The (Over)representation of Minority Students in Special Education Programs:

Teachers’ Perspectives

By

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Abstract

This study explored factors that may be contributing to the overrepresentation of minority students in special education programs in Ontario. To carry out this research project, two teachers from the Greater Toronto Area were interviewed using a semi-structured model. Findings included teachers’ beliefs that parental involvement is crucial when it comes to students being referred, assessed and diagnosed into the special education program, and that the minority students being overrepresented are students living in poverty, students from monoparental homes and English Language Learner students. These findings suggest that some parents may choose not to attend referral-related meetings because they may not feel sufficiently well-informed to make suggestions or provide feedback. These findings also suggest that if overrepresentation of minorities is a persistent issue in special education, there may be a problem with the way students are being identified and assessed. Recommendations include that schools create a parent orientation session about the special education referral process. This orientation section would be made available for parents who will be attending IEP and IPRC meetings in order to provide them with the support needed prior to attending individual meetings.

**Key Words:** Special Education, special education teachers, Individual Education Plan, minorities, overrepresentation
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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.0 Introduction: Research Context and Problem

Special education is one of the fastest growing programs in Canadian school systems. Even so, there are still a number of people within society and education who do not understand the way special education programs work and the services they provide. This lack of understanding has created a stigma around special education, potentially making students feel as though they are of less value due to their cognitive and learning capacities (Peters et al., 2014). When people think of special education, they tend to blur together all the different components that make up this program. However, special education provides resources for students identified as autistic, gifted, learning disabled, ADHD, behavioural, emotional disturbed, amongst other exceptionalities (Peters et al., 2014). So it is important to understand that special education students are just as diverse as an entire school community.

The disproportionate representation of minorities and ELL students in special education is a topic that has been studied fervently since the 70s. A number of factors within special education programs, such as lack of understanding, lack of training, and inconsistencies between schools, school board and provinces, have served as catalysts to the issue of overrepresentation (Dworet & Bennett, 2002). There were many researchers, sociologist, psychologists and educational professionals who made significant progress within this issue by making suggestions that helped shaped the special education program set in place today (Artiles & Trent, 1994). However, recent studies have shown that the overrepresentation of minorities and ELL students is still a prevalent issue (Addo, 2011). Although the majority of studies has been conducted in the United States, there is still strong evidence that this issue is relevant in Ontario. In Canada, Black Canadians and Indigenous students are the most overrepresented groups within the special
education system (Artiles & Trent, 1994). In the last century Latinos and students of low socioeconomic status have joined the latter group (Artiles & Trent, 1994).

There is sufficient data to show that overrepresentation of minorities is still a persistent issue in Canada. Compared to Caucasian students, students from minority groups are 2.3 times more likely to be identified as needing special education support (Addo, 2011). Furthermore, students who are status Indians are four times more likely to be suspended and referred to special education (Addo, 2011). A report issued and published by the British Columbia Ministry of Education (2011) brings to light, as a pressing issue, the overrepresentation of Indigenous students in all categories of special education (except for gifted) (Addo, 2011). With this information in hand it is important to explore and understand what educators are doing today to combat this issue.

Why is it important to address this issue in Ontario? As mentioned earlier, the special education program is quickly growing. In Ontario, there are currently two million students (including primary, elementary and high school students) of which 319,200 are part of the special education program (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2011). That means that roughly 16% of Ontario students are considered to be exceptional, thus requiring special education services. It is important to note that of the 319,200 students, only 191,600 were formally assessed and placed, meaning that 127,600 students were informally referred and assessed by their teachers and schools as needing special education services (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2011). The concern with informal placements is the criteria in which teachers are basing their assessment to determine whether a student has exceptionalities that need to be met. The question that needs to be kept in mind is: on what are teachers basing their criteria when referring students to the special education program? How do we ensure that all teachers are using the same, equitable
criteria to assess students to be part of the special education program? When looking at this issue, it is important to see what teachers are doing both in the classroom and outside of the classroom to help minority students who may be overrepresented. This is particularly important as teachers play a major role in students being identified, assessed and placed in special education.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the criteria used by Ontario teachers in identifying and referring students to the special education program. As well, I aimed to explore the steps taken by teachers to combat the overrepresentation of minorities and ELL students in the special education program. I interviewed a sample of these teachers about: their experiences teachers have with the referral and assessment process using Response-to-Intervention (RTI) as well as the difficulties they have reportedly faced; their perceptions of the special education program and the overrepresentation of minorities; and the criteria teachers reportedly use when determining if a student should be referred to the special education program.

From this study, I hope to understand the process of using RTI and if the implementation of this model is making a difference from the teacher’s point of view in the special education program, especially when it comes to the overrepresentation of minorities and ELL students. Furthermore, I want to explore whether teachers believe that more professional training will help face the inconsistencies found within the special education program. Lastly, as an educator I want to understand the best way to help students who are facing challenges both in the general classroom and in the special education program.
1.3 Research Questions

The central question guiding this study was: what are teachers’ experiences and practices in relation to identifying and referring students to the special education program?

The following questions will support the central question:

1. What training do teachers receive to help identify, refer and assess students needing additional support?
2. What criteria do teachers use to help students facing challenges in their classroom?
3. What are teachers attitudes about the difference between formal and informal placement into special education?
4. What are teachers’ attitudes and beliefs about the RTI model?
5. What are teachers’ attitudes and beliefs about the special education program?

1.4 Background of the Researcher

The issues found within the topic of special education have always interested me for a number of reasons. The first reason has to do with my own learning experiences both in Colombia and here in Canada. From an early age I was diagnosed with a learning disability, with ADD, and mild dyslexia. However, because in Colombia there is no such thing as individualized education plans, I was kept in the same classroom as the rest of my classmates. My mother had to look for outside resources, programs and services to help me deal with my learning disabilities and to strengthen my academic and intellectual skills. By the time I was in Grade 4 it was hard to tell that I had any issues because of the support that I had received. That same year I moved to Canada and I was placed in the ESL program and there I once again began to have serious learning issues. However, all my teachers associated my learning issues with speaking English as a second language. It was not until Grade 6 that I was informally assessed to see if I
should be placed in the Special Education program but the school advisor told my parents that I would benefit more from being in the general education program, so they recommended that I stay there. However, they did warn my parents that I would require extra help to be able to keep up with my classmates in certain areas. Until this day, there are times when I feel that there is a gap between my classmates and I and I feel as though I have to work three times harder to achieve or reach the same academic standing.

My interest in this topic continued to grow as I volunteered in a grade 10 learning strategies class in multiple occasions. While volunteering I began to notice issues that were impacting the learning development and success of the students in the class. I realized that the program included students with learning disabilities, behavioral issues, mental disabilities and kids who simply did not want to be in school. The more classes I volunteered in the more I began to notice the number of minorities and ELL students who were part of this program. I then began to read more about it and it struck me how this issue has persisted despite all the new models and legislations that have been implemented both in Canada and the United States. With this study, I now have the chance to dig deeper into this issue and find answers to my research questions.

1.5 Preview of MTRP

The introduction of this MTRP has presented the research topic, question and objectives that will guide my work. Chapter 2 reviews literature that already exists on this topic, and specifically on referral, assessment and placement procedures, the overrepresentation of minorities and ELL students and the implementation of the RTI model. Chapter 3 outlines my research methodology. In Chapter 4 I reveal my research findings and explore the dominant themes in the data. Chapter 5 looks at both the broad and narrow implications of my study,
drawing conclusions and highlighting the areas needing further research. A list of references and appendices are found at the end.
Chapter 2 – Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

With the implementation of the Canadian Special Education system in the 1960s, researchers, educators, and psychologists have done extensive research and carried out studies analysing the issues within the special education program. Research shows that one of the most studied topics is the overrepresentation of minorities and ELL students within special education programs (Dworet & Bennett, 2002). The literature presented in this chapter will look at various component of the special education program before reviewing the literature specialized on the issues of overrepresentation. I will review literature on the referral, assessment, and placement practices and procedures, parental involvement, mistakes in identification, overrepresentation of minorities and ELL students, and the implementation of RTI. The articles that compose this literature review range in dates, starting as early as 1968 and ending in 2015. This is important for this project as it shows the way special education practices have evolved for the past 47 years and the changes that have been implemented.

2.1 Overview of Special Education: Zooming in to Canada

This first section will focus on literature that addresses issues schools are facing when it comes to the implementation of legal documents, such as individualized education plans (IEPs). As well, this section will begin to look at factors that may lead to inconsistencies when identifying students as exceptional.

2.1.1 Individualized Education Plan: Student and parent contributions. One of the most criticized aspects of the IEPs is the lack of student and parental involvement in the process. The majority of students have minimal to zero contribution when it comes to putting together their IEP’s (Dworet & Bennett, 2002; Myers & Eisenman, 2005). Some argue that this is due to
the students’ age or inability to understand their ‘condition’ (Myers & Eisenman, 2005). Therefore, the assessment and placement team consist of educators and parents to create the IEP (Myers & Eisenman, 2005). Many educators and psychologists give emphasis to the importance of having strong parent-educator collaboration to ensure that the most effective educational program is created (Fish, 2008). Many school boards see parents as partners and as a crucial component to the development of the IEP (Drasgow et al., 2001; Fish, 2008; Johns, Crowley, & Guetzloe, 2002). For that reason, they set regulations in place to ensure that parents are as involved as possible (Fish, 2008). However, although there is a lack of recent literature and data on parental involvement in the IEP process, the studies that do exist suggest that parents feel alienated during the IEP process because educators have the most influence in decision-making (Fish, 2008; Vaughn, Bos, Harrell, & Lasky, 1988). This can be especially true of parents who come from low socioeconomic status and minority groups (Fish, 2008; Kalyanpur, Harry, & Skrtic, 2000). Many parents report that the initial IEP meeting was confusing, traumatic and complicated as they did not understand their child(ren)’s condition and the proper way of meeting their academic needs (Fish, 2008; 2006; Fitzgerald & Watkins, 2006; Stoner et al., 2005). In such cases, parents may let educators make all the calls as they do not feel prepared to make decisions regarding their child’s educational needs (Lytle & Bordin, 2001). Even the parents who feel more prepared and have a greater understanding of their child’s needs, can be easily persuaded by educators and eventually lose trust in the special education program (Fish 2008, Stoner et al., 2005). Fish (2008) suggest that a simple way of improving the educator-parent relationship is by thoroughly explaining their rights as parents, their child’s condition and the resources and services their child needs. Educators should be making the effort to get parents
involved in every step of the IEP process, especially because no one knows a child better than their parent(s) (Goodall & Bruder, 1986).

2.1.2 Inconsistencies in identifying exceptional students in Canada. In Canada, every Ministry of Education creates their own criteria to determine a student’s “type” of exceptionality (Dworet & Bennett, 2002). This type of autonomy creates inconsistencies across the nation, making it hard to find the same type of education or resources in the different provinces and territories (Dworet & Bennett, 2002). In Ontario, the Ministry of Education identified five main exceptional categories, with multiple subcategories, such as, intellectual, communication, physical, behavioural and multiple (Dworet & Bennett, 2002). However, other places like the Northwest Territories do not have categories identifying what constitutes an exceptionality as they believe in providing support services to exceptional students regardless of their needs (Dworet & Bennett, 2002). In other words, they may not believe that labeling (as it can actually be damaging to the student) is necessary for students to receive services and funding (Dworet & Bennett, 2002). On the other hand, Ontario see categories as necessary for students to receive services that target their specific need (Dworet & Bennett, 2002). The process of labelling in the identification process becomes an issue when a student moves provinces. In many cases when moving from one place to the next, a student could change categories and qualify for different services and different levels of funding (Dworet & Bennett, 2002). In a worst case scenario, a student identified as exceptional in one jurisdiction could potentially lose his identification in another jurisdiction (Dworet & Bennett, 2002).

Although the inconsistencies in policy making across the provinces and territories can potentially create serious issues, this form of autonomy may be the best model for Canada (Dworet & Bennett, 2002). Canada’s geographic and ethnic diversity makes it difficult to create
a single policy applicable to the entire nation (Dworet & Bennett, 2002). Many provinces and territories have a hard time finding and retaining qualified teachers, psychologist and support personnel to help run the special education program (Dworet & Bennett, 2002). At the same time, it can be a challenge finding the right resources and assessment tools to meet the needs of Canada’s diverse population (Dworet & Bennett, 2002). Despite all the challenges and differences nation-wide, the special education programs put in place by the different jurisdictions is proof that Canada remains committed to providing the best service to all students (Dworet & Bennett, 2002).

2.2 Referral: Teacher Efficacy

Teachers have a great responsibility when it comes to referring students to the special education program (Soodak & Podell, 1993). Early studies such as that done by Aglozzine, Christenson, & Ysseldyke (1982) suggest that teacher referrals more often than not lead to the placement of the student into the special education program. So the important question this raises is, what criteria do teachers use when referring students into the special education program? Studies done in the 1980s brought to light the fact that there was not a single model in place that regulated the criteria used to refer and identify students into the special education program or that could encapsulate the complexity of the process of referring students (Aglozzine et al., 1982; Nisbett & Ross, 1980). Some of the studies done around this same time suggested teacher efficacy is one of the most important factors influencing the decision to refer a student into the special education program (Dembo & Gobson, 1985). An example of this can be when deciding whether to refer a difficult-to-teach student (Soodak & Podell, 1993). In this case, teachers who believe that their teaching cannot reach or influence this student will be more compelled to refer a student into special education (Bandura, 1982; Soodak & Podell, 1993). On the other hand, a
A teacher who is confident in their ability to influence a hard-to-teach student is more likely to rely on their resources and teaching methods to help the student overcome their academic barriers (Bendura, 1982; Soodak & Podell, 1993). Only after seeing no change will this teacher decide to refer the student into the special education program (Soodak & Podell, 1993).

The teacher efficacy referral model can be both positive and negative. On the one hand, teachers will be able to filter out poor behaviours (such as laziness and lack of motivation) from actual exceptionalities that require special education services (Soodak & Podell, 1993). On the other hand, if a teacher is too convinced that their teaching style can help a struggling student, then they run the risk of possibly missing serious learning disabilities (Soodak & Podell, 1993).

For a period of 10 years I found a relative gap in the literature on this topic. However, in the mid 2000s Dunn (2006) led a study that focused on the teachers’ referral criteria for special education services. In this study, Dunn focuses on the test results of Ontario students on both national and international levels collected in previous years. Such studies made it clear that Ontario was headed for crisis as students were not academically prepared at the time of graduation. Therefore, it was crucial to understand the criteria teachers were using when referring students. Although some time had passed, teachers were still using practices from the 80s to determine whether or not a student should be referred. Teachers were still “reading students” performance, attitude, behaviour, and demeanour to determine if action was to be taken (Dunn, 2006; see also Algozzine et al., 1983). A new phenomenon, however, was emerging in the 2000s. Researchers were finding that teachers often referred students who came from unstable homes, students who were ELL, or students who lived in poverty (Caram, 2001; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001).
Although most researchers believe the inconsistency of referral criteria to be problematic, others believe that giving teachers the responsibility and power of referring students is the best approach. If teachers were not allowed to use their own judgement when referring student, then they would be forced to take a number of standardized tests that could yield more problematic results (Cullen & Shaw, 2000). The autonomy given to teachers allows them to make a global and educated assessment of students’ overall performance (not simply academic) (Cullen & Shaw, 2000). Cullen and Shaw were not alone on this idea, other researchers found in their studies that teachers had the potential to accurately predict students who required a special education referral (Kohler, 2001; Fu 1995). Furthermore, teachers would only make a referral based on significant persistent problems in the classroom (Cullen & Shaw, 2000). Certain findings in Dunn’s (2006) study support such claims. Dunn showed that many teachers were basing their criteria on the students’ inability to perform at a basic level, students consistently asking for assistance and needing directions to be repeated, and inattentiveness. In most cases, such students referred were eventually placed in the special education program or received special education services.

2.3 RTI: Response-to-Intervention Model

The RTI model it not a model applied to a student who is not excelling. Instead, teachers use the RTI model to begin weaving out the students who are meeting expectations and those who are not. To make this model practical, it was divided into three tiers. In the first tier general education teachers are expected to teach their class in a research-based manner (Fuchs, Mock, Morgan, & Young, 2003). In this first step, teachers complete a scanning of their class, of which 80% of students should be able to respond to (Dunn, Cole, & Estrada, 2009). In the second tier, the teacher alternates and focuses their attention on the 15%-20% of students who did not meet
the curriculum expectations. This step is intense and usually requires the teacher to do additional work. If after the intensive intervention students still do not respond, it is likely that there is an underlying learning disability. Roughly 5% of the 20% move on to tier three. In this tier the teacher refers the student to get a formal assessment (Dunn et al., 2009; see also Fuchs et al., 2003).

This three tiered model was introduced in schools across the United States and Canada for a number of reasons, but the most important one (to this study also) was to help teachers monitor the referral process and eliminate subjectivity (Dunn et al., 2009; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007). With RTI, teachers could not simply base their referral on assumptions, they would need assessment data to support their referral (Dunn et al., 2009).

2.3.1 RTI: Is it meeting expectations? When analyzing whether RTI has made a difference or not, it is difficult to simply pick one side or the other. Studies have explored both sides of the argument and presented valid points to support each side. Originally, the RTI model was meant to help teachers make the referral process easier by providing a straightforward framework to follow (Gersten & Dimino, 2006). However, not all teachers report understanding how to adequately apply research-based components into the classroom so that RTI can work (Dunn et al., 2009). Other teachers have been found to struggle with the implementation of the three-tier system while teaching culturally relevant material and targeting curriculum expectation (Fuchs & Vaughan, 2012). This is partly due to the lack of resources in certain schools and the lack of professional development programs to help train teachers (Fuchs & Vaughan, 2012). Therefore, teachers who have received the appropriate training and have access to the needed resources are more likely to be successful when implementing RTI (Fuchs & Vaughan, 2012).
Studies done on the progress made by RTI suggest that it has indeed helped to improve the identification process for students facing math and reading difficulties (Fuchs & Fuchs 2007). Compton et al., (2012) strongly believe that tier 2 of the RTI model is making the biggest difference when it comes to helping students with learning disabilities. The intensive intervention of the second tier of the RTI model allows teachers to help student before is too late (Compton et al., 2012). Some teachers may only come to realize that a student is in need of help when they are already failing the course (Fuchs & Fuchs 2007). This tier can help prevent students from receiving help too late (Fuchs & Fuchs 2007).

The second area in which significant progress has been made is in progress monitoring. In the past, there was a lack of record keeping when a students transitioned from one year to the next (Fuchs & Vaughan, 2012). With teachers being required to keep records of the student’s progress and the type of intervention they have received, other teachers are able to access that information when needed (Fuchs & Vaughan, 2012). This has allowed teachers to pick up where the previous teacher left off but most importantly it helps them see what has worked and what needs to be adjusted (Fuchs & Vaughan, 2012). Program monitoring has also helped schools save money in intervention programs and resources on students who are falsely identified (Compton et al., 2010; Fuchs & Vaughan, 2012). Before RTI, universal screening frequently led to the false identification of a number of students, which consequently led to the misuse of resources (Compton et al., 2006).

Although there are clear signs that RTI is making a difference in the education system, there are still a number of questions on how to best implement this model. Although a number of issues have been identified with RTI, the most relevant to this study is the used of research-based intervention to help decrease the number of students being referred. Literature on this topic
shows that for RTI to be able to work properly teachers must have a clear understanding of how to make effective and affirmative decisions about their instruction (Fuchs & Vaughan, 2012; Harlacher, Walker & Sanford, 2010; Vaughan et al., 2009). However, many teachers seem to be struggling when it comes to determining how to differentiate their teaching and how to modify their intervention approach (Harlacher, Walker & Sanford, 2010). Teachers must also alter their teaching to be able to deal with students who are considered behavioural (Harlacher, Walker & Sanford, 2010). In other words, teachers need to plan lessons that target all styles of learning and is appropriate for the different types of behaviours. Researchers affirm that when this is done properly, RTI helps reduce the number of falsely identified students (Fuchs & Vaughan 2012; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007; Harlacher et al., 2010; Vaughan et al., 2009). Most importantly, it helps reduce the referral of minority students and English language learners into the special education program (VanDerHeyden, Witt, & Gilbertson, 2007). However, this notion only seems to be true in the early primary grades but not in the middle school grades (Fuchs & Vaughan, 2012; Vaughn, Linan-Thompson, & Hickman; 2003). Despite the fact that the number of referred minorities and ELL students has dropped in the last decade, they are still the most overrepresented groups in special education (Vaughan et al., 2009). What this suggests is that middle and intermediate grade teachers are having harder time implementing RTI and as a consequence some students have regressed in their learning (Vaughan et al., 2009).

Therefore, the literature that addresses these issues suggests that, in theory, RTI can be a useful model (Fuchs & Vaughan, 2012; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005; Fuchs et al., 2003; Harlacher et al., 2010; Garcia & Ortiz, 2006; Gersten & Dimino 2006; Ikeda, 2012). However, RTI is a model that is dependent of teachers being equipped with the right training and resources to implement it (Fuchs & Vaughan, 2012). In this case, RTI may only bring change to
those students who have well-prepared teachers. Even in that case, there is no guarantee that the student will continue to excel as they move on to the upper grades. This has caused students to be referred to the special education program in the middle school grades – especially students belonging to minority groups and students who are ELL (Fuchs & Vaughan, 2012).

2.4 Overrepresentation of Minorities and ELL Students in Special Education

All of the literature that focuses on the overrepresentation of minorities and ELL students does so by analyzing the various components of the special education program. The latter part of this literature review broke down the issues that influence the overrepresentation of certain groups into the special education program. This last section will explore some of the other issues researchers have found to be persistent within this topic.

Disproportionate placement refers to the overrepresentation of certain minority groups over others in program like special education (Gravious & Rosenfield, 2006). Studies done in the past show that minority students who do poorly academically most frequently tend to come from cultural groups that have been controlled by dominant groups (Gravious & Rosenfield, 2006; Gritzmacher & Gritzmacher, 2010) In such cases, these minority groups can develop a sense of inferiority and insecurity when interacting with the “dominant group” (Cummins, 1989; Gritzmacher & Gritzmacher, 2010). Therefore, students belonging to minority groups may question the value of their own culture and cultural identity to the point that they feel educationally disempowered (Cummins, 1989).

Although measures have been taken to regulate the issue of misidentification of students into the special education program, the overrepresentation of certain students is still a dominant issue (Garcia & Ortiz, 2006). A study (Hosp & Reschly, 2003) done in the United States shows that 60% to 80% of students in special education come from low-status background groups, such
as minority ethnic groups, non-Standard-English speaking groups, and non-middle class families. Dunn (1968) was the first to conduct a research that identified issues of overrepresentation in the special education program. In his study, Dunn (1968) was calling for the attention of educators to address the issues of disproportionate number of minority students placed in special education. His findings were later endorsed and supported by the findings of other research project in the years to come (Artiles & Trent, 1994). Studies (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Dunn, 1968; Garcia & Ortiz, 2006; Hosp & Reschly, 2003) done from 1968 until the mid 2000s proof that the overrepresentation of minorities has not been corrected although attempts have been made. The following subheading will briefly overview the three main groups overrepresented in the special education program: African Americans and Black Canadians, Indigenous and ELL students.

2.4.1 African Americans and Black Canadians

One of the most overrepresented minority groups in special education are African Americans in the United States and Black Canadians in Canada (Patton, 1998). Although attempts have been made to address this issue, studies (Patton, 1998) show that today African American students are still twice as likely to be referred and placed into the special education program over Caucasian students (Patton, 1998). Studies have also shown that black males are most likely to be referred, identified and placed into the special education program over females (Patton, 1998). Many of the male-students who are referred are identified as behavioural or multiple (Patton, 1998), meaning that teachers still look at the behaviour and demeanour of the student to determine if he should be referred or not. Studies consistently show that if a teacher perceives a student as not fitting into the norms of the school, then they believe that to be enough ground to base a referral (Patton, 1998). In this case, students placed early into the special education program fail to receive consistent quality education that could help them be successful
in the future (Patton, 1998). This is not to suggest that the special education provides poor quality of education, but rather that the focus may be on modified curricula and lower expectations (Markowits, Garcia, & Eichelberger, 1997; Patton, 1998;). For that reason, students may miss essential general education academic and social curricula which lessens their probability of wanting to acquire post secondary education (Patton, 1998).

Artiles et al., (2002) suggests that the placement of colour students in special education programs is one of the most complex issues entering the new millennium. The factors influencing overrepresentation are complex and at times interconnected. Such factors include things such as, institutional discrimination, over-referrals, over identification and socioeconomic issues (Artiles, et al., 2002; O’connor & Fernadez, 2006)). Furthermore, studies (Artiles, et al., 2002; O’Connor & Fernadez, 2006; Park, Turnbull, & Turnbull, 2002) show that factors such as poverty can contribute, both directly and indirectly, to poor performance in school and eventually lead to school failure. This in turn, can lead to the over-identification and essentially to the overrepresentation of minority groups. The This particular factor affects black Canadians and African Americans as they tend to higher poverty rates than other groups (O’connor & Fernadez, 2006; Park, Turnbull, & Turnbull, 2002).

Although it is difficult to pin point the exact cause of this issue, a study suggest that issue still lies in the identification and referral process (Artiles, et al., 2002; Patton, 1998). Even with the implementation of RTI, ultimately, teachers may still have the ability to refer a student who they believe is not complying with societal norms or meeting curriculum expectations. The conversation on this topic has not change much in the past two decades (Artiles, et al., 2002; Patton, 1998).
2.4.2 Indigenous communities. In Canada, the overrepresentation of black students is not as dominant as in the United States, although it is still a persistent issue. In Canada, the most overrepresented students in the special education program are students of Indigenous communities. Canadians researchers for the past 30 years have been analyzing the factors enlarging the gap between Indigenous communities and other Canadians (Greflund et al., 2014). One of their main area of focus in the educational system and the issues students face in schools. Although Indigenous students experience discrimination in public sectors like the education system, it is important to note that students with Indian Act status tend to have more academic disparities than students without status (Greflund et al., 2014). Studies done in the past 5 year show that Status-Indigenous students are four times more likely to receive an identification in the behavioural category and the multiple category (Greflund et al., 2014) (these vary slightly from province to province).

When looking at the issue of the overrepresentation of Indigenous students in the special education program, it is important to look at other factors that play a key role such as intergenerational trauma, poverty, and disproportionate school discipline practices (Greflund et al., 2014). When looking at these factors, it is also important to understand the history behind them. For example, research has shown that both parents and children have a serious mistrust of the education system due to the implementation of residential schools (Greflund et al., 2014; Smith, Varcoe, & Edwards, 2005). Indigenous l communities may still view schools as a foreign and unwelcoming place that is structured by institutional racism (Varcoe, & Edwards, 2005).

Teachers who are not familiarized with the cultures of different Indigenous communities can misread cultural characteristics as a call for intervention (Garcia & Malkin, 1993). Indigenous students who come from more traditional families (mostly status Indian) may display
cultural characteristics that can affect their success in the public school system (Gritzmann & Gritzmann, 2010). For example, some Indigenous students may be less verbal, less competitive, and they may not look at teachers and administrators in the eye (Gritzmann & Gritzmann, 2010). When you take these character traits out of context they can make it seem as though a student has serious problems to be addressed (Gritzmann & Gritzmann, 2010). In addition to this, the majority of Indigenous students have parents or family members who attended residential schools and therefore have a negative view of school (Gritzmann & Gritzmann, 2010). For that reason, many parents do not value Western education and therefore do not stress its importance to their children (Gritzmann & Gritzmann, 2010).

Although some of the factors mentioned above can contribute to learning disabilities and mental health problems, research (Greflund et al., 2014) has shown that Indigenous students are often referred to the special education program due to behavioural issues. In other words, even when a student does not show signs of having a cognitive or a learning disability, if their behaviours falls outside of the norm, it can be basis enough for a referral (Greflund et al., 2014). Teachers may put a lot of emphasis on deviant and acceptable behaviour in schools. Studies such as the one done by Krezmien et al., (2006) support the latter argument by showing that Indigenous students are 1.8 times more likely to be suspended than Caucasian students.

When Indigenous students are referred to the special education program teachers tend to use pedagogy to implement RTI and modes of assessment that are not culturally relevant to the students. The issue with this is that they may use methods that are not culturally responsive, so Indigenous students may be less likely to respond to intervention (Gritzmann & Gritzmann, 2010). One of the suggestions Gritzmann and Gritzmann (2010) make is that Elders or ‘Indian Education Directors’ become a consistent part of the referral and assessment process.
This way they can help with the various cultural differences and they can also help parents become active participants of the process (Gritzmacher & Gritzmacher, 2010).

Despite the fact that some schools have taken steps to improve this issue, Indigenous students are still the most overrepresented group in the special education program (in Canada). Studies (Gritzmacher & Gritzmacher, 2010) have shown that once, in this case, Indigenous students are referred, those who should not be placed in the special education program can still be identified as exceptional. This is mostly due to confusion when interpreting assessment results, lack of progress monitoring, lack of culturally relevant pedagogy and assessment procedures, and lack of involvement of Indigenous community members in the referral and assessment process. The recommendation given by many researchers to address this issue is essentially the same in that educators and school staff need to continue to educate themselves when it comes to the culture of Indigenous communities. Understanding regional cultural differences can help teachers better work with Indigenous students, thus reducing disproportionate placements (Gritzmacher & Gritzmacher, 2010).

2.4.3 English language learners. In places as multicultural and diverse as Canada, a large and growing number of students come from families that do not speak English as a first language (Orosco & O’Connor, 2013). Many ELL students who struggle academically – especially with reading-comprehension – tend to be referred to the special education program (Orosco & O’Connor, 2013). Research shows that when ELL students are referred and placed in the special education program at an early age, they remain the poorest readers in the education system in terms of decoding, word reading, and fluency (Swason, Orosco, Lussier, Gerber & Guzman-Orth, 2011). Studies (August & Siegel, 2006; Orosco & O’Connor, 2013; Saenz, Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005) also suggest that these students tend to display characteristics of inactive learners
who are unable to self-regulate their learning; therefore, they may remain poor students for the rest of their school years.

Unlike other places, Canada faces a bigger problem than the United States when it comes to teaching ELL students. Although there are large visible minority groups, most schools have a range of different cultures. Therefore, it makes it more challenging for a teacher to develop culturally relevant lessons that target all the various cultures and religions (Garcia & Ortiz, 2006). Therefore, when students begin to struggle and fall behind, teachers are encouraged to identify the difference between learning differences and learning disabilities (Hoover & Erickson, 2015; Garcia & Ortiz, 2006). Given this, researchers encourage teachers to educate themselves on the various cultures they are teaching (Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Garcia & Ortiz, 2006). By doing this, teachers will be able to recognize the difference between home and school culture and how one can impact the other (Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Garcia & Ortiz, 2006).

Cummins (1986) recognized the importance of teachers setting high expectations for all their students, regardless of their cultural, linguistics, economic and other characteristics. However, when teachers fail to do so, they may lack the ability and opportunity of designing accessible, inclusive and equitable learning environments for bicultural and bilingual students (Garcia & Ortiz, 2006).

All the factors mentioned above can play a key role in the disproportionate representation of ELL students in special education. Much of the research done in the past and in recent years shows that ELL students who are unresponsive to intensive and alternative instructional interventions over time become the most likely candidates for special education (Garcia & Ortiz, 2006; Ortiz, 2002). The fact that students are unresponsive does not automatically suggest that they are exceptional students, but instead that the teaching and assessment approaches may not
be culturally sensitive (Garcia & Ortiz, 2006). Even when using RTI, if teachers and educators do not use culturally and linguistic responsive material, they run the risk of falsely identifying students (Vaughan & Fuchs, 2003).

This section explores that factors that teachers need to keep in mind when working with ELL students. For example, teachers need to consider the students’ sociocultural, linguistic, racial/ethnic, and other relevant background characteristics at every step of the referral and assessment process (Ortiz, 2002). Studies (Hoover & Erickson, 2015; Garcia & Ortiz, 2006; Ortiz, 2002) have shown that prevention and early intervention efforts can significantly improve the academic achievements of culturally and linguistically diverse students (In many cases, when early intervention is done successfully and the cultural and linguistic needs of students are met, students are able to respond academically without the need of special education services (Hoover & Erickson, 2015; Garcia & Ortiz, 2006).

2.5 Conclusion

The literature reviewed in this chapter explored the issue of overrepresentation of minorities and ELL students in special education programs. Studies show that this is not an issue only in Ontario, but it is an issue in other Canadian provinces and in the United States. Although not all articles presented the same findings, there were three factors in common. In first place, all the articles looked at other issues within special education programs that serve as a catalyst to the issue of overrepresentation of minorities. For example, studies looked at lack of teacher training, lack of resources, lack of culturally relevant pedagogy, inaccurate referrals, inconsistencies across provinces, and the inconsistent implementation of the RTI model. Depending on the specific minority group researchers focused on, some factors were found more prominent than others. The second factor most studies have in common was the analysis of how this issue has
changed over the years. Most researchers agree that although the number of overrepresented minority students has slightly improved, it has not made the expected progress in the past 47 years. They emphasize that although new models, legislation and policies have been implemented, the conversation in the literature regarding this issue has not changed much. By looking at this issue through a historical lens, researchers are calling for drastic changes in the education system to address the issue of overrepresentation. Lastly, most researchers acknowledged that educators have made an attempt to address the issue of overrepresentation by implementing models and policies to help regulate the referral and intervention process.

At the end of my study, my findings will compliment previous literature that focuses on practices that may be causing overrepresentation of minorities in the special education program. In particular, my study will focus on teachers’ perception of the most current issues affecting the identification, referral and assessment process. As well, it will look at teachers’ perceptions of possible outside factors, beyond the school boundaries, that could also be having a profound effect on the issue of overrepresentation.
Chapter 3 – Methodology

3.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I will explain my research methods and the importance of using a qualitative approach to conduct my study. I will then review the tools that I will be using during the data collection process and how I plan to organize, record and analyse the data gathered. In this chapter, I will also be introducing my participants and how I was able to find them. Further, I will give an overview of my sampling criteria and sampling procedure and I will conclude the section by providing a brief bio of the participants. I will then give an overview of the ethical review procedures of my study by highlighting potential issues, how I will be addressing them, and why they matter. Following this, I will review the limitations and strengths I will face when conducting my research and the influence they had on my overall study.

3.1 Research Approach & Procedures

This study was conducted using a qualitative approach, with semi-structured and face-to-face interviews while at the same time including a literature review. In the field of research methodology, for quite some time, there has been an ongoing debate on the effectiveness of qualitative studies over quantitative. To understand the conflict between the two research approaches, it is crucial to understand the meaning of a qualitative approach and how it came to be. Although there are many definitions of qualitative research, a rather simple one is provided by Strauss and Corbin (1990), in which they explain it as “research that produces findings that are not arrived at by means of statistical procedure or other means of quantification” (p. 8). Others like Anderson (1987) describe qualitative research as a paradigm which is mostly focused on inductive, interpretive methods applied to the everyday world “which is seen as subjective and socially created” (p. 18) These definitions still stand today. In fact, many researchers prefer
the qualitative approach over quantitative because it allows for a more real personal way of studying others (Hatch, 2002). It also allows the researchers to use a “slice-of-life” approach, in which they are able to use personal accounts and ordinary language to guide their study and provide data (Hatch, 2002). On the other hand, quantitative research often focuses on a deductive approach. In this case, the researcher first identifies the theory, develops a hypothesis and then tests the hypothesis with the data collected, which either confirms it or disproves it (Barczak, 2015). As Hatch (2002) explains, qualitative research first aims to understand the perspective of their participants and the context in which they are situated.

When overviewing the main focus of both qualitative and quantitative research the question then becomes, is one better than the other? This is a question that I find rather difficult to answer because I believe that both studies have their pros and cons. Walsh (2011) thoroughly explains the blurring between both approaches. He explains that many qualitative studies use quantification and quantitative methods to make judgements, collect and analyze data. He further explains that, with the progression of time, the conversation on qualitative vs. quantitative research has gone beyond “hard vs. soft and rigorous vs. less rigorous” (p. 10). Therefore, it is difficult to say that one approach is better than the other. In the end, a methodological approach is chosen based on the type of study the researcher is trying to conduct.

Keeping the latter in mind, it is also important to understand the challenges that come with conducting a qualitative study. Unlike quantitative studies, qualitative studies need to thoroughly explain the choice of their participants, the process of data collection and the findings (Barczak, 2015). Also, the data collected needs to be presented in such a way that the readers understand and can trust it (Barczak, 2015). In other words, we need to present our work in a
way that is credible, that includes detailed information and that explores literature without losing
focus on our research question.

After analyzing literature and extensively thinking about my research purpose and
questions, a qualitative research method is the best choice for my topic. In my study, I will be
asking teachers about their thoughts and experiences with teaching students in the special
education program who may be overrepresented due to false identification. It is important for the
participants of this study to be able to talk freely so that they feel comfortable talking about a
highly sensitive issue.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

In qualitative research, there are a number of ways to collect data. For the purpose of this
study the main tool for collecting data will be a semi-structured interview protocol. In
quantitative studies interviews can be conducted in various ways and each approach has its
benefits and its challenges. For example, interviews can be done formally, informally, or semi-
structured (Linchtman, 2013). Such interviews can be done face-to-face or via a media device
with each participant or in focus groups (Linchtman, 2013). Also, there are a number of ways to
formulate the interview protocol; a protocol may have a combination of open- and close-ended
questions. Depending on the purpose of the study, an interview protocol may have a few
question or an extensive number of questions. Either way, the researchers must be careful not to
create leading, complex, or double-barreled questions (a question that touches upon multiple
topics or issues) (Linchtman, 2013).

When conducting a qualitative study, studies (Barriball & While, 1994; Hatch, 2002;
Lichtman, 2013) have shown that the semi-structured interview protocol has benefits when used
properly. They are structured in the sense that they researcher plans a number of questions
beforehand, the researcher is in charge of leading the interviews and there is a set time and place established for the interview (Hatch, 2002). They are also semi-structured because although they come with planned questions, an interviewer using a semi-structured protocol is willing to follow the stream of the conversation (Hatch, 2002). By doing this, the researcher focuses on going in depth and “to go deeply in the understanding the background of the informants” (Hatch, 2002, p. 94). Lichtman (2013) further explains that a researcher using a semi-structured interview is willing to modify the interview plan as needed. For that reason, interviews are more organic and answer may vary from participant to participant. Barriball and While (1994) identify two benefits of using semi-structured interview. First, this type of interview is well suited for exploring in depth the perception and opinions of the participants. Especially when discussing topics that are sensitive and required more information for the clarification of answers (Barriball & While, 1994). Second, the researcher will expect to get a number of different answers due to the “varied professional, educational and personal histories of the sample group” (Barriball & While, 1994, p. 330). Most importantly, when this occurs, the researcher can be sure that this occurred because of the differences between the participants, and not because of the questions beings asked (Barriball & While, 1994).

For my study, I am interesting in knowing how teachers perceive the special education program, and their experience using models such as RTI, as well as their experience identifying and referring students into the special education program. I am also interested in understanding what type of factors may be causing the overrepresentation of minority students in special education programs. The best way of achieving my goal is by conducting semi-structured interviews. This approach will help me better understand my participants and their thoughts and feelings towards my research topic. My interview guide in divided into four sections. The first
section focuses on the background information of the participants. The second sections looks at teachers perception of possible issues within the special education program. The third section focuses on teachers’ experience teaching special education and or working with students receiving special education services. The last section looks at possible steps than can be taken in the future.

### 3.3 Participants

In qualitative studies, the participants are more than just anonymous objects to be measured and observed (Linchtman, 2013). In this case, the participants are seeing as informants or co-researchers; they are the experts on the topic and the ones who can provide insight to the issue being studied (Linchtman, 2013). Hatch (2002) describes the participants as the ultimate gatekeepers. He believes that they determine to what extend the researcher will have access to the information aspire. For the study to be effective, participants should be carefully chosen so that they can be of value to the study.

#### 3.3.1 Sampling Criteria: Is there an overrepresentation of minority students?

The following criteria will be implemented when choosing the participants for this study:

1. Teachers will have experience working with students with identified Special Education needs.
2. Teachers must have experience teaching for minimum five years.
3. Teachers must have experience working with ELL students.
4. Teachers must be working in the Greater Toronto Area at the time of the interview.

Hatch (2002) explains that the kind of research approach chosen to conduct the study will affect the participant selection criteria. In my case, the teachers I interview must have some experience working with students with special education needs. The reason why I am looking for
teachers with minimum 5 years of experience is because they need to be exposed to the school system long enough to see a pattern in the special education program.

3.3.2 Sampling Procedures/Recruitment

In regards to how many participants should be chosen to participate in the study, Hatch (2002) answers this question by simply stating “it depends.” He further explains that it depends on the purpose of the study, what type of study is planned, and what type of questions they study aims to answer (Hatch, 2002). Once that is identified, then a sampling plan and procedure can be set in place.

Patton lists over 14 strategies that can be employed when trying to find a purposeful sampling strategy. Of all the ones mentioned, the 4 that stand out to me the most are convenience, critical case and snowball examples (Patton, 1990). Convenience sample focuses on choosing subjects based on their proximity to the researcher, critical case focuses on choosing small cases that are likely important to the study, and snowball examples is focuses on finding subjects based on their acquaintances (Patton, 1990). However, before choosing a sampling method it is important to keep in mind the size of this study. Therefore, I will most likely use the convenience and snowball sampling methods. Hatch (2002) argues that qualitative researchers should not focus solely on announcing their sampling method, but instead on being able to justify the inclusion of those being interviewed. The reason I believe this to be important is because one may be set in using a specific sampling strategy, but the course of the study may create room for a completely different strategy to develop that can benefit our study. Hatch further explains that we should not be picking sampling strategies that are opportune for us, but instead we should be going out of our way to find participants that will add value to our study. In this same regard, both Hatch (2002) and Patton (1990) argue that convenience samples are “the most common and
least desirable” (p. 50). In many cases, researchers find people who they are familiar with, who they know are familiar with the topic, and are easy to access (Hatch, 2002). On that account, I chose to continue with convenience samples, not because of my own convenience, but because of the scope of this particular study.

I recruited my participants by reaching out to specific high schools in the GTA. I reached out to a number of schools; some which I had volunteered and done my placement. I reached out to these schools via email and awaited for a response. While reaching out to teachers I explained the nature of my study and its focus. After a while, two teachers from two different districts replied to my email and were willing to participate in my study.

3.3.3 Participants Bios

For this study, two teachers were selected to participate. Both participants have been given pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. The first participant, Greg, is special education teacher who has been teaching for close to 30 years. At the moment, Greg works in a high school in the GTA teaching courses such as learning strategies, essentials math and English, amongst other courses. Greg has worked in special education departments since he first began his career as a teacher. The second participant is Aaron. Aaron began his journey as an educator first as a Child and Youth Worker, until a few years later when he decided to become a teacher. Aaron has been teaching for several years in an elementary school in the GTA. Aaron’s unique career path has allowed him to work with children from various ages, grades, and backgrounds.

3.4 Data Analysis

In a qualitative research, it is important to remember that data does not only have to be numbers; rather, data can also be in the form of words and visuals (Lichtman, 2013). It is important to understand that data does not generate theory. Rather, “data describe the empirical
patterns observed, while theory explains why empirical patterns are observed or expected” (Shah & Corley, 2006, p. 1822). This is important, because we, as researchers, may already have an opinion about the theory we are trying to explore, so we need to be careful that the data collected prove or disproves a theory, but it does not create it.

Once the data is collected, it is then analyzed in a way that codes can emerge. Saldana (1988, Pg, 33) explains that a code “in a qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing… or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data.” In a qualitative study, codes allow the researchers to symbolize or translate data. (Saldana, 1988). In doing so, a researcher then begins to use coding to identify emerging patterns (Saldana, 1988). These patterns can be identified through a number of different forms of coding. For example, attribute coding, descriptive coding, in vivo coding and values codes.

Once codes are identified in data, they can then be synthesized and divided into categories. Saldana (1988) explains that although in qualitative research there is no algorithm or formula to calculate the words and their meaning, categorizing helps consolidate the meaning of such codes. In such case, a category becomes a type of label or heading for codes that have similar meaning. When a category is rather large, subcategories can also be created to help it be more specific (Saldana, 1988).

Once the categories have been identified, they help form themes. Given (2008, pg, 248) describes themes as “basic building block of inductive approaches to qualitative … research and are derived from the lifeworlds of research participants through the process of coding.” The emergence of themes allows researchers to make substantive connections, identify patterns and at times develop theories (Given, 2008).
In qualitative research focuses on the information gathered through the interviews (or other data collection tools). On the other hand, quantitative research focuses on following a strict pattern of data collection followed by data analysis (Lichtman, 2013). In qualitative research, to be able to analyse the data collected, it is important to understand the belief system, their culture, or context of their background (Lichtman, 2013).

I analyzed my data by first looking at words or patterns that caught my attention. I proceeded by coding the information depending on its relevance and and type of code. I then looked for similarities between my participants and began to create categories that grouped together the codes that were important to my research questions. Lastly, I used the categories to identify emerging themes in data that identified teachers’ perception of factors that are possibly causing overrepresentation in special education.

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

Ethics is an important part of any research study, whether it is something we keep in mind throughout the entire process, or it is something we need to keep reminding ourselves to be conscientious about (Lichtman, 2013). As researchers, we constantly need to be questioning reflecting and critiquing the ethical decisions we have made throughout the study (Tracy, 2013). When thinking about potential ethical dilemmas, there are obvious things that may stand out to us, but there are other smaller things we should also keep in mind. For example, we may want to ask ourselves, “is written informed consent appropriate if participants view such consent as bureaucratic, unnatural, repressive, or intrusive” (Tracy, 2013, p. 74) Furthermore, pertaining to qualitative research it is also important to remember that ethics of care is important as it values respect, dignity, and connectedness between researcher and researched, and between researchers and the communities they live and work with (Tracy, 2013). This is particularly important for us
grad students hoping to work as teachers in the communities that we might be researching. It is crucial to maintain good relationship with both of our participants and the community in which they are situated.

Although there are standards set in place to help ensure the safety and comfort of the participants, ethical obligations are much more complex than that (Tracy, 2013). There may be cases in which an action that is permissible within the studies regulations and standards may still seem inappropriate for a participant and we should view it as so (Tracy, 2013). In my case, I will be asking teachers questions that may suggest that certain teachers who mislabel and misplace minority students into the Special Education program may have racist or ignorant tendencies. In the literature I review in chapter two it suggested, time and time again, that many teachers who label students as needing Special Need services do not understand how a student’s culture, family background, and socioeconomic status may affect their ability to learn the same way as other students. Nonetheless, that is not to suggest that because they learn differently that they have an actual learning or cognitive disability that would deem them exceptional pupils. The issue of misrepresentation of minorities and ELL students is suggested to stem from the general teachers’ classroom, so I must be careful not to suggest that certain teachers are racist, ignorant or incompetent.

A way to address such ethical issues by getting the informed consent of the participants. I will also explain them the purpose of the study and how literature supports and disclaims my hypothesis. I will also remind my participants that they have the right to pass on the questions that they do not want to answer. Also, when storing and using data, participants will be made aware that their answers will not be shared with anyone and their names will remain anonymous. All the data collected will be kept on a locked computer which only I will have access to. Lastly,
I will ensure that the participants know that they have the right to withdraw from the study at any point.

3.6 Methodological Strengths and Limitations

The use of qualitative research methods in a study has its strengths. As Tracy (2013) mentions, the use of qualitative research is a good way of studying context that a researcher may be curious about but never had a chance or a valid reason of exploring it. This is actually my case; issues within the Special Education program have always interested me, and although I have kept myself informed I never had the chance to study it in depth. Another strength of qualitative research is that it gives insight into cultural context or activities that may be missed in other forms of studies (Tracy, 2013). In this case, I will be able to not only look at culture created in Special Education programs but I will also be able to look at how the school culture affects students in Special Education. Lastly, doing a qualitative study can produce themes and theories that have the potential to provide insight about marginalized, stereotyped, or unknown populations (Tracy, 2013). This is particularly important for my study as it may raise deeper and more fundamental issues within the special education program that are influencing the overrepresentation of minorities and ELL students.

The limitations of the employed methodological approach revolves around the scope of this project. The guideline of the MTRP only suggest we interview two to five teachers, which limits the amount of data we can collect and analyse. This can, particularly be an issue if the teachers we interview are reluctant to share what is on their mind, and the researchers lack the time, practice, or sensitive sensitivity to help the participants express themselves (Hatch, 2002). Also, in this study we are only able to interview teachers, and we are not to interview parents and students. This can also serve as a limitation to my study as it would be of value to know and
understand the experiences and feelings of the students and parents who feel marginalized by the special education program.

3.7 Conclusion

In this chapter I explained the research methodology that is best suited for the purpose of my study. Under the first subheading I explained the value of using a qualitative approach. For example, qualitative research first aims to understand the perspective of their participants and the context in which they are situated, while quantitative studies are mostly interested in samples and subjects. Also, qualitative research allows for the researcher to take many different aspects into consideration when understanding the context in which their participants are situated. From there I offered an overview of the instrument of data collection, which in this case is a semi-structured interview protocol. In this section I was able to go over some of the values of using a semi-structured approach when interviewing the participants. I then reviewed the participants that I will be looking for and the criteria I will be using to determine if they are a good fit for this study. In the following subheading I explained my data analysis process. Following this, I reviewed the importance of keeping ethics in mind the entire duration of the study, and the importance of questioning, critiquing and reflecting on our ethical decisions. Lastly, I looked at the strengths and limitations of using a qualitative research approach in a study of such scope. In the next chapter I will reporting the findings of the research.
Chapter 4 – Research Findings

4.0 Introduction to the Chapter

In Chapter 1, I introduced my topic and research question by highlighting the purpose of the study and by providing the reasons that motivated me to partake in this research project. In Chapter 2, I reviewed the literature that already exists on my topic by analyzing multiple views and arguments related to my research question. Chapter 3 focused on the methodology that I used to conduct research for this project and I concluded by introducing the research participants. This chapter presents and discusses the findings that surfaced from the data gathered for this research project. In analyzing my data, I constantly looked back to my research question – what are teachers experiences and understanding of the identification and referral process into the special education program– to help drive my research and organize my data. In this chapter, connections are made between educators and their training, their experience, and other influential factors, while at the same time linking it back to Chapter’s 2 literature review. This chapter is organized into 4 four major themes:

1. Training, Misdiagnosis, Overrepresentation: Is There a Link?
2. Overrepresented Minority Groups
3. Parental Involvement
4. Results of overrepresentation

Each theme includes a number of subthemes that break down the research findings. I will first introduce each theme by giving a general overview. I will then provide detail and support it with hard evidence and I will end by presenting the significance of my findings within the context of existing literature.

4.1 Training, Misdiagnosis, Overrepresentation: Is There a Link?
Training is a key factor for educators to effectively assess, refer and work with exceptional students. Therefore, a lack of training can lead certain students to be misdiagnosed, which can then lead to overrepresentation in the special education program. In this section, I will first look at the difference between an educator being trained and understanding their field of work, followed by educator’s ability to bridge theory into practice, and lastly I will discuss the idea of training being coupled with personality.

4.1.1 **Training is futile without understanding.** When participants were asked if training plays a key role in minimizing the margin of error that leads to certain groups being overrepresented, they both mentioned the idea of “understanding” as a key component of training that many educators overlook. The participants believed that an educators’ inability to understand the community and students they work with, can lead to misunderstandings which can result in misdiagnosis.

While exploring the idea of understanding, Aaron gave an example of the importance of getting to know the community and students one is working with:

> Now I am part of the mobile CYW program, which means that I work with specific students in various schools. This experience has shown me the importance of getting to know the students, the community and the barriers they face within that community.

Aaron later explained that making this a habit has helped him understand his students much better: “that is how … [he] can give them the help they actually need, not what [he] think[s] they need.”

Greg had similar sentiments to that of Aaron; he too stated that training means nothing if an educator is unable to understand the people they are working with. To further his point, Greg
relayed his experience of working with a student who was so behind for his grade level that in the end his teacher failed him:

So one day he told me how upset he was that all his friends were in gr 3 and he was still in gr 2 … then he said something that put everything into perspective – he said… “my mom works two jobs, she’s never home so she can never help me with my homework and even when she is home she doesn’t really know how to help me, and school is boring anyways, I don’t like it!” So then it clicked, how did we expect him all of the sudden to respond to a tutor or after school program if he was not accustomed to this… but we assumed he was. And then on top of that, we take him out of a recreational after school program, to put him on academic reinforcement program and we expected him to react to it. See that made me feel guilty, we did not understand him or his world and we assumed we knew what was right for him. Had I known what I knew a year later, I would have fought harder to not have him failed.

This quote is important because it shows how taking the time to understand students will allow teachers to paint a complete picture. In doing so, teachers can better identify the factors creating challenges for students. Both Aaron’s and Greg’s experiences are significant because they reinforce the idea that no matter how much training educators receive, if they do not understand the community and people they work with, it can make it difficult to find ways to effectively help students within those communities. Part of understanding the community involves understanding the factors that are affecting that community. Failure to do so may lead to the misdiagnosis of a number of students facing the same or similar issues, which in turn can lead to overrepresentation in special education.
Artiles et al.’s (2002) study on the over identification of students of colour in special education show that it is important to understand the factors that are affecting specific communities. For example, poverty can, directly or indirectly, lead to student failure, which in turn leads to students’ referral into special education. This study converges with the comments of the participants. Had Greg and other teachers and administrators understood the factors affecting the second grader, they could have avoided failing him and placing him in special education. Therefore, this shows the importance taking the time to be critical about the factors that could be directly or indirectly affecting students.

4.1.2 Bridging theory into practice. In the process of identification and referral, teachers are often trained to identify signs indicating that a student may be at risk. My participants believe that one of the hardest bridges for educators to cross is that of theory to practice, in particular related to the referral process. During the interview Greg mentioned that after years of teaching, it is still difficult to apply new theories and pedagogical practices into the classroom. When the participants were asked why certain teachers may have a hard time bridging theory into practice Aaron first stated that, “some teachers are really black and white” and for that reason “they follow theories to the T.” Therefore, he argued that it is hard to create strong practices when teachers only stick to theories. He then compared theories to cars, he explained:

I see theories like a car – they loose value the minute they leave the dealership… they are important, and fancy and they definitely get us somewhere… but meanwhile there is a new car [theory] being developed that is better and fancier … so we need to be open minded and create a teaching practice that is supported by theory and not driven by it…
Similarly, Greg argues that educators need to be “reflective teachers” to be able to identify when a theory needs to be updated or simply “done away with.” In his view, this can help teachers stay relevant and up to date. Greg later tied this back to the issue of overrepresentation by explaining that the process of identification, referral, assessment and placement into the special education program has changed a number times in the past few decades. He further opined that the way educators see exceptionalities has not only changed “significantly, throughout time” but “the location of where one teaches [school board, province, etc.] also determines what theories and practices are appropriate to use.” Therefore, it is essential for educators to find effective ways to turn theories into practice and at the same time be able to identify when a theory needs to be replaced and new practices need to be implemented.

Soodak and Podell (1993) conducted a qualitative study that focused on teacher efficacy and student problem as factors in special education. Their findings suggest that teacher efficacy is one of the most important elements influencing the decisions to refer a student into the special education program. Therefore, they argue that teachers who believe that their teaching cannot reach or influence this student may be more compelled to refer a student into special education. On the other hand, a teacher who is confident in their ability to influence a hard-to-teach student is more likely to rely on their resources and teaching methods to help the student overcome their academic barriers (Soodak & Podell, 1993). Although this research does not make explicit mention of theory being bridged into practice, it connects to this study as it shows that teacher efficacy plays an essential role when implementing effective classroom practices. More importantly, it also allows teachers to be more comfortable with the process of identification and referral.
4.2 Identifying Overrepresented Minority Groups

This theme focuses teacher’s perception on groups that seem to be overrepresented in special education and explores the factors that may be contributing to this issue. Although there are many factors that directly or indirectly cause students to be placed in special education, there are a number of students within special education who, alongside their exceptionalities, also live in poverty, face racism and discrimination, and come from unstable homes. This section focuses on how teachers perceive the impact of factors such as poverty, unstable homes, and lack of parental involvement on placement in special education.

4.2.1 Students facing poverty. While looking into the issue of overrepresentation, the topic of poverty emerged from the data. Both participants, but in particular Greg, who has been teaching for close to 30 years, shared their perception that many students placed in special education come from a lower socioeconomic home or community. This is a major factor because, as Greg suggest, “students who may be struggling in school do not have access to the resources needed to improve their learning”. Often, if teachers cannot find the appropriate resources to help a student improve, it can result in students being given an IEP and unofficially placed in special education.

When asked if poverty is a major contributing factor to students being placed in special education, Greg was a bit puzzled, and he addressed the question by stating:

This is a bit of a taboo topic, but the reality is that there are certain parents from low socioeconomic backgrounds who [have a hard time] valuing education and … for whatever reason they pass this idea onto their children, and in the end if they are facing issues [exceptionalities], it makes it harder for us to help them see the value of education and… good habits.
Greg felt that for certain families facing poverty and other socioeconomic issues, it is rather difficult to give education priority. For that reason, it may seem as though they do not value education and they can pass down that belief to their children. In such cases, it becomes more difficult to be able to help the students in the general classroom, and as a result end up being referred to the special education program.

Aaron also agreed that poverty is an “uncomfortable” topic that needs to be addressed “but a lot of educators do not know how to.” He explained that poverty should not be treated generally, because there are many successful students who come from a low socio economic status. At the same time, it should also not be treated lightly because “it is a factor that can have a profound effect on students … and can alter their ability to be academically successful.” When asked to give an example of how poverty affects students, Aaron mentioned: “when working with elementary school students I find that parents tend to be absent… usually working a number of jobs. So the parents are not there to establish rules, help them complete their homework, so they miss signs of little wrinkles [issues]that need to be ironed out.” Aaron adds on that this is when signs can be misread and students are placed in special education without necessarily needing to be there. This quote shows that poverty may cause parents to be absent for a significant period of time, preventing students from receiving adequate support at home. Therefore, teachers consider referring students into the special education program as the best option to maximize the support they receive at school.

Studies such as the one completed by Dunn (2006) focused on the referral criteria teachers were using to determine if a student should be referred to special education. The study found that teachers often referred students who lived in poverty, therefore turning socioeconomic status into one of the criteria (Dunn, 2006). This became a problem because teachers were basing
their criteria for referring students to special education on their inability to perform at a basic level; students consistently asking for assistance, needing directions to be repeated, and inattentiveness. Despite this, teachers were not seeing poverty as a direct link to students’ inattentiveness or inability at perform at a basic level. This study and my participants’ comments converge as it shows that if teachers do not understand how poverty can affect students, then it can lead them to misread such signs.

4.2.2 Monoparental and foster homes. The participants also identified students who come from single-parent homes or who live in foster homes as being overrepresented in special education. Aaron noted that children who grow-up with a single parent, “especially in lower income communities”, are often affected by the absence of their parent. Greg, along the same lines, mentioned that “the absence of a parent can lead to small issues not being identified in time” and as a result of that “those once small correctable issues now turn into big and complicated ones”. For that reason, both Aaron and Greg saw a direct link between the presence of a parent and a child’s ability to overcome minor challenges during the developmental stages.

When asked why foster children seem to be overrepresented in special education, Aaron offered his own perception:

foster kids… are put in homes with other kids going through the same thing as them, most of the parents see [foster care] … as a business and they do not play a parental role. A lot of their [the children’s] things get stolen at home, they get beat up – so they bring all that anger an issues to school.

Aaron then added that when such issues happen on a consistent basis, the school may deem it appropriate to refer the student to special education. Greg’s response to the same question shed more light in the issue. He emphasized that “instability makes it difficult for a child to build a
strong foundation” and when they reach the teenage years, a weak foundation makes it difficult for them to build, or find their identity.

A qualitative study (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001) carried out in the early 2000s found that the number of students from ‘unstable’ homes being referred into special education was growing at alarming rates in a number of Canadian schools. The study first hypothesized the cause of this phenomenon to be teacher’s lack of understanding of the students. However, the findings showed that teachers did understand and acknowledge the situation of students in unstable homes, but they believed the best method of intervention was to refer them to special education. Both participant’s notions align with already-existing literature and this is important because it helps to show that an unstable home can cause a student to be unstable emotionally, physically and mentally. However, teachers must consider multiple ways of dealing with this factor and should avoid seeing Special Education as the only feasible answer. As there may be times that a student does require support, but that support can be given from the general classroom. Only if this support begins to fall short, then teachers can consider referring them to special education.

4.2.3 ELL students. Both participants believe that there is the possibility that an ELL student may be misdiagnosed due to literary deficiency or aggressive behaviour. When the participants were asked if they considered English language learner students to be overrepresented in special education, the participants pondered on the question. Aaron first stated that he does not believe ELL students to be overrepresented in special education, but “there tend to be a number of students, especially in elementary school, who are misdiagnosed based on their language barrier.” Greg explained during his interview that the overrepresentation of ELL students was a phenomenon of the 90s and 2000s and that phenomena has decreased in the last
couple of years.” He then added that this is due to the regulations that have been set in place to protect ELL students “through their journey of learning English.” For example, one of the regulations is the 5-year grace period in which students are not allowed to be assessed [to be placed] into special education “unless there is a significant evidence that the assessment is necessary.” Lastly, Greg explained that ELL students are constantly overwhelmed and frustrated due to their language barrier, and “aggressive behaviour” is one of the ways they express such frustration.

A qualitative study done in Canada by Garcia and Ortiz (2006) show that ELL students who are unresponsive to intensive and alternative instructional interventions, over time become the most likely candidates for special education. Their research found that when students are unresponsive it does not automatically mean that they are exceptional students, but instead that the teaching and assessment approaches are not culturally sensitive. They concluded their research by suggesting that prevention and early intervention efforts can significantly improve the academic achievements of culturally and linguistically diverse students. Although the points made by my participants for the most part align with the existing literature, Greg’s point about the shift between the 2000s to now made me conscious of the dates of the articles used in my literature review. Most research on this topic was done between 2000 and 2012, Garcia and Ortiz’ in particular was conducted in 2006. Therefore, it would be significant to see what findings research done in 2017 can bring to light on this topic and how it is similar or different to past findings.

4.3 Parental Involvement

These teachers believe that parental involvement is crucial when it comes to students being referred to the special education program, as they should have a say when it comes to
creating an IEP or safety plan. The following theme will explore their beliefs about at the perceived effects of lack of parental involvement, and the perceived effects of overly involved parents.

4.3.1 Lack of parental involvement. When the participants were asked what role they felt parents played in a students’ education, particularly in that of a special education student, both agreed that they played a vital role. Greg explained that “it is vital because it makes a world of a difference. The parent’s presence can mean them [students] being able to grow academically, or getting into a rut.” Greg then related it back to the story of the boy in second grade as he mentioned that had he made an effort to communicate more with the mom, “then things could have turned out better.”

Aaron expressed that working with parents is one of his biggest struggles and frustrations. He talked about how damaging the lack of parental involvement is, in his view, to students’ academic success. He explained:

As educators, we sometimes think that parents not being involved means that they do not care, but sometimes its deeper than that. I have had moms who feel like if they get involved, they will get in my way, or they feel like they will never understand anything that has to do with their child’s education. Aaron felt as though parents do not get involved in such process due to lack of understanding and lack of communication between the teacher and parents. Both Greg and Aaron believe that parents play an important role in the process of identifying, referring and assessing students into the special education program.

A study done in 2008 focuses on the perception of parents during the initial IEP meeting (Fish, 2008). The study noted that school boards see parents as partners and as a crucial
component to the development of the IEP and they set regulations to ensure that parents are a part of process (Fish, 2008). However, the research derived from the study shows that although in theory this seems to work, the reality is the contrary. Many parents report the initial IEP meetings to be confusing, traumatic and complicated as they do not understand their child(ren)’s condition and the proper way of meeting their academic needs (Fish, 2008). In such cases, parents often let educators make all the calls as they do not feel prepared to make decisions regarding their child’s educational needs (Fish, 2008). For that reason, many parents, even if they want to be involved, decide not to because they do not feel they have the right knowledge and resources to make a meaningful contribution (Fish 2008). It is also possible that some educators do not take the time to break down the process for the parents and ensure that they feel welcome, safe and comfortable. In connection to this study’s findings, teachers should not assume that parents are not interested in the identification, referral and assessment process if they do not seem involved. Rather, teachers should try to understand the factors preventing the parents from being more involved.

4.3.2 Overinvolved Parents. In contrast to the latter subtheme which looked at lack of parental involvement, this subtheme looks at the effects of parents being overinvolved in their child’s education. When the participants made mention of “overly involved parents” I asked if they believed parental over-involvement to be negative. Aaron stated that no matter how “intense” a parent can be; it is always better than zero parental involvement, in his experience. He then added that the most overly involved parent he has worked with was a special education teacher, so he understood why she was so involved. Aaron expressed that he is so used to working with parents of children in special education who have little involvement, that this experience was unusual for him.
Greg mentioned during the interview that through the years he has come across a number of different types of parents. He found the most parents who were overinvolved “either have a career in education, they came from strict academic countries, or they practice a professional career of some sort.” Greg’s point directly connects to the argument that parents of low socioeconomic status tend to be less involved, for a number of reasons, in their child’s education. Greg then made an interesting observation by stating that, “parents who came from strict academic backgrounds, for the most part, were low- to middle-income families, but back home they were professionals.” Here, Greg suggests that it is parents’ understanding of education that pushed them to be involved with their child’s education. Both Aaron’s and Greg’s beliefs about parental involvement highlighted educational background as a driving force in a parent’s ability and willingness to be involved in the education of their child.

Although there is an extensive list of literature that study the effect of parental contribution (or lack thereof), I did not come across literature that talked about overinvolved parents. This gap in the literature should be addressed, as it would be helpful to be able to identify, or have a working definition, of what it means to be overly involved. It is only then that studies can focus on researching the effect of overly concerned parents in a child’s education.

4.5 Conclusion

The first theme discussed teacher’s perception on training and its connection to educators ability to understand the community and the people they work with. The participants perceived the aspect of understanding to be significant for educators to be able to provide students with the help and resources they truly need for their overall success. In addition to this, the participants also found it important for educators to successfully bridge theory into practice to be able to develop teaching strategies that align with 21st century learning. These two components;
understanding and bridging theory to practice are in these teachers’ view important for educators to properly refer, assess and place students into special education. In turn, keeping these factors in mind may help reduce the overrepresentation of minorities in the special education program.

The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 supported the idea that misreading a student and their cultural differences can lead to a call for intervention and a student can be wrongly placed in special education. For this section the only gap in the literature I found was regarding the concept of overinvolved parents and the concept of personality. In regards to the concept of personality, the closest article I have come across mentions the importance of teachers being confident of their teaching abilities, but it does not mention the idea of open-mindedness, flexibility and approachability. Therefore, these topics are worthy of more research.

The second theme focuses on teacher’s perception on groups that seem to be overrepresented in special education and explores the factors that can be contributing to this issue. The participants explicitly made mention of students living in poverty and students who come from unstable homes as the most overrepresented students in special education. When it came to ELL students, the participants explained that although there are still students being misdiagnosed, they are not overrepresented in like manner of the other groups identified in this discussion. The teachers suggested that these minority groups may be overrepresented due to lack of understanding, lack of resources, and lack of parental support.

Last, I looked at the teachers believe that parental involvement is crucial when it comes to students being referred, assessed and diagnosed into the special education program, as they should have a say when it comes to creating an IEP or safety plans. The participants suggested that lack of parental involvement can cause educators to misinterpret certain behaviors, character traits, or cultural differences, and therefore feel the need to refer a student into special education.
Both participants also suggested that parental involvement can be a result of parents feeling unprepared or confused when dealing with their child’s exceptionalities. As a result of this, many decide to let the educators make decisions based on their own judgment. On the other hand, this study found that parents who tend to be overinvolved usually come from a strong academic background or work in education related fields. Studies used in chapter 2 support the idea that parents tend to shy away from dealing with their child’s exceptionality when they feel unequipped to help them. The research, however, did not make mention of parents who are overinvolved. This gap in the literature is worthy of further research.

When organizing the data for this chapter, I had a difficult time identifying one main factor causing certain groups of students to be overrepresented in the special education program. However, it was quickly made clear that the issue of overrepresentation can be liken to a domino effect, and every domino is a different factor possibly causing a student to be overrepresented. Some of the factors affecting the students are the ones mentioned throughout this chapter. Based on the findings shared in this chapter, in Chapter 5, I discuss the direct and indirect implications for these finding, provide recommendations and identify potential areas of further research.
Chapter 5 - Conclusion

5.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I will give a general overview of the key findings of this research project. Based on these key findings, I will analyze crucial implications, make recommendations and suggest possible areas of further research. My overall findings suggest that, in the view of these teachers, there are a number of factors that can cause certain groups of students to be misdiagnosed and, potentially lead to the misrepresentation of such groups in special education programs across Ontario. This final chapter will provide implications of the misrepresentation of minorities in special education and offer recommendations. The implications and recommendations will focus on how to help students receive, not only the best education possible, but one that allows them to be the best that they can be.

5.1 Overview of Key Findings and their Significance

After closely analyzing the data from the interviews, three main themes emerged. The first theme focused on training, and the idea of effectively being able to bridge theory into practice. This theme looked at factors such as the type of training teachers receive on special education topics, the support they receive in their respective schools and the attitude such teachers have towards training and applying what they learn. This theme is significant because it highlights the importance of teachers receiving adequate training to be able to refer, assess, and place a student into the special education program. Furthermore, this theme considers the possibility that attitude can affect a teachers’ ability to correctly diagnose students who they deem exceptional. The second theme identifies the minority groups that may be overrepresented in special education and why this is the case. This theme looks at groups such as students living in poverty, students facing discrimination and racism, students coming from monoparental
homes, and ELL students. This section is significant because it highlights teachers perceived notions as to why these specific types of students seem to be overrepresented in special education. The third and last, theme pays close attention to the role parents play in the process of referral, assessment and placement of their child. This theme is significant because it suggests that most parents shy away from actively participating in this process due to a number of factors, for example, things such as language barriers, cultural barriers, and lack of understanding of the process of such meetings. These three major findings suggest that the issue of overrepresentation is likely not caused by a single factor, but rather, it is the result of a number of factors, that when mixed together could have a domino effect. Therefore, the contribution of this research project sheds light on the importance of not approaching overrepresentation as a broad issue. Instead, educators should focus on specific factors at a time, and that way begin to mend the issue of overrepresentation.

5.2 Implications

In this section I will discuss the implications most important to this study. I will first look at the broad implications that will focus on the educational community. I will then conclude this section by overviewing the narrow implications, which deal with my own practice as an educator, my philosophy of teaching, and my identity.

5.2.1 Broad implications: The educational community. This section will discuss in detail the broad implications pertaining to the educational community. The following implications will highlight possible repercussions that may arise in schools when dealing with the issue of overrepresentation in special education. Although these implications have surfaced and are supported by the research findings of this project, they remain simple observations. The
major stakeholders concerned with the following implications are parents, general classroom teachers, and administrators.

Findings in my research project suggest that there may be certain minorities groups being overrepresented in the special education program due to a number of reasons. If overrepresentation of minorities is a persistent issue in special education, this may suggest that there is a problem with the way students are being identified and assessed. Although it is difficult to identify the exact factor that could be causing overrepresentation to occur in the special education program, consistency in the referral and assessment process could be an influential aspect. When teachers refer a student to the special education program, they can base such referrals on a number of factors. The teachers do not have a strict check list to help them determine if a student should be referred or not. In a way, this leniency is beneficial as it may allow the teacher to consider a number of factors before referring a student. However, it is possible that this leniency leaves room for inconsistency in the referral criteria. This level of inconsistency can also be attributed to the level of subjectivity in teaching. What one teacher may consider a factor that calls for intervention, another teacher may see it as an issue that can be rectified without special education. Therefore, it is possible that teacher perception of the students or community they work with, their teaching efficacy, and ability to reach students may influence the factors they consider signs for special education intervention.

The second implication is concerned with the lack of parental involvement during IEP and IPRC meetings. The findings in my research project suggest that some parents may choose not to attend these meetings because they do not feel well informed to make suggestions or provide feedback. It is possible that many parents are intimidated by factors such as language barriers and therefore, choose not to attend these meetings. By language barriers I do not only
refer to the ability to communicate coherently in English but also the ability to understand complex academic terms and theories. Language is not the only factor preventing parents from fully participating in such meetings. The lack of parental involvement in the IEP and IPRC meetings could also be a result of schools not building a strong sense of community. Many schools may find it challenging to appeal and respond to the fast and ever-changing multicultural communities. As well, schools may find it difficult to fuse opposing binaries, such as differences in culture, race, and socioeconomic background. Factors such as these could cause parents to feel unwelcomed and recoil at the idea of having to make uninformed decisions.

The last implication for this research project is concerned with the rate of teacher burn-out in Ontario schools. The findings, both, in my research project and in other scholarly articles suggest that teachers tend to burn-out the quickest within the first five years of teaching. I make clear, however, that the findings in this project do not prove this but rather support what other literature suggests. Teacher burn-out, especially among special education teachers, may be affecting the amount of time teachers spend working with underachieving students and differentiating instructions. It is also possible that the quality of their work suffers if teachers feel overwhelmed and overworked. From what I heard my participants mention about teacher burn-out, special education teachers may burn-out quicker than a general classroom teacher due to the size of their portfolio. This can be a result of the level of expectation put on lesson planning, attending regular school meetings, attending IEP and IPRC meetings, and IEP planning. Special education teachers have a large portfolio, and they may at times not have the adequate support to balance out all the things expected of them. Subsequently, although burn-out may be out of the control of teachers, it is a factor that can affect the quality of their work. In turn, if their work
suffers, this can affect the way students are being referred, assessed, and placed into the special education program.

5.2.2 Narrow implications. The findings that derived from this research project also helped me identify implications that concern me as an educators and as a researcher. The first, and most important thing I learned, is the value of truly getting to know my students and their families. This study has helped me to see that if I take the time to get to know my students, I may be able to recognize certain factors that can be affecting their ability to learn in the classroom. In my attempt to get to know the families of my students, I can reach out to the parents and share with them the success and challenges of their child. This can serve as a stepping stone for me, as the teacher, to build a relationship with the parent(s). If this relationship can be established, then we can work as a team and help the student overcome the challenges they are facing. For example, I could ask the parent(s) what strategies they are using at home to approach the challenge at hand. Likewise, I can share with the parent(s) the strategies that are working in the classroom. I truly believe that if I am able to do so, parents will be more disposed to participate in IEP and IPRC meetings.

Following along the same lines as the previous narrow implication, this study also taught me the importance of understanding the community I work with. It is difficult to effectively differentiate instruction and teach in a culturally relevant way if I do not understand the factors that are affecting, shaping and influencing the community in which I find myself situated. In fact, I learned from the participants of this research project that every community has mini-bodies that form the larger community. Therefore, it is not enough to view the community as a single entity that is unmoveable and unchangeable. As an educator, I have to make sure I recognize and attempt to understand, to the best of my abilities, the diverse people who make up a community.
Doing so will allow the community to recognize me as a legitimate member that is working with them and not against them.

5.3 Recommendations

Following both the broad and narrow implications, this section will provide three recommendations and various actions than can be taken to address the issues at hand. The first recommendation is directed to administrators in schools and special education teachers. As mentioned in the broad implication section of this chapter, special education teachers may be burning out at a rapid rate due to the amount of work demanded of them. Therefore, to address this issue super teams can be created for every single student who requires an IEP. The team should be made up of a special education teacher (not necessarily the department head), a secondary general classroom teacher, an administrator and the parent(s). Although the special education teacher would still be responsible for conducting the IEP meetings and completing the official documentation, the rest of the team can help in the process. I strongly believe that the key in the success to this team is the secondary teacher (this teacher can be any staff within the school). The student may choose any teacher who they are close to, or who they feel they can relate to. Therefore, the secondary teacher can help put together the final IEP by providing meaningful suggestions and methods that will benefit the student. If this recommendation is to be implemented, it could have many positive effects. First, the special education teacher can delegate some of their work and, in turn, alleviate their work load. Also, this process would require the participation of the majority of the school. Therefore, more teachers will be familiarized with the IEP process, and they can contribute to the overall success of the school as a whole.
The second recommendation is for the Ontario Ministry of Education and school boards in regards to IEP’s. The official IEP document should be made accessible for all students. Instead of referring and assessing certain students to determine whether they require special accommodations, all students should be given an IEP starting kindergarten. This recommendation stems from the universal design theory; beneficial for some, good for everyone. In applying this theory, the IEP document would create a space for teachers to make accommodations but also for them to share methods that have worked with that specific student. This document will be carried by students for the 12 years that they are in school. Therefore, at the beginning of the year, each teacher can read the comments and suggestions made by the previous teacher. Completing the IEP document would be the job, mainly, of the general classroom teacher every school year. This means that every teacher would have roughly between 20 to 30 IEPs to complete in detail throughout the year. The biggest downfall of this recommendation is the amount of work being added to the general classroom teacher. However, if school boards allocate more time, or provide teachers with additional prep time, this can be done. Implementing a system that allows every student to receive an IEP will, in the long run, allow for issues such as overrepresentation and special education teacher burn-out to be better addressed. This will also force every teacher to take the Additional Qualification, Special Education Part One in order for them to be part of this initiative. Most importantly, if all students are given an IEP, the negative connotation attached to this term and special education will begin to shift to a positive one. Rather than students seeing special education as a segregated and exclusive program, they can truly recognize it as an inclusive program.

The last recommendation is directed to school staff; teachers and administrators. As mentioned earlier in the broad implication section, many parents may choose not to attend IEP
and IPRC meetings because they do not feel well prepared to make rational decisions on terms that they do not understand. This can be alluded to language and cultural barriers, among other factors. Therefore, to address this issue, schools should create a parent orientation section. This orientation section would be made available for parents who will be attending IEP and IPRC meetings in order to provide them with the support needed prior to attending the meetings. The meetings should be composed of two sections: a private, one-on-one section and a meet and greet with other parents undergoing the same process. The private session will allow teachers and administrators to create a safe environment, in which the parents can voice their concern and ask questions. This session will also permit for a mock meeting to take place in order for the parents to know what to expect. This private session should be casual to ensure that parents feel comfortable as teachers and administrators take the time to build a relationship. The meet and greet portion of this orientation is intended for parents to get to know other parents going through the same process, share their experiences and, in turn, build a stronger school community. For parents to be able to see that they are not the only ones facing similar situations and challenges, will not only be uplifting, but it will also allow for a support system to be created. If the parent orientation session is well implemented, this may compel more parents to be active participants in the IEP and IPRC meetings.

5.4 Areas for Further Research

As highlighted throughout this research project, but specially in this chapter, I am particularly interested in parental involvement and the impact it may have if more parents participated in IEP and IPRC meetings. I constantly found myself asking questions such as: what are schools doing to address this issues? What are some of the factors preventing parents from being more involved in the process? Is it smaller factors such as being able to take time off
work? Or larger factors such as feeling uncomfortable, unprepared and out of place? While doing research for this project, I came across literature that demonstrates the lack of parental involvement in IEP and IPRC meetings and provides some suggestions as to why. However, I think more research needs to be conducted on what schools are doing to address the problem and what results they are having. This can help other schools follow their example and be moved to start initiatives of their own.

5.5 Concluding Comments

This chapter focused on providing implications, making recommendations and identifying areas for future research based on the key finding of this research project. The central question for this project is: is there overrepresentation of minority groups and ELL students in the Ontario special education programs? The findings from this project contribute to literature suggesting that groups such as students living in poverty, students facing discrimination and racism, students coming from monoparental homes, and ELL students may be more likely to be overrepresented. This research project also found that factors such as training, ability to bridge theory into practice and lack of parental participation in IEP and IPRC meetings may be contributing to the overrepresentation of minorities in special education programs.

After reviewing the key findings of this research project, implications are provided to further analyze the factors contributing to the overrepresentation of minorities. The first implication is concerned with the overarching question of this project. Therefore, I suggest that if overrepresentation is a persistent issue in various schools in Ontario, it is possible that there is a lack of consistency in the referral and assessment process. This section also looked at the lack of parental involvement in the IEP and IPRC meetings and why this may be so. I suggest that schools may not be creating a strong sense of community, in which parents feel welcome and
comfortable. The last implication addresses the issue of teacher burn-out, focusing mostly on the causes and effects.

In this section I also made narrow implications that concern me both as a teacher and researcher. Through this research project I learned the importance of building a relationship with my students and their parents so that I can truly get to know them. Similarly, I also learned that as a teacher I need to be acquainted and understand the community I work with.

Following the broad and narrow implications, I also make recommendation that can help address some of the issues that surfaced from this research project. I first suggest to create IEP super teams composed of a number of teachers. This team would be responsible for creating the IEP plan and completing the documentation. Creating a team will help alleviate the work load of a special education teacher, reduce chances of burn-out and get the entire school involved in the IEP process. The second recommendation is addressed to the Ontario Ministry of Education and school boards regarding the distribution of IEPs. In this section I suggest that all students be given an IEP when they first start school. That way, every student has the opportunity to have differentiated instruction, and students will not feel “dumb” or “different” for having an IEP. Lastly, I recommend to school administrators and staff to create a parent IEP/IPRC orientation night. This orientation session would provide parents with one-on-one support to help prepare for the meeting. At the same time, it will allow them to meet other parents who are undergoing a similar process.

In the last section of this chapter I suggest that educators continue to research methods being employed by schools to ensure that they are creating a sense of community. I think it will be beneficial for the Ontario educational community to know what are some of the methods that are working and how can other schools apply similar techniques.
As I come to the conclusion of my MTRP, I reflect on the ways this project has shaped me as a student, researcher and educator. My biggest take away is the importance of getting to know my students, their families and communities. Then based on what I learn, make sure not to overlook any factors regardless of how inconsequential they may seem. Also, I am now encouraged to try various methods of teaching without fearing failure, always remembering that the best theory is the one we can successfully turn into practice. Similarly, I should not be quick to refer a student into special education if I do not have a clear understanding of the challenges that my students are facing. That is not to suggest that I should not ask for help, but rather that I should try everything possible in the classroom before asking for special education intervention. Doing this can help minimize the margin of error in the referral and assessment process that can cause overrepresentation. Lastly, as I reviewed my project as a whole, I am now more convinced than ever that as teachers we all bring unique characteristics and traits to our classrooms. Therefore, we should not be afraid to use these amazing qualities we posses to create a strong relationship with our students, and help them reach their full potential.
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Appendices

Appendix A: Letter of Consent for Interview

Date:

Dear ______________________________,

My Name is Lisbani Paola Martinez-Zuniga and I am a student in the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). A component of this degree program involves conducting a small-scale qualitative research study. My research will focus on the overrepresentation of minority and ELL students in the Special Education program. I am interested in interviewing teachers who have experienced in the field of Special Education. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

Your participation in this research will involve one approximately 60 minute interview, which will be transcribed and audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient for you, outside of school time. The contents of this interview will be used for my research project, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates. I may also present my research findings via conference presentations and/or through publication. You will be assigned a pseudonym to maintain your anonymity and I will not use your name or any other content that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information will remain confidential. Any information that identifies your school or students will also be excluded. The interview data will be stored on my password-protected computer and the only person who will have access to the research data will be my course instructor.

You are free to change your mind about your participation at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may also choose to decline to answer any specific question during the interview. I will destroy the audio recording after the paper has been presented and/or published, which may take up to a maximum of five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks to participation. Please sign this consent form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. I am very grateful for your participation.

Sincerely,
Lisbani Paola Martinez-Zuniga
Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw from this research study at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Lisbani Paola Martinez-Zuniga and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: ______________________________________

Name: (printed) _______________________________________________

Date: ______________________________________
Appendix B – Interview Protocol

Thank you for participating in my research study. The purpose of this research is to study the overrepresentation of minorities and English language learner students in the Special Education program. This interview has 20 questions and should take approximately 60 minutes to complete. The interview protocol for this study has been divided into 4 different sections. The first section focuses on the participant’s background information, followed by questions regarding special education (things like overview of the program, purpose and issues encountered within program). The following two sections will focus on the participant’s experience with Special Education and any issues or challenges that they may have faced regarding referral, placement and providing Special Education services to students.

To begin can you state your full name for the recording?

Section A – Background Information

1. How long have you been living in Canada?
   a. If you were born here, where did you grow up?
   b. If you immigrated to Canada, what country did you immigrate from?
2. How many years have you been a teacher?
   a. Have you always taught in Canada? If not, what other countries have you taught in?
   b. What grades have you taught and currently teach?
   c. What courses have you taught?
   d. What courses do you currently teach?
3. In addition to your role as a teacher, do you play any other role in the school?
4. Can you describe the community of the school in which you currently work in?

Section B – Experience teaching Special Education and or working with students receiving Special Education services.

5. What experience do you have teaching special education or students receiving special education services?
6. How would you describe the training you received in special education?
7. Would you say that you have received (proper) training in assessing and referring a student who shows signs of exceptionality?
8. Have you ever referred a student to special education?
9. What steps do (or did) you take when referring a student to special education?
10. Are you familiar with the Response-to-Intervention model?
11. How often do you see ELL students in the Special Education program?

Section C – Issues within Special education

12. What are some issues that you can identify within the special education program?
13. Would you agree or disagree that certain groups such as visible minorities and ELL students are overrepresented in the special education program?
14. Can you identify some of the groups that are possibly being overrepresented (either in your school or community?
15. What do you think are some of the factors that contribute to certain groups being overrepresented?
16. Do you believe that there is a standard way of assessing student who are showing signs of struggle?
17. What other members of the school are involved in the process of assessing, referring and placing a student into the special education program?
18. Are the parents involved in the process? If so, how would you describe their level of participation/involvement?

Section D – Further Steps

19. What recent training have you or other teachers received regarding Special Education (how to work with students in Special Education, how to assess and refer them, etc.?)
20. How do you, personally, believe that these issues could be combated?
21. Any other comments?