised to use many more classroom-based interventions before they even consider making a special education referral. This change in practice would, of course, be compatible with what advocates of Response to Intervention recommend (Haar, Palladino, & Ribicheau, 2008).

With respect to administrators, findings from the study address, though possibly indirectly, the role administrators might play in the improvement of the interventions that their schools provide to struggling learners. As Gentry (2009) and numerous others have shown, effective schools rely on the leadership of administrators who focus much of their attention on curriculum and instruction. These instructional leaders are attentive to research findings such as those that my study has produced. In particular, my research
findings have the potential to influence the way principals organize, implement, and monitor special education referral and intervention procedures at their schools.

My research findings might also influence how parents and other advocates view the purpose of their advocacy for students with special needs. Because my study reveals that many students view special education placement as a detriment rather than a benefit, parents and advocates might want to devote their energies toward keeping students from being placed in such programs.

**Significance for policy.** Answers to the research questions that my dissertation addressed are also important because they can help policy makers understand how the provision of special education in U.S. schools actually aligns with the requirement of equitable education (under the Brown ruling) and the requirement of appropriate education (under IDEA). Although some research has examined the potential inequality of educational provisions for special education students (Connor, 2009; Feggins-Azziz et al., 2006; Losen & Orfield 2002; Moore, Henfield, & Owens, 2008), almost none of this research has done so from the perspective of the student. Currently, regulations attempt to ensure that students who qualify for special education services receive a high-quality education, but little research actually evaluates the quality of the services they do receive. One part of such an evaluation is a study of students’ experiences of the benefits and disadvantages associated with special education labeling and placement, and my study addresses this need.

**Personal significance.** Another source of the study’s significance comes from my own personal experience, which ultimately is the reason I became an educator. Being
raised in an environment where many of my family members struggled in special education settings inspired me to want to learn more about special education programs. By witnessing these experiences, I began to wonder if prevailing special education referral, placement, and intervention practices are actually beneficial to students.

The experience of growing up in a single parent home with a mother who couldn’t read above a third grade level and a sister who was labeled with dyslexia at the age of five taught me the importance of education. I can remember at a young age having to read important documents to my mother because she could hardly make out the words or even understand what she was reading. I also was distressed by my sister’s frustration with homework and other school assignments. I often wondered why schools allowed such frustration to develop and persist. No one could explain to me why school districts would allow someone to graduate from high school without knowing how to read or write.

My own work as an educator has been inspired and sustained by my commitment to struggling learners. But what is best for such students? Is it better to provide special education services to them or to protect them from such “services”? As a school counselor, I work directly with students, parents, school psychologists, school nurses, and school administrators to determine whether or not students should be placed into special education programs. And what I have seen in this role has led me to question whether or not students with special needs are receiving appropriate interventions either in their general education classrooms or in their special education placements. In fact, my work as a counselor has led me to doubt the benefits for students of current practices for
identifying and serving them in special education programs. The findings from my study tend to confirm my general impression but point to ways that special education services can, from the perspective of students themselves, provide certain benefits.

Assumptions and Limitations

In conducting this study, I made three assumptions that had the potential to limit the extent to which my findings would represent a set of objective “truths”. The first assumption was that I would be aware of my own biases and be able to keep them from influencing what I reported about the experiences of the students whom I interviewed. My personal experiences have led me to question the conventional view that special education programs are good for students. Therefore, if the students whom I interviewed viewed their special education experiences as positive, it would be important for me to reveal and not suppress or distort the experiences they described. In order to keep an open mind as to what the data might reveal and let the students tell their stories without interjecting my own, I did what I could to control the influence of my own biases. In particular, I kept a self-reflections journal throughout the data collection and data analysis phases of the research. In the journal I wrote about my reactions to what I was hearing from students. When I began to interpret the data, I returned to the journal in an effort to assure that claims made in the interpretation came from what the students said in the interviews and not from my possibly biased impressions of the interviews.

My second assumption relates to the choice to use students as informants about their school experience (Patton, 2002). Self-reporting might have jeopardized my data collection and been detrimental to my study because students might or might not have
wanted to share their experiences. For example, if students had had negative experiences, they might not have wanted to relive them by talking about them. Or perhaps seeing me as an educator, they might have concluded that I was untrustworthy or uninterested in their perspectives. The actual experience of interviewing the students, however, suggested that their responses were neither guarded nor censored.

I believe that certain procedures I used resulted in students’ willing to be open and honest. First, I worked hard to build good rapport with students. To do so I spent time explaining to students that my study would help “tell their story” while at the same time not exposing them to harm. Indeed, I took several steps in designing and reporting the study to ensure that no students were harmed by the study or its dissemination (see chapters 3 and 5 for more detail). Furthermore, the three-interview protocol that I used gave me time to get to know the students gradually. Even those who were uncertain about my motives in the first interview had warmed up to me and come to trust me by the third.

A final assumption related to my belief that racism characterizes much of what goes on in schools. This belief predisposed me to expect that African American special education students might be receiving different—and less responsive—treatment than their White counterparts. My review of the literature had also revealed that African American students are disproportionately placed in special education programs, and this finding had intensified my concern that such placement might represent a disadvantage—a kind of institutional racism in and of itself. Nevertheless, my preconceptions about how racism operated did not keep me from seeing what actually took place. As mentioned earlier, I used a self-reflections journal throughout the research process to help me
“bracket” my own preconceptions and focus attention on the perspectives represented in the words of the students I interviewed.

**Conceptual Definitions**

This section of the chapter provides definitions for concepts that are discussed throughout this dissertation:

- *Academic Watch:* A designated state performance rating based on four measures reflecting student achievement levels (including growth as determined by a state-adopted value-added model), adequate yearly progress, and a global performance score. The rating, *Academic Watch*, is the second rating from the bottom. The list of possible ratings sequences them as follows: *Excellent with Distinction*, *Excellent*, *Effective*, *Continuous Improvement*, *Academic Watch*, and *Academic Emergency*.

- *Direct institutional racism:* systematic practices that are intended to cause harm to individuals from marginalized racial groups.

- *Education for all Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (also known as Public Law 94-142 or PL-94-142):* the first federal law requiring states to develop and implement policies to ensure that students with disabilities receive a free appropriate education (FAPE).

- *Effective:* A designated state performance rating based on four measures described above under the definition of *Academic Watch*. The *Effective* rating is the third from the top.
• **Inclusion**: the practice of placing students with disabilities in educational settings where they receive instruction alongside their non-disabled peers.

• **Indirect institutional racism**: practices that unintentionally discriminate against or cause harm to individuals from marginalized racial groups.

• **Individual with Disabilities Act 2004 (IDEA)**: the reauthorization of the Education for all Handicapped Children Act of 1975, which included stricter provisions especially regarding Least Restrictive Environment.

• **Individual Education Program (IEP)**: an annual educational plan specifying goals, educational services, special instructional modifications, and testing provisions for a student with a disability.

• **Institutional racism**: systemic and structural practices that disadvantage and cause harm to individuals from non-white racial groups while advantaging and providing benefits to whites (i.e., members of the dominant racial group).

• **Intentional institutional racism**: purposeful discrimination against members of racial groups other than Whites.

• **Learning disability**: a category of disability used to identify students with particular challenges associated with learning one or more of the basic academic skills of reading, writing, and mathematics.

• **Least restrictive environment**: the educational setting for students with disabilities whereby they are educated to the greatest extent possible with nondisabled peers.

• **Mild cognitive impairment**: a term used to describe students with specific or generalized learning difficulties that are significant but limited in severity.
• **Referral bias:** the intentional or unintentional practice of referring a student for special education services based on characteristics or circumstances that are not relevant to the student’s academic needs (e.g., his or her race, social class, appearance, and so on).

• **Resegregation:** the consequences of population shifts resulting in reduced racial and/or ethnic heterogeneity.

• **Response to Intervention (RTI):** “an individualized, comprehensive assessment and intervention process, utilizing a problem-solving framework to identify and address student academic difficulties using effective, efficient, research-based instruction” (Cortiella, 2006, p.2).

• **School climate:** “the physical and psychological aspect of the school that are more susceptible to change and provides the preconditions necessary for teaching and learning to take place School climate influences the way students, teachers, and other school personnel feel about their schooling” (Michigan State University Outreach and Engagement Program, 2004, p.2),

• **School organizational culture:** the character of a school community as defined by the expectations, attitudes, beliefs, norms, and values shared by its members (Allodi & Fischbein, 2000; Schein, 1999, 2005).

• **Segregation:** an educational arrangement whereby students from marginalized groups are separated from students from the dominant majority.
• **Self-fulfilling prophecy:** positive or negative expectations about students’ academic performance that affects their behavior or thinking about their academic abilities and perhaps also their actual academic performance.

• **Separate but equal:** a judicial ruling (Plessy v. Ferguson) upholding the practice of offering services to Blacks and Whites (e.g., educational services) in separate facilities so long as the services are equal.

• **Silent racism:** the unspoken thoughts that people have about people from racial groups other than their own.

• **Socioeconomic status (SES):** “commonly conceptualized as the social standing or class of an individual or group. It is often measured as a combination of education, income and occupation. Examinations of socioeconomic status often reveal inequities in access to resources, plus issues related to privilege, power and control” (American Psychological Association, 2012, p. 1)

• **Stereotype threat:** fear of performing in a way that will reinforce a negative stereotype about the group to which a person belongs; also subtle comments or prompts that encourage a person to feel anxious about the possibility of reinforcing a stereotype.

• **Stigmatization:** the process where a negative stigma influences the identity one has about his or her self (Goffman, 1990).

• **Teacher efficacy:** the degree to which a teacher believes him or herself capable of teaching in an effective manner.
• **Teacher expectation**: the belief a teacher has about a student’s academic ability and the difficulty of the academic work the student can perform.

• **Traumatic events**: disturbing or disruptive experiences in the lives of participating students. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network defines a traumatic event as “a sudden and unexpected occurrence that causes intense fear and may involve a threat of physical harm or actual physical harm” (2013, p. 1).

• **Unintentional institutional racism**: discrimination that is not purposeful but still produces negative consequences for individuals from marginalized racial groups.

• **White privilege**: unearned advantage or special treatment obtained by White people that is directly linked to their race.

**Chapter Summary**

Building on the Brown vs. Board of Education ruling, in which education was declared a right rather than a privilege, parents of students with disabilities fought for their children to receive appropriate educational services. Their reasoning was that such services would confer benefits to their children, but they also understood that disability labels might harm their children. The law that responded to their advocacy, Public Law 94-142, addressed both of these concerns, requiring that schools provide an appropriate education to children with disabilities but that they do so in the least restrictive environment.

Despite the intentions of the law, troubling evidence suggests that the placement of students in special education programs might not always (or even often) confer benefits. Rather it might burden students with stigmatizing labels and result in their
segregation from non-disabled peers. Of particular concern is the fact that schools have used the disability label to identify more students from some subgroups in the U.S. population than from other subgroups. Notably, over the last 20 years, the percentage of African American students identified as disabled and subsequently placed into special education programs has increased steadily.

Researchers who document the overrepresentation of students of color in special education programs suggest that further examination of the potentially discriminatory practices of teachers and schools might be needed. One approach would be to explore the connection between teachers’ expectations for students who appear to have learning problems and those students’ self-esteem, engagement in the learning process, and academic achievement. Another would be to investigate students’ own perceptions of their experiences in special education programs, including their views about benefits and detriments of such placements.

The research reported in this dissertation takes the latter approach, seeking to explore how African American students with disabilities perceive their school experience. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do African American special education students perceive their high school experience?
2. In what ways do African American special education students see their special education as beneficial and in what ways do they see it as harmful?
3. How do African American special education students experience their interactions with others in the high school environment: teachers, peers, counselors, and administrators?
Chapter 2: Literature Review

In chapter two I discuss four bodies of literature that relate directly to my research. These bodies of literature draw attention to (1) institutional racism and the miseducation of African American students, (2) support for theories about the overrepresentation of African Americans in special education programs, (3) consequences of placement in special education programs, and (4) African American students’ experiences in special education programs. For each body of literature I identify strong claims—those that are supported with ample evidence, and weaker claims—those that have limited empirical support. I end the chapter with a discussion of gaps in the literature that justify the need for additional studies.

Institutional Racism and the Miseducation of African-American Students

A crucial and fundamental tenet of U.S. democracy is that all citizens have equal rights and equal access to economic, social, political, and educational opportunities (Blanchett, 2009; Jones, 1997; Ogbu, 1990). Despite this hopeful view of how democracy ought to function, some groups within U.S. society have neither equal rights nor equal access (Blanchett, 2009; Jones, 1997; Ogbu, 1990). Because of the legacy of slavery, African Americans are among the groups whose rights and access have often been denied (Blanchett, 2009; Jones, 1997; Ogbu, 1990). Although denial of rights and access sometimes results from the racist actions of individuals, more often it comes from the seemingly impersonal operation of institutions—a phenomenon that some call “institutional racism” (e.g., Kamali, 2009; Rudy, 2013; Treganier, 2006).
Numerous researchers have provided definitions of “institutional racism.” Kamali (2009), for example, claimed that institutional racism occurs when members of the majority group in a society systematically discriminate against members of a minority group. From this perspective, institutional racism reflects the routines and practices of organizations—explicit or tacit arrangements that restrict minority group members’ access to resources, careers, and other opportunities.

Putting forward a similar definition, Trepagnier (2006) claimed that institutional racism occurs when “institutions favor the dominant group—white Americans—over black Americans and other minorities” (p. 65). Such institutional arrangements produce “racial inequality,” which, according to Trepagnier (2006), perpetuates a cycle in which some groups are repeatedly advantaged and other groups are repeatedly disadvantaged. As Trepagnier commented, institutional racism occurs when “social institutions such as the criminal justice system, education, and [the] economy put people of color at a disadvantage while simultaneously giving white people an unwarranted advantage” (p. 65).

According to both Treganier (2006) and Kamali (2009), institutional racism manifests in two different forms. Kamali (2009, p. 53) called the two forms “intentional” and “unintentional,” and Treganier (2006, pp. 69-70) called them “direct” and “indirect.” Institutional racism occurs in its “intentional” or “direct” form when institutions create policies and practices with the explicit purpose of harming or discriminating against minorities. Institutional racism occurs in its “unintentional” or “indirect” form when the norms of daily life in society limit opportunities and outcomes for members of minority
groups. According to Treganier (2006), indirect institutional racism is “carried out with no intent to harm the members of the subordinate group affected” (p. 70). Kamali (2009, p.6) used the term “structural discrimination” to refer to this unintentional or indirect form of institutional racism.

Schools are one of the social institutions that enact both direct and indirect forms of institutional racism. Although they are supposed to provide children and youth with the skills and knowledge they need for adult life (e.g., Rudy, 2013), schools do not impart skills and knowledge equally to all students (Blanchett, 2009; Losen & Orfield 2002). In particular, the system of education in the United States provides certain students, mainly those from White and affluent backgrounds, with far better educational opportunities and outcomes than it provides to other students, mainly those from low income backgrounds and racial and ethnic minority groups (Jones, 1997; Ogbu, 1990, Orfield, 1979, 2001). According to some scholars (e.g., Blanchett, 2009; Jones, 1997; Ogbu, 1990; Orfield, 1979, 2001) these disparities reveal the extent to which institutional racism and classism pervade our society.

Within the institution of schooling one can observe several forms of direct and indirect institutional racism. For example, “separate but equal” schools might be viewed as an indirect form of institutional racism because ostensibly this approach to education in the Southern United States was designed with no explicit intent to harm African American students (Jones, 1997; Orfield, 1979; Orfield, 2001). Soon after the approach was implemented, however, African American educators and parents discovered that “separate but equal” usually meant “separate and unequal” (Connor, 2009; Jones, 1997;
Losen & Orfield 2002; Orfield, 1979; Orfield, 2001). In comparison to White schools, African American schools lacked resources, often employed fewer and less well-qualified teachers, and received little support from state or district education agencies (Blanchett 2009; Green, 2006; Harry et. al., 2007; Kozol, 2005; Losen & Orfield 2002). When educators and policy makers became aware of the discrepancies and their consequences, their inaction turned what might originally have been indirect institutional racism into direct institutional racism (Kamali, 2009; Trepagnier, 2006).

Another example of indirect institutional racism may involve the processes relating to referral for special education services. When teachers make such referrals, they rarely believe they are doing so in order to cause harm to students. In fact, teachers often believe they are helping students when they make such referrals. Nevertheless, as the next section of the chapter shows, such referrals can lead to misdiagnoses and placements in programs that do, in some cases, impose unfair limits on students’ chances for academic and life success (Blanchett, 2009; Blanchett, 2006; Connor, 2009; Dykes, 2008; Losen & Orfield, 2002; Peterz, 1999).

According to Trepagnier (2006, p. 79), this type of indirect institutional racism is sustained by the “silent racism” of White educators. Their failure to take action to eliminate institutional racism comes from “the unspoken negative thoughts, emotions and assumptions about Black Americans that dwell in the minds of White Americans, including well-meaning Whites that care about racial equality” (p. 15). Individuals whose thinking is influenced by silent racism do not see themselves as racist or as unfair because they do not intend to discriminate against or act in racist ways toward African
Americans (Trepagnier, 2006). According to some authors, “White privilege” (e.g., Blanchett, 2009 p. 24; McIntosh, 1998, p. 1), contributes to silent racism. Blanchett (2009) defined White privilege as

….any phenomena where individual (e.g., biased teachers, attitudes/perceptions), structural (e.g., curricular and pedagogical practices geared towards Whites, middle class students) political (e. g., biased educational policies), economics (school funding formula that contribute to inequality), or social (social constructions of race and disability), that serve to privilege Whites while oppressing people of color and promoting White supremacy. (p. 24)

White privilege can be invisible to White people because they do not see the benefits that come to them as a result of being White. As with all institutional conditions that sustain racism, White privilege becomes so deeply embedded in the structures and functions of institutions that most people accept it as natural. A growing body of literature talks about the benefits of experiences that require White people to become aware of and take ownership for their privilege (Blanchett, 2009; Larson & Choate, 2011; Lund, 2010; McIntosh, 1998). Although such experiences do not themselves reduce institutionalized racism, they do sensitize White people to the institutional arrangements that need to be changed on behalf of a more equitable society (Blanchett, 2009; Larson & Choate, 2011; Lund, 2010; McIntosh, 1998).

The discussion above points to some ways by which racism in the institution of schooling limits African American students’ opportunities. Similarly, a variety of other types of institutional racism limit their access to up-to-date school facilities, highly
prepared teachers, challenging curricular offerings, enrichment opportunities, and the ability to interact with a wide variety of peers (Blanchett 2009; Green, 2006; Harry et. al., 2007; Kozol, 2005; Losen & Orfield 2002). This dissertation focuses particularly on the institutional racism embedded in practices relating to special education referral, testing, placement, and instruction via the Individualized Education Program (IEP). The literature relating to this form of institutional racism is presented in the next section of the chapter.

Overrepresentation of African Americans in Special Education

As discussed in the previous chapter, the over-representation of students of color in special education programs is a serious problem because the services that the students receive may not benefit them, while at the same time the disability label may harm them. Several circumstances associated with special education placement may, in fact, be detrimental. Among these are racially segregated classrooms, limited engagement with the general education curriculum, and instruction that tends to be slow-paced and oriented toward memorization rather than accelerated and oriented toward problem-solving and critical thinking (Connor, 2009; Feggins-Azziz et al., 2006; Losen & Orfield 2002; Moore, Henfield, & Owens, 2008).

Reasons for overrepresentation. Researchers posit three possible reasons why African American students are overrepresented in special education programs: (1) African American students often receive an inadequate education; (2) the poverty of many African American families contributes to their children’s developmental delays; and (3) systemic bias is enacted through schools’ processes for referring students for
special education, assessing their levels of performance, and placing them in purportedly appropriate educational settings.

Inadequate education. According to some researchers, inadequate education of African American students can result in their misidentification as disabled and their subsequent placement in special education programs (Blanchett 2009; Green, 2006; Harry et. al., 2007; Losen & Orfield 2002). Students who are deprived of access to quality instruction often lack the skills needed for grade-level academic performance (Blanchett 2009; Green, 2006; Harry et. al., 2007; Losen & Orfield 2002). When teachers observe the skill levels of such students, they may incorrectly assume that the below-level performance results from some type of learning disability rather than from inadequate prior instruction (Blanchett 2009; Green, 2006; Harry et. al., 2007; Losen & Orfield, 2002). This assumption may even keep such educators from fully exploring the circumstances leading to students’ apparent learning difficulties (Blanchett, 2009; Green, 2006; Harry et. al., 2007; Losen & Orfield 2002).

Green (2005) claimed that another reason why students of color are placed into special education programs is that their schools fail to provide them with appropriate early interventions. According to Green (2005), African American students seem to have characteristic learning patterns that schools often do not address. Among the nine reasons for overrepresentation that Green (2005) lists, two clearly reference the inadequacies of the education that African American students typically receive: (1) limited learning opportunities and (2) the failure of schools to provide African American students with
positive African American role models in positions of authority (e.g., as teachers and principals).

Researchers Harry, Klingner, and Cramer (2007) came to the conclusion that the poor quality of the education that African American students typically receive in U.S. schools is the primary reason why they are overrepresented in special education programs. These researchers claimed that “inappropriate and inadequate instruction and school-based decision making has increased the likelihood of [African American students’] special education placement” (p. 5).

The researchers arrived at this conclusion based on a qualitative case study of the processes by which special education placements are made. They focused in particular on (1) how placement teams involved parents in the process and (2) how those teams interpreted and implemented the requirement to educate students in the least restrictive environment (LRE). The study examined the referral and placement processes used on behalf of 12 students from several different elementary schools. In addition, the researchers assessed the instructional environment at the schools as well as parental perspectives on how their children’s education was being handled. To collect data, they conducted observations of students and parents. Observations took place both in classrooms and in homes. The researchers also conducted interviews with teachers, other school personnel, and parents.

Data from Harry and associates’ study showed that the schools typically placed African American and other students from non-mainstream groups in self-contained classrooms, especially if the placement team identified the student as mildly retarded or
as having a behavior disorder. Not only were these students placed in more restrictive environments than their disabilities warranted, they also remained in these restrictive placements even after their performance had improved.

Data pointed to four reasons for overrepresentation at the schools in the study—two of which related to inadequate education: (1) failure of the schools to partner with parents by sharing information with them about the special education options available to their children and (2) ineffective educational practices responding to external pressures such as high-stakes testing, the need to uphold the reputation of the school district, and requirements to conclude special education assessment and placement procedures according to a strict timetable (Harry et al., 2007).

Despite the tendency of Harry and associates (2007) to portray their findings as widely applicable, the study was actually limited by its small sample. With such a small number of schools, students, and parents—all from one geographic area, findings cannot be said to represent dynamics other than those pertinent to the particular sample. As numerous methodologists have claimed (Glesne, 2001; Patton, 2002; Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Seidman, 2006), case studies such as the one conducted by Harry and associates capture the experiences and reflections of a unique group or set of individuals; their value is in identifying possible theoretical connections, not in verifying associations, patterns, or trends across a population.

According to another set of case studies, those conducted by Kozol (2005), African American students have limited learning opportunities in part because the urban school districts they often attend lack appropriate resources. His comparisons of the
resources available in suburban and urban districts showed that suburban school districts tended to have more resources to support the education of their students. These comparisons led him to conclude, moreover, that limited resources contributed to less ambitious educational goals: “the general idea that schools in ghettoized communities must settle for a different set of goals than schools that serve the children of the middle class and upper middle class is widely accepted” (p. 3).

The relatively small number of African American role models in positions of authority can also influence the attitudes and aspirations of African American students. When African American students are limited to seeing White role models only, they may come to believe that it is impossible for people of color (including themselves) to assume leadership roles (Hopson, Hotep, Schneider & Turenne, 2010; Ogbu, 1990; Pollard & Ajirotutu, 2000; Woodson, 1933). This conclusion, in turn, lowers their aspirations for high academic achievement and attainment (Hopson et al., 2010; Ogbu, 1990; Pollard & Ajirotutu, 2000; Woodson, 1933). In order to provide an alternative to this mental model, some educators support the establishment of Afro-centric schools (Hopson et al., 2010; Pollard & Ajirotutu, 2000; Woodson, 1933). Such schools give African American students opportunities to interact with African American professionals from their communities as well as African American school and community leaders (Hopson et al., 2010; Pollard & Ajirotutu, 2000; Woodson, 1933).

According to some researchers, culturally mismatched classrooms are part of the reason why schooling for African American students is often inadequate (Gay, 2004; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Milner, 2003; Reiter & Davis 2011). According to Gay (2004) among
others, culturally mismatched classrooms are classrooms where African American
students and/or non-mainstream students are taught primarily by White teachers (Gay &
Kirkland, 2003; Milner, 2003; Reiter & Davis, 2011). According to some research, this
type of cultural mismatch has detrimental consequences for the academic achievement
and social and emotional well-being of African American students (Gay, 2004; Gay &
Kirkland, 2003; Milner, 2003; Reiter & Davis, 2011).

Several studies, for example, have investigated the dynamics that contribute to
deleterious outcomes in culturally mismatched classrooms (e.g., Gay, 2004; Gay &
Kirkland, 2003; Milner, 2003; Reiter & Davis, 2011). These studies show that White
teachers often make assumptions about the motivations and academic ability of African
American and other diverse students—assumptions that then cause students to react
negatively towards their teachers and toward the schooling experience in general (Gay &
Kirkland, 2003; Milner, 2003; Reiter & Davis, 2011). Subsequently, these negative
reactions (e.g., inattentiveness, low motivation, misbehavior) reinforce the original
perspectives of the teachers with regard to their students’ abilities and interest in
education (Gay, 2004; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Milner, 2003; Reiter & Davis, 2011).

Evidence of such “self-fulfilling prophecies” dates back to the work of Rosenthal
and Jacobson (1968). As discussed in chapter one, “self-fulfilling prophecies” resulting
from teachers’ low expectations for the performance of certain students affect these
students’ performance substantially because such prophecies encourage students to
protect themselves from psychological harm by disengaging from academic work
(Cotton, 1989; Harris et al., 1986; Weinstein, 2002). According to some researchers,
teachers’ expectations also influence what students think about their own efficacy, and their self-efficacy beliefs then cause them to match their performance to the reduced level of performance that their teachers expect of them (Cotton, 1989; Crawford, 2007; Harris et al., 1986; Harbor & Jussim, 2005; Weinstein; 2002).

Sometimes the inability of White teachers to hold high expectations for the performance of African American students and to provide these students with the support needed for high levels of performance causes them to refer students for special education services even when such services are unnecessary and inappropriate (Brown, 2004; Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson, & Bridgest, 2003; Orfield & Losen, 2002). In most of these cases, the teachers are unaware that they are playing a role in the mis-education of African American students and instead believe they are helping such students receive the services they need (Blanchett, 2009; Brown, 2004; Ferri & Connor, 2005; Gentry, 2009; Neal et al., 2003; Orfield & Losen, 2002).

According to some researchers (Gay, 2004; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1992), teachers’ use of culturally relevant instructional practices reduces the likelihood that they will mis-educate African American students. Ladson-Billings (1992), for example, described culturally relevant pedagogy as an approach that “empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 382). Some research shows that this instructional approach helps students connect their learning to their cultural experiences, thereby validating their identities, families, cultural values, and aspirations (Gay, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1992; Neal et al, 2003; Ryan, 2006).
The contribution of poverty to developmental delays. Another explanation for the overrepresentation of African American students in special education programs relates to the fact that so many of these students grow up in poverty (O’Connor & Deluca-Fernandez, 2006). The reasoning here is that (1) conditions of poverty interfere with children’s early physical and intellectual development, (2) such limitations result in developmental delays, and (3) educators interpret such developmental delays as disabilities (O’Connor & Deluca-Fernandez, 2006).

Despite this logic, research in the social sciences has thus far been unable to demonstrate with precision the extent to which poverty contributes to delays in intellectual development. Poverty, after all, does not exist as a condition separate from inadequate education and systematic bias (e.g., Ramey & Campbell, 1984; Campbell & Ramey, 1994; Ramey, Campbell & Ramey, 1999; Gottlieb & Blair, 2004). Nevertheless, research on the effects of deprivation (e.g., Ramey & Campbell, 1984; Campbell & Ramey, 1994; Ramey et al., 1999) and research on the benefits of early intervention with young children from impoverished homes (e.g., Ramey & Campbell, 1984; Campbell & Ramey, 1994; Ramey et. al, 1999; Gottlieb & Blair, 2004) do provide some basis for believing that there may be a link between poverty and intellectual development.

Researchers Ramey and Campbell (1984), for example, conducted a long term study, the Abecedarian Project, to examine whether or not early intervention influenced the development and well-being—operationalized in terms of intellectual competence---of children from disadvantaged families. To select children to participate, the researchers measured students’ levels of “risk” for academic difficulties. They used an intervention
index that included family educational background information among other salient family characteristics to determine eligibility (Ramey & Campbell, 1984).

The research design identified equivalent groups of “at-risk” children—with each group including approximately 28 children and each receiving a different educational treatment. The first group received preschool and early elementary intervention from birth to age eight, the second received preschool intervention from birth to age five, the third received three years of intervention during the early school years, and the control group received no educational intervention.

The results indicated that the children who had received preschool and early school-aged intervention obtained IQ and academic achievement scores that were significantly higher than those of children in the control group. The results also showed that children who had received any amount of educational intervention during the experiment showed increases in IQ and academic performance. The study suggested that the possible challenges to intellectual development that result from poverty can be overcome through educational interventions. A significant concern, however, was the fact that the observed increases in intelligence test performance were relatively short-lived. Follow-up testing revealed that, without continued intervention, students lost much of what they had gained from the experimental treatment. The researchers concluded that factors other than educational intervention—factors related to home life—also influence the trajectory of children’s intellectual development.

Although its results suggested that poverty can depress intellectual development and that intervention can reverse that effect, the study was limited by its geographic
specificity and its inclusion only of African American children. Furthermore, it focused neither on the mechanisms by which poverty depresses intellectual development nor on the mechanisms by which early intervention counteracts the influence of poverty.

In another study directly related to special education placement, Scott and Blair (2002) examined the extent to which students’ low socioeconomic status (SES) represented a risk for LD placement. These researchers examined birth records of school-aged children to see which characteristics predisposed these children to be placed in general education classrooms, LD classrooms, or gifted education classrooms. The researchers gathered information from the birth records that identified the students’ gender, race, maternal education, maternal age of delivery, maternal marital status, birth weight, and the trimester when prenatal care began.

Statistical analysis revealed that all of the risk factors associated with low SES did indeed increase children’s chances of being placed in an LD program. The analyses indicated that 30% of the likelihood of LD placement among boys and 39% of the likelihood among girls was attributed to SES risk factors. The researchers also found that the likelihood of placement for children with any of the risk factors was significantly higher than the likelihood of placement for children with no risk factors.

Despite its identification of statistical associations, the study had one serious limitation, namely its failure to account for pertinent variables (beyond those included) that may also influence LD placement. Such variables relate to children’s upbringing, the characteristics of the schools they attend, the community support they receive, and their physical health. Because these variables influence and are influenced by SES, the
association between low-SES markers and an LD diagnosis is likely to be far more complicated than cause and effect. Poverty, for example, may predispose a child to live in a family where parents’ work schedules are so demanding that parents have little time to provide early literacy experiences, and the lack of early literacy experiences may then make the process of learning to read more difficult for the child, thereby prompting a teacher to refer the child for LD placement.

Another study that purported to identify causes of overrepresentation of diverse students in special education placements attempted to use data from large national data sets to evaluate the merits of two competing hypotheses (Oswald, Coutinho, & Best, 2002). The researchers used data from the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) to determine the relative salience of the “systemic bias” hypothesis and the “biological impact of poverty” hypothesis to explain the overrepresentation in special education programs of students from particular backgrounds. From these data sets, the researchers selected a number of variables that allowed them to examine the association between disability status and gender, ethnicity, and other social circumstances.

The first hypothesis was that individuals from certain ethnic groups are susceptible to disabilities. According to this view, susceptibility results from the social circumstances affecting the lives of these students, such as poverty, poor nutrition, and so on. The reasoning behind this hypothesis is that inhospitable social circumstances place limits on the developmental trajectories of children from these groups and expose them to added risks—two circumstances that increase children’s susceptibility to various
disabling conditions. The first hypothesis also embedded the view that diverse students, because of their susceptibility to disabling conditions—are more likely to fit eligibility requirements for placements in programs for students with mental retardation than to fit eligibility requirement for placement in programs for students with learning disabilities or behavior disorders. Using regression models that included individual and school-level characteristics, the researchers found that schools’ higher overall poverty level did not predispose Black males to be placed in programs for the mentally retarded. Nevertheless, schools’ higher poverty rates did predispose Black males to be placed in programs for the seriously emotionally disturbed (SED) and learning disabled (LD). Although the findings did not support the hypothesis that the poverty of African American students led to their overrepresentation in programs for the mentally retarded, they did show patterns of overrepresentation that seemed to be associated with poverty. The researchers interpreted the findings to suggest that poverty did not tend to depress intelligence, despite the tendency of schools with large numbers of low-income students to seek special education services for their African American males. This interpretation tended to support the theory that bias, not physical deprivation caused by poverty, explains overrepresentation of African American students in special education programs.

**Bias as a cause of overrepresentation.** According to some researchers, systemic biases are the most likely cause of the overrepresentation of African American students in special education programs (Oswald et al., 2002). From their perspective two systemic biases are particularly germane to the question of overrepresentation: test bias and teacher referral bias.
According to Scheuneman and Slaughter (1991) test bias involves “the systematic over or under estimation of true abilities of a group of examinees formed according to some demographic variable such as sex or ethnicity” (p. 27). These authors claimed that, although test biases do exist, they are hard to detect because “true ability is unobservable” (p. 24). For this reason, these authors argued that researchers would need to use indirect measures to demonstrate the existence and extent of test bias (Scheuneman & Slaughter 1991). Researchers Cole and Zieky (2001) agreed with this assessment, claiming that there is no definitive way to determine the “fairness of a test” (p. 369).

Despite these reasonable cautions, some research has demonstrated that the most common tests used to determine eligibility for special education placement do embed biases. A 1995 study conducted by Valencia, Rankin, and Livingston, for example, showed that the content of items on the K-ABC was biased in favor of Whites and against Mexican-Americans. Reschly and Sabers (1979 as cited in Reynolds, 1981) found some evidence of test bias in their examination of the WISC-R IQ and the Metropolitan Achievement Test. Lewis, Balla, and Shanok (1979 as cited in Reynolds, 1981) also found test bias in relation to over-identification of Black adolescents for placement in programs for students with mental impairments. Overall, however, as Powers and associates (2004) have noted, empirical findings about the existence and extent of test bias are inconclusive.

In response to the growing consensus that studies of test bias yield inconclusive findings, researchers Wicherts, Dolan, and Hessen (2005) used an unusual approach to examine the effects that bias had on achievement and intelligence test performance.
Instead of comparing test performance by group or analyzing test items for bias, they investigated a construct called “stereotype threats,” a term first used by Steele and Aronson in their 1995 research. From the perspective of these two research teams, stereotype threats result when test administrators insert subtle comments into their instructions to individuals who are taking a test. Stereotype threats, for example, might include comments suggesting that a student does not have adequate intellectual ability to perform well (Wicherts, Dolan, Hessen, 2005).

To evaluate the possible influence of stereotype threats on students of different races and genders, the researchers used three different experimental designs to manipulate the extent to which female test takers and those from diverse groups received stereotype threats from test administrators. The researchers randomly assigned students to testing situations in which the test administrators used differing types and amounts of negative commentary. Overall, results of the study showed that stereotype threats in which a student’s ability was questioned had an adverse impact on the test performance of that student. This study, moreover, replicated findings from Steele and Aronson’s (1995) earlier study, which showed similar consequences for African American students who took the Graduate Records Exam (GRE) shortly after hearing negative messages about their abilities from test administrators.

Although the research on stereotype threats showed that negative messages from external sources tend to depress the test performance of African American students, some researchers have argued that internal beliefs about one’s own race have an even more profound effect. Notably, Helms (2002) claimed that students of color often have low test
performance because of their racial self-perceptions—a construct she termed “racial identity.” She defined racial identity as “more than who you call yourself or what you call yourself. It’s also a combination of how you perceive your environment. It’s the filters [through] which you make sense of your environment” (Helms, 2002, minute 36.11 in video). Drawing on her work with this construct, Helms (2002) explained how racial identification filters might affect the way students of color view their life experiences—views that might subsequently affect their test performance. In short, if an African American student has internalized the belief that African Americans are less intelligent than Whites, then that self-perception is likely to keep the student from performing at high levels on a test of intelligence or achievement.

Another circumstance that may have an impact on overrepresentation is “referral bias”. According to some special education researchers, “referral bias” occurs when a teacher refers a student for special education because of characteristics or circumstances unrelated to the student’s ability or educational needs. Ysseldyke, Algozzine, Regan, and McGue (1981) called these characteristics or conditions “naturally-occurring characteristics” (p. 168). Naturally-occurring characteristics include race, sex, socioeconomic status, and physical attractiveness as well as other inherent traits. The researchers found that such characteristics did, in fact, influence the referral and decision-making process. They conducted a study in which they randomly assigned 159 educators and school psychologist to groups, each of which received a different hypothetical case file. These files described students with different characteristics (e.g., gender, SES) and identified the referrals either as referrals for academic issues or as referrals for behavioral
issues. In addition, no matter what other information was available about the hypothetical students, all had test information showing that their abilities were in the average range.

The experiment required each participant first to review the hypothetical student’s case file and then to make a recommendation regarding that hypothetical student’s placement.

The results indicated that students whose referrals cited behavioral problems were more likely to be recommended for special education than those whose referrals cited academic problems. Gender, socioeconomic status, and reason for referral had the greatest influence on decision making especially when the referrals were academic. Boys irrespective of SES were referred more often than girls. Low-SES students were referred more often than high-SES students.

Reflecting a somewhat more complex theory of action, a study conducted by Podell and Soodak (1993) examined the role of teacher bias and teacher efficacy in decisions about special education placement. The researchers defined teachers with a high level of efficacy as those who believed in their own ability to help students learn no matter what the circumstances. They defined teachers with a low level of efficacy as those who were less confident in their ability to increase students’ learning, especially the learning of students from low-SES backgrounds. The researchers formulated the following two hypotheses:

(1) teacher efficacy interacts with students’ SES such that teachers high in efficacy are less likely to refer high-SES students, whereas those low in efficacy are most likely to refer low-SES students [and] (2) teacher efficacy interacts with presumed etiology of a student’s learning problem such that teachers high in
efficacy are less likely to refer students whose learning problem have a known etiology, whereas teachers low in efficacy are most likely to refer students whose learning problems have an unknown etiology. (p. 248)

The researchers studied a sample of 240 teachers, randomly assigning each teacher to a group. Members of each group read a case study that described the etiology of a hypothetical student’s problems as well as his or her background characteristics, academic difficulties, and medical history. The researchers provided details about the SES of the student’s family by giving descriptions of the type of jobs held by each parent. The researchers asked members of each group to read the case study assigned to him or her and to make a hypothetical referral or placement determination for the student described in the case study. As part of the study, each teacher also completed a Teacher Efficacy Scale to measure his or her level of self-efficacy, and he or she answered a short list of demographic questions, asking such things as years of teaching experience and ethnicity.

The results of the study indicated that teachers’ judgments about referral and placement were not solely based on the presenting educational needs of the students in the case studies but also on the teachers’ levels of confidence in their ability to work with students from low-SES homes. This finding supported the first hypothesis, namely that teachers with high levels of self-efficacy believed that general education classrooms were an appropriate placement for low-SES students. Teachers with low self-efficacy, by contrast, expressed the belief that low-SES students would not benefit from being in a general education classroom. The researchers also found that teachers’ self-efficacy did
not affect the decisions they made regarding the special education referral and placement of students from high-SES backgrounds.

Meijer and Foster (1998) also conducted a similar study, investigating the relationship between teachers’ self-efficacy and the rate at which teachers referred students with learning or behavior problems for special education services. The researchers explained that if a teacher perceived a student to be difficult, he or she would be likely to make a referral. From the perspective of these researchers, teachers with higher self-efficacy would tend to see fewer students as difficult, and those with lower self-efficacy would tend to see more students as difficult. Consistent with the results of Podell and Soodak’s (1993) study, these researchers also found that teachers’ self-efficacy mediated their referral decisions. Data from the study showed that the theoretical relationship between self-efficacy and number of referrals was borne out in practice.

Overall, the research discussed in this section of the chapter shows that bias does appear to influence decisions regarding the referral and placement of students from certain groups, particularly students from low-SES backgrounds. Because teachers tend to over-refer students with certain characteristics (e.g., African American or low-SES students) and then evaluators use eligibility tests that are biased against such students, schools often find that students with these characteristics are overrepresented in special education programs.

Consequences of Overrepresentation

The research below suggests, two negative consequences often outweigh the benefits students derive from their placement in special education programs. These
consequences relate to stigmatization and to placement in a restrictive environment. Of course, special education placement does not always produce these consequences. In schools where inclusion is used to a significant extent, students with disabilities spend almost all of their time in general education classrooms (Buell, Hallam, Gamel-Mccormick & Scheer, 1990; Salend & Garrick-Duhany, 1999). In these cases, other students may not see them as different, thereby limiting the effects of negative stigmas (Buell et al., 1990; Salend & Garrick-Duhany, 1999).

Stigmatization. In her discussion of anthropological theories of disability, Reid-Cunningham (2009) explained how cultures construct “insiders” and “outsiders.” Depending on the extent of “otherness” of some outsiders, insiders might fear, hate, or even shun them. In our culture, according to Reid-Cunningham, various subcultures view disability differently—some assigning “outsider status” to people with disabilities and others not. For example, the medical community often sees disability as a disease or impairment that requires medical intervention (p. 104). Because of the power differential between patients and medical professionals, moreover, viewing disability as a disease tends to relegate people with disabilities to “outsider” status. Some subcultures, according to Reid-Cunningham, also view people with certain disabilities as deviant and, as a consequence, stigmatize them or treat them as lower in status than other members of their communities.

Focusing on how stigmas are created rather than on groups that are subject to greater and lesser degrees of stigmatization, Link and Phelan (2001) identified a five-stage process. According to these authors, the first stage gets underway once people in a
society identify and label differences among people—differences that distinguish a minority group from the mainstream. Following such labeling, people in the mainstream begin to attach negative stereotypes to those in the minority—a circumstance that then allows mainstream members of society to establish distance between themselves and members of the non-mainstream group. When such distancing has become institutionalized, members of the mainstream come to view members of the non-mainstream group as having low social status. Eventually, the low status that mainstream members of society attribute to non-mainstream group members leads to actual power differentials between the labeler (i.e., the mainstream member of society) and the labeled (i.e., the member of the non-mainstream group). Such power differentials then enable discrimination because non-mainstream group members have limited power to resist the unfair ways in which members of the mainstream treat them.

Whereas Reid-Cunningham and Link and Phelan focused on the social processes by which stigmas are produced, Susman (1994) considered the experiences of people with disabilities. From her perspective, not all individuals with disabilities accept being “othered.” Some view their disabilities in a positive light, and some offer effective resistance when community members attempt to treat them as deviant. Also construing stigma as a socially constructed phenomena, Towler and Schneider (2005) conducted an empirical study to explore similarities and differences in the stigmas assigned to people in different categories. First, these researchers used cluster analysis to identify characteristics and conditions that tended to be classified together and therefore stigmatized similarly. They identified seven clusters: physical disability, mental
disability, economic disadvantage, social deviance, physical appearance, sexual identity, and racial identity. Then they used multidimensional scaling to show how ratings of the seven stigmas differed across three dimensions: social undesirability, controllability, and general pity. The results indicated that the dimension with the largest variance across the clusters was social undesirability. The researchers found that some groups—particularly those in which individuals were seen to have more control over their circumstances—were more undesirable than other groups. For example, the researchers found that social deviants tended to be viewed as more undesirable than people with physical disabilities.

Despite the alignment between the findings and what common sense might lead one to speculate, the study had important limitations. First, the researchers used inadequate procedures to validate the existence of the seven distinct clusters. Second, they used their own prior experiences to identify groups that might be subject to stigma rather than identifying such groups through an empirical process (e.g., a set of focus group interviews).

**Stigmatizing effects of disability status, including special education placement.** Although findings from Towler and Schneider’s (2005) study revealed disability as a category of difference that was not subject to high levels of stigma, studies in schools have found that students in special education placements are sometimes stigmatized. A study conducted by Cooney and associates (2006), for example, examined stigmas associated with LD students in the United Kingdom who were either mainstreamed or served in segregated placements. One important aim of the study was to determine if the placement alternative (i.e., mainstreamed or segregated) contributed to
the degree of stigmatization. The researchers found, however, that students reported equal
levels of stigmatization in both settings. Students in both settings reported being
stigmatized, as evidenced by ridicule and exclusion from activities with their non-
disabled classmates.

In a study that drew on Link and Phelan’s (2001) five-stage model, McHatton and
Correa (2005) examined the impact that sigma-related discrimination had on 50 Puerto
Rican and Mexican single mothers of children with disabilities. The researchers
interviewed the mothers, asking them about their experiences with professional agencies
as well as about their perceptions of family needs and their beliefs about disability. In
addition, the researchers queried the mothers about their children’s and families’
characteristics. Results of the study suggested that the women experienced discrimination
based on both their ethnicity and the disability status of their children. They reported that
professional agencies as well as strangers in the community were the sources of
discrimination. Despite the study’s contribution to the empirical literature on
stigmatization of children with disabilities and their families, the study’s findings were
not generalizable because of the relatively small sample size. Furthermore, the authors
used a method for transcribing interviews that may have caused some critical information
to be lost in the process.

A study conducted by Kelly and Norwich (2004) in the United Kingdom examined
the degree to which children with moderate learning difficulties in mainstreamed and
segregated placements had positive, negative or mixed self-perceptions. The researchers
also explored the association between type of special education placement and self-
perception. To answer their research questions, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with 101 children. Of the children selected to participant 50 were from highly segregated placements (in a special school) and 51 were from more mainstreamed placements.

The results of the study were similar to those reported by McHatton and Correa (2005). According to the researchers, most of the participants who were mainstreamed had negative feelings about their special education placements because they perceived themselves as less capable than their non-disabled peers. Students in the special school, by contrast, seemed to have a more positive outlook about their disabilities. Some students, however, reported having mixed emotions about their special education placements. One important caution in interpreting this study is its context. Educational arrangements in the United Kingdom may differ considerably from those in the United States. Therefore, the finding that students who received their education in more segregated settings had more positive self-perceptions than those who received their education in more mainstream settings may not apply to students in the United States.

As McHatton and Correa’s (2005) study revealed, members of some groups are discriminated against because they differ from the mainstream in two or more ways (e.g., disability status and ethnicity). This finding substantiates earlier theoretical work on “double bias” (e.g., Alston & Mngadi, 1992, p.120; see also Herbert & Cheatham, 1988; Wright, 1988). Although the empirical work aligns with theory, it is quite limited. Additional work on stigmatization based on disability status seems warranted.
**Restrictive environment.** In addition to stigmatization and associated discrimination, overrepresentation of African American students in special education programs leads to continuing segregation, lowered educational expectations for their performance, and decreased educational attainment. According to Feggins-Azziz and associates (2006), re-segregation often results when African American students are disproportionately placed in restrictive environments, such as in special education classrooms (Feggins-Azziz et al., 2006). Explaining historical causes of such re-segregation, Ferri and Connor (2005) claimed that as “dividing students in schools according to racial ‘difference’ was being challenged, dividing students according to ‘disability’ gained greater acceptance” (p. 454). In other words, when civil rights legislation forced school integration, educators found another way to keep the races apart, namely by placing African American students in special education programs.

Moreover, as some educators have argued, when African American students are inappropriately classified as disabled, they are likely to be denied access to the general education curriculum (Blanchett, 2009; Connor, 2009; Losen & Orfield, 2002). And, lacking such access, they are often exempted from meeting state standards and participating in state testing programs—exemptions that actually decrease their chances of reaching high level of academic achievement (Telfer, 2011).

To test the factual basis of this claim, researchers Fierros and Conroy (2002) conducted a study to examine the restrictiveness of special education programs. They focused on 10 urban Connecticut schools in which large numbers of African American students had been placed in special education programs. Their method was to compare
rates of restrictiveness in these schools with rates of restrictiveness reported at the national, state, and district levels. Findings from the study revealed two major trends: (1) students of color with disabilities were more likely than White students with disabilities to be removed from general education classrooms for all or part of each day and (2) African American students were more likely than White students to be found eligible for placement in the special education classrooms, such as classrooms for the emotionally disturbed and mentally retarded, where mainstreaming options were the most limited.

**Summary.** Overall, as the discussion above shows, the research on the consequences of special education placement is limited. Nevertheless, what little evidence exists points to the likelihood that special education placement exposes students to stigmas and restricts their access to the general education program. For African American students, these negative consequences combine with other discriminatory school practices (e.g., lack of resources, inadequately prepared teachers) that increase their risk of receiving a substandard education. For these reasons it important for administrators to play a major role in promoting for these students

**An Alternative to Overrepresentation**

Some educational researchers and theorists position social justice education as a useful starting point for combatting institutional racism—the sort of racism that has allowed the overrepresentation of African Americans in special education programs to persist. Social justice education, as these advocates claim, promotes an equitable educational environment that is inclusive of all students (Capper, Theoharis, & Sebastian, 2006; Frattura & Capper, 2009; Theoharis, 2007). These advocates use the term “social
justice” to mean the same thing that Goldfarb and Grinberg (2002) meant when they defined it as: “the exercise of altering these [institutional and organizational] arrangements by actively engaging in reclaiming, appropriating, sustaining, and advancing inherent human rights of equity, equality, and fairness in social, economic, educational, and personal dimensions” (p. 162).

For Capper and colleagues, social justice starts with actions taken by school leaders. Based on a study of school administrators, Theoharis (2007) identified several ways these educators transformed school aims, culture, curriculum, instructional practices, and climate in order to make their schools more inclusive of previously marginalized students. The administrators reported using several strategies: (1) raising student achievement by recognizing the need for all students to excel on state-mandated and district assessments, (2) improving school structures by eliminating pullout programs and other segregated grouping arrangements, (3) building staff members’ capacity to address racial tensions by providing ongoing staff development that focused on ways to build equity and justice for all students, and (4) shifting the values undergirding school and community culture.

Although the administrators that Theoharis studied reported some success with these strategies, they also met with resistance from the district, school staff, and community members. They stood firm, however, in the face of such resistance by remaining focused on students’ needs.

Despite the difficulties associated with implementation of a social justice agenda in schools, the approach may be the only way for educators to combat the sorts of
institutional racism that result in the overrepresentation of African American students in special education programs. As earlier discussions in this chapter suggested, racism is pervasive: institutional racism is sustained in part because of deeply held (and sometimes deeply buried) racist beliefs. For African American students who encounter serious learning or behavior problems, the combination of prejudices against people of color, people with low incomes, and people with disabilities may so powerful that few educators will advocate their inclusion in general education programs. Educators with a strong commitment to social justice can, however, push against the purported “commonsense” (but actually exclusionary) perspective held by many of their colleagues.

**African American Students’ Experiences in Special Education Classrooms**

Although studies of the restrictiveness of special education programs offer some insight into the character of the education African American students receive when they are enrolled in such programs, these studies do not tell the whole story. Another important source of evidence is research that gives African American students the opportunity to describe their experiences in special education classrooms. The current study, in fact, proposes just such an investigation. Two other studies (Connor, 2009; Ferri & Connor, 2009) also had a similar aim.

In the first of these studies, Connor (2009) used narratives from LD students to disclose these students’ feelings about their disability, race, and social class. The interviews that resulted in such narratives provided LD students with the opportunity to discuss in detail how being labeled with a disability changed their lives. Altogether
Connor interacted with eight African American and Latino(a) male and female students, aged 18-23.

Connor (2009) collected data in four phases. At each phase the participants created different kinds of products that the researcher used as data. First, they created personal narratives and self-portraits. Next, they discussed their self-portraits and narratives among themselves in a dialog resembling a focus-group interview. At the third stage, the participants reframed their self-portraits through alternative representations (e.g., poems or rap songs). Finally, the students came back together to consider all of the narratives they had produced—both their original narratives and their reframed narratives. At all stages of the process Connor collected field notes, and during the data analysis phase, he developed methodological and substantive researcher notes.

Connor analyzed the data using what he termed an “intersectional analysis” (p. 12). This approach to analysis allowed him to gain a multi-dimensional understanding of the data through the use of Collins’ (2000) matrix of domination. The matrix included four domains of domination: structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal.

Analysis of the data showed that participants thought their peers viewed special education in a negative light and believed that students who received special education services were slow intellectually. The perceived negative attitudes of their peers, in turn, affected LD students’ attitudes, causing them to resent the disability label and making it difficult for them to tell people about their disability. Students also explained that they had never received any factual information about their disability or about how having a disability might change their lives.
Connor’s study was a model for my study because it allowed students with disabilities to describe their experiences. My study also had a similar aim. Nevertheless, my study was more focused than Connor’s. Whereas his study elicited student narratives about their disability, race, and social class, my study primarily focused on students’ perceptions of their special education placements. In addition, my study allowed students to offer evaluative comments about the positive and negative ramifications of placement in special education programs. Connor did not ask students directly to evaluate their experiences in special education programs, but rather inferred some evaluative perspectives from self-portraits and personal narratives. Finally, Connor’s method suggested that he already presupposed that African American students with disabilities would feel dominated in a variety of ways. My study, by contrast, was more objective. Rather than presuming what my participants might be experiencing, I was open to their descriptions of their experiences and their evaluations of the impact of special education placements on their lives.

A second study with similarities to mine was Ferri and Connor’s (2009) investigation of the special education experiences of five diverse young women, aged 18-20. Also using qualitative methods, this study, like mine, allowed students to describe their experiences in their own words. Commonly discussed by the young women were their interactions with peers and teachers. They frequently mentioned that these interactions were negative or disappointing. For example, they mentioned a lack of privacy at school and talked about their feelings of isolation from students in the general education program. One student reported that her interaction with peers changed once her
friends found out she was in a special education program. Another student described how she denied being in a special education classroom when a boy in the general education program repeatedly asked her if was she in “that class” (p. 4). This student also explained that teachers treated her differently after learning about her disability. She stated “they think less of me, like she’s not gonna do this [because] she came from the third (special education) floor” (p.4). This student reported that no matter how hard she worked her teachers still held lower expectations for her and treated her differently from other students.

This study showed that, for these young women, the costs of placement in the special education program outweighed the benefits. They suffered a loss of social status, feared being ridiculed and rejected by others, questioned their economic future, and doubted their ability to make successful adjustments to adult life. Nevertheless, the study also revealed that at least some of the young women were prideful, refusing to let their special education labels place limits on their future success.

**Gaps in the Literature**

As the discussion above shows, a number of studies have examined why African American students are overrepresented in special education classrooms. This research has surfaced a variety of possible explanations for such overrepresentation, but it has not yielded definitive conclusions. At the same time, a much smaller body of research has provided in-depth investigations of the ways parents and students view special education—an issue that is germane to interpretations of the consequences of overrepresentation.
To show why their perspectives are germane I reviewed briefly the argument presented in chapter 1: (1) overrepresentation exists; (2) if overrepresentation exposes students to unwelcome or unproductive experiences, it may represent unfair discrimination; (3) if overrepresentation exposes students to desirable or highly productive experiences, it may represent a benefit; and (4) literature identifying students’ and/or parents’ views about the value of special education placement is limited and does not yield definitive findings about perceived costs and benefits. As this argument suggests, the assessment of the implications of overrepresentation rests, at least in part, on a determination of whether or not special education placement is perceived by parents and students as a benefit or as a cost. Because almost no studies investigate their perspectives, however, there is a clear need for additional research.

Furthermore, the very few studies that examine students’ perspectives provide findings that relate obliquely to determinations of the costs and benefits of special education placement. For example, the literature on parents’ experiences mostly examines their role in ensuring that their children are properly screened, identified, and placed in special education programs (e.g., Strax, Strax & Copper, 2012). In addition, some of this research focuses on how parents are treated, not on how they view the ramifications of their children’s placement in a special education program. Fish’s (2006) study, for instance, disclosed parents’ views about how educators treated them during the IEP process. Research conducted by Childre and Chambers (2005) also focused on this issue.
As suggested above, the small body of literature focusing on students’ views about their experiences in special education (e.g., Connor, 2009; Ferri & Connor, 2005) does provide some insight into the lived experiences of student with disabilities. Its findings, however, are hardly definitive, and there is certainly room for additional work in this area. For example, neither of the two studies with aims and methods similar to those I used examined students’ perceptions of the costs and benefits of their placement in special education programs. By targeting such matters directly, my study added new insights to those offered by Connor (2009) and Ferri and Connor (2009). In addition, its emphasis on the narratives of students has the potential to enrich conversations among educators about the wisdom of continuing to place relatively large numbers of African American students in special education program.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

The study explored how African-American students in secondary-level special education placements perceived their school experiences. As part of this investigation, the study investigated whether these students perceived their experience in special education placements as beneficial or limiting; and it examined the manner in which they interacted in the school environment with others, including teachers, peers, counselors, and administrators.

To address the research questions, I used the qualitative methodology of in-depth interviewing. This approach helped me learn about the educational experiences of this particular group of students by eliciting an extensive verbatim narrative from several of them. According to Seidman (2006), in-depth interviewing enables researchers to gain a deep understanding of the experiences of others. In this case, “others” included a number of African American secondary school students who receive at least a part of their instruction in special education programs.

This chapter considers the underlying methodological assumptions that guided the research as well as the specific research methods I used. It includes three major sections: (1) methodology; (2) research methods; and (3) research ethics, validity and potential threats to validity, and limitations.

Methodology

I used in-depth interviewing to investigate the research questions of interest in this study (Seidman, 2006). The method was a variant of a more general approach that some
researchers call “narrative inquiry” (e.g., Creswell, 1998; Creswell, 2009; Patton, 2002). According to Patton (2002), narrative inquiry is a way to honor people’s lived experiences by providing them with the opportunity to revisit those experiences in order to make sense of them, both for themselves and for the qualitative researcher who is studying their experiences. Creswell (1998) sees narrative inquiry in a similar way: “narrative research is best for capturing the detailed stories or life experiences” (p. 55).

Like other forms of narrative inquiry, in-depth interviewing is a qualitative approach to the study of human experiences. Through this approach, I was able to gain access to participants’ thoughts, hear about their experiences and the impact of those experiences, and learn about their perceptions of organizations and social interactions (Glesne, 2001; Patton 2006; Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Seidman, 2006; Weiss, 1994). Weiss (1994) described in-depth interviewing as a way to “learn about places we have not been” (p. 1). The “places” to which Weiss referred are the places people have been in their lives—in other words, their experiences—and the ways they have given meaning to those experiences.

Several other researchers also have viewed in-depth interviewing in terms that are similar to those used by Weiss. Seidman (2006) claimed that the best way to gain understanding about a participant’s life experiences is by conducting in-depth interviews. In Seidman’s (2006) discussion of this approach he claimed, “The root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (p. 9). Patton (2002) also saw this approach in a similar way, construing lived experiences as the stories of people’s journeys—stories that
not only show how people interpret the past but also shape the way those people view new experiences and future prospects. According to these and several other qualitative researchers, people’s stories represent a view of reality and are therefore worth recording (Glesne, 2001; Patton, 2002; Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Seidman, 2006).

As the discussion above suggested, in-depth interviewing enables researchers to uncover the subjective truth about the ways participants perceive their experiences. For my study, these experiences related to identification as a student with a disability and subsequent placement and instruction in a special education program. Documenting students’ experiences in school programs, such as their special education placements, provides educators with information that can be useful as a basis for improving or sustaining those programs. Because my research examined each participant’s interpretation of his or her own experiences, it did not produce generalizable or “objective” truths (Johns, 2004; Overvold, 1973). Rather than focusing on explanations that apply to all students or a significant proportion of them, the study directed attention to the truths that each participant created for him or herself, in other words, each student’s subjective truth (Chadwick & Pawlowski, 2007; Duffy, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005).

As some methodologists have discussed, the process of sense-making that discloses subjective truths entails both cognitive and affective processes (Chadwick & Pawlowski, 2007; Duffy, 1995; Weick et al., 2005). The cognitive processing involved in sense-making relates to how participants perceive, draw on information about, and attach meaning to their experiences (Reiser & Dempsey, 2007; Sojka & Giense, 1997). The
affective side of sense-making involves the feelings or emotions that participants have about their experiences (Sojka & Giense, 1997). Researchers Sojka and Giense (1997) argued that cognitive and affective processes function independently of each other during the sense-making process but also operate interactively depending on the way participants react to and interpret their experiences.

The sense-making of participants in my study contributed to rich descriptions of their experiences in special education. When their descriptions included common elements, this evidence of intersubjectivity pointed to certain conditions in the life-world that might extend beyond the few students (and the few schools) included in the study. By contrast, when students’ experiences differed, the study pointed to the character of variability across individuals and the special education programs in which they were enrolled. In both cases, the study brought to the surface issues with salience to educators who are trying to establish and sustain effective practices for the provision of special education to African American high school students.

I also viewed the approach used to gather information about students’ experiences as a way to give them control over their experiences. By making sense of them in conversations with me, the students perhaps became less constrained by those experiences. According to some authors, research can be emancipating when it empowers participants to take control over the sense they make of their experiences and gives them the ability to speak and take action on their own behalf within organizations or environments that, prior to the research, seemed to be unapproachable and resistant to change (Aspis, 1997; Dowse, 2009).
I observed responses from students suggesting that the research process functioned to empower them. Notably, the interviews allowed me to forge a collaborative relationship with the students—a relationship that gave them confidence to share both positive and negative impressions of their schooling experience. In fact, many students shared quite personal experiences and talked about how they had overcome serious life challenges.

**Research Methods**

In this section I discuss the selection of research sites, the selection of participants, data collection through in-depth interviews, and the organization and analysis of the interview data.

**Selection of sites.** I collected data through interviews that took place in three high schools, in a Midwestern urban school district, respectively representing low, medium, and high percentages of students on individualized education programs (IEPs).

To determine which schools fit best with my criteria for inclusion in the study, I used data from a Midwestern urban school district. I gathered data about the district’s schools from the *Special Education Count by School, Program and Gender Report 2010-2011*, which provided information about the numbers of special education students in various categories on the basis of their special education program, gender, and race. I also used the *Student Enrollment Report 2010-2011* from each school to determine the approximate number of students who were enrolled. Together these reports provided me with the information I needed to determine the percentages of students in special education programs at each high school.
After I examined the data, I developed a list of schools and selected my first, second, and third choices in each category: low, medium, and high percentage of students on IEPs. For the low category I selected schools that had less than 14.7% of their students on IEPs. For the medium category, I selected schools that had between 16.4% and 18.7% of their students on IEPs, and for the high category I selected schools with 19.0% or more of their students on IEPs. In each case if the first-choice school decided not to participate, I identified two alternates in each category. Table 3.1 shows Midwestern urban schools with high, medium, and low proportions of students on IEPs as indicated on the reports listed above.
Table 3.1: *Schools and Percentages of Special Education Students*²

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Percentage of Special Education Students</th>
<th>Category (High (H), Medium (M), Low (L))</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scott High School</td>
<td>25.70%</td>
<td>H</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beechwood High School</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>H</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington High School</td>
<td>19.60%</td>
<td>H</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brook Valley High School</td>
<td>19.50%</td>
<td>H</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Franklin High School</td>
<td>19.30%</td>
<td>H</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weston High School</td>
<td>19.00%</td>
<td>H</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easthaven High School</td>
<td>18.70%</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian Plains High School</td>
<td>18.50%</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bridgeview High School</td>
<td>17.60%</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middleton High School</td>
<td>17.10%</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ridgefort High School</td>
<td>16.40%</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central High School</td>
<td>14.70%</td>
<td>L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easthaven Academy</td>
<td>14.30%</td>
<td>L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valley Fort High School</td>
<td>14.30%</td>
<td>L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Lake High School</td>
<td>13.70%</td>
<td>L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avondale High School</td>
<td>7.40%</td>
<td>L</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

² Data presented in Table 3.1 came from the 2010-2011 school year Midwestern City Schools Special Education Count by School, Program and Gender report.
I obtained permission to perform research in these schools by submitting an application to the Evaluation Services Department of the Midwestern City Schools District. The application explained the aims of my study and the procedures I planned to use. I received approval from the district and gained entry to the schools by consulting with their principals. I sent a letter to each principal to explain the purpose of the study, the involvement of the school and selected students, and the potential benefits and possible risks of the study. About a week after sending the letter, I met with the principal to discuss his or her willingness to allow me to conduct the study with students enrolled in the school. After a principal agreed, I discussed logistics (e.g., place and time for interviews with students, approach to gaining parental consent, and so on) with him or her.

Selection of participants. At each high school I asked the special education teacher and school counselor to select students who met the selection criteria below. I randomly selected three students whom special education teachers or school counselors had identified on the basis of my selection criteria. The students who were identified in this way met the following selection criteria: (1) they were African American, (2) they were juniors or seniors, (3) they carried a diagnosis of learning disabilities or mild cognitive impairment, and (4) they had received special education services for at least three years. The criterion that was absolutely essential to my research was the race of participants. All of the students whom I interviewed were African American, high school juniors and seniors.
I asked that the participants be students who had been identified as learning disabled (LD) or as having a mild cognitive impairment (MCI) because these categories of exceptionality traditionally are the ones in which African American students are disproportionately placed. In addition, students with mild cognitive impairments are more likely than those with moderate or severe impairments to have the capacity to reflect on and express views about their experiences of schooling. My interviews with students in these categories also indicated that they were able to understand my role, interact with me in conversation, and provide elaborate descriptions of their experiences. All of the participants also had been in special education for at least three years which allowed them to integrate into their identities their status as a student with a disability—a circumstance that helped them discuss their experiences with greater insight.

**Standards of quality interviewing.** Seidman (2006) recommended that researchers use certain techniques in order to make the interviewing process effective: listening carefully, following up on what the participant says, not interrupting the participant when he or she is speaking, and asking real questions. In the discussion below I explain how I used these techniques—all of which Seidman claimed are required for conducting interviews that provide insights into participants’ lived experiences and potentially contribute to conversations that empower participants. Through this discussion, I show how Seidman’s three-interview process enabled me to address the research questions guiding the study.

Listening intently involved concentrating on what the participant was saying and not interrupting his or her narrative flow. Using this approach to listening, I thought,
would give me the greatest likelihood of comprehending what the participant was trying to express. Such comprehension was critical so that I would be able to understand what the participant meant when he or she talked about his or her experience of special education. Careful listening, moreover, allowed me to hear the participant’s “inner voice.” (p. 78). As the interviewer, I brought each participant’s “inner voice” to the forefront by asking specific questions that engaged the participant and encouraged him or her to explore thoughts in deep and meaningful ways (Seidman, 2006). I knew that I had captured a participant’s “inner voice” when he or she provided detailed descriptions of his or her experiences and offered reflective commentary about those experiences. Careful listening gave me the opportunity to hear those detailed descriptions and reflections.

Listening closely revealed critical information that I might otherwise have missed; it also allowed me to pose relevant follow-up questions in response to what the participant had said. Follow-up questions were questions that I developed during the interview itself. Their purpose was to elicit more (and more in-depth) information from the participant. These questions helped me gather specific details about or clarifications of the answers that the participant had provided in response to the questions on the interview schedule (Seidman, 2006).

When participants were having difficulty answering an initial question, I prompted them by using questions that I had developed in advance. These prompts differed from follow-up questions because they primarily helped clarify a question that was already on the interview schedule. They were not aimed to encourage elaboration of
an answer provided by a participant. For example, one of the initial questions was “please
tell me about yourself and your family?” This open-ended question allowed each
participant to discuss whatever he or she would like to share about his or her family
background. If the participant had trouble providing information about his or her family, I
used a prompt such as “please tell me about your mother and father” to clarify the
meaning of the initial question.

Asking real questions was another way to ensure that I got meaningful
information from each participant (Seidman, 2006). A real question allowed the
participant to open up about his or her experiences and elicited information that helped to
answer the research questions posed in the study. According to Seidman (2006), a
question is “real” when the “interviewer does not know or anticipate the response” (p. 84). Asking real questions was important because it allowed me to gather accurate and
nuanced information about the students’ experiences. If I had not asked real questions,
the data might have been insignificant and might not have revealed students’ subjective
“truths” about their experiences of the special education programs in which they were
placed.

Interview design. To collect data for this study, I used Seidman’s three-interview
series. Seidman (2006) argued that the three-interview series allows the interviewer and
participant to examine the participant’s experiences in depth and place those experiences
in context. In this process, participating students went through a series of three 45- to 90--
minute in-depth interviews. The first interview investigated the life history of the
participant, focusing on such matters as family dynamics and educational beliefs. The
second interview elicited detailed information about the participant’s experience in the special education program, for example, how he or she felt upon initial placement in the program. The third interview gave the participant the opportunity to reflect on the meaning of his or her experiences, enabling the participant to think deeply about how special education had affected his or her life.

The purpose of the first interview was to provide a foundation for future interviews by building rapport and developing trust with the participant. It also gave the participants the opportunity to focus on past experiences that had shaped who he or she was at the present time (Seidman, 2006). I used the following questions to structure the first interview:

- **Question 1: Please tell me about yourself?**
  - Prompt 1.1: What are three words that describe you?
  - Prompt 1.2: How do you think your friends and family would describe you?
  - Prompt 1.3: How do you want others to see you?
  - Prompt 1.4: What is your approach to solving problems?
  - Prompt 1.5: What are some of your short-term goals?
  - Prompt 1.6: What are some of your long-term goals?

- **Question 2: Please tell me about your family?**
  - Prompt 2.1: Please tell me about your mother and father?
  - Prompt 2.2: Do you have any brother(s) or sister(s)? If so, please tell me about them.
Promote 2.3: How do you get along with the people in your family?

Prompt 2.4: How often do you spend time with your family?

Prompt 2.5: What types of activities do you do with your family?

Prompt 2.5: What is your relationship like with your family members?

Question 3: What type of things do you like to do outside of school?

Prompt 3.1: How did you get involved with these activities?

Prompt 3.2: What do you like most about being involved in these activities?

Prompt 3.3: How does being a part of these activities help you?

Question 4: Please tell me about your friends.

Prompt 4.1: What type of qualities do you like your friends to have?

Prompt 4.2: What types of things do you do with your friends?

Prompt 4.3: Who are your best friends?

Prompt 4.4: Why do you consider them to be your best friends?

Prompt 4.5: What is your relationship like with your friends?

Question 5: Please tell me about a time when you were successful at something?

Prompt 5.1: How did it make you feel?

Prompt 5.2: How did you feel about what happened?

Prompt 5.3: Is there anything else you would like to share about your life?

The second interview asked each participant to recount details of his or her experiences in the special education program. I asked each student to describe what his or
her relationships were like with teachers, peers, counselors, and administrators. The following questions guided the second interview:

· Question 1: Please tell me about what it’s like to go to school here?
  o Prompt 1.1: Please tell me about all of your classes.
  o Prompt 1.2: Please tell me about any special classes you attended in order to get help with reading, writing, math, or any other subject.
  o Prompt 1.3: What are the teachers like?

· Question 2: How are your relationships here at school?
  o Prompt 2.1: What is your relationship like with your teachers?
  o Prompt 2.2: What is your relationship like with your counselors?
  o Prompt 2.3: What is your relationship like with your administrators?
  o Prompt 2.4: Which relationships do you value the most and why do you value those relationships?

· Question 3: What are the best and worst parts of going to school here?
  o Prompt 3.1: Overall, what do you like about this school?
  o Prompt 3.2: Overall, what do you dislike about this school?

The final interview focused on the meanings that each participant attached to his or her special education placements and to his or her identity as a student with a disability. Discussions of the meaning of students’ experiences in special education programs provided insights about how they connected those experiences to their past and future lives. For example, some questions in this interview focused on current learning strategies that students used and on ways they had learned to cope with their learning
disabilities or mild cognitive impairments. Also some questions elicited information about how the education the students had received had (or had not) prepared them for what they would encounter as adults. I asked the following questions in order to encourage each participant to make sense of his or her experience of schooling:

· **Question 1:** Overall, what do you think about being in special education at this school?
  
  o **Prompt 1.1:** How has being in special education affected you?
  
  o **Prompt 1.2:** Describe for me some of the advantages and disadvantage of being in special education?
  
  o **Prompt 1.3:** How did you feel when you were first placed in one or more of these special classes?

· **Question 2:** Please talk to me about anything at school that you see as a support and anything you see as an obstacle.
  
  o **Prompt 2.1:** Please tell me about anything at school that helps you overcome obstacles.
  
  o **Prompt 2.3:** What type of strategies do you use in order to learn effectively?
  
  o **Prompt 2.4:** Who taught you these strategies?
  
  o **Prompt 2.5:** How does using these strategies help you at school?

· **Question 3:** How have your learning problems affected you?
  
  o **Prompt 3.1:** How have your learning problems changed you?
  
  o **Prompt 3.2:** Are there ways in which your learning problems have affected your relationships with teachers? If so, what are they?
  
  o **Prompt 3.3:** Are there ways in which your learning problems have affected your relationships with other students? If so, what are they?
o Prompt 3.4: Are there ways in which your learning problems have affected your relationships with the principal(s) or counselors? If so, what are they?

· Question 4: What are some things you would change (and keep the same) about your experience at this school?

o Prompt 4.1: What are some things you would keep the same?

o Prompt 4.2: What is the most beneficial experience you had being a student in a special education program?

o Prompt 4.3: What is the thing you least like about being a student in a special education program?

o Prompt 4.4: What type of changes would you make to the special education program at your school?

o Prompt 4.5: What else would you like to tell me about your home or school experience?

I recorded each interview using a digital recorder. Digitally recording the interview provided a way for me to preserve each participant’s actual words (Seidman, 2006). After all the interviews were completed, verbatim transcripts were created by listening repeatedly to the digital recording and writing word-for-word what each participant said in response to the interview questions. I kept a field journal in which I described my impressions of each interview. In my journal I recorded my interpretations of and reactions to each participant’s responses. Reflective journaling of this sort plays a critical role in qualitative research because, in this type of research, the interviewer is the instrument for gathering and analyzing data (Janesick, 1998). Because I was asking the questions and analyzing the information provided by participants, it was important for me to have a place to reflect and capture thoughts about the data. The process of reflective journaling helped me to limit the extent to which my pre-existing beliefs would affect my
interpretation of the data. It also gave me an outlet to reflect on the data before I began coding and making sense of the data in a formal way (Janesick, 1998). My informal efforts to make sense of the interview data as soon as they were collected provided insights that contributed to the thoroughness and accuracy of the data analysis and interpretation process overall.

**Scheduling and conducting interviews.** I conducted interviews at the school in a secure location designated by the principal. I scheduled interviews during the school day or after school depending on what worked best for the participant. I conducted a sequence of interviews over a three-week period at each high school with each participant. This approach gave participants the opportunity to think more deeply about their experiences before each subsequent interview, and it also limited the time between interviews so that I would not lose rapport with the participants (Seidman, 2006).

**Data Analysis**

The in-depth interviewing process produced rich data that needed to be formatted and categorized in ways that allowed me to gain clear understandings about each participant’s unique experiences as well as about similar experiences common to most participants. To organize and analyze the data, I used the data analysis process described by Miles and Huberman (1994). The process involved several steps: (1) inductive analysis and coding, (2) development of participant and school summary sheets to produce case-specific profiles, (3) organization of codes to identify categories and patterns in the data, and (4) creation of themes through a process of postulating and testing explanatory patterns.
The first step, inductive analysis and coding, involved a process whereby I reviewed transcripts line by line to identify the main ideas conveyed in each sentence (Johnson & Christensen, 2004; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). I used keywords (i.e., inductive codes) to capture each separate but salient idea. I was particularly attentive to coding the portions of the transcripts that seemed relevant to the research questions guiding the study. Inductive coding allowed me to identify what was meaningful to each participant and later, through cross-case analysis, to identify what seemed to be meaningful to most of the participants at each school and across schools (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This inductive approach to analyzing the interview transcripts allowed me to review the data with an open mind—seeking out the important ideas that came directly from participants (Seidman, 2006).

Following the coding of all transcripts, in the second step of the data analysis process, I created a summary sheet to organize and summarize the information about each participant. Seidman claimed that by creating a summary sheet for each participant, I would be able to create a “vignette of the participant’s experience” (p. 102). Such a vignette captured the most critical points that the participant made during the sequence of interviews. To create the summary sheet for each participant, I reviewed the coded transcripts from his or her three interviews and looked for patterns in the coded passages that revealed the perspectives that seemed to be of greatest importance to the participant.

Next I compared the summary sheets for participants from the same school to identify commonalities and differences. After the comparison was complete, I created a
summary sheet that characterized the commonalities and differences across participants at each school. This analysis produced a school-level summary sheet.

In the final step in the data analysis process, I used the student summary sheets, the school summary sheets, and the data to which they were linked to examine patterns across participants and across schools. One important aim of this analysis was to identify the themes that best explain the similarities and differences across all cases.

According to Miles and Huberman (1994), the way to derive cross-case themes from coded data is to organize, summarize, and display apparent patterns in several matrices. Patton (2002) also endorses this approach, explaining that the cells in such matrices represent the “linkage, patterns, themes, experiences, content or actual activities that help us to understand the relationship between processes and outcomes” (p. 472). Matrices reveal themes in two ways: by revealing patterns implicit in the categorized codes and by revealing patterns in the way categorized codes fit with features of context (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I found, for example, that six out of the nine students interviewed acknowledge the fact that their disability label had negative connotations, but nonetheless seven out of the nine students had a positive perception about their placement in a special education program. I recognized this pattern in examining the matrix to determine the extent to which these two seemingly contradictory perspectives were aligned in the responses of participants. I then looked for possible contextual influences by identifying differences in the salience of this complex and seemingly contradictory perspective across the school sites. For example, School #1 represented the school with a high percentage of students in special education program, and although all three students
from this school believed there was a stigma associated with placement, two of them valued their special education experience; in School #2, with a medium percentage of special education students, only one student felt stigmatized by the placement, while two valued their experience; of the three students at School #3, which had a low representation of student in special education programs, two believed there was a stigma associate with their special education placement, but all them valued their special education placement. The students at School #3 valued certain aspects of their special education experience because the school climate and culture exhibited high expectations.

To enable this type of examination of the data, I developed one matrix in which the rows designated participants and the columns designated concepts that related directly to the study’s research questions. For example, one column focused on relationships with teachers and another on feelings about disability labels. In each cell, I included either a brief explanation of the participant’s perspective or a direct quote from the transcript. I also developed a matrix that compared participants’ responses across the three schools. The matrix, which matched what Miles and Huberman described as an “explanatory effects matrix” (1994, p. 148), consisted of phrases and quotes that corresponded to categories that related to students’ experiences of special education at these schools. In addition to providing a comprehensive picture of similarities and differences across schools, the matrix also helped me explain, at least tentatively, what features of school context did or did not seem to influence features of the special education experience. For example, participants at a school with a higher population of students with disabilities all reported that they were experiencing academic success and also that they had an excellent
relationship with their special education teacher. The alignment of these two perspectives pointed to the possibility that the positive relationship with the teacher was the cause of students’ academic success. Once a pattern pointed to an explanatory statement, I went back to the transcripts to see if students actually did attribute their success to the teacher or their relationship with the teacher.

At the beginning of this final stage of the analysis, I treated the themes that seemed to emerge from the cross-case analysis as tentative. Then I went back and forth between transcripts, codes, and matrices to be certain that the apparent patterns actually reflected the experiences described by participants. When I discovered that a tentative theme did not fit well with the data, I dismissed it as a possible theme. I treated as definitive those tentative themes that explained dynamics reported by participants and that had strong grounding in the data. For example, data to support the apparent patterns associated with the school in which a student was enrolled—such as those suggested in the discussion above—actually did not seem prevalent enough in the data set to support claims about school differences.

As discussed in the next section, I also used researcher triangulation with my dissertation chair to help assure that the themes I identified actually were well supported by the data. She and I both looked at the data displayed in the matrices to determine whether or not they provided sufficient support for each tentative theme.
Research Ethics, Validity and Limitations

In this section I discuss the importance of research ethics and study validity. I explain the procedures I used to ensure that the human subjects who participated in the study were treated with respect and that their identity was protected. I also discuss potential threats to the validity of the study and related limitations, and I explain the procedures I used to make sure the study was as valid as possible. I conclude the discussion with a consideration of the study’s limitations.

Research ethics. Sieber (1992) discussed three guidelines for ensuring that research is ethical: beneficence, respect, and justice. Miles and Huberman (1994) also advocated an ethical framework similar to the one discussed by Sieber. In Miles and Huberman’s conception, the ethical basis for research draws on perspectives from utilitarian and deontological positions on ethics.

From the utilitarian position, according to Miles and Huberman, I needed to evaluate the costs and benefits of the research for study participants as well as for my own work, the progress of scholarship in the field, and the potential significance for the general public. These considerations fit with Sieber’s explanation of beneficence. According to Sieber, ”beneficence” related to a study’s ability to “maximize[e] good outcomes for science, humanity, and the individual research participants while avoiding or minimizing unnecessary harm, risk or wrong” (p. 18).

In addition to these utilitarian concerns, Miles and Huberman (1994) also called on deontological theories to provide a second basis for evaluating the ethics of a research study. These theories—which seek fundamental ethical principles—often posit that a
principle such as the “golden rule” provides a starting point for ethical judgment. In applying this principle to research, Miles and Huberman argued that the researcher should ask if he or she would be willing to be participants in his or her own studies, e.g. “Would I find one of my own studies sufficiently important and its procedures sufficiently safe to warrant my own participation?” This approach corresponds to Sieber’s (1992) second guideline—respect. She defined respect as “honoring the rights of persons to choose whether to be in the study, and showing concern for their well-being” (p, 20). One such form of respect involves honoring each participant’s choice to contribute to or withdraw from the study (including after the point at which he or she has submitted data). Respect also involves protecting participants’ confidentiality, treating the information they provide as important, and finding ways to ensure that their contributions to the research effort are presented accurately and honestly in all reports of the research.

Sieber’s (1992) final guideline, justice, also reflects the deontological position on ethics. This guideline was defined by Sieber (1992) as a way of “ensuring reasonable, nonexploitative, and carefully considered procedures and fair administration; fair distribution of cost and benefits among person and groups” (p.18). Justice involves treating participants fairly by letting them have an equal share in the study’s work and outcomes without privileging one group over another (e.g., Orb, Eisenhauer, Wynaden, 2000). The principle of justice is important because it demands protection from exploitation and discrimination.
In order to ensure that my study followed the ethical principles discussed above, I put in place various procedures to safeguard the study’s beneficence, respect for participants, and concern for justice. Additionally, I relied on others—notably, my dissertation committee members and members of the Ohio University Institutional Review Board—to help me develop research protocols that operationalized the three ethical principles I was seeking to uphold. Among the procedures I used to assure that the study met the standards of beneficence was my communication with potential interviewees about why their participation in the study was important. As part of my effort to demonstrate to possible participants that the study would benefit students and teachers at other schools, I explained how the voices of participants contributed to a truthful and rich story. I also explained how their stories might influence educational practice as well as special education policy.

Confidentiality was another safeguard I used to protect participants—a safeguard that showed my respect for them. I informed participants that I would never reveal their identities when I discussed the study and its findings. I assured them that participants have a right to privacy and that I respected that right and considered it important to protecting their well-being. Another way I showed respect was to discuss possible risks and benefits with participants. One possible risk that participants faced was the risk of feeling overwhelmed or anxious about disclosing information about or reactions to their experiences in the special education program. Another possible risk was the possible awakening of feelings of frustration resulting from the inability to communicate exactly what they intended. As I conducted interviews, I remained aware of these possibilities
and provided reassurance to participants if they appeared to feel anxious or frustrated. I also reminded participants that they could withdraw from the interview process at any point.

Accurately representing their voices was essential to showing respect for participants as well as to treating them with consideration and fairness (Seidman, 2006). To operationalize accurate representation, I recorded interviews, transcribed them verbatim, used systematic processes to identify the most salient patterns in the data, and included illustrative quotes in my report of the study’s findings. I did not place greater emphasis on any particular finding than the data analysis supported even if that finding seemed more interesting or more in line with my preconceptions than those that had emerged as most salient.

I met the standard for justice by making sure that I gained access to the experiences of each participant in a reasonable and fair manner (Sieber, 1992). Being reasonable and fair required that I showed participants I was interested in their stories and wanted to learn about their experiences in special education programs. Furthermore, I treated all participants with equal respect. I guarded against treating any participant—even a participant with whom I had difficulty establishing rapport—with less concern and interest. Upholding the principle of justice also required me to present myself as an equal, not as a person with authority over the students. I wanted to be certain not to make students feel that my status as a researcher entitled me to information that they did not wish to share. Instead, my interest was in hearing the stories they chose to tell, not those that they might feel compelled because of my authority as an educator or researcher.
Validity. According to Guion and associates (2002), “validity, in qualitative research, relates to whether the findings of [a] study are true and certain” (p. 1). To promote the discovery of true and certain findings, Patton (2002) claimed that the qualitative researcher must become an “instrument” for creating data (p. 14). In this role, the researcher gathers data by getting close to the lives of participants either by observing them in their homes or workplaces or by talking with them in more or less formal interviews. Ethnographic studies often require the researcher to live or work side by side with participants.

From this perspective, the closer a researcher can get to the actual experiences of the participants, the more likely will he or she be to provide a truthful rendering of those participants’ experiences. This perspective suggests that, because they require extensive engagement with participants’ life-worlds, ethnographic studies are likely to be more valid than less extensive qualitative studies, such as those that rely solely on direct observation, interviews, or both. With interview studies, researchers get at the truth about participants’ experiences by asking questions about those experiences. The more probing the questions and the more extensive the interviews, the more likely are they to give access to the experiences of participants.

The processes I used for conducting interviews influenced the extent to which the interviews gave me access to participants’ subjective truths. As discussed above, five procedures were especially important to the production of valid interview data: listening carefully, following up on what the participant said, listening to each participant without interrupting, asking real questions, and accurately reporting findings. Whereas the “truth”
of findings related to the fidelity with which each participant’s perspectives were
gathered, their “certainty” related more to the evidence supporting the overall
interpretation. Certainty, then, related to the strength of the inferences I made from the
data overall.

As part of my analysis of the data, I used two procedures to increase the validity
of the study: researcher triangulation, and critical review of my reflective journal. Both
researcher triangulation and critical review of my journal provided ways to demonstrate
that my inferences were supported by the data and did not represent personal biases.

According to several researchers, triangulation is a way to test consistency in
qualitative data and the interpretations derived from such data (Guion, Diehl &
McDonald, 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1992; Patton, 2002). Researcher triangulation is a
process whereby two or more researchers review the data independently to compare
interpretations. In this study, both my dissertation chair and I analyzed data and
compared our interpretations. We assumed that those findings about which we both
agreed were more certain than those about which we disagreed. This process led to re-
evaluation of the results and the discovery of previously unidentified themes.

I found the process of recording my thoughts in a reflective journal to provide a
way to help me keep an open mind by giving me a place to acknowledge my reactions to
participants and their stories as well as to the experience of conducting the research.
Taking time to be reflective was important because, as the instrument for collecting and
analyzing data, my point of view inevitably influenced what I heard and how I interpreted
it. Nevertheless, having a perspective is different from having a bias. My perspective,
which came from my own personal history, inevitably influenced the way I interpreted and made sense of the data. A bias, by contrast, would have entailed making intentional judgments about the relevance of data on the basis of my preexisting beliefs. Keeping a reflective journal helped me separate my perspectives from my potential biases.

**Limitations.** As various methodologists have noted (e.g., Glesne, 2001; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002), researchers cannot produce generalizable findings by using qualitative research methods. This limitation exists because sample sizes in qualitative studies tend to be small and not representative of a larger population. In addition the research questions addressed by qualitative research often relate to specific phenomena that affect specific groups of people. Despite limited generalizability, qualitative research produces rich descriptions of the lived experiences and perspectives of participants.

My study used in-depth interviewing and the three-interview process, which yielded elaborate and detailed descriptions of participants’ experiences. Notably, the three-interview process allowed me to interact with each participant on several different occasions, filling in gaps in data obtained via the first or second interviews with additional information gathered via the second or third interview. This approach to data collection enabled me to create a data set with sufficient depth and breadth to support inferences pertinent to the research questions guiding the study.

**Chapter Summary**

In this chapter I discussed the methodology of in-depth interviewing; my research methods; and ethical responsibility, study validity, and the limitations of my research. As
noted earlier, several researchers have described in-depth interviewing as a method for asking detailed questions that focus on participants’ lived experiences. In this study I used in-depth interviewing to discover how participants made sense of their experiences in special education programs.

I used the following research methods to gather and analyze data:

• selected school sites;
• identified participants;
• assured that participants assented to the interview process and that their parents provided informed consent;
• conducted in-depth interviews over a three-week span at each school with each of nine participants (three participants from each of three schools for a total of nine weeks);
• audio recorded all interviews;
• made verbatim transcriptions of the interview recordings;
• kept a record of my experiences with and responses to the research process in a reflective journal;
• coded data;
• developed a summary sheet for each participant;
• developed a summary sheet for each school;
• completed a cross-case analysis using data from all participants and all schools;
• identified themes; and
• compared my interpretation of the data with that of my dissertation chair.
Following discussion of these research methods, the chapter concluded with brief
descriptions of the steps I took to ensure that the research was ethical and valid. As part
of this discussion I also disclosed my views about the study’s limitations.
Chapter 4: School and Students Profiles

Introduction

In this chapter I provide profiles with descriptive details about each school and the participants from that school. Each school profile provides a brief overview of the school’s demographics and culture based primarily on my observations as well as on information from secondary sources. Each student profile tells a story about a participant and characterizes his or her perceptions of the school experience, especially as it relates to placement in a special education program. To protect participants’ confidentiality, I have selected pseudonyms for each student. Also, to assure that no reader is able to identify particular participants from my descriptions of them, I have excluded specific details about their home lives and school experiences. In particular, I have been extremely cautious about reporting information about the traumatic events that participants experienced. Nevertheless, most participants shared stories about one or more events in their lives that they experienced as traumatic. For this reason, a general discussion of “traumatic events and their ramifications” will appear in chapter five as one part of the discussion of salient themes.

School #1 and its Three Participating Students

School #1 is an urban high school with a notable history; the school reputedly has strong ties to the community. According to the Midwestern State Department of Education, the school enrolls 482 students: 72.1% are African American, 23.2% are White/Non-Hispanic, and 2.3% are Multi-Racial. Among enrolled students, 25.9% are students with disabilities, and 91.3% are economically disadvantaged.
This school’s current rating on the state’s accountability metric is “academic watch,” which means that in 2011-12 it met none of the state’s 12 required indicators. These indicators focus on proficient performance on the Graduation Test (GT) as well as attendance and graduation rates. Not only was the school’s performance low in general, the performance of its students with disabilities was especially disappointing. According to the Midwestern State Department of Education, students with disabilities who took the GT scored in the proficient through advanced ranges in the following proportions: 26.3% in reading, 34.2% in writing, 21.1% in math, 34.3% in science, and 31.6% in social studies. By comparison, students without disabilities scored significantly higher on the GT in reading (61.4%), writing (77%), math (57.4%), science (36.1%), and social studies (50.6%). These scores reveal relatively large achievement gaps between students with disabilities and those without disabilities in reading, writing, math, and social studies.

School #1 was the one in my study with the highest percentage of students on IEPs.

My visits to the school revealed that it had recently been remodeled: it had clean hallways and classrooms and well-kept school grounds. Most of the classrooms were equipped with technology such as smart boards and computers. In general the students were well-behaved in the hallways, classrooms, and throughout the rest of the building. The school administrators interacted in a cordial manner with students, greeting those whom they passed in the hallway. They also engaged in one-on-one conversations with some students and immediately corrected student behaviors they deemed to be inappropriate. In the classrooms, students appeared to be engaged in learning and to follow the teachers’ directions.
Participant 1.1: Terry was a young man in his senior year. He was an extremely soft spoken individual who stood about 5 feet 6 inches tall and had short, dark, curly hair. He appeared shy: His speech was halting, almost sounding like a whisper. During the interviews, Terry sat back in his chair with his arms crossed and sometimes held his head down. When his arms were not crossed, he placed them under his chin or on his face. As he became more comfortable, however, I noticed that Terry relaxed his arms and spoke a little louder.

Terry reported living in a single parent home with his mother, five brothers and five sisters. He was the second oldest in his family. Based on several of his comments, he seemed to take the responsibility of being a big brother seriously, describing himself as a “good brother” even while acknowledging that his younger siblings rarely listened to him (Terry, Interview1, January, 2013). Terry reported having close relationships with two adults: his grandfather and an uncle whom he described as his mentor. He said that he did not have any close friends because he does not trust people. He reported that his favorite activities included playing video games and watching movies.

Terry reported that he started having academic difficulties when he was in elementary school. During that time, the school district in consultation with his mother sent him to a special private school that helped him work on anger management issues. He explained that this school helped him learn appropriate ways of dealing with his anger. The school used a behavior management system in which students were given incentives for exhibiting appropriate behaviors. After Terry completed this program, he was placed on an IEP and returned to a public middle school. He believed he was placed
in special education in the middle school because he had fallen behind in reading and writing as a result of having had behavior problems in elementary school.

In contrast to his experiences in elementary school, where he felt teachers did not respect him and were unfair to him, Terry reported that he had had many positive experiences in middle school. His first years in high school were also positive. In his freshman and sophomore years, for example, he was mainstreamed into regular education classes, which he enjoyed. He said that these classes offered positive experiences because they challenged him. Terry reported that part of the challenge stemmed from the fact that the teachers did not teach the same thing over and over again—an approach typically used in his special education classes. In his junior and senior years he went to the Career Center for part of the day to study graphic design. Since he viewed drawing and design as his passions, this school experience left a positive impression. Due to a scheduling conflict at the high school, however, Terry was not able to participate in the academic classes he preferred. The scheduling issues forced him to make a choice between enrolling in mainstreamed academic classes or participating in the Career Center program. Because he decided to remain in the Career Center program, he was forced to return to a special education classroom for most of each day because this placement allowed him to receive required instruction in academic subjects. This administrative decision made Terry feel stripped of the ability to make the best educational choice for himself. According to Terry, the choice to stay at the Career Center consigned him to boring academic instruction in the special education classroom. Ultimately, he became
frustrated because of the slow pace and easy work in the special education program as well as the disruptive behavior of other students in the program.

Even in light of this frustration, Terry said his teachers treated him respectfully, and he rarely behaved in ways that caused him to be disciplined. He spoke about having excellent rapport with the school counselor who helped him with college applications and with enrollment in a computer-based program designed to help students figure out what careers they might like to pursue. Terry described his meeting with the counselor to discuss his goals after high school. At the meeting they discussed some of the options Terry had after he graduated from high school. The options included attending State Community College and attending a four-year college or university to study design.

Terry explained that he did not have a relationship with the school’s administrators because he rarely got into trouble. Apparently, from his perspective, the school’s administrators did not get to know students who were well-behaved. Terry said that he respected these administrators even if they did not know him well. He claimed that he also had respect for his special education teachers, even though he sometimes found that these teachers lacked the authority to ensure that the students in their classrooms would follow directions and behave appropriately.

Terry shared with me his belief that his placement in the special education program was wrong for him, and he reported that he had asked his mother to remove him from the program when he was in his freshman year of high school. He went on to say that his mother did not seek his removal from the program, however, because she was afraid of possible struggles he might encounter as a result. Terry also had conversations with his
participant 2.1: Brandon was a young male who was enrolled in his senior year of high school. He was a popular athlete who stood about 6 feet 3 inches tall, with short, dark hair. He described himself as “nice, happy, funny, outgoing, and weird” (Brandon, Interview 1, January, 2013). During the interviews, Brandon made eye contact, spoke clearly, and sat in his seat with his body relaxed. He smiled most of the time, but I noticed that he sometimes took a deep breath and let a long pause elapse before he answered a question. This response seemed to occur when I asked personal questions, and it may have indicated Brandon’s discomfort with answering these questions.

Brandon lived with his mother, younger sister, and brother. His parents had divorced when he was in elementary school. He described his mother as being overprotective but also as providing a lot of encouragement when it came to school. He discussed her typical practice of reading information to him and then asking him questions to make sure he understood the information. In addition to the support he received from his mother, Brandon said he also received considerable support with his school work from his father, friends, and basketball coach. In fact, Brandon reported that he had a strong work ethic that contributed to his serious attitude toward school work. He attributed his work ethic to his mother, father, and other family members such as aunts, uncles and cousins—all of whom encouraged him to do well in school. Brandon said he had a positive relationship with his father, which involved spending time together,
discussing his school work, and talking about what he planned to do after he graduated.

He also reported that his family did a lot of “fun things” together like going out to eat and going to an arcade (Brandon, Interview 1, January, 2013). Brandon enjoyed spending time with his friends and his cousin; with these close associates, he enjoyed playing video games and basketball.

Brandon reported that in elementary school he had a hard time focusing on his work and tended to daydream a lot when he did not get help from his teachers. He said that occasionally he asked for help, but he reported the general tendency to react in a passive way when he felt that the work was too difficult. He said that the academic areas where he required the most help were reading and writing. He believed that his placement in the special education program resulted from his difficulty focusing on school work, and he explained that both his mother and his teachers saw this decision as the best course of action. Brandon also reported that he agreed with their decision because the instruction he received in the special education program did, indeed, enable him to concentrate more on his work. He enjoyed the small class size and the one-on-one help he received. He expressed the opinion that the teachers were more supportive in his special education classes—a circumstance that helped him focus better and stay on track. When asked if he thought his race influenced his relationships with teachers or the decision to place him in the special education program, he said “no” (Brandon, Interview 2, January, 2013). He saw his special education placement as appropriate to his needs and the instruction beneficial because it provided him with the support he required in order to understand the school work he was assigned.
Brandon reported that he had been placed in special education in 7th grade because he had difficulty concentrating when he was in a classroom with a large number of other students. In middle school his strategy for completing work he did not understand had been to copy the work of other students. When Brandon was first placed in special education classes, he had a positive reaction. He was glad finally to have the opportunity to learn, an opportunity that was lacking in his general education classes because in those settings there were too many things distracting him. Also once he was placed, Brandon’s grades improved and he gained confidence. According to Brandon, these positive changes caused him to have a positive impression of the school. He felt his special education placement had helped him significantly. Overall, Brandon did not seem embarrassed about his special education placement.

Brandon reported that once he reached high school, he was mainstreamed into general education sections. He said that sometimes high school was a boring place to be—so boring, in fact, that he would actually fall asleep in class. His relationship with teachers was positive, and he felt there was reciprocal trust. Because he trusted his teachers and they trusted him, he did not misbehave and, he reported, had never received any type of disciplinary action. In his words, his relationship with teachers, counselors and administrators was “great” (Brandon, Interview 2, January, 2013). Brandon said he valued his relationships with teachers the most because he spent more time with them than with other school personnel. Nevertheless, he also mentioned that his counselor helped him with college preparations including registration for the ACT.
In Brandon’s junior year he reported he had a negative school experience at the Career Center. He had enrolled at the Center to study HVAC (heating, ventilation, air conditioning). He did not like this vocational program, however, because he thought the teacher was racist. He claimed that the teacher did not help the Black students and that he gave him a failing grade in the class because he was Black. When he received the failing grade from this teacher, Brandon brought the issue to the attention of his principal. The principal may then have had a talk with the teacher. In any case, after sharing his concerns with the principal, Brandon did see slight improvements in the way the teacher treated him. He told me that he nevertheless decided not to return to the Career Center for his senior year. Getting a failing grade, moreover, had prevented him from being on the school’s honor roll, which had been a frequent (and significant) accomplishment for him in the past.

Participant 3.1: David was a young male in his senior year. He wore glasses, had curly black hair, and stood about 5 feet 8 inches tall. He described himself as “demanding, mysterious, cocky, and articulate” (David, Interview 1, January, 2013). I noticed that David seemed very confident and well-spoken as he answered questions. He constantly made eye contact, spoke with a clear voice, and did not hesitate to provide thorough answer to the questions I asked. Nevertheless, when I asked him questions of a serious nature, David often made a joke and laughed, perhaps as a way to divert my attention away from him or as a way to relieve tension. In these cases, I would rephrase the question, and David tended to provide serious answers to these rephrased questions.
David reported living with his mother and two older sisters. He also had a half-sister and a half-brother on his father’s side, and these half-siblings lived in a different household. David described his family as a “regular” Black family that was “lazy” (David, Interview 1, January, 2013). He stated that having a family that was lazy meant “there’s nothing going on at our house.” He reported that the family often spent time together watching movies and hanging out around the house. He said he had a very close relationship with his mother and his 22 year old sister. David indicated that he believed they were close because they had a lot in common. They both had similar personalities, from his perspective, and they both enjoyed listening to music and playing video games.

David reported spending time with his friends and creating music using rhythmic beat machines and different electronic instruments at a local studio. He and his friends played video games, watched movies, and participated in a few activities that adults would deem inappropriate. He explained that his friends were a big influence on him when he made the choice to participate in inappropriate activities. He said that his participation in these activities helped him cope and made him feel good. According to David, his involvement with influential friends often leading to participation in inappropriate activities caused him to miss a lot of school. He reported that he struggled with school work when he was absent and that he did not enjoy coming to school sometimes because he was bored. He also explained that he did not have many friends at his school. Rather, most of his close friends went to different schools in a suburban district. He commented that most of his close friends were White and that he did not hang
out with many Black friends because sometimes he felt embarrassed by their rude behaviors and inappropriate language in public.

David said that he had a good relationship with most of his teachers, the counselor, and the school’s administrators. He reported, however, that he did not talk to his counselor unless he needed college information. He described the administrators as “cool” with him because they “let him get away with stuff sometimes” (David, Interview 2, February, 2013). He said that he valued his relationships with his teachers the most. David reported that he felt he connected better with his African American male teachers than his White teachers. He stated “[African American male teachers] taught me more than a White man would as a teacher—like as a Black person you could be smart. Like as Black people we can actually become something—what they want to be” (David, Interview 2, February, 2013).

David reported that he could not remember when he was identified for placement in the special education program. However, he guessed that it had occurred when he was in the fifth or sixth grade. He mentioned that he had behavior problems in elementary school and that these problems interfered with his learning. He described himself as “troublesome” and a “brat” in elementary school (David, Interview 2, February, 2013). He reported that he got into arguments with his elementary school teachers and even hit one of them. David reported having his teachers explain to him that he did not understand what he read. That was why, they claimed, he was placed in the special education program. He disagreed, claiming instead that he was just being lazy. He said he felt
confident he could get out of special education classes but did not have the desire to do so because of his laziness.

David talked about feeling very insecure initially about going into special education classes, but he explained that, once he had adjusted to them, he never wanted to get out of these classes because the work was easy. He nevertheless claimed to be smarter than most of the students in his classes, and he also admitted that he would have liked to have been given more challenging work. Being “smart” seemed important to David, and some of his answers suggested that he was trying to “cover up” his disability by claiming to be lazy rather than admitting to having learning problems (David, Interview 2, February, 2013).

David reported that things changed for him in middle school, which was when he “got back on track” (David, Interview 2, February, 2013). Nevertheless, despite his acceptance of his special education placement during middle school, David reported that, during his high school years, he began to hate being a special education student. He explained how difficult it was for him to stand out as an individual because he was a special education student. He also reported that he did not have a favorable opinion about the regular education students because he felt they looked down on students with disabilities. According to David, being a special education student was “lame”. He stated.

I needed to stand out in high school. And it was hard for me to stand out while I was in IEP classes. Kinda like—I was kind of like, um…I hate saying the word lame but I was kinda like a loner a little bit (David, Interview 2, February, 2013).
In order to cope with these feelings, he reported he turned to creating music as an outlet. David mentioned that his insecurity about being a special education student even caused him to sneak into the classroom so people would not see him. He also described his feeling of embarrassment at the way his special education classmates often behaved in the hallway. David stated they did “stupid, loud, ignorant and embarrassing things like Black people when they get rowdy over dumb stuff” (David, Interview 2, February, 2013). He said these feelings started to dissipate as he became older, however.

In his junior year his life changed dramatically when his father died, and he felt the pressure to grow up quickly in order to become the “man of the family” (David, Interview 1, January, 2013). David reported that, at this time in his life, he stopped hanging out with the friends who were a bad influence on him, friends whom he said encouraged him to do “stupid stuff” (David, Interview 1, January, 2013). As a result, he was mainstreamed his junior year but failed a class because, in his opinion, his classmates were too loud and disruptive. After failing this class, he was placed back in special education classes. He reported that in these classes he got away with a lot because he did not have to pass the Graduation Test and could not get suspended for more than 10 days. David also reported that, at this time in his school career, he began to make a greater effort to focus on his academic work as a strategy to get through school. He said he came to the realization that graduation was dependent on passing all his classes.

Overall, David’s view of his school experience was difficult to follow because he seemed to express a number of contradictory opinions throughout his interviews. He reported that he wished someone would have explained to him why he was going to be in
special education and had given him a reason for being there or had offered him the choice to be there or not. He reported he was placed without full awareness of what was happening. But he also said that he had been told by teachers that he was being placed in special education because he did not understand what he read. Ultimately, David did conclude that being placed in special education was the best choice for him. He expressed the opinion that being in special education classes allowed him to take advantage of an easier level of work, but he also wished he would have been challenged more in school. He expressed the view that special education placement had prevented him from becoming the loner he might have otherwise been, if he had been in general education classes. But his self-reports suggested that, despite his hopeful claims about the benefits of special education, he nevertheless was a loner in high school.

Another contradictory set of statements related to race. On the one hand, David said that he did not like to hang out with Black students because of the negative ways they represented themselves. But, on the other hand, David explained that his White friends were the ones who had had a negative influence over him. Furthermore, at the same time that he expressed negative views about his Black peers, he expressed positive views about his African American teachers, claiming that they showed him that African Americans could be smart and could make something of their lives.

Overall, the contradictory perspectives that David expressed indicated that he may have been conflicted about a number of issues including his racial identity, his identity as a student with a disability, his affiliation needs, and his need to assume responsibility. In the face of conflicting feelings, David tended to blame conditions somewhat beyond his
control, such as his inherent laziness, the bad influence of his friends, or his loner status. This tendency, as demonstrated in the series of contradictory claims he made, suggested that David was uncomfortable in his special education placement even though he acknowledged some of its benefits.

**School #2 and its Three Participating Students**

School #2 is a neighborhood high school located in the heart of the city. This school was among those originally established in the district in the late 1800s, but it is now located in a different place from its original one; it moved to its current location in the early 1900s. According to the Midwestern State Department of Education, in 2011-2012 the school enrolled 510 students. Of these students, 95.3% were African American, 94.0% were economically disadvantaged, 4.7% were limited English proficient, and 21.2% were students with disabilities.

The Midwestern State Department of Education designated this school in the category, “academic watch”, the same categorical rating that School #1 received. This rating means that the school met none of the indicators the state requires as part of its accountability system. As mentioned previously, these indicators are based on students’ scores on the Graduation Test (GT) as well as on their attendance and graduation rates. In addition to the school’s low rating overall, the performance of its students with disabilities was extremely poor. Percentages of such students in the proficient and above categories in 2011-12 were 23.8% for the reading subtest, 15% for the writing subtest, 10% for the math subtest, 21.1% for the science subtest, and 35.3% for the social studies subtest. In comparison, students without disabilities had much larger percentages of
students scoring in the proficient and above categories: 57.2% in reading, 65.5% in writing, 57.6% in math, 39.6% in science, and 59.5% in social studies. For my study, this was the school with neither the largest nor the smallest percentage of students on IEPs—in other words, it was in the middle.

Despite its academic difficulties, the school’s physical facilities seemed more than adequate. Recently remodeled, the school had well groomed, landscaped, and clean grounds surrounding the building. Throughout the school, there were trophy cases that showcased paraphernalia associated with the history of the school as well as awards and other markers of the accomplishments of past and present students. The classrooms were equipped with up-to-date tools for instructional technology including computers, projectors, and smart boards. Each classroom I visited had brand new desks, tables, and chairs.

Student behavior, however, was not what most people would consider exemplary. In general, for example, I observed that students often arrived late for their classes, loitering in the hallways where they spoke loudly to one another. Some of the students stood outside the classroom doors talking with peers and using language that was forbidden by the school’s rules. In classrooms I observed teachers repeatedly asking students the same or similar questions and restating the lesson objectives. In addition, I heard teachers intervene with students by redirecting their attention to the lesson and asking them to follow directions. When school administrators were in the hallways or classrooms, students’ behavior seemed to change. They became quieter and more attentive and tended to disrupt the academic process less often.
Participant 2.1: Diane was an outspoken and confident young lady who stood 5 feet 8 inches tall and had light brown hair and eyes. Diane rarely seemed uncomfortable during the interviews; she spoke in a loud voice and answered every question openly, making eye contact and appearing excited. She sat upright while simultaneously seeming relaxed in her chair. She described herself as “confident, persuasive, and intelligent.” She indicated that she would like others to see her as a person who “handles her business” (Diane, Interview 1, February, 2013).

Diane lived with her mother and was an only child. She described her mother as “overprotective”—attributing this characterization to her mother because she consistently reminded her about doing school work (Diane, Interview 1, February, 2013). According to Diane, her mother did not want her to grow up and become an adult. Diane described how her mother, aunt, and grandmother “spoiled” her by giving her whatever she wanted. But this description did not exactly fit her circumstances. Notably, as was the case with many of her peers, Diane had gotten a job to help support her mother, grandmother, and herself when the family had needed her to contribute to its economic well-being—not a characteristic response of a child who has truly been “spoiled.”

Diane said that she had a lot of “successful” people in her family (Diane, Interview 1, February, 2013). Most of them were educators, judges, lawyers, police officers, and military personnel. She also said that she enjoyed hanging out with relatives from her mother’s side of the family because they had family dinners, participated in bowling tournaments, went to the movies, and had parties to celebrate family
accomplishments and birthdays. She said that during her free time she enjoyed swimming as well as spending time with family members and with her boyfriend.

Diane reported that she had met her father only once, when she was six years old, and never formed a meaningful relationship with him prior to his death, which occurred during her junior year in high school. She also explained that she had seven brothers and seven sisters on her father’s side, but that she did not maintain close relationships with any of them. Diane mentioned that she tried to develop a relationship with one of her half-brothers, but he did not believe she was his sister because he had not met her previously. As a result of his initial reaction to her, Diane decided not to bother her half-brother anymore.

At the time of the interview, Diane indicated that she did not have a lot of friends. She said that she and former friends had “grew apart” and were on different paths (Diane, Interview 2, February, 2013). She stated that she wanted to go to college, but her friends did not know what they wanted to do with their lives. She said that it was difficult to remain friends with people who did not have the same goals as she did, and she explained that the mismatch between her goals and those of her former friends had caused the dynamics within their relationships to change.

Diane reported that she had been placed in a special education program with an Individualized Education Plan during her sophomore year of high school. She said that she did not want to be placed on an IEP, but her mother thought it was a good idea because Diane had struggled in general education classes during her freshman year. Diane said that the main reason she did not want to be in special education classes was
because “it makes me feel like I’m slow…people look at you like you’re in IEP classes, you’re slow…I don’t want that…cause I know I’m smarter than what I look like” (Diane, Interview 1, February, 2013).

Diane talked about a teacher who had made her feel better about her special education placement. She reported that this teacher encouraged her to do her work and explained to her what being educated according to an Individualized Education Program truly meant. He agreed with her that her placement in the special education class was inappropriate, but he apparently did not take any action to help her change her placement: notably, she was never removed from the special education program. Nevertheless, this teacher had boosted her confidence by saying things such as, “I don’t know why you’re in this classroom. You’re smarter than half the kids that’s in here” (Diane, Interview 1, February, 2013). Diane described the teacher as an inspiration. He was consistently there for her whenever she needed help with her school work or personal life.

Despite her belief that she was incorrectly placed, Diane chose to make the best of the placement. Nevertheless, in her junior year she did tell an administrator that she wanted to be mainstreamed, but that educator told her that she would need to stay in special education classes until she had her mother’s permission to be removed.

Diane reported that her school experience in elementary and middle school was different from her experience in high school. She admitted to having had a behavior problem during her earlier years but also added that she had always done her work. She also discussed her suspicion that her behavior had played a major role in her identification as a student who needed special assistance. In elementary school she
remembered having used inappropriate language when talking with her teachers, and as a result she had been suspended. She reported that she had still completed her work and made honor roll despite having been suspended. In middle school she also made honor roll; she reported, however, that once she entered high school, the work grew increasingly difficult, and she was no longer able to earn high grades.

Diane said that, for the most part, she had a satisfactory relationship with her high school teachers and administrators. She stated that one teacher “gets on her nerves” because that teacher complained that the seniors act like freshman, but Diane also offered positive comments about that same teacher, stating that the teacher pushed them to complete their class work (Diane, Interview 1, February, 2013). Diane reported that her relationship with the school counselor was positive. She said they discussed in detail potential colleges that Diane might attend and the importance of the ACT. The counselor, according to Diane, made it clear that she wanted the students to whom she provided advice to graduate and go to college. The thing Diane most disliked about attending her school were students who were disrespectful; she also disliked the behaviors of some of her peers: fighting, smoking in the bathroom, and “not being on track” (Diane, Interview 2, February, 2013).

Diane described the students in her special education classroom as lazy and not wanting to do their work. She stated that often the students in her class asked to copy her work. She told them “no, you can do it yourself” (Diane, Interview 2, February, 2013). Diane said that she planned to go somewhere in life and wanted to get her work done.
She reported that she wanted to go to college to become a “business woman” (Diane, Interview 2, February, 2013).

Participant 2.2: Casey, a young man who stood 5 feet 8 inches tall and had long black braids, had a calm demeanor whenever I met with him. During the interviews he sat upright in his seat with his head up, shoulders relaxed, and hands by his side. He took his time when he answered questions and asked me to repeat or clarify if he did not understand. He described himself as “nice, generous, and a laid back person” (Casey, Interview 1, February, 2013).

Casey lived with his mother and had three older siblings: a brother who lived in Florida, a sister who lived in North Carolina, and another sister who resided in Midwest City. He said that he was closest to his sister who lived in North Carolina and had a satisfactory relationship with his brother and other sister. He indicated that he and his mother had lived in North Carolina but had moved to Midwest City after his mother and stepfather divorced. He reported that he had a decent relationship with his stepfather who taught him how to reupholster the interior of automobiles. Casey also said that he had a good relationship with his biological father, who now also lives in Midwest City.

Casey said that he did not have a lot of close friends. He explained that a lot of the other students with whom he hung out were not trustworthy and talked about him behind his back. He said that the friends he did have were mostly female. He also mentioned that his acquaintances in North Carolina were different from the ones in the state in which he was currently living, and he described his acquaintances from North Carolina as “more phony and fake.” What he meant by this characterization was that these individuals acted
differently when he was not around them than they did when he was with them (Casey, Interview 1, February, 2013).

Casey reported that he was placed in a special education program when he was in the third grade. He said that when he was identified as a special education student, he felt “confused” but did not believe his race played a role in his identification (Casey, Interview 3, February, 2013). He indicated that his behavior and lack of focus were the main reasons he had been placed in a special education program. He said that the teachers in elementary school did not like him and treated him like he really had “special problems.” He reported that there was one elementary school teacher who had helped him, but for the most part he believed that he had not received much assistance. He went on to say that “nobody really cared for me” (Casey, Interview 2, February, 2013). When asked to express his feelings about school, Casey responded, “for all my life I really haven’t liked school” (Casey, Interview 2, February, 2013). He also said that he understood that school was something he had to do. He explained that his experience in middle school was similar to his experience in elementary school, adding that in middle school he got into multiple fights and did not complete his schoolwork.

Casey reported that once he got to high school he began to see the importance of education. He stated that he had had three good teachers who supported him and helped him with his work; and during his sophomore year, he had become more focused. His added effort had resulted in his making the honor roll that year. He was proud of this accomplishment because it was the first academic award he had ever earned. In his junior and senior years Casey attended the Career Center in order to study masonry. He stated
that “I’m actually—I’m working with my hands…on my feet, instead of just sitting at a
desk doing book work” (Casey, Interview 2. February, 2013). Casey enjoyed masonry
because it was a trade he would be able to use in his career after he graduated from high
school. He also explained that he was not interested in going to college, but rather wanted
to graduate from high school and find work in the construction industry.

Casey mentioned two traumatic events his junior year in high school. He said that
the stress of these events caused him to become involved in inappropriate activities,
which in turn caused him to get into trouble with the law. He stated that he had learned
from his mistakes and had decided to focus on graduating from high school. He also
indicated that, during this time period, he had not gotten a lot of support from his sister,
even though she lived in his neighborhood, and he was forced to do a lot of things on his
own. He reported that he had not been prepared to handle the responsibility. Reflecting
on that time in his life, he said, “everybody knew what was going on, but it like wasn’t
nothing changing, ‘cause I was like nobody helping, like there wasn’t nobody going to
come over there to my house and just sit with me…I was alone and was all by myself”
(Casey, Interview 3, February, 2013).

Casey stated that he had a “good connection….good relationship” with the
schools’ administrators, characterizing himself as a “good kid” who stayed to himself at
school (Casey, Interview 2, February, 2013). However, Casey did not think he had much
of a relationship at all with the school counselors, indicating he didn’t feel the need to
communicate with them because he was not going to attend college.
According to Casey there were three teachers who had a major impact on his decision to make high school graduation a priority. One of the teachers was the same male teacher Diane described above; the other two were female teachers. Casey stated that they all provided support, helped him solve problems, and were there to help him resolve issues he was having at school and home. He said that the thing he enjoyed most about school was seeing and hanging out with his friends. He said that the worst thing about school was dealing with the other students with whom he had not established friendships.

In regards to his special education class, Casey said “It’s too small of a class and…I just wanna have a real class with my friends—like being in the class with all kids, instead of a little class all the time” (Casey, Interview 3, February, 2013). He also said that he wished he had never been placed in special education classes because his special education classes had several grade levels mixed together—an arrangement that made it hard to concentrate because students did a lot of talking and did not complete their work. Despite the challenges that he experienced in special education classes, he reported that the program had helped him with his math and reading skills.

Overall, when Casey was asked how his learning disability affected him he stated, I can say it really hasn’t affected me, but it helps me—it helped me out. Helped me become a better reader, and um, and better with, um, math skills…..see the things that I need to know, that I might see again in life—when I’m out on my own….” (Casey, Interview 3, February, 2013). From this statement it seems evident that he liked the support he had received from the special education program. But when asked if he what
he would change anything about the special education program, he stated, “I’d say at least make the class a little bit bigger” (Casey, Interview 3, February, 2013).

Participant 2.3: Marcus was a junior who stood 5 feet 8 inches tall and had short dark hair. He spoke in a soft voice but did not appear to be shy, although it did take him a few minutes during each interview to feel comfortable answering questions. He described himself as “fun, nice and smart” (Marcus, Interview 1, February, 2013). Marcus reported during one of the interviews that he enjoyed talking to me because “I was nice” (Marcus, Interview 3, February, 2013).

Marcus lived with his mother and four brothers, three of whom were younger than he. He reported that his family had moved to Midwest City and that he and his mother had an excellent relationship. During the interviews, Marcus talked in detail about his life in his home town. He stated, “[he] like [it] in Midwest City; they got like a lot of places to go” (Marcus, Interview 2, February, 2013). He explained that he and his brothers had gotten into trouble often with the police for behaving inappropriately in their neighborhood. Their unruly behavior caused the police to monitor the brothers closely and resulted in Marcus and his brothers earning a bad reputation in the neighborhood. He expressed the opinion that his mother had had a difficult time with the police allegations about her sons—a circumstance that had influenced her decision to move her family back to Midwest City.

After the family had arrived back in Midwest City, he said that his mother had relied on him a lot because he was responsible and always did what she asked him to do. She had some health issues that caused her to be unable to work, ultimately affecting
family finances. At the time of the interviews, he was assisting her in caring for his brothers and was helping her find a place for them to live. They were living with his grandmother, but the house was too small for seven people. He reported that he and his brothers had a good relationship but sometimes fought.

He said that he had five friends with whom he hung out. This group played video games as their activity of choice. He said that he did not spend as much time with them as he had with his friends in his home town.

Marcus reported that he had never met his father. He said that he had at one time had a desire for a relationship with him, but it diminished as he got older. He stated, “I really don’t—I really don’t care…about him…to tell you the truth, ‘cause he did leave, so—really don’t know him that well. I ain’t never talked to him, ain’t never seen him” (Marcus, Interview 1, February, 2013).

Marcus said that he had been placed into a special education program when he was in the third grade. He said that he had had a serious anger problem in elementary school that caused him to be suspended on various occasions. He said that his anger problems continued in middle school—a circumstance that made it a struggle for him to stay enrolled in school. Marcus said that he enjoyed middle school because he had more friends there than he had had in elementary school, and he also received help in reading and math through his special education classes. His favorite subject was math. It was his favorite because he had had a middle-school teacher who had spent time teaching it to him. He said, “She taught me Algebra. That’s why I’m good at my Algebra now.” He said that this teacher also rewarded students for doing their work—an approach that made
him feel special. Marcus explained that he had struggled with reading because it was hard for him to understand the sentences. He said that his reading teacher in middle school had helped him improve his reading comprehension, stating, “She showed me how to sound out words and spell, and she gave us this book that we had to do… that helped.”

When asked about how his disability changed him, Marcus said that he still had a hard time with reading. He became extremely emotional and began to cry when he discussed the fact that he still struggled with reading. He stated that it was difficult “cause if I can’t read something I ask my mom or my little brothers… cause my little brothers can read better than me” (Marcus, Interview 3. February, 2013). He discussed his belief that being in special education had affected him in a “good way” (Marcus, Interview 3, February, 2013). He enjoyed being in smaller classes and getting additional time to complete his work. He noted, however, that sometimes in his classes students were disruptive, a situation that made it hard to concentrate and complete his work.

Marcus stated that he did not have a relationship with the administrators or his counselor in high school. He said that he had a 2.8 grade point average and stayed out of trouble. He went on to say that he still had anger issues and was seeing a mental health counselor from a local agency to learn how to manage his temper. He said that he felt that the program was working and that he enjoyed meeting with his counselor. Marcus said that he had excellent rapport with his teachers, stating that most of them were supportive and helped him if he did not understand something.

Overall, Marcus reported that he enjoyed being in special education classes in spite of his reading difficulty. He said it was beneficial to be in smaller classes because
he was able to get extra time and help with his work, assistance for which he was very appreciative.

**School # 3 and its Three Participating Students**

Located on the northwest side of the city, School #3 served students from different racial and ethnic groups. The school opened in 1976 after a neighboring school’s enrollment increased sufficiently to make housing the students in that one building impossible. The students were assigned to School #3 or remained in the original school based on their home neighborhoods. According to the Midwestern State Department of Education the enrollment in School #3 for the 2011-12 school year was 826 students: 38% were African American, 45.5% were White, 7.8% were Hispanic, 3.7% were Multi-Racial, and 3.7% were Asian or Pacific Islander. Among the students enrolled, 15.3% were students with disabilities, 9.8% had limited English proficiency, and 55.3% were economically disadvantaged.

This school’s most recent rating on the state’s accountability metric was “effective,” which means that in 2011-12 the school met 11 of the state’s 12 required indicators. These indicators focus on proficient performance on the Graduation Test (GT) as well as on attendance and graduation rates. According to the Midwestern Department of Education, students with disabilities who took the GT scored in the proficient through advanced ranges in the following proportions: 51.7% on the reading subtest, 58.5% on the writing subtest, 44.8% on the math subtest, 41.3% on the science subtest, and 51.7% on the social studies subtest. By comparison, students without disabilities scored significantly higher on the GT in reading (94.5%), writing (91.3%), math (87.7%),
science (82.2%), and social studies (86.4%). These scores revealed achievement gaps between students with disabilities and those without disabilities in reading writing, math, science, and social studies. Of all the schools in this study, School #3 also had lowest percentage of students on IEPs.

My visits to the school revealed that it had clean hallways and classrooms and well-kept school grounds. Some of the classrooms were equipped with technology such as smart boards and computers. In general the students were well-behaved in the hallways, classrooms, and throughout the rest of the building. The hallways were extremely quiet, and there were hardly any students loitering in the halls after the bell rang. During classroom transitions, I rarely saw the school administrators or any teachers in the hallways. In the classrooms, students appeared to be participating and engaged in learning.

Participant 3.1: Allison was a female in her junior year. She was petite, standing about 5 feet tall, and she had a light complexion and dark, shoulder length hair. She seemed very cheerful, often giggling and laughing throughout the course of our conversations. She was also extremely talkative and had a lot to say during the interviews. She described herself as “shy, intelligent, and pretty outgoing sometimes” (Allison, Interview1, February, 2013).

Allison reported that her goals were to graduate from high school and go to college so she could become a pediatrician. She explained that she had completed an internship at a local hospital. According to Allison, she loved to work with children and
enjoyed helping people. She indicated that she had especially appreciated the opportunity to work at the hospital, because it gave her the chance to do all the things she loved to do.

Allison lived with her mother and stepfather, along with an older brother and older sister. She also had an older half-brother and a younger half-sister, but they did not live in the same household. She said that she had a good relationship with all members of her family. When she discussed her mother, she said, “She’s funny; she makes me laugh all the time. Like when I’m—when like—whenever I’m sad she makes me laugh” (Allison, Interview 1, February, 2013). She also reported that her family was “crazy…. They’re fun to be around …sometimes they get on your nerves. Hey, you gotta love family. And they’re always there for me when I need ‘em.” (Allison, Interview 1, February, 2013). She indicated that her mother, stepfather, older brother and sister were supportive and always pushed her to do her best. She explained that her relationship with her biological father was challenging. She stated,

My dad was there for the first part of my life, and then he went away for a while. He came back when I turned 13, but then again, he’s never really there…. It was hard, because I felt like he didn’t know my anymore after he left and came back, ‘cause he went to jail, so… it kinda made me feel hurt because I used to look at my friends, and they would have their dad all the time, and I’m like, ‘I don’t even have mine.’ But I see him…but I don’t have him, (Allison, Interview 1, February, 2013).

She reported that she had begun to rebuild the relationship with her father. Allison also indicated that her mother and father had both been special education students.
Allison said that she had a boyfriend and a few friends with whom she spent a lot of time. She reported that they liked to go shopping and to the movies. She indicated that when it was time for her to tell them about being a special education student, she had a hard time. She said she had felt especially awkward revealing to her boyfriend that she was in a special education placement “cause I was afraid to tell him that I had an IEP, ‘cause I was like, ‘What if he doesn’t like me?’ ….when I told him, I was surprised because he was like—‘ok’…” (Allison, Interview 1, February, 2013). She said this about her friends,

Um, when people hear that I’m an IEP student, they’re like, ‘Oh, she’s slow. I don’t wanna hang around her.’ That’s like a popularity disability right there, and I’m like, ‘Are they really that serious? I only have an IEP in one thing’….. I keep telling myself, ‘I’m going to graduate from high school, and I’m going to go to college, and I’m going to prove all these people wrong,’ at our —at the reunion thing. (Allison, Interview 3, March, 2013).

Allison reported that she had experienced difficulties in school after her father had been incarcerated. She stated, “I’ll never forget that day, and when I got back from school that week, I just shut…down” (Allison, Interview 1, February, 2013). She shared that after this incident, she was retained in first grade and placed in special education. Allison said her mother did not oppose the retention because she believed it would help. During this time, Allison had two traumatic events happen that caused her to shut down and become very violent throughout the rest of her elementary school years. She reported that she had received counseling, but her mother was told by the agency providing counseling
services that “she really don’t need it until she gets older” (Allison, Interview 1, February, 2013). She said, “so, as I got older I guess the anger progressed, because I used to punch walls when I was 10…I would just punch walls and keep punchin’ ‘em… until my hand would bleed” (Allison, Interview 1, February, 2013).

Allison explained that she had attended several schools. She reported that she had attended a public elementary school in the district but later transferred to a private school for middle school and for her freshman year of high school. She indicated that her middle school experience had been positive, stating that she had “an awesome tutor there” and had lots of friends (Allison, Interview 2, March, 2013). When she transitioned to the private high school, however, she felt that it was “a stupid choice” (Allison, Interview 2, March, 2013). Of particular concern to her at the time was the poor treatment she received from her tutor there:

She really downed me. Um…I told her I wanted to be a doctor. She told me I couldn’t do it because I had an IEP, and some of the stuff that a doctor could do, I couldn’t do…..It kinda hurt. Like, ‘I went home crying that day’, and I was like, ‘I don’t wanna be a doctor. I can’t do it.’ (Allison, Interview 2, March, 2013).

Allison explained that her mother had supported her by telling her, “Don’t let anybody tell you can’t do, ‘cause I’ve always told you you could be anything that you wanna be” (Allison, Interview 2, March, 2013).

After that incident, according to Allison, her mother decided to take her out of the private school and place her back in public school. Allison reported that she enjoyed attending the public high school because of the “academic level….I like that students
graduate from here—top of their class sometimes. Uh, they go to all types of colleges…

Oh, because they never let their students quit. Like never” (Allison, Interview 2, March, 2013). Allison indicated that most of her teachers at the high school had been supportive. She said this about a teacher who had provided encouragement: “He’s like, ‘You need to be more confident.’ He’s like, ‘Even if you’re wrong, still be confident’…” (Allison, Interview 2, March, 2013). She said the following about another teacher: “She kind of holds you accountable” (Allison, Interview 2, March, 2013). Allison also reported that she had a good relationship with her school counselor and the building administrators: “Oh, they love me….uh—uh—I don’t really get in—in trouble, so when they see me, I’ll be like, ‘Hi!’…” (Allison, Interview 2, March, 2013).

Overall, Allison indicated that special education classes were helpful but there were some things that she would change. For example, she stated that the main thing she would change about special education was “I really think they should just put other students in—I don’t wanna be mean when I say this—in a—not superbly slow, but medium. Because, like, not all of us learn at the…sloooow pace” (Allison, Interview 3, March, 2013). She shared that it was difficult to be in class that moved at a slow pace because it felt like she was not learning. She also reported that most of the time she understood the work, but that more thorough explanations of the information would be beneficial.

Participant 3:2, Jackson was a male in his senior year. He had a dark complexion and stood 5 feet 8 inches tall. During the interviews he was very well spoken, respectful, and polite. For example, he said, “Yes, ma’am,” whenever he answered a question.
Sitting directly across from me at a small table, he held his shoulders and head back. He sometimes crossed his arms or placed his hands flat on the surface of the tabletop.

Jackson described himself as an athlete and a Christian. He enjoyed playing football and said that one day he wanted to pursue a career in the National Football League. He also described himself as “outgoing, funny, and respectful.” He stated that he wanted others to see him as “talented and a hard worker” (Jackson, Interview 1, February, 2013).

Jackson lived with his mother in the inner city. He reported that he had four older brothers and sisters and a younger sister. He discussed his close relationship with his father, who was an excellent football player. Jackson indicated that his father had been born in New York but that he currently lived in Midwest City. His younger sister also lived there with his father. He reported that his extended family was extremely close and spent a lot of time together attending church. He shared the fact that he played several instruments for church events and helped lead the music ministry. He reported that church was a huge part of his life and that he spent a lot of time at church during the week.

Jackson also reported that he and his mother moved a lot. He had attended several elementary schools, two middle schools, and two different high schools. He explained that the reason for their frequent moves was the fact that his mother had lost her job and was not financially stable. He also said that during the time his mother was having financial difficulties, he had to stay with an aunt while his mother lived somewhere else. He recalled that this experience was difficult for him.
Jackson reported that he had a lot of close friends with whom he spent time laughing, joking, and playing football and basketball. He described his relationship with his friends as “respectful” (Jackson, Interview 1, February, 2013). He talked about the fact that he had grown up with most of his friends and knew their families. He said that knowing their families was important to him because it made him closer to his friends.

According to Jackson, he had been placed in a special education classroom when he was in the fifth grade. He stated, “I switched a lot of schools in elementary—and, ‘cause at the time—when I was a little kid and of course I was bad, and uh, I switched to a different school. I was still bad” (Jackson, Interview 2, March, 2013). When he was first placed in a special education program, he did not know anything about being on an IEP. He indicated that he found out more about what being on an IEP meant when someone pulled him aside and told him that his mother had signed him up for the special education program. He stated, “Well, since I was young, I didn’t know anything about IEP, but when I was growin’ up, that’s when I started…to know about it more—how they, uh—told us we were slow and everything. And you get more attention to learn things” (Jackson, Interview 2, March, 2013). Jackson also said this about being on an IEP:

When I got [on an] IEP, it was a little easier, but like sometimes I—sometimes I be feelin’ like I wanna be out of IEP, just because of, like, what I’m capable of…because I know I—I am smart—I can be smart and everything…” (Jackson, Interview 2, March, 2013).
Initially, according to Jackson, he did not have a problem with his special education placement because he knew that he learned differently from the way other students learned. But soon he began to notice that the pace of the classes was too slow. He stated, “I didn’t learn the things I wanted to learn. I wanted to learn more things, but—about—like the pace just not…cooperating…. And me go slow, it takes time to—it takes time that you can’t learn a lot since you goin’ slow, but that’s the only disadvantage that I have for my IEP” (Jackson, Interview 3, March, 2013). He also remarked, “I didn’t learn much in special ed. Like…um…yeah—just I didn’t learn much, as the regular class would learn” (Jackson, Interview 3, March, 2013). In a similar vein, Jackson shared his belief that he could succeed in the general education program: “I could handle their [general education] pace. I can handle their work, um…if I want to, uh, handle their work and learn more things…with them…in the fast paced [classroom]” (Jackson, Interview 2, March, 2013).

Jackson also stated that when he went to school in a different district “they was different too, so, they had different classes and everything,’ so I really kinda in a regular class, but—that was the only reason like—their IEP was different and better” (Jackson, Interview 2, March, 2013). It seemed like Jackson had experienced placement in a more inclusive setting and that he preferred that arrangement to the more segregated arrangement in his current school. Jackson reported that he had attended the career center where he had studied masonry and said that he had really enjoyed that experience. He stated that he had had a teacher at the career center who “uh, they funny, um, but they—they help you out and, like they—they get you where you wanna go, or need to go, and
they help you get a job or anything you ask them to do—they help you” (Jackson, Interview 3, March, 2013). He reported that his favorite subject was math and that he struggled with reading and writing.

Jackson indicated that he wanted to go to college but he knew that he would have to work hard because there are no special education programs in college. He stated, “like big colleges and stuff, but… ain’t havin’ no, uh, IEP in college—so it’s gonna be more of me have to step up and everything” (Jackson, Interview 2, March, 2013). He reported that he had been receiving some support for attending college from school personnel, “my teachers and counselors—they help me. Um, they help me with colleges and—ya know—keep me on the right track, and uh—do anything for me I ask them to do.” Jackson indicated that when he graduated from high school, he planned to move to Maryland to live with his older sister; he said he planned to go to college there.

Participant 3.3: Eric was an extremely soft spoken male in his junior year. He was relatively short, standing approximately 5 foot 6 inches tall, and he had dark curly hair. During the interviews he seemed shy, but I noticed as we talked for a while that he began to open up and share more information about himself. He described himself as a “jokester” and wanted others to see him as a “hard worker” (Eric, Interview 1, March, 2013). Eric was relaxed when he answered questions and rarely showed any emotion. He smiled and laughed a few times, but for the most part he was serious. Eric hesitated sometimes when he answered questions, and I noticed that when he did not have an answer he tended to say, “I don’t know,” His reluctance to talk made the interview
challenging. When he said, “I don’t know,” my approach was to rephrase the question or to tell him, “we’ll come back to it later” (Eric, Interview 1, March, 2013).

Eric lived with his mother and step-father. He had two siblings, a sister and a brother, both of whom were considerably older than he. He reported that he felt like he was an only child. He told me that his sister had sons who were close to his age and that he often fought with them. He described his nephews as “immature” (Eric, Interview 1, March, 2013). He reported that he rarely saw his brother or his brother’s family because they lived on a different side of town. Eric described his mother as a “hard worker” and a “good person” (Eric, Interview 1, March, 2013). He reported that he had a good relationship with his step-father. He reported that his step-father had taught him how to fish and to do landscape work. Eric said that he did not know his biological father.

Eric recalled that he had been placed in special education classes in the sixth grade. He stated that when he was identified, it felt “kinda good… I got more help in there and understand the work better” (Eric, Interview 2, March, 2013). He also said that he enjoyed special education classes because “not too many students there—like, just—maybe fifteen maybe” (Eric, Interview 2, March, 2013). He mentioned that his favorite subject was math and that reading was difficult for him. Eric indicated that his teachers in middle school were helpful and pushed him to complete his work. He stated, “Well, one of ‘em was, uh, hard on me—tryin’ to get me to do my work more… to try harder or something (Eric, Interview 2, March, 2013).

In high school, Eric went to the career center to study landscaping. He indicated that he wanted to pursue a career in landscaping after he graduated. He also said that his
step father had taught him about landscaping when he was younger—an experience that had contributed to his interest in taking landscaping courses at the career center. Eric reported that he would like to attend a local college after he graduated from high school. His aim is to become a professional landscaper.

Eric reported that some of the advantages of being in special education classes were that he received extra help and had fewer students in his classes. When he the work became more challenging, he said that he followed his parents’ advice: “If you don’t know anything, just ask the teacher” (Eric, Interview 3, March, 2013). He found that this strategy worked, at least some of the time: “And sometimes the teacher would say—or ask me if I get it, and…she’d explain it better” He even reported that that he made honor roll because “they [his teachers] explained the work better to me” (Eric, Interview 3, March, 2013). He also said that in some of his classes he wished the work was “a little harder” because some of them were not challenging (Eric, Interview 3, March, 2013).

When Eric was asked how special education had affected him he said, “It made me a better person, I think—I guess” (Eric, Interview 3, March, 2013). He told me that he liked the slow pace because it felt like he was able to learn more information. He stated, “regular ed[ucation] is a lot more faster, and I wouldn’t be able to get—like some of the stuff they say or anything” (Eric, Interview 3, March, 2013). Overall, Eric reported that he enjoyed his experience in the special education program.

**Chapter Summary**

In this chapter I developed nine profiles that provided a brief description of the three schools selected for the study and that characterized the participants based on their
responses to interview questions. In each profile I described the participant’s personal appearance, personality traits, and family dynamics and discussed the details of his or her experiences in school, especially in terms of placement and participation in a special education program. I tried to capture significant quotes to illustrate these characterizations. I have also summarized information about the schools and the student participants in tables appearing in Appendices B and C.

The data presented in the chapter that was most relevant to my study came from the stories participants shared about their experiences in special education classrooms, but data about their other school experiences, their home life, and their interactions with peers was also significant. In the next chapter, I will talk about how this information led to the emergence of themes revealing patterns characterizing the experiences of the nine students.
Chapter 5: Results

In the previous chapter I presented nine profiles that characterized the experiences of the participating students in the three schools included in this research. Each profile described the student’s appearance, affect, personality, and family dynamics as well as capturing significant details about his or her educational journey, especially regarding academic difficulties, special education placement, and experiences in a special education program.

In this chapter, I report findings from the cross-case analysis that I described in chapter three. The cross-case analysis provided a basis for answering the research questions guiding the study. These questions are as follows:

1. How do African American special education students perceive their school experience?
2. In what ways do African American special education students see their special education as beneficial and in what ways do they see it as harmful?
3. How do African American special education students experience their interactions with others in the high school environment: teachers, peers, counselors, and administrators?

Emergent Themes

The cross-case analysis supported the salience of two major themes. The first theme can be characterized by the statement, “the journey from general to special education had predictable milestones.” The milestones along this journey, related to: (1) the experiences associated with being placed in special education, (2) the formation of
student’s perceptions (positive or negative) regarding placement in special education, and
(3) the students’ longer term responses to their placement in a special education program.
The second theme related to students’ views about their confinement in special education
programs and can be characterized by the statement, “special education placement was a
dead-end.” This theme shows the connections between students’ experiences in special
education and their encounters with the stigmas that are associated with disability labels
and special education placement.

The journey from general to special education had predictable milestones. As
noted previously, the data supports the existence of three milestones in the students’
journeys from general to special education. The first milestone concerned experiences
leading up to the special education placement decision and the events associated with the
placement itself. The second milestone concerned the formation of a reaction to the fact
of being placed in special education. Finally, the third milestone related to the longer-
term response to the special education placement. These milestones will be discussed in
detail next and are represented in Table 5.1 below with quotes from students that connect
to each milestone.
Table 5.1: Emergent Themes # 1 Journey from general education to special education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Participants</th>
<th>Experience associated with being placed in SPED Behavior /Traumatic events *</th>
<th>Positive or negative perception of being placed</th>
<th>Response to placement in SPED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Terry</td>
<td>I just gone through a lot of trouble. Didn’t really like to—listen to teachers…….</td>
<td>…….cause it felt like none of the teachers liked me…They suspended me for stupid stuff.</td>
<td>Mm—I don’t know…. I didn’t know about what it was at first.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brandon</td>
<td>Mmm…before I was identified…it was a little bit bad. *Experienced a traumatic event</td>
<td>I was fine with it, because I wasn’t learn—learning anything in that one class in middle school.</td>
<td>First placed…Mmm…I felt alright.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>…I was troublesome. I was—I was a brat. Um, I used to get like in big arguments with my teachers. *Experienced a traumatic event</td>
<td>…They [teachers] don’t that much to support. Like, I have my own type of motivation…….</td>
<td>I didn’t even know I was in those classes when I was first placed in that. I thought it was a regular class (small laugh).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane</td>
<td>…..Not—it’s not tryin’ to be rude or anything, but.... Some teachers got smart mouths, and that’s when my bad behavior come out……. *Experienced a traumatic event</td>
<td>It makes me feel like I’m slow…people look at you like you’re in IEP classes, you’re slow…I don’t want that...cause I know I’m smarter than what I look like</td>
<td>Um, embarrassed. I felt slow.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casey</td>
<td>I just had…I had, uh, a behavior problem, and, I really always got distracted off of my work *Experienced a traumatic event</td>
<td>I’ll ask my teacher, um—I—I had to ask my teacher for some help, and then when he helps, I kinda get—I get familiar</td>
<td>At the time I really didn’t know.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5.1: Emergent Themes #1 Journey from general education to special education (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Participants</th>
<th>Experience associated with being placed in SPED Behavior /Traumatic events *</th>
<th>Positive or negative perception of being placed</th>
<th>Response to placement in SPED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marcus</td>
<td>I was a bad student… I used to always get suspended… ‘Cause of my anger problem”  *Experienced a traumatic event</td>
<td>I do better in small classes….</td>
<td>I didn’t care. And ‘cause I was gettin’ help.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allison</td>
<td>I guess the anger progressed, because I used to punch walls  *Experienced a traumatic event</td>
<td>And then I met this tutor…she really downed me. Um…I told her I wanted to be a doctor. She told me I couldn’t do it because I had an IEP, and some of the stuff that a doctor could do, I couldn’t do Um, some days I don’t like it, and some days I do like—the part that I don’t like is, again, being in the slow class, but um, the part that I do like is that I’m finally getting help.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackson</td>
<td>I was a little kid and of course I was bad, and uh  *Experienced a traumatic event</td>
<td>…Like, I didn’t learn much in special ed. Like…um…yeah—just I didn’t learn much, as the regular class would learn Since I was young, I didn’t know anything about IEP, but when I was growin’ up, that’s when I started…I’ to know about it more</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>*Did not have a behavior problem in school</td>
<td>…not too many students there—like, just—maybe fifteen maybe</td>
<td>[I] kinda good… I got more help in there and understand the work better</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first milestone: Experiences of placement in special education. In general students were placed in special education because of their behavior. Although the behavior may have had some impact on the students’ academic performance, the
circumstances that led to their special education placement related to the behavior itself. In particular, educators became concerned about the students’ inability to control their emotional reactions to events in the classroom, school, and community at large. Curiously, however, in some cases the “backstory” regarding the student’s behavior implicated a significant traumatic event in the student’s life. That event was either unknown to or ignored by the educators involved in decisions regarding the initial special education referral and assessment. It also seems not to have had a bearing on placement decisions, educational plans for students, or eventual decisions regarding whether or not the students should be retained in a special education program or returned to the general education mainstream. I will discuss these dynamics in greater detail later in the chapter.

In this section I will discuss the impact student behavior had on their placement and experience in special education programs. All of the students acknowledged that they had severe behavior problems before they were identified as disabled and placed in special education programs. According to each student, his or her behavior problems contributed to a poor relationship with the educators with whom he or she interacted. For example, some said they were misunderstood by teachers, others talked about being distracted, and most said they had been suspended from school frequently.

The students expressed the view that their behavior problems led to unproductive relationships with teachers, which in turn led to their placement in special education programs. The following quote from one of the students illustrates the belief that his behavior problems were exacerbated by teachers’ failure to grasp all that was going on:
I just gone through a lot of trouble. Didn’t really like to—listen to teachers…Uh, ‘cause that they [teachers] always—they [teachers] didn’t uh—understand like—when, uh, people were making me mad, that—they just can’t—they just can’t—like—I just can’t sit there and let them keep doin’ it (Terry, Interview 2, January 2013).

Terry’s statement reveals his belief that his teachers were not attentive to the classroom dynamics that resulted in his acting out behaviors.

Casey shared his belief that his behavior prevented him from completing his work in class. He stated, “I just had…I had, uh, a behavior problem, and, I really always got distracted off of my work (Casey, Interview 2, February, 2013). In this case, Casey’s behaviors appear to have kept his teachers from accurately determining what Casey could and could not do academically.

The same dynamics seem to have resulted from Marcus’ behavior. He reported, “I was a bad student… I used to always get suspended… ‘Cause of my anger problem” (Marcus, Interview 3, February, 2013). When Marcus got suspended from school, he began to fall behind in his school work and soon he appeared to have academic deficits as well as behavior problems.

Jackson’s behavior affected him differently. He explained that despite switching elementary schools a lot, his behavior did not change. Jackson said, “I switched a lot of schools in elementary—and, ‘cause at the time—when I was a little kid and of course I was bad, and uh, I switched to a different school. I was still bad” (Jackson, Interview 2, March, 2013).
The behavior of these students ultimately led to negative experiences in their school lives, and these experiences affected (and were affected by) the relationships these students had with educators. These students’ challenging (perhaps even anti-social) behaviors influenced the way educators treated them. From the perspective of the students, their teachers found them difficult to handle and therefore stopped searching for behavioral and academic interventions that could be implemented in general education classrooms. Rather, the teachers referred the students to the special education program in an effort to remove them from the general education program.

The students’ inappropriate behavior also negatively impacted their experiences in school by distracting them and preventing them from completing their assignments. According to the students, teachers tended to view their lack of focus and failure to finish school-work as evidence of their inability to learn grade-level academic content. Nevertheless, the students saw teachers’ judgments about their academic capabilities as inaccurate. Furthermore, they did not believe their teachers were attempting to use all of the interventions they might have tried in order to help them learn grade-level content and demonstrate mastery of that content.

Because several of the students had experienced a traumatic event that had precipitated or contributed to their acting out behavior, these students were particularly distressed by their teachers’ lack of attentiveness to their circumstances. The students hoped that their teachers would recognize the influence of non-academic issues on their ability to stay on track academically. Instead, they believed their teachers too readily conflated their behavior problems with their academic capabilities and sought to remove
them from the general education program. In the next section I will characterize the traumatic events that the students experienced, either before or after a placement decision had been made, and talk about the impact of those events on students’ school experiences.

**Impact of a traumatic event.** The traumatic events discussed by the students occurred before they were placed in a special education program, during the placement phase, or while they were receiving instruction in a special education program. These events negatively impacted the lives of the students, thereby making it difficult for them to function academically. Data from the interviews with the students revealed their belief that their teachers misinterpreted the types of behaviors they displayed. Although the teachers typically concluded that the students had learning disabilities, in actuality what they observed were students’ tumultuous reactions to traumatic events in their lives. According to the students, what they needed from their teachers at the time was emotional and social support sufficient to help them deal with the traumatic event.

Interestingly, almost all of the students provided similar stories. Eight out of nine of them reported experiencing a traumatic event, and all of these students characterized their teachers’ responses as misguided. Moreover, these students all shared their belief that the traumatic event that they had experienced affected in a negative way their performance in school. For example, one student explained that his mother had been diagnosed with cancer. He acknowledged the pain and disruption caused by her diagnosis and reported that no one at school was there to support him. He remarked,
Everybody knew what was going on, but it like wasn’t nothing changing’, ‘cause I was with nobody helping, like there wasn’t nobody going to come over there to my house and just sit with me…I was alone and was all by myself. (Unnamed Student, Interview 3, February, 2013).

This student said that he felt abandoned by the people—his teachers and other adults—whom he thought should have supported him. His school work suffered, and he began to engage in unproductive behaviors as a way to immunize himself from what was happening in his life. During the time he was engaging in such behaviors, his grades dropped and he lost interest in school.

Several other students also explained that the death of a close relative, such as a father in one case and a grandfather in another, affected their ability to stay focused on schoolwork. For others the trauma related to a family member’s injury or illness. One student’s mother, sister, nephew, and niece were in a major car accident—a circumstance that caused him to become overwhelmed. The student was afraid that his family would not survive what had happen. He became distracted by worry about his family’s well-being. Distracted in this way, he paid little attention to his schoolwork or to other school activities; as a result, his performance in his school subjects and in extra-curricular activities suffered.

Another student’s trauma involved an event in the past that had long-term consequences. That student had been the victim of an inappropriate act as a young child, causing the student to feel disconnected from the world and to misbehave in school. A professional counselor who had provided some services to the student never addressed
this traumatic event, so the student was forced to deal with the event alone. Overwhelmed by pain and grief, the student was unable to focus on academic work or participate in class. Rather than looking for a deeper reason for the student’s presenting behaviors, however, the teachers viewed what they observed as evidence of the student’s inability to understand the work.

These examples show that traumatic events affected most of the students’ ability to attend to instruction and, in turn, their school performance. In some cases, students were so overwhelmed by the traumatic events in their lives that they became almost totally disengaged from what was going on in school. Their disengagement was misinterpreted by educators as evidence of their inability to learn or function in a regular education setting.

**The second milestone: Positive versus negative reaction to being placed.**

Interviews with the students who participated in this study revealed that most of them had had at least some positive experiences after being placed in a special education program. Once in the program, these students had received services such as academic support. They also experienced improved social interactions with their teachers and parents.

For some of the students, however, the negative experiences associated with their special education placement outweighed their positive experiences. These students concluded that they would be better able to improve their circumstances if they were allowed to return to a regular education program. So they asked either their parents or their teachers to help them get out of the special education program and go back to the
general education classroom. In all such cases, however, the adults were unwilling or unable to help them.

For example, Terry and Diane explained that they wanted to return to a regular education classroom but were not afforded the opportunity because their parents or educators felt that special education was the appropriate place for them to be. Terry stated, “[Mother] wants me to stay in there, but I don’t.” Diane said,

She [the principal] was like, “No, you need to stay in them classes.” No I don’t. I know where I need to be at. You can’t tell me where I wanna be at. And they [mother and principal] didn’t listen to me. Still in my IEP classes. I wanted to get on mainstream junior year…. (Diane, Interview 2, February, 2013).

One way that parents and teachers influenced students’ experience of special education concerned their need to stay in that placement, but there were other influences. In the next two sections, I discuss other ways in which teachers and parents influenced students’ experiences in special education programs. I will provide evidence suggesting why certain students did or did not feel supported by their teachers and parents.

**Teachers’ influence.** As discussed in the literature presented in chapters one and two, teachers can influence students based upon their expectations for those students. Teachers who have high expectations for students’ performance tend to encourage better performance from students than those who have lower expectation. In this study the teachers who were discussed by students seemed to exert an influence on the experiences of these students. Most of the students’ comments about their teachers were positive and indicated that their teachers had had a positive influence on their experience overall. In
some instances, the students attributed the positive influence to the academic assistance that they had received from the teachers. In other instances, students focused on the affective influence of teachers, school counselors, administrators, and peers with whom they had developed good relationships. Listed below are examples of relevant student comments:

The work is easy. You just gotta do it. If you need help, you just call him [teacher] over and he help you out. And…that’s about it. (Brandon, Interview 1, January 2013).

I would say [teacher], but I mean…mmm…the way he supports me is probably “tough”. Uum…pro—the way he supports me is probably sayin’ that he (sighs)…makes me think a lot more. Like…he thinks like stronger thoughts and stuff, so… (David, Interview 2, February, 2013).

The teachers, they help—at least help me out—some of ‘em, so I can graduate. The um—they have little…they have little volunteer jobs, that I—I help, so I can get my hours on. That’s something’. (Casey, Interview 3, February, 2013).

Although most of the comments students shared about their teachers were positive, there were a few negative comments. For example, Terry suggested that he did not think some of his teachers liked him. He explained,

‘cause they [students] … get more—they [students], get more information, I guess, [than I do]. And that’s what really—that’s what you need, except for, um, I’ bits—little bits of it at a time ……cause it felt like none of the teachers liked me…They suspended me for stupid stuff. (Terry, Interview 3, January, 2013).
Diane mentioned that her relationship with her teachers sometimes lacked mutual respect. For example, Diane reported,

I think my teachers—I do get—what I don’t intentionally meant to get smart with you, but if you say something’ smart to me, I’m gonna get smart with you back. Not—it’s not tryin’ to be rude or anything, but.... Some teachers got smart mouths, and that’s when my bad behavior come out……” (Diane, Interview 3, February, 2013).

Overall in this study, students reported that their teachers’ influence had a positive impact on their experiences in special education settings in their schools. These positive influences impacted the academic work of some students and the social and emotional interactions of others. These findings are consistent with the perspective evident in some prior literature that, when students feel teachers’ support for them, they work harder in school.

*Parental influence.* The students made statements revealing their belief that parents can have a positive or a negative impact on the school experiences of their children. In some cases, the students provided comments demonstrating how their parents had been supportive, helping them navigate their placement in the special education program. In other cases, students shared the view that their parents’ own personal struggles, including struggles with their own schooling, affected parents’ ability to respond in ways that were supportive of their children’s education. As mentioned in chapter four, Terry’s mother did not have positive experiences in school. Terry’s
comment seemed to indicate that his mother’s experiences led her to be critical of the educational experiences Terry was having in school. Terry reported,

They just, um, put me into spec—my mom put me into special ed[ucation] after that, ‘cause I missed a lot of school. I’m guessin’ it’s because of when she was in school she always got bad grades inside those —inside the regular classes. But, I was inside a couple, and I didn’t never get a bad grade. I stuck to an A—an A or a B. (Terry, Interview 3, January, 2013).

Brandon shared his belief that support from his family was a lot different from what Terry received from his family. Brandon mentioned that his family was extremely supportive, and he got help from them often. Brandon stated,

My mom help[s] me. Like every —like I give it to mom and then she read it, and then she give me, like—she told me the questions and I answer it if it’s right. And then I know it. (Interview 3, January, 2013).

Diane also talked about the support she received from her mother and other family members. She noted about her mother,

She is [a] nice, overprotective person. But, at the end of the day, you gotta love her. ‘Cause she your mom. She works hard. I’m the only child, so she works hard for me, and that’s my mom and my dad. (Diane, Interview 1, February, 2013).

Allison had a similar experience. She shared this about her family: “Because practice makes perfect. That’s what my parents always taught me, and since I have this disability, my mom and my step dad do not play when it comes to anything I do” (Allison, Interview 1, February, 2013).
These examples showed that parents who were supportive influenced their children’s school experiences in positive ways. And their children were highly aware of the support they were receiving from home. Most of the students in this study, moreover, thought their parents were supportive. The few who did not have supportive parents expressed the belief that it was difficult for them to navigate through special education. In some cases, parents’ unpleasant memories of their experiences of schooling and their related insecurities appeared to have a negative impact on the student’s experiences in school.

It appears that students who feel supported by their parents may do better in school than those who do not feel supported, and their experience in the special education program may be better than that of students who lack parental support. For the students who were not supported, it seemed that the negative experiences their parents had had in school got in the way of their providing the kinds of support that the students hoped to receive. These parents wanted their student to have a positive experience and believed that their child’s placement in a special education program would provide the support their child needed in order to be successful in school. In some cases, however, this perspective was detrimental to their child’s experience because the child did not believe he or she belonged in special education and wanted to be removed from the program.

**The third milestone: Perception of the long-term effects of being placed.** Each of the students expressed views about his or her placement in the special education program. Below are three different perspectives that the students expressed: (1) Unknowing – The student was unaware of his or her special education placement, (2)
Unsure – The student disagreed with the placement decision or was not sure why he or she was placed and (3) Knowing – The student understood why he or she was placed. Each student’s perspective was represented by one of the three categories, and some illustrations follow.

For example, Jackson explained that he was unaware of his special education placement. Jackson stated,

Since I was young, I didn’t know anything about IEP, but when I was growin’ up, that’s when I started…I’ to know about it more—how they, uh—told us we were slow and everything. And you get more attention to learn things. (Jackson, Interview 2, March, 2013).

Jackson’s statement shows that he had been unaware of his placement in the special education program, but when he was told about it, he was told he was “slow” and needed more “attention to learn things.” Later in his interview, Jackson indicated that he did not like being called “slow” and did not like being a part of classes that were slow-paced. He wanted to be in faster-paced classes where he could learn more information.

Casey, David, and Diane described their perspective about their special education placement as “unsure.” Casey said that when he was identified as a special education student, he felt “confused” (Casey, Interview 3, February, 2013). He discussed the fact that his behavior and lack of focus were the main reasons he had been placed in special education. David reported instances when his teachers explained to him that he did not understand what he read. Based on his issues with comprehension, his teachers claimed, he was placed in the special education program. He disagreed, claiming instead that he
did understand what he read but was just being lazy. He said he felt confident that he could get out of special education classes, but he did not have the desire to do so because of his laziness.

Diane was also unsure about her placement. She said that she had not wanted to be placed on an IEP, but her mother had thought it was a good idea because Diane had struggled during her freshman year in general education classes. She stated,

It makes me feel like I’m slow...people look at you like you’re in IEP classes, you’re slow...I don’t want that...cause I know I’m smarter than what I look like (Diane, Interview 1, February, 2013).

These students were unsure about why they had been placed in special education. The statements above show that these students believed they had the capability to learn in the general education program but had been mistakenly placed in special education.

Terry, Brandon, Marcus, Allison, and Eric all said that they knew they needed to be a part of a special education program. Terry responded that he understood why he had been placed in special education in middle school because he had fallen behind in reading and writing as a result of having behavior problems in elementary school.

Brandon stated that his placement in the special education program was a result of his difficulties focusing on school-work. Brandon agreed with the decision to place him on an IEP because the instruction that he had received and was currently receiving in the special education program helped him concentrate more on his work. Marcus, by contrast, said that he had not had academic difficulties per se but had been placed in special education because he had had a serious anger problem in elementary school that
had caused him to be suspended on various occasions. He said that his anger problems continued into middle school—a circumstance that made it a struggle for him to stay enrolled in school.

Allison had been placed in special education in the first grade. During this time, Allison discussed having had two traumatic events happen that caused her to shut down in elementary school. Her response to the traumatic events resulted in her being identified as having difficulties quite early in her school career. Allison suspected that the traumatic events in her childhood interfered with her ability to concentrate on her school work—a circumstance that led to her placement in a special education program. She reported that she had not received sufficient support from adults to help her handle what was going on in her life. Recognizing that other support structures were not working, Allison understood why she was going to be placed in a special education program.

Eric was placed in special education in the sixth grade. He stated that when he was identified, it felt “kinda good… I got more help in there and understand the work better” (Eric, Interview 2, March, 2013). He also stated that he enjoyed special education classes because “not too many students there—like, just—maybe fifteen maybe” (Eric, Interview 2, March, 2013).

**Special education was a dead-end.** The second theme supported by the cross-case analysis was *Special Education Was a Dead-End*. This theme relates to students’ feeling of being trapped and to the stigmatization associated with being identified as having a disability and subsequently having limited access to general education programs. At the end of this section I will discuss the compensating benefits of special
education placement that some students reported even when they experienced negative fallout from being identified with a special education label.

The results of the analysis suggested that students saw special education programs as a dead-end because they did not believe they would ever be removed from these programs. Evidence supporting this theme included statements revealing students’ feelings of being trapped, stigmatized by their peers, and given limited access to general education programs. Additional statements indicated that students believed that, because of their placement in special education, they were consigned to receiving instruction through a slow-paced curriculum. The use of the term, “dead-end” also related to students’ belief that they were restricted, re-segregated, and denied an appropriate education. I will discuss these perspectives below, followed by a brief discussion of some of the benefits students shared about their experiences in special education programs. I have also provided a table below (Table 5.2) with relevant quotes from students about their experiences.
Table 5.2: Emergent Theme #2 Special education was a dead-end

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Participants</th>
<th>Trapped in SPED programs</th>
<th>Stigmatized in SPED</th>
<th>Exposed to slow-paced curriculum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Terry</td>
<td>She wants me to stay in there [special education], but I don’t……She’s the only one that doesn’t want me to. I just—she didn’t never tell us why. …and all the teachers said they want me to be out of it too… but my mom doesn’t want me to.</td>
<td>Mm—they’re not learning, but like—it’s just like more slower than inside the other classes.</td>
<td>They [teachers] gave more different stuff, but like…it’s like—it’s just a little bit harder—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brandon</td>
<td>‘Cause it’s a smaller classes—you don’t get disrupted like the big classes. Um…it—I like the slower pace. The bigger classes—eer—sometimes I get lost. Lost because it’s goin’ too fast. Mm…so I miss some of the questions.</td>
<td>Well, [I am] kind of mad because we’re <em>not</em> in retarded classes. It just be that ‘we’re learnin’ different from ya’ll</td>
<td>The slow pace. That one on one. Uh—uh smaller classes. Uh…mmm…I would teach the kids, like—be out there writing on the board, instead of just give us paperwork and sit down. And…mm…just help us when we need help.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>‘Cause, um…it makes you feel contained—in the same cycle.</td>
<td>It used to ‘cause when they used to try to call me, like, slow in some ways I used to get really mad.</td>
<td>..They’d [teachers] give us like—they gave me like this easy work, and I’d get mad with that ‘cause it wasn’t a challenge—like…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane</td>
<td>She [the principal] was like, “No, you need to stay in them classes.” No I don’t. I know where I need to be at.</td>
<td>Yeah, they (students) treat me like, ‘You’re in slow classes, da, da, da, da. You can’t learn somethin’ You get an easy “A” by just sittin’ there, lookin’ at the teacher.”</td>
<td>It makes me feel like I’m slow…people look at you like you’re in IEP classes, you’re slow…I don’t want that…cause I know I’m smarter than what I look like…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Participants</td>
<td>Trapped in SPED programs</td>
<td>Stigmatized in SPED</td>
<td>Exposed to slow-paced curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Casey</td>
<td>Normal class work. It wasn’t really hard. It was a little easy.</td>
<td>…everybody got to know who I was, they just all started actin’ different….</td>
<td>‘Cause sometimes I feel like we don’t get as much work as we supposed to be gettin’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marcus</td>
<td>I like bein’ in special ed classes.</td>
<td>Actually, one of disadvantages—like when you is in like not a—um—when you like in a regular class, people talk about them classes….special ed classes.</td>
<td>Only the people in them classes is slow, and, like—ok, like—people in regular classes be like, “You need to be in them slow classes, and…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allison</td>
<td>…because practice makes perfect. That’s what my parents always taught me, and since I have this disability, my mom and my step dad do not play when it comes to anything I do”</td>
<td>Um, when people hear that I’m an IEP student, they’re like, “Oh, she’s slow. I don’t wanna hang around her.” That’s like a popularity disability right there, and I’m like, “Are they really that serious? I only have an IEP in one thing!”</td>
<td>I’m a slow paced learner…like you have to explain slow to me. Not like slow slow, but slow…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackson</td>
<td>Like, I didn’t learn much in special ed. Like…um…yeah—just I didn’t learn much, as the regular class would learn</td>
<td>…how they, uh— we were slow and everything…</td>
<td>It’s affected my speed. Um…’cause I used to be fast, but now it’s just slowed down. Um…it was a little bit of learning in special ed….</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>I got more help in there [special education] and understand the work better.</td>
<td>Um…they [friends] didn’t really care or anything, so…</td>
<td>I can stay on one thing, and like actually learn about what I’m doin’, ‘cause if I’m movin’ fast I [cant] really, like…</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Being trapped.** The students described their experience of being trapped as the inability to withdraw from special education even if they were capable of functioning in a general education classroom. For instance, Terry mentioned that, when he had been in general education classes, he had been able to comprehend and perform the work. Other students also described feelings of being trapped once they entered special education classrooms. Some students described being trapped because of their parents’ unwillingness to remove them from special education placements. Others claimed that school administrators denied them access to general education classes.

As discussed above, parents’ responses to students’ school experiences can either support or interfere with their progress. Terry shared that his mother did not want him withdrawn from special education because she was afraid that he would fail. He stated,

She wants me to stay in there [special education], but I don’t……She’s the only one that doesn’t want me to. I just—she didn’t never tell us why and all the teachers said they want me to be out of it too… but my mom doesn’t want me to (Terry, Interview 3. January, 2013).

Diane had a similar experience when she asked to be taken out of the special education program. Diane’s mother believed that being in a special education program would help Diane with her school work, but Diane felt that she did not need to be in special education. When she asked to be taken out of her special education placement, the school administrator disagreed. These examples showed that the students felt they had limited control over whether or not they were removed from special education programs.
even if they believed they had been (or could be) successful in general education classrooms and would benefit from being returned to more inclusive settings.

**Stigmas associated with being identified.** Being stigmatized involves negative attributions that influence the formation of a person’s identity (Goffman, 1990). When students begin to internalize the negative stigma that is associated with being identified as having a disability, their self-images often suffer. The students in the current study, for example, were unhappy when their peers called them “slow,” “retarded” or questioned their ability to learn. For example, Diane said,


David shared,

> It used to ‘cause when they used to try to call me, like, slow in some ways I used to get really mad. Um, they’d give us like—they gave me like this easy work, and I’d get mad with that ‘cause it wasn’t a challenge—like, I felt like they were just callin’ me dumb (laughs)—I mean not dumb, but slow. Yeah, I don’t like them ‘cause I feel like in some way they look down on IEP students, and knowing that they’re—knowing that they’re human, they think in some way they can look down on people they don’t even know. That’s why I don’t like them at all (David, Interview 3, January, 2013).

Brandon’s experience with being stigmatized was different from Diane’s and David’s. Brandon told me, “Well, [I am] kind of mad because we’re not in retarded
classes. It just be that ‘we’re learnin’ different from ya’ll’ (Brandon, Interview 2, January, 2013). His statement showed that although he felt stigmatized he didn’t internalize the stigma. Brandon also did not view being in special education programs in a negative light. He appreciated the support he received from teachers and from his parents. The encouragement he received helped him deal with the potentially negative attributions that he heard from his peers.

The discussion above indicated that peers questioned the participating students’ ability to learn. The peers of the participating students also appeared to assume that school work in the special education program was “easy”. The students in the study reported that such comments from their peers often made them emotional and even caused them to dislike some of their peers. These comments also had a negative impact on the way the participants felt about themselves.

*Slow-paced curriculum.* A slow-paced curriculum such as that used in many special education classrooms as well as limited occasion for interaction with high-achieving peers might limit students’ opportunities learning and thereby reduce their chances of passing graduation tests, attending college, or obtaining a professional career. The students provided examples in the quotes below to show how the slow-paced curriculum and “easy work” provided to them in the special education classroom limited their ability to access the general education curriculum to the maximum extent possible. Terry wished “they gave more different stuff, but like…it’s like—it’s just a little bit harder—not that much harder. But as a—it’s um—it’s just, um—a better—it’s just a
better—a better, um—way to, um, learn more, I guess.” (Interview 2, January 2013). He also shared this about the slow-paced curriculum:

‘Cause it a—it was just like—um…. (pause)…well last year it was just like too—too easy I guess. And I just wanted to get a little bit more better at this stuff, and it seemed like all the work they was givin’ us was just like, not really what I was—what we was supposed to be—like, what I was supposed to, like, be learnin’ and stuff. Like a good—like a good—get you to learn better and stuff. That was just takin’ everything slow and stuff, and then—and I just noticed if we’re not—when I first came into this, um—when I was a freshman, I learned all the same stuff and then next year on, and then the next year we kept on learning the same stuff, and that’s what seemed like they just keep somethi’ on the same stuff and over and over again. And I just wanted to get into the different classes, and learn different (Interview 3, January 2013).

Terry’s example indicated that in his special education program the work was easy, slow and repetitive and did not push him to learn at a high level. Terry also shared that when he was in a general education classroom he had been given the opportunity to experience challenging work:

He was a funny teacher, and um—well, there was a lot of notes…a lot. My hand was—was cramping every time, but he was—he was—he was still a good teacher—he was like—see him get mad at you, and like, he’d tell jokes—he’d tell jokes and stuff” (Terry, Interview 3, January 2013).
Other students also shared similar types of experiences in special education classrooms.

For example, Jackson reported,

It’s affected my speed. Um…’cause I used to be fast, but now it’s just slowed down. Um…it was a little bit of learning in special ed…. Like, I didn’t learn much in special ed. Like…um..yeah—just I didn’t learn much, as the regular class would learn (Jackson, Interview 3, March, 2013).

Diane had a similar perspective on the special education program. She said,

Really know what you about to diagnose a kid with…before you put ‘em in a class that not’s gonna help them or anything. Or teach the—at least if you do put ‘em in the classroom, make sure they’re learnin’ a lot of stuff—not just…one—one thing, or three times each. That just make ‘em feel slow or something’.

(Diane, Interview 3, February, 2013).

Her statement revealed her belief that many educators do not understand what is (and is not) being taught in special education programs. From her perspective, once a student is placed in such a program, he or she does not learn much.

Many of the participating students indicated that the slow-pace and easy work of the special education classroom had hindered their progress, making them question the wisdom of their identification as a student with a disability and their subsequent placement in a special education program. The students, however, did not have uniformly negative things to say about such placements. In the next section I will discuss how the students conceptualized the benefits of their placement in special education programs.
Benefits of placement in a special education program. Although being a special education student carried a negative stigma, some students did see the benefits of being in such a program. They enjoyed being in a classroom with fewer students, and they appreciated receiving one-on-one help when they did not understand the course content. Brandon shared several comments about the benefits of his special education experience. For example, he stated,

I was fine with it, because I wasn’t learning anything in that one class in middle school. ‘Cause it was too loud and stuff like that. And I wasn’t focusing in that class, so I was just playin’ around the whole entire time ……… ‘Cause it’s a smaller classes—you don’t get disrupted like the big classes. Um…it—I like the slower pace. The bigger classes—sometime I get lost. Lost because it’s goin’ too fast. Mm…so I miss some of the questions. (Brandon, Interview 3, January 2013).

Marcus’ comments about his experience were similar to Brandon’s. He commented,

I do better in small classes….So, I think—I think more teachers would help more—like if—‘cause if we had more teachers—special ed teachers in school—in the schools—they could teach more kids that need the help. (Marcus, Interview 3, February, 2013).

Casey expressed the following about the benefits of his special education experiences:

It [special education]—I think everything changed for me. Like, I was doin’ a little bit different stuff. Like, little bit different things. Things that I would never thought I’d do. Things I never thought I’d see….It [special education] can—well,
it make me become a smarter person…than I am—well, than I was. (Casey, Interview 3, February, 2013).

Allison claimed that she enjoyed the slower paced instruction she received. She stated, I’m a slow paced learner...like you have to explain slow to me. Not like slow slow, but slow…You couldn’t just go through it and expect me to get it” (Interview 3, March, 2013).

Eric also mentioned that he felt that special education was helpful. He said, [I am] kinda good… I got more help in there and understand the work better (Eric, Interview 3, February, 2013).

All of the students shared several positive reactions to their experiences in special education including appreciation for being in smaller classes and receiving one-on-one help from teachers. Brandon, Marcus and Eric expressed the belief that, overall, their experiences in special education were beneficial; while Terry, David, Diane, Casey, Allison, and Jackson all reported some positive experiences but mostly focused on the negative consequences of their special education placement. I concluded, therefore, that the students who had positive special education program tended to be outliers because the majority of the students shared the belief that most of their experiences in special education programs were negative.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I discussed two themes that were represented in the cross-case analysis. The first theme can be characterized by the statement, “the journey from general to special education had predictable milestones,” and the second theme can be
characterized by the statement, “special education was a dead-end.” As the chapter showed the milestones on the students’ journey from general education to special education included: (1) the experiences associated with being placed in special education, (2) the formation of perceptions (positive or negative) regarding placement in special education, and (3) the longer-term response to placement in a special education program. The students’ narratives about these milestones showed that their experiences in special education programs were mostly negative. The benefits that they attributed to placement related to relationships that helped them acquire new skills and adaptive capacities—relationships with their parents as well as with special education teachers. These relationships helped them feel more confident about their ability to achieve academically, a change in self-concept that enabled them to perform better in school. Despite such relationships, many of the students saw special education as a sacrifice of instructional pace, challenging content, and the ability to return to the mainstream. The need for these sacrifices suggests how detrimental special education can be for students.

In the discussion of the second theme, the chapter explained that students’ placement in special education programs felt to them like a dead-end. This theme illustrated the connections between students’ experiences in special education and their encounters with the stigmas that are associated with disability labels and special education placement. The students said they felt trapped once they were identified, explaining that being trapped meant they would be in special education programs for the duration of their schooling even if they asked parents or educators to help them return to the general education program.
Finally, the chapter reported on the fact that students saw benefits associated with their placement in special education programs. Three students concluded that their overall experience in special education programs was beneficial, making them outliers in study. But even the majority, who believed overall that their special education programs limited their opportunities, acknowledged that special education offered some benefits such as smaller class sizes and more personalized instruction. The majority of the students overwhelmingly discussed their negative experiences with the expectation of some of them who did appreciate being in smaller classes and receiving one-on-one help when they did not understand. This chapter has also enabled me to present evidence that showed how data from this study connects to each theme. In chapter six, I will show how my research data supports, enhances and confirms what already exists in the literature advanced in chapter two.
Chapter 6: Connection to the Literature, Implications, Assumptions, and Recommendations

In chapter five, I discussed the two major themes that became apparent through the cross-case analysis. These themes offered a way to answer the research questions that guided the study:

1. How do African American special education students perceive their high school experience?
2. In what ways do African American special education students see their special education as beneficial and in what ways do they see it as harmful?
3. How do African American special education students experience their interactions with others—teachers, peers, counselors, and administrators—in the high school environment?

The statement “the journey from general to special education had predictable milestones” captured the essence of the first theme. This theme made sense of information provided by participants regarding the following experiences: (1) the events associated with being placed in a special education program, (2) the formation of perceptions (positive or negative) regarding placement in a special education program, and (3) responses over time to placement in a special education program. The second theme was characterized by the statement, “special education placement was a dead-end.” This theme referred to the students' experiences of being confined in special education programs. It focused on commonalities and differences in students’ experiences as well as their reactions to the stigma associated with placement in a special education program.
In this chapter, I will discuss how the themes my study identified enrich the literature that relates to African Americans in programs for students with disabilities. I will also present findings that are not yet well represented in either the literature on overrepresentation of African Americans in special education program or the literature on the experience in general of students’ (i.e., from all backgrounds) who are placed in special education programs.

**Connections to the Existing Literature**

To a considerable extent, findings from my study illustrated dynamics that other research (both theoretical and empirical) has explored. These connections relate to teacher expectations and perceptions, parents’ influence on children’s educational experiences and outcomes, students’ perceptions of their experiences in special education programs, and overrepresentation of African Americans in special education programs.

**Teacher expectations and perceptions.** One theme from the extant literature that I reviewed earlier indicates that teachers are sometimes unaware of the influence of their perception of a student’s behavior on identification of the student for placement in a special education program. Researchers have suggested that engaging in unacceptable behavior can increase the chances of a student being identified or misidentified for inclusion in a special education program (Gay, 2004; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Milner, 2003; Oswald, Coutinho, & Best, 2002; Peterz, 1999; Reiter & Davis, 2011; Ysseldyke, et al., 1981). Moreover, teachers sometimes misinterpret student behavior as indicative of actual or potential learning problems, resulting in the misidentification of students for special education (Gay, 2004; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Milner, 2003; Oswald, Coutinho,
& Best, 2002; Peterz, 1999; Ysseldyke et al., 1981). My research added to earlier literature by revealing that the ways in which teachers interpret student behavior in the classroom still appear to lead to misidentification of students, at least in some cases.

As indicated in the findings from my study, eight of the nine students reported engaging in behavior that was problematic in school and that they believed resulted in their being identified (or misidentified) for special education placement. This discovery is important, as it adds to findings from existing research regarding the schooling experiences of students from marginalized populations.

Incorrect or negative assumptions about the motivations and academic ability of African American and other students from marginalized groups often cause students to react negatively towards their teachers as well as toward their schooling experience in general (Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Milner, 2003; Reiter & Davis, 2011). The participants in my research confirmed this finding in their discussion of their feelings and their perceptions that their teachers did not believe them to be capable academically.

When the students in my study perceived that their teachers held high expectations for them and believed in their abilities, they were motivated to do academic work as well as maintaining a positive outlook about being in special education programs. The extant literature includes findings consistent with this reaction from the students in my study. Researchers have shown that teachers’ expectations influence students' sense of self-efficacy and that their sense of self-efficacy then influences their performance in the direction of the teachers' expectations of them (Cotton, 1989; Crawford, 2007; Harris et al., 1986; Jussim & Harber, 2005; Weinstein; 2002).
Consistently low expectations held by the teacher inevitably are communicated to the student and affect his or her sense of self-efficacy, and, in turn, depress his or her academic performance (Gentry, 2009; Good, 1981; Guskey, 1982; Weinstein, 2002).

**Parents’ influence on children’s educational experiences and outcomes.** As discussed in chapter five, students reported better academic performance in school when they felt supported by their parents. The literature suggests that children can reach high academic levels if their parents hold high expectations for them and communicate those expectations to their children along with the belief that their children will be able to succeed in school. According to findings from research conducted by Yamamoto and Holloway (2010), parents who hold high expectations for their children can also buffer the negative influence of teachers’ low expectations.

My findings suggested that these patterns characterized the experiences of the participants in my study, as well, especially those students who had positive experiences in special education programs. Analysis of the narrative data suggested two parallels between the reported experiences of the students and the perceived influence their parents had over their success in special education programs. The first indicates a connection between the reported experiences of several students who had positive relationships with parents and teachers and then also had positive experiences in the special education program. The students stated that, when they felt supported, they worked harder and completed their schoolwork. The second connection was the converse; when students did not feel support from their parents, they reported not being as successful. The students explained that they felt unsupported by their parents in situations in which they wanted to
be removed from the special education program because they believed they could succeed within the general education curriculum, but were encouraged by their parent(s) to remain in a special education classroom. They also reported feeling unsupported as a result of their parents’ own insecurities with the education system and belief that, if their son or daughter were removed from the special education program, he or she would not be successful. Ultimately, teacher and parent expectations appeared to be an extremely significant factor in whether student-reported experiences in the special education program were positive or negative.

**Students’ perceptions of their experiences in special education programs.**

According to the narrative data, as explored in chapter five, students’ perspectives could be identified as belonging to one of three categories indicating their perception of their experience in special education. The categories were as follows: "unknowing," that is, the student was unaware of his or her special education placement; “unsure," that is, the student disagreed with or was not sure why he or she had been placed in special education; or "knowing," that is, the student understood why he or she was placed in a special education program. In some cases the students in my study reported that being labeled negatively impacted them, even while agreeing that the label was appropriate. Nonetheless, each of the students reported experiencing some kind of negative impact associated with being labeled, such as being stigmatized by his or her peers or being trapped in a restrictive environment.

My findings in this regard connect with those of other researchers, such as Gold and Richard (2012), who contend that regardless of the special education placement or
services, the mere act of labeling students adversely affects their production, and hence their success, in society. These researchers further argue that categorizing or labeling individuals based on behaviors or physical characteristics forces them to the margins of society, particularly if the label is perceived as negative. Moreover, the detrimental impact is exacerbated for individuals who have multiple stigmatized identities, such as African American students.

**Overrepresentation of African Americans in special education programs.** At the core of my discussion of the literature related to my study was the overrepresentation of African American students in special education programs due to misdiagnosis, misidentification, and misplacement. Consistent with this literature, the narrative data from my study revealed that African American students believed they were misdiagnosed, misplaced, and hence overrepresented in special education programs.

As reported in chapter five, the students had been evaluated for special education programs without teachers first developing and implementing interventions to address their academic or behavioral needs. In addition, the data suggested that some students’ behavior may have been associated with traumatic events endured before identification and that those behaviors strongly influenced their teachers’ decisions about placing them in special education programs.

The participants reported that the experience of being placed in special education programs resulted in their feeling trapped, stigmatized, and consigned to a slow-paced curriculum. Their reports connect with findings from other research. According to Ferri and Connor (2006), students of color are less likely than their White counterparts to be
exposed to general education once they have been identified as having a disability; and, furthermore, African American students who have been identified and placed in special education programs do not adjust as well as White students to the special education setting. Feggins-Azziz and associates (2006) concurred, finding that among students with disabilities, African Americans were more likely than European Americans to be educated in restrictive environments, in other words, as my informants reported, to become trapped in environments that inhibit their academic and social development. Connor (2009) also found that African American students with disabilities typically spend more of their time in segregated special education placements than do White students; some, in fact, spending their entire day in separate classrooms (Connor, 2009). According to current studies, segregating students placed in special education programs limits their opportunity to be educated with their peers, excludes them from the general education curriculum, keeps them from fully reaching their academic potential, and decreases the skill levels they eventually attain (Blanchett, 2006, 2009; Ferri & Connor, 2005).

Another strong connection between my findings and the literature on overrepresentation of African American students was the apparent lack of effective mechanisms at the local, state, and federal level to hold school districts accountable for the practice of placing disproportionate numbers of African American and students from other marginalized groups into special education classrooms (Blanchett, 2006, 2009; Connor, 2009; Dykes, 2008; Gentry, 2009; Losen & Orfield, 2002; Peterz, 1999). The absence or ineffectuality of such mechanisms permits bias in the process of referral,
assessment, and/or placement in special education. Clearly, bias existed in the processes determining placement of the students in my study, as I discuss in the implications section of this chapter.

Unique Contribution to the Literature

Through the analysis of my data, one pattern emerged that was not found in the existing literature. The pattern concerned the impact of traumatic events in students’ lives on school behavior that their teachers found unacceptable. Such behavior (and the purported disruption it caused in classrooms and schools) was a precursor or accompaniment to placement in special education. Several students in my study described dealing with a traumatic event during or after being placed in a special education program. It was apparent in the analysis that the traumatic event was a significant factor in the student’s experience at school, particularly for those who experienced the event during the referral and placement process.

Consideration of the fact that students experienced these traumatic events and then experienced behavioral changes in response to them invoked a different way of thinking about students who were placed in special education programs. At the time of my study there was no research that connected traumatic events in students’ lives to their identification as having disabilities and their resulting placement in special education programs. Much of the extant research has looked at impact of inadequate teaching practices on the miseducation of African American students and their subsequent misidentification as having disabilities. The extant research has also suggested that poverty may influence students’ development and cause them to fall behind their White
counterparts. The idea that a traumatic event can hinder a student’s ability to learn, due to the stress caused by the event, and can lead to the student’s being perceived as having a serious learning disability or emotional disorder, adds something new to the literature on bias in the identification for and placement of students in special education programs.

**Traumatic events.** The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) defines a traumatic event as "a sudden and unexpected occurrence that causes intense fear and may involve a threat of physical harm or actual physical harm” (p. 1). A traumatic event can have profound effects on the physical health, mental health, and development of the student experiencing it. The NCTSN explained that students who experience a traumatic event typically encounter some form of distress that can impact their ability to function properly in their home, school, and community environments. The impact of trauma on behavior seemed evident in the responses of several of the students in my study who were identified as in need of special education.

As a result of trauma, students often engage in self-destructive, accident-prone, or reckless behaviors. These types of behavior impact their interpersonal relationships with family members, teachers, and classmates in ways that can cause changes in their school performance, attendance, and behavior (NCTSN, 2013). The traumatic event can also cause students to withdraw from school, seriously disrupting school routines and learning processes. In the case of the students in my study, traumatic events seem to have played a significant role in placement and affected some students’ ability to function in special education classrooms even after placement in such programs.
Overall, my discovery about the impact of traumatic events adds something significant to the literature. It shows that, as a part of the referral and placement process, there is a need to determine whether or not students have experienced a major trauma that might contribute to changes in behavior or willingness and ability to perform school work. The examination of the impact of traumatic events might also alert educators to other non-academic barriers that might be keeping a student from focusing on schoolwork and remaining productively engaged in the learning process.

In the section below, I discuss the implications my study has for practice and policy. The implications for practice I identify suggest ways to support struggling learners and offer recommendations for educators working with students with disabilities. I also share ways that policy could be improved to ensure that students with disabilities are placed appropriately and receive the support they need to be successful students.

**Implications for Practice**

As discussed in chapter one, there are many complex issues associated with the identification and placement of students in special education programs, including the complexities of student learning and motivation and the difficulties that schools have in meeting the needs of some students. My study suggested that further efforts should focus on the ways schools might disrupt practices leading to misidentification of students with apparent behavioral and academic problems. For example, *overuse* of special education referral and placement might be stopped if educators learned how to be more sensitive to the influences that might be affecting students whose behavior and/or academic performance appear troubling. Not only ought such teachers to be cautious in making
referrals, they should be competent users of various powerful strategies that would enable struggling students to reconnect in positive ways to the instruction and social relationships available to them in general education classrooms.

Because teachers need to be more careful at the referral stage and more competent with various general-education intervention strategies, I believe more training would be appropriate. For teachers such training would promote more appropriate responses to the needs that students present.

Training might also be made available to parents to help them critique the idea that special education is the best way to address their children’s educational needs. Training of this type would give parents confidence to speak out on behalf of their children and to know how to get support for their in advocacy role.

In addition to training, other practices might cut down on the number of students who end up being miseducated in their special education placements. Notably, in cases in which it is determined that a special education classroom is the appropriate placement, part-time or full-time, there should be an opportunity to implement a transition plan for removing students from general education and placing them into special education. The transition plan would be designed to build students’ self-esteem and provide them with ways to deal with possible stigmatization by peers. There is also a need for schools to find more effective ways to transition special education students back into general education classrooms so that students who are leaving the special education classroom can feel more comfortable as they move into general education classrooms—a condition that would contribute to their likelihood of success.
My findings also have implications for school leadership practice. As reported in chapter one, Gentry (2009) and numerous others have shown that effective schools rely on the leadership of strong administrators who focus much of their attention on curriculum and instruction. In particular, my research might have a bearing on the way such principals choose to organize, implement, and monitor special education referral and intervention procedures at their schools. The data suggest that teacher intervention to improve student progress before students are identified as having a disability would decrease the number of students who are being misidentified. Principals who read the results of my study might work hard to influence teaching practices at their schools—promoting practices that lead to inclusion rather than practices that lead to special education referral and placement.

In chapter two, I discussed ways social justice advocacy in education can combat overrepresentation of African American students in special education programs. Social justice advocates (including policy makers) have the opportunity to promote an equitable educational environment for all students. Theoharis’ (2007) work identifies several ways educators might promote social justice by transforming school aims, culture, curriculum, instructional practices, and climate in order to make schools more inclusive for marginalized students. Such efforts appear essential to the practices of school administrators in order to ensure an equitable education for all students.

**Implications for Policy**

My research findings could also help state and federal policy makers in the United States understand the need to align policies that govern placement in special education
programs with policies that govern the equitable provision of education (under the Equal Educational Opportunities Act) and the provision of appropriate education (under IDEA) for all students. IDEA requires a free appropriate public education for all students with disabilities. “Appropriate” assumes an education that offers adequate preparation in the academic and functional skills needed for productive participation in modern society. My study confirmed that, in the case of at least some African American students identified as having disabilities, there is a need to ensure the provision of an appropriate education.

The EEOA mandate for equitable opportunities applies in determining whether or not an educational provision is adequate and, thus, whether or not it is equitable. As discussed in chapter five, some students in my study did not believe they were receiving as high quality an education as they might have received had they been permitted to remain in general education programs. In some cases, students wanted to return to general education classrooms so they could learn more. By denying them that alternative, their schools perhaps were interfering with their access to equal opportunities. Only when educational placements actually permit students to learn at high levels in accordance with their capacities and interests are they truly affording equal opportunities. Policy makers might need to consider remedies for what appears to be a common problem: the practice of denying African American students an equal education by confining them in slow-paced and segregated special education classrooms.

**Implications for Future Research**

The student perspectives that my research revealed could also increase educators’ awareness that tracking of special education students’ placements should be considered
for future study. Tracking the academic settings in which students with disabilities spend their time as they go through school would help determine the proportions of students that move out of special education programs and the proportions that never return to the general education classroom full-time. These latter proportions, perhaps tracked by state or even by school district, represent the students who may indeed be “trapped” in special education.

My research also revealed ways traumatic events may impact students before, during, and after placement in special education programs. Further investigations of students’ reactions to traumatic events, perhaps showing the range of behaviors that tend to be linked to them, would help educators distinguish between disabilities that may require the help of specially trained educators and responses to trauma that may require consultations with families and perhaps the help of school counselors or professionals from other agencies. Knowledge of this type could help educators engage in important discussions about how to improve special education referral and assessment processes for students whose behavior points to some kind of problem.

Another implication for future research is the need for studies of students’ experiences in special education programs that incorporate perspectives in addition to those of the students themselves. Interviews with teachers and parents as well as with students might generate deeper information about how adults’ expectations and the supports adults provide to students contribute to various outcomes: students’ success in general education classrooms, the duration of students’ placements in special education programs, and students’ academic performance.
Assumptions and Limitations

In chapter one, I presented three assumptions that might limit the extent to which my findings represent a set of objective “truths.” The first assumption was that I would be able to control the possible influence of my own biases on my research findings. To help reduce the impact of personal bias, I listened closely and reported exactly what the students said during their interviews. I used self-reflection throughout the data collection and data analysis phases of the research, writing my reactions to what I heard from the students in a journal in an effort to assure that claims made in the interpretation came from what the students actually said and not from my possibly biased impressions of the interviews.

My second assumption related to the feasibility of involving students with disabilities as informants about their own school experiences (Patton, 2002). Their self-reports might not have been candid if the students did not want to share information with me. Fortunately, the students who participated did seem comfortable with me as a researcher and were willing to share their reflections of their experiences in special education programs. The three-interview sequence also contributed to my ability to establish rapport. In addition, I had raised some concerns about the possibility that students with disabilities might lack the communication skills or confidence needed in order to participate in interview activities totaling about three hours in length. No such problems became evident. All of the students understood the questions were able to articulate their perspectives.
As noted in chapter three, findings from a qualitative set of case studies cannot be generalized widely. The in-depth understandings produced by a study of this type, however, off-set its lack of generalizability. To share details about what I learned from the interviews with participating students, I have tried to provide detailed explanations of the themes along with illustrative quotes from interview transcripts.

One other limitation of my study relates to a feature of its design that I hoped would be productive of relevant insights but that did not turn out to support such insights. Notably, this feature relates to the way I selected schools for inclusion in the study. In chapter three, I noted that I wanted to interview African American special education students from high schools representing low, medium, and high percentages of students on individualized education programs (IEP). I assumed that this approach would enabled me to include students whose experiences in special education programs took place in different contexts—a selection method that I expected to be productive of findings about how schools’ different organizational cultures and climates affected students’ experiences. Data from the study, however, did not reveal any patterns that might point to differences in school culture and practice associated with the school’s percentage of students on IEPs: most of the students described having similar experiences in special education programs, and observed differences appeared to relate to individual circumstance not to the school in which the students were enrolled. Nevertheless, by interviewing students only, I may have failed to get a deep enough picture of school context to determine whether or not it might play a role in determining the character of students’ experiences. Further research is needed to address possible contextual
influences on the ways students experience their special education placements and the education they receive in special education programs.

**Final Recommendations**

In this final section of the chapter, I share recommendations about how educators can work collaboratively to ensure that African American and other students from marginalized groups receive the proper support they need to have a positive experience in school. I will also discuss recommendations for future studies. As indicated in chapter one, my own work as an educator has been inspired and sustained by my commitment to struggling learners. After completing the research reported in this dissertation—listening to the stories, thinking about what students were tell me, analyzing the data, and identifying patterns—my overarching recommendation would be that schools work very hard to provide special education services that keep students from being trapped, stigmatized, and left behind. Greater commitment to inclusion might be one approach; using Response-to-Intervention in the way it was originally intended might be another.

As research suggests and IDEA requires, it is also important to include parents, school administrators, and support personnel, such as school psychologists, and school nurses in the conversation to determine whether or not students should be placed in special education programs and whether students with special needs are receiving appropriate interventions in their general education classrooms or in their special education placements. My work as a school counselor and as a researcher has led me to doubt that the current practices for identifying and serving students with disabilities are appropriate. Nevertheless, I believe there are ways to ensure that these students are
getting the education they need—the education they deserve. Regarding African American students, one of the most important ways is for educators to monitor closely their schools’ referral, intervention, and placement practices to ensure that students are appropriately served.
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U.S. Department of Education: Individuals with Disabilities Act 2004


Appendix A: Demographic of School Sites

Table A.1: Demographics of School Sites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Number of Students Enrolled</th>
<th>Percent of African American Students</th>
<th>Percent of White Students</th>
<th>Percent of Multi-Racial Students</th>
<th>Percent of American Indian or Alaska Native Students</th>
<th>Percent of Hispanic Students</th>
<th>Percent of Asian or Pacific Islander Students</th>
<th>Percent of Limited English Proficient Students</th>
<th>Percent of Students with Disabilities</th>
<th>Percent of Economically Disadvantaged Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1</td>
<td>482</td>
<td>72.1%</td>
<td>23.2%</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>25.9%</td>
<td>91.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#2</td>
<td>510</td>
<td>95.3%</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>21.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#3</td>
<td>826</td>
<td>38.9%</td>
<td>45.5%</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
<td>15.3%</td>
<td>55.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Appendix B: Student Participant Demographic

#### Table B.1: *Student Participants Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Participants</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>Years in SPED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Terry</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>#1</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brandon</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>#1</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>#1</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>#2</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casey</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>#2</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marcus</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>#2</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allison</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>#3</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackson</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>#3</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>#3</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[3\] In the random student sample seven of the nine students were male which equaled 77% compared to the national average of two-thirds of the population.