

THE DISPOSITIONS OF THREE SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS REGARDING
CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS

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Dedication

My sweet and beautiful boy Jacob,

God blessed me so much to be your mom. You are my first gift of motherhood – my firstborn child. I remember your first smile as a baby. It was infectious! Why God allowed me a beautiful and invaluable opportunity to be your mom, I will never fully understand. Whatever the reason, I am so grateful for it. You have taught me so much about unconditional love, patience, kindness, and joy. I am so grateful to you for loving me unashamedly and with great passion that was uniquely yours. Thank you for embracing the difficult task of being a big brother and setting an example of love and laughter to everyone. I know it was not always easy to do, but I know you treasured that role. It was made just for you.

I cannot articulate the depth of my pain in losing you – not being able to hug, kiss, or smell you is simultaneously overwhelming and excruciating. However, I trust God and thank Him that you are with Him, and for the countless memories we shared that I can recall. I also am appreciative of the new things I am discovering about you through the stories, pictures, and videos that I was not aware of. I did not know you were such a good dancer! I treasure the memories of the songs you sang to me, the dances we shared, and the hugs and kisses you initiated. Thank you for allowing me to give you unlimited hugs and kisses and sometimes tolerating them with a smile.

Thank you for being a vessel of joy in my life and for teaching me not to take life so seriously. Thank you for impacting my life in such a significant and profound way. Thank you for leaving behind things that let me know that you understood and

understand the depth of my love for you and that you love me as well. I thank God that I will see you again and I know that you are looking down on us in love.

I love you forever and always,

Your mom

Jacob William Edwards

4/21/2004 – 4/20/2020

Abstract

Background: School psychologists have the ability to leverage a substantial degree of subjectivity in their findings, conclusions, and recommendations that may greatly contribute to the determinations of identification, placement, and discipline of school-aged students with disabilities. Long-standing, consistent, and established evidence-based research exists that supports the significant educational, economic, and emotional disparities that correlate with cultural differences. It is therefore incumbent upon school psychologists to carefully consider their role in the process of actively contributing to this dynamic through self-reflective practices that support culturally responsive assessment and practices. **Purpose:** The primary research question of this study is how will practicing school psychologists across a variety of experience levels collectively inform their involvement in and interpret the importance of culturally responsive practices in their current role? Additional sub-questions addressed in this study included: What constitutes relevant and applicable culturally competent education, training, and support for practicing school psychologists and special education staff? Are the culturally responsive practices of practicing school psychologists lower than entering school psychologists due to an emphasis on promoting diversity and cultural responsiveness in school psychology graduate training programs? **Methods:** This qualitative study analyzed the perceptions and variety of experiences of school psychologists regarding cultural responsiveness. The research exclusively studied three currently practicing school psychologists who support students in large metropolitan school districts in the Greater Houston area. Each study participant engaged in a total duration of three interactions, including the completion of a 40-question self-assessment checklist,

interview, and participation in a focus group session. The total duration of an individual subject's participation in the study was two hours. Results from the self-assessment were used to frame an interview protocol. The data collected from individual interviews were analyzed to determine common patterns and emerging themes pertaining to beliefs about cultural responsiveness in relation to school psychologists, resulting in five focus group questions. Finally, research participants participated in a focus group to discuss their perception of their assessment results and overall experience. **Results:** Overall, findings from the study indicate that school psychologists perceive that they bear the professional and ethical responsibility to monitor the degree to which they employ the ongoing practice of cultural responsiveness in the school setting. However, they collectively noted that they lack the capacity and support in their current roles to perform this function. Study data revealed that several factors influenced this dynamic, including the role, training, and professional development of school psychologists, their relationship with mental health and academic achievement, school discipline, including disproportionality in special education, bias and equity, and the practicality of culturally responsive practices. **Conclusion:** Upon completion of the data analysis, information from the self-assessment checklists, interviews, and focus groups provide ample evidence that while school psychologists hold beliefs that culturally responsive practices are essential to the effective fulfillment of their role to support students and families, many barriers exist to their ability to provide services in this manner. Implications for future study include the identification of ways in which school psychologists can reduce barriers to practice cultural responsiveness.

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Chapter I

Introduction

A practicing school psychologist in the United States of America holds a significant amount of influence on the short and long-term educational trajectory of students with disabilities. This influence extends to both students eligible or seeking eligibility for special education services in the public school system, and directly affects three areas of critical importance in the lives of students with disabilities. They include the determination of student eligibility for support through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), determination of student placement to receive special education services and supports, and the determination of disciplinary consequences for eligible students with disabilities.

Statement of Problem

School psychologists have the ability to leverage a substantial degree of subjectivity in their findings, conclusions, and recommendations that may greatly contribute to the determinations of identification, placement, and discipline of students with disabilities. Because school psychologists wield a significant amount of direct and indirect influence in this regard, and given the history of significant disproportionality in the U.S. public school system, several factors are important to examine that contribute to the overall perceptions of school psychologists as it relates to culturally responsive practices that directly link to student outcomes. These factors include the role of school psychologists, historic and current demographic trends of school psychologists, training requirements and expectations of school psychologists, the tools/techniques used in the

profession, the potential for the subjectivity of their work, and factors that actively contribute to the realization of culturally responsive practices.

Purpose

Due to the nature of their work, school psychologists must guard against the possibility of subjective practices that fail empirical validation. When school psychologists act in opposition to scientific evidence, they run the risk of allowing their own biases, anecdotes, and/or clinical judgment to inform decisions that will influence the outcomes of individual students. In describing the need for “clinicians” to recognize the complex nuances of each “patient” with an array of physical, emotional, and relational difficulties in their lives, Magnavita (2016) asserts:

We navigate the world using pattern recognition tools based on schema and theory, but we must be cognizant that these can be error prone. These sources are often useful starting points, but clinical expertise is more than just textbook knowledge; it includes the ability to use the best information available in an unbiased manner and convert this information into knowledge.

He further describes “the practice of discounting information that does not match our internal self- or worldview” as “dangerous.” Magnavita (2016) notes that while the human species has the most well-developed ability to make decisions that have been honed since birth, we are equally more likely to biases and cognitive errors. Magnavita & Lilienfeld (2016) assert that it is the responsibility of the clinician to avoid the cognitive traps of bias and should possess a “duty to know.” Roberto (2009) noted, “Our cognitive limitations lead to errors in judgment—not because of a lack of intelligence, but simply because we are human. Systematic biases impair the judgment

and choices that individuals make” (p. 31). School psychologists may present biases and subjectivity in their analysis, interpretation, conclusion, and recommendations of individual student assessments. This occurrence may take place more particularly in situations when students represent differences between the school psychologist and the student (e.g., gender, ethnicity, religion, body type, sexual orientation). Accordingly, it is important to explore how subjective practices and biases influence school psychologists and ways in which to reduce their effect.

Significance

While it is widely endorsed as a practice in the field of education and is embraced in guiding ethical practices of school psychology, the actual employ of culturally responsive practices by school psychologists are not part of a measured set of evaluation criteria determined for successful practice. Culturally responsiveness has been defined as a philosophy and practice that include (a) holding high expectations for all students, (b) using students’ cultures and experiences to enhance their learning, and (c) providing all students with access to effective instruction and adequate resources for learning (Klingner et al., 2005). Ortiz, Flanagan, & Dynda (2008) identify the skill of being able to demonstrate competence in the provision of psychological services to children and families of “diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds” a “necessity.”

The skill development and application of cultural competence as a practice is also endorsed by both the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) and the American Psychological Association (APA). NASP (2008) further describes the application of cultural competence as a “best practice in school psychology.” Cultural competence has been defined as centrally focused on knowledge, communication, and

awareness. The divergence of clear endorsement and expectation between cultural competence and cultural responsiveness in the profession of school psychology, as well as the disposition of school psychologists regarding its practice is the central focus of this study. As school psychologists have a significant amount of influence on the educational outcomes of students, it is imperative to further explore how these professionals view these concepts as a practice that contributes to the identification of students with disabilities, their placement recommendations, and findings related to discipline.

Narrative

The most vivid memories of my childhood educational experience involve riding the school bus as a middle school student. I remember my single-parent mother awakening me at 5:30 AM each morning, despite my desperate pleas for “five more minutes” of sleep. The early rise for school preparation was necessary due to my long commute on the school bus. Each morning, I traveled by school bus from the northeast Houston community of Clinton Park to the Vanguard/Gifted and Talented Program at T. H. Rogers Middle School in a large urban school district located in the lavish and affluent community of River Oaks. Clinton Park was the neighborhood of my grandparents with whom my mother, sister, and I recently moved into after my parent’s divorce, a response to the end of domestic violence.

I recall sitting in the passenger seat of my mother’s Buick Regal while waiting for the small bus to arrive. My bus stop was located across the street from a Mexican restaurant with an uneven, pitted parking lot littered with takeout cartons, bottles, and plastic bags and populated with wandering persons loitering the entrance of the establishment soliciting financial assistance from patrons. Once on the bus, I observed

starkly contrasting scene changes while traveling through several neighborhoods on the way to school. I was privately thankful that I was one of the first stops on the route to avoid exposure in the eyes of the peers of my comparative humble lifestyle.

During the commute, I gained a clear awareness of the social and economic disparities that existed between myself and my schoolmates. Many of my peers lived near the school. Accordingly, after overcoming initial feelings of inferiority compared to my affluent peers, I began to develop an increased sensitivity of perceived social and economic injustices and cultural differences and seek to advocate for those in a group considered disenfranchised.

My career path to the field of education has been somewhat indirect. My mother has been an Educational Diagnostician in the same large urban school district I attended for over 40 years. She used me as a test subject as she practiced the administration of new cognitive and achievement assessments. I often tease her by stating that I likely used a WISC block from the Block Design subtest of a cognitive assessment kit as a teething toy. After graduating from high school, I enrolled in the McCombs School of Business at The University of Texas at Austin and earned a Bachelor of Business Administration in Finance. I began my career as a Financial Analyst for PACE/SFX Entertainment. However, when an opportunity arose that presented a job description involving serving as a Grant Coordinator of a 3-year federally-funded grant program targeting middle school students by addressing factors of resiliency, I immediately shifted my career into the realm of non-profit work.

After the grant period, I was hired as an Executive Director of a non-profit organization that was birthed from a large urban church in the Greater Houston area. The

mission of the non-profit was to increase the self-sufficiency of low-income populations living in Section 8 and Low-Income housing through on-site community-based programming. After servicing as Executive Director for nearly eight years and working intimately with several communities identified by the City of Houston as “Poverty Pockets,” I realized that an unmet need in the area of psychological services must be addressed to have a more sustainable impact of lasting change and trends toward self-sufficiency in those communities. Accordingly, I chose to enroll in a Masters-level program in School Psychology.

As a Licensed Specialist in School Psychology (LSSP) and later Behavior Specialist employed in another large urban school district with a significantly low socioeconomic student population, I sought to educate my colleagues, staff, students, and parents about ways to address disproportionality in discipline and special education. With colleagues, I conducted several professional development presentations on the subjects and regarding Cultural Responsiveness in Education. I have attended numerous training in various parts of the country and have participated in poster presentations in professional organizations, as well as served in leadership for the Texas Association of School Psychologists. As a Lead LSSP in a large suburban school district, I again observed social disparities evidenced across the district, but also noted targeted strategies initiated by district leadership and implemented by staff to address inequitable resources, staffing support, and structures. As a Program Manager of Behavior Support Services and Out of District Placements, I was tasked with assisting in the development and implementation of systems of support that will help address disproportionality in the district and establish methods that will increase culturally responsive practices. In my

current role as Special Education Director of Programming and Campus Support in a different large suburban school district, I am directly accountable to our district rates of identification, placement, and disciplinary disproportionality. Accordingly, I am charged with developing systems and plans to address said disproportionality, which has been recently identified as significantly disproportionate concerning In-School and Out-of-School Suspensions (ISS and OSS) for black and special education students. Directly linked to disproportionality, according to past and current research, are underlying beliefs that are premised in historically accepted educational practices. School psychologists play a significant role in addressing the areas defined in significant disproportionality.

My collective professional, educational, and personal experiences have resulted in a combination of knowledge of and passion for education in urban and suburban communities. I plan to translate this experience, knowledge, and passion into contributions to the field of study by conducting targeted research in the areas of culturally responsive practices and any other major contributing factors involving disproportionality in education. I am eager to add to the field of research and believe that my recall of experiences with disproportionate resources in my community will add a unique perspective to my findings.

Research Design

A qualitative study involving triangulation analyzed the perceptions of school psychologists regarding cultural responsiveness. Three school psychologists who support students in a large metropolitan school district in the Greater Houston area were administered the Self-Assessment Checklist for Personnel Providing Behavioral Health Services and Supports to Children and their Families. This self-assessment measurement

tool with a Likert scale has been completed individually and submitted to the researcher anonymously. This Likert scale self-assessment served as an instrument to examine school psychologists' perceptions of cultural responsiveness. The instrument was used to frame an interview protocol that was conducted with all participants to better understand school psychologist perceptions. The data collected from the individual interviews were analyzed to determine common patterns and emerging themes about beliefs about cultural responsiveness concerning school psychologists. Focus group questions were developed based on the emerging themes from the individual interview data. Finally, all three research participants were invited to participate in a focus group to discuss their perception of their assessment results and overall experience. Qualitative findings of their collective dispositions regarding cultural responsiveness are reported. Qualitative methods included the researcher exploring identified themes as related to field notes and other data that provide triangulation.

Research Questions

The primary research question of this study focus on addressing the following: How will practicing school psychologists across a variety of experience levels collectively inform their involvement in and interpret the importance of culturally responsive practices in their current role? Additional questions addressed in this study include: What constitutes relevant and applicable culturally competent education, training, and support for practicing school psychologists and special education staff? Are the culturally responsive practices of practicing school psychologists lower than entering school psychologists due to an emphasis on promoting diversity and cultural responsiveness in school psychology graduate training programs?

Limitations of the Study

Although this study may reveal findings related to dispositions of school psychologists regarding cultural responsiveness, limitations exist in survey studies. Validity threats, including subjective recall and social desirability bias, may occur due to the self-report techniques used in this research study. Additionally, as only three school psychologists who were recruited through personal contacts completed all components of the study, findings may not represent a cross-sample of all school psychologists. However, the research study successfully identified the dispositions of three school psychologists related to culturally responsive practices.

Conclusion

School psychologists wield a significant amount of direct and indirect influence regarding the identification, placement, and disciplinary consequences of students eligible for special education supports and services. Many assessments and services administered by school psychologists allow for a high degree of professional judgment and subjectivity, notwithstanding the findings of culturally biased assessment instruments. Accordingly, findings and recommendations submitted by school psychologists can present an inaccurate depiction of student performance and ability, particularly if a cultural gap exists between the student and the school psychologist that is not acknowledged and accounted for. According to Skiba et al (2002), the ability to cognitively and emotionally assess ethnically, linguistically, and culturally diverse children is a significant concern for school psychologists, educators, and parents. Ultimately, school psychologists bear the professional and ethical responsibility to

monitor the degree to which they employ the ongoing practice of cultural responsiveness in the school setting.

Chapter II

Review of Literature

School psychologists can leverage a substantial degree of subjectivity in their findings, conclusions, and recommendations that may greatly contribute to the determinations of identification, placement, and discipline of students with disabilities. School psychologists wield a significant amount of direct and indirect influence regarding the identification, placement, and disciplinary consequences of students eligible for special education supports and services.

Many assessments administered by school psychologists allow for a high degree of professional judgment and subjectivity. Accordingly, findings and recommendations submitted by school psychologists can present an inaccurate depiction of student performance and ability, particularly if a cultural gap exists between the student and the school psychologist that is not acknowledged and accounted for. Long-standing, consistent, and established evidence-based research exists that supports the significant educational, economic, and emotional disparities that correlate with cultural differences. It is therefore incumbent upon school psychologists to carefully consider their role in the process of actively contributing to this dynamic through self-reflective practices that support culturally responsive assessment and practices.

Given the history of significant disproportionality in the U.S. public school system, several factors are important to examine that contribute to the overall perceptions of school psychologists as it relates to culturally responsive practices that directly link to student outcomes. Accordingly, this chapter will begin with an overview of the theoretical framework of Critical Race Theory and provide a review of the literature with

a focus on themes that emerge based on this topic. Finally, this chapter will conclude with a review of the relevant methodology selected for this study.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework based on the Critical Race Theory (CRT) is used for this study to best analyze the concept of culturally responsive practices, and the dispositions of school psychologists accordingly. CRT originated in the mid-1970s, in part as a response to the fledgling progress and gains that had been experienced by people of color since the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. Early pioneers of CRT included Richard Delgado, Derrick Bell, and Alan Freeman, who built CRT using insights of prior movements including critical legal studies and radical feminism.

Delgado & Stefracic (2001) identified numerous tenets of CRT, including: 1) “Racism is ordinary” – the awareness that it is a common occurrence that people of color generally experience every day in the United States; 2) Interest Convergence/Material Determinism – the concept that racism serves to advance the material interests of white elites, leaving the majority of society with little incentive to end it; 3) Social Construction Thesis – races are categories that are defined by society as a means of convenience that postures racial groups to assume pseudo-permanent characteristics based on falsehoods; 4) Differential Racialization – dominant society radicalizes different minority groups at different times to benefit their interests; 5) Intersectionality and Anti-Essentialism – no person has a single, easily stated, unitary identity, but instead, everyone has potentially conflicting, overlapping identities, loyalties, and allegiances; 6) Unique Voice of Color – minority status brings with it a presumed competence to speak about race and racism; due to different histories and experiences with oppression, black, Indian, Asian and Latino/

writers and thinkers may be able to communicate to their white counterparts matters that the whites are unlikely to know.

Critical Race Theory in Education. Specific to critical race theory in education, Tate (1997) identified prominent concepts, including counter storytelling, interest convergence, and intersectionality. In counter storytelling, “scholars use stories to dispute myths of meritocracy and destabilize supposed norms and values of behavior based on white middle-class families and values.” Forms of counter storytelling may include storytelling, family histories, testimonies, narratives, and biographies.

Stories build consensus, a common culture of shared understandings, and a deeper more vital ethics. But stories can serve an equally important destructive function.

They can show what we believe is ridiculous, self-serving, or cruel. They can show us the way out of the trap of unjustified exclusion. They can help us understand when it is time to reallocate power. (Delgado, 2000, p. 61)

Through storytelling, CRT asserts that the result can produce outcomes that support the defiance of myths, derailment of stereotypes, and the expansion of overall awareness of and perceptions of the human condition (Delgado, 2000).

Interest convergence is a concept that claims the politically powerful are generally interested in allowing those considered marginalized to overcome their struggles if the outcome will mutually benefit both parties. Thus, both parties can assert their claim of success in the outcome of the struggle. According to Solrazano & Yosso (2001), “people of color cannot rely on our altruistic legal system to decide their plight...but must build social alliances and coalitions with people from numerous groups to determine goals with mutually beneficial outcomes.” Delgado & Stefancic (2001) describe the concept of

interest convergence through reference to Derrick Bell's "shocking proposal that *Brown v. Board of Education* – considered a great triumph of civil rights litigation – may have resulted more from the self-interest of elite white than a desire to help blacks." The concept of intersectionality in CRT education postulates the notion of whiteness as property. Crenshaw (1995) identified three areas of intersectionality, including structural, political, and representational. Intersectionality recognizes that because people ascribe to many subgroups outside the scope of a singly defined race, race cannot define in isolation the totality of a person.

Gloria Ladson-Billings and William F. Tate (1995) authored a pioneering article, *Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education*. While CRT was initially used to build counter stories intended to highlight the experiences and cultures of families of color, examine the foundations of education policy, and challenge current education policies, Chapman (2010) noted:

Scholars have applied the branches of CRT to issues of access and equity in education to shed light on continued injustices that are supported through school finance, teacher dispositions and pedagogy, state and federal education policies, and societal inequities that impact a student's ability to be successful.

Both CRT and critical theorists in education share the focus of the common experiences of "historically disenfranchised people with desegregative, urban education bureaucracies" (Chapman, 2010). Billings & Tate (1995) present three propositions: 1) Race continues to be a significant factor in determining inequity in the United States; 2) U.S. society is based on property rights rather than human rights; and 3) The intersection

of race and property creates an analytical tool for understanding social and consequently, school inequity.

Accordingly, Billings and Tate (1995) suggest that the inequalities presented in Kozol's Savage Inequalities (1991) are "a logical and predictable result of racialized society in which discussions of race and racism continue to be muted and marginalized." As CRT supports the importance of culturally responsive practices through its established tenets, its theory has been selected to serve the basis of this research study. CRT embraces the importance and awareness of social change and acknowledges the challenges of cultural disadvantage. CRT will provide a historical and current perspective of the research study findings and establish a broader context in which to deconstruct the understanding of the problem, purpose, significance, research questions, methodology, and data analysis. Accordingly, the following themes that have emerged will be explored in this chapter, including the training and professional development of school psychologists, the relationship between mental health and academic achievement, disproportionality in special education, school discipline, bias and equity, and cultural competence and responsiveness. However, it is important to establish foundational information regarding the role of school psychologists and the current and historical trends of school psychologists.

The Role of School Psychologists

School psychologists who practiced in the public school setting before the 1950s generally served as psychological examiners. These school psychologists typically administered assessments to children that either determined their eligibility for special education placements or identified them as "ineligible for public school because of their

disabilities.” (Miami University, 2020, “Historical and Current Perspective on School Psychology,” para. 1). With the signing of the Individuals with Disability Act (IDEA) into law in 1975 and its subsequent reauthorization by Congress in 2004 and amendment in December 2015, school psychologists have emerged as critical members of school teams to ensure a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE) for students with disabilities. Contrary to the definition at its inception, the role of school psychologists has evolved to include tasks of a multitude of responsibilities in support of the overall emotional, behavioral, mental, and academic well-being of school-aged students in both general and special education settings. The primary roles of school psychologists in traditional practice can be categorized into three areas: assessment, intervention, and consultation. Accordingly, school psychologists wield significant authority and the resulting impact on student outcomes, particularly of students with disabilities in the area of disability identification, placement of services, and disciplinary consequences.

Guiding Principles for School Psychologists. The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) was formed in 1969 as a professional organization to “advance effective practices to improve students’ learning, behavior, and mental health” (National Association of School Psychologists, 2020, “About NASP,” para. 1). Currently, its membership boasts over 25,000 school psychologists, graduate students, and other related professionals with members both the United States and internationally in over 25 countries. In 2015, NASP sanctioned a policy document that outlines educational policies and practices, resulting in a series of guiding principles, entitled *Ready to Learn, Empowered to Teach: Guiding Principles for Effective Schools and*

Successful Students. According to NASP, school psychologists are not only well suited to support these principles but are also able to seamlessly link their services to research and policies toward the improvement of student outcomes (NASP, 2015). NASP cites that school psychologists are equipped and should actively participate in the following activities with teachers, administrators, students, and families that promote the guiding principles:

- Improved Instruction and Learning
- Supporting Healthy Successful Students
- Creating Safe, Positive School Climates
- Strengthening Family-School Partnerships
- Improving Assessment and Accountability

Accordingly, NASP charges school psychologists to deepen their work to support not only the academic achievement of students but to include the promotion of systems of support that extend beyond the classroom to include the support of diverse learners (NASP, 2015). Based on the NASP Position Statement: *Racism, Prejudice, and Discrimination* (2004), within Domain 7 – Family-School Collaboration Services and Domain 8 – Diversity in Development and Learning, school psychologists should “work to enhance understanding and acceptance of diverse cultures and backgrounds and to promote the culturally competent practice.” Ortiz (2008) asserts that significant evidence exists that when practitioners fail to address the linguistic and cultural differences of students and families, assessment activities, and students’ performance on achievement tests are negatively impacted.

Historic and Current Trends in School Psychology

Early Trends in School Psychology. The American Psychological Association (APA) held the Thayer Conference in West Point, New York, in August of 1954 (Fagan, 2005). The Thayer Conference, designed to survey the roles, qualifications, and training of school psychologists (Miami University, 2020, para. 3), marked the beginning of the embraced realization regarding the importance of school psychology as a distinct and differentiated discipline for public schools and school-aged children. According to Fagan, the majority of these school psychologists practiced in the regions of the Midwest, Northeast, West Coast, and Florida (a map of this appears in Benjamin & Baker, 2004, p. 103, based on a report by the Division of School Psychologists, Committee on Certification and Training, 1954). In her review of the history of the Thayer Conference, Fagan notes that approximately 1,000 school psychologists were serving in mainly urban and suburban settings in United States public schools at the time of the Thayer Conference (Division of School Psychologists, 1954, p. 2). However, increased demands for school psychologists grew in the public school system with developments in the field of special education and growth in student enrollment. Approximately 55-60% of school psychologists at that time were female who primarily worked in public school settings, while their male counterparts primarily worked in county districts and state agencies (p. 3). The majority of school psychologists were identified to have prior teaching experience (70%), but only 28 training programs existed in the specialized area of school psychology in the United States, including five doctoral-level training programs (Fagan, 1986). At the time of the Thayer Conference, states with practicing school psychologists

had varying expectations of qualifications for credentialing and no established guiding standards or procedures for field training and practice (Fagan & Wells, 2000).

Current Trends in School Psychology. Data collected 60 years later reflects a significant change in the basic demographic information of the school psychologist. Since 1990, the National Association of School Psychologists has conducted membership surveys every 5 years through a randomized selection of regular and early career members. These surveys aim to capture broad characteristics of NASP members, including their demographics, characteristics, and perspectives tracked over time. NASP 2015 data sampled 1,274 respondents of a pool of 13,270 eligible participants, representative of a 48% response rate, using electronic-only recruitment, delivery, and response methods (NASP, 2018). Similar to the findings of 1954, the 2015 sample of respondents were predominately White and female. This survey demographic information of school psychologists, that utilized the U.S. Census method, resulted in the identification of significantly more females (83.7%) than males (16.2%) who have a NASP membership (Walcott & Hyson, 2018). Of this same sample group, the racial differences were similarly stark in contrast. White school psychologists (88.2%) represented five times the amount of school psychologists from the combined total of all other racial/ethnic group, including Hispanic (6%), Black/African American (5.1%), Asian (2.9%), and Other (3.8%) (Walcott & Hyson, 2018). The majority of respondents (82.9%) in this survey identified their primary job role/setting as a school-based psychologist. The NASP Research Report acknowledged:

Although the vast majority of school psychologists are still White and speak only English (87%), there have been noticeable increases in the number of Black,

Asian, and Hispanic school psychologists, and a corresponding increase in the proportion of school psychologists who report fluency in languages other than English (Walcott & Hyson, 2018).

The report also cites that since 1990, non-White school psychologists have increased by 7% that appears to illustrate a rise in diversity among the profession (Walcott & Hyson, 2018). However, this increase in diversity, as noted by the authors, is spread among three racial subgroups with modest gains for Black/African American (3%), Asian (2%), and Hispanic (4.5%).

Table 1: Gender-by-Race Data for School Psychologists

Race	Male	Female	Total
White	175 (14.4%)	898 (73.8%)	1,074 (87.2%)
Black or African American	6 (0.5%)	56 (4.6%)	62 (5.1%)
Asian	5 (0.4%)	30 (2.5%)	35 (2.9%)
American Indian or Alaska Native	1 (0.1%)	2 (0.2%)	3 (0.2%)
Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0	2 (0.2%)	2 (0.2%)
Identified as Multiracial	7 (0.6%)	22 (1.8%)	29 (2.3%)
Other (not listed here)	3 (0.2%)	9 (0.7%)	12 (1%)
Total	197 (16.2%)	1,019 (83.8%)	1,217 (100%)

Additionally, Walcott & Hyson (2018) reported that school psychologists appear to collectively have limited access to professional development and mentoring. They assert that less than half (49.5%) of the respondents indicated that they “received systematic professional support, mentoring, and/or peer supervision for their professional activities.” Also, the majority of respondents (64.5%) endorsed limited time to

participate in professional development activities outside those provided by their employment district. Because the majority (78.4%) indicated they did not receive financial reimbursement to cover the costs of their participation in professional development activities, more than 80% indicated cost reimbursement “affected their decision about whether to attend a conference or other professional development event.”

Similar to findings outlined in the Walcott & Hyson (2018) NASP Research Report, McNamara, Walcott & Hyson (2019) reported findings of demographic characteristics of school psychologists employed full-time in a school setting in its NASP 2015 Membership Survey, Part Two. A sample size of 990 respondents resulted in a racial breakdown of significantly more White female school psychologists than all other groups combined. Accordingly, White (86.3%) school psychologists accounted for nearly 5 times the total number of all other racial groups, including Hispanic (6%), Black/African American (5.5%), Asian (2.9%), and Other or Multiracial (4%). The majority of these professionals endorsed that they served in either Urban (26.4%) or Suburban (49.5%) schools.

McNamara, Walcott, & Hyson (2019) also surveyed school psychologists regarding the types of services they deliver based on their full-time employment in a school setting. Based on survey results, a high number of school psychologists appear to engage in the practices of conducting initial evaluations (91%) and reevaluations (93.3%) for special education. Full-time school psychologists surveyed reported a mean of 27.5 initial evaluation cases and 32.1 reevaluation cases for special education. A majority of survey respondents (71.6%) also informed that they engage in individual behavior/mental health counseling with students. School psychologists surveyed reported that they spend

less time counseling students academically (44.9%) or conducting parent groups or presentations (30.5%).

Results from the NASP 2015 Membership Survey, Part Two also included responses to new items presented regarding engagement of school psychologists in 14 different activities during the 2014-15 school year. Respondents were instructed to select from the following numerical scale: 0-Not At All, 1-Rarely, 2-Somewhat, 3-Quite a Bit, 4-A Great Deal. As these items were not included in previous surveys, responses are unable to be compared. While school psychologists reported that they participated in conducting individual evaluations to determine eligibility for special education “Quite a Bit,” they noted all other engagement activities as “Somewhat” or “Rarely.” Among the 13 inquired activities included Participating in meetings focused on the development of Individual Education Plans (Somewhat), Providing mental and behavioral health services and interventions (Somewhat), Consulting and collaborating with a team regarding developing and evaluating system-level or school-wide programs (e.g., bullying prevention, PBIS, school violence prevention) (Rarely), and providing services to families and promoting family engagement (Rarely). 2015 survey results reveal that the primary role for school psychologists continues to be engaged in individual student evaluations. Significantly fewer school psychologists reported participating in a more broad range of services as recommended in the NASP Practice Model (McNamara, Walcott, & Hyson, 2019).

Shortages in School Psychology. Historical consistencies of shortages of school psychologists have been maintained across the United States. It is predicted that these shortages will not only continue, but will increase through 2025 (Castillo, Curtis & Tan,

2014; Curtis, Grier, & Hunley, 2004, and NASP, 2017). However, school psychologists are not the only school professionals with significant shortages. Special education teachers, and teachers in general, had an estimated shortage of 64,000 teachers in the 2015-2016 school year (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016). Sutcher et al. (2016) proposed that “annual teachers shortages could increase to as much as 112,000 by 2018 and remain close to that level thereafter.” Shortages in school psychologists are problematic due to their unique levels of expertise regarding the combination of education and mental health. Additionally, “students who live under adverse social conditions or who are from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds may have additional needs that schools struggle to address” (NASP, 2017).

As the number of students increases who require supports and services from school psychologists, while the level of school psychologists employed in the school setting decreases, schools will be ill-equipped and/or unable to meet the needs of their students. Contributing factors to the shortage of school psychologists include a variety of reasons. One factor includes the failure of school psychology graduate programs to keep pace with the demand of the profession. Over nearly 40 years, graduate programs in school psychology have only increased by 9% (Rossen & von der Embse, 2014). Additionally, a significant percentage of school psychologists are likely to retire soon – nearly 20% (Castillo et al., 2014), and more school psychologists (16%) have expressed interest in leaving the profession soon or immediately (Bocoi, Weisz, & Lefkowitz, 2016). NASP (2016) proposed a three-part resource guide to respond to the challenges in addressing shortages in school psychology. They include an emphasis on recruitment, respecialization, and retention.

Training Requirements and Professional Development Expectations

School psychologists are required to complete a specialized training program and maintain ongoing professional development to provide services to students as a licensed professional. These professionals must complete initial training in a graduate program for school psychology that will yield a specialist-level or doctorate in psychology.

Accordingly, to earn admission into a school psychology graduate program, individuals must have a bachelor's degree and any identified undergraduate prerequisites required by the program (NASP, "How to Select the Best Graduate Program for You," 2020). NASP maintains a minimum set of requirements for school psychology training, including:

- A minimum of three years of full-time graduate study (or the equivalent) beyond the bachelor's degree, involving at least 60 graduate semester or 90 graduate quarter hours (the specialist level)
- An internship one academic year in length (included in the three full years of study) consisting of at least 1,200 clock hours of supervised practice, 600 of which must be in a school setting
- Coursework and experiences as prescribed by the National Association of School Psychologists

Each state also maintains an established set of requirements for licensure and certification as a school psychologist. These requirements must be satisfied and maintained on the basis and increment as determined by the respective State. In the State of Texas, the Texas State Board of Examiners of Psychologists (TSBEP) acts as the licensing and governing state agency that oversees and regulates the practice of psychology. They oversee four groups of licensees: Licensed Psychologists,

Provisionally Licensed Psychologists, Licensed Psychological Associates, and Licensed Specialists in School Psychology (LSSP). In the State of Texas, TSBEP prohibits the use of the term “School Psychologist” unless the individual has a doctoral degree.

TSBEP is authorized by the Psychologists’ Licensing Act to both establish and enforce rules. The requirements established to become an LSSP in the State of Texas are defined in Board rule 463.9, which was recently amended in February 2019, include:

- Requires completion of a training program in school psychology approved/accredited by the American Psychological Association or the National Association of School Psychologists, or a graduate degree in psychology with specified course work.
- Requires a formal internship of at least 1200 hours, of which 600 must be in a public school.
- Requires passage of the Praxis School Psychology Examination.
- Requires passage of the Jurisprudence Examination (TSBEP, “Act and Rules of the Board,” 2019)

TSBEP requires all licensees to renew their license to practice psychology on a biennial basis, including school psychologists/LSSPs. Board rule 461.11 requires licensees to complete at least 40 hours of professional development during the two-year renewal period. As these hours must be related to the practice of psychology, at least 6 hours must be in the area(s) of ethics, Board Rules of Conduct, or professional responsibility. Additionally, at least 6 hours must be completed in the area of cultural diversity. TSBEP provides examples of what could be considered cultural diversity, including disability, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, language, national origin, race,

religion, culture, sexual orientation, and social-economic status. If licensees do not complete and submit the required professional development hours as according to Board rule 461.11, their license will become delinquent and they will not be permitted to practice psychology in the State of Texas.

Tools and Techniques Used by School Psychologists

Traditional school psychologists provide services and support in three primary areas, including assessment, intervention, and consultation. As current trends indicate the significant majority of school psychologists provide assessment services, with a minimal amount providing intervention and consultative services, the assessment will serve as the focus of this section.

Assessment. Cohen, Swerdlik, and Phillips (1996) define psychological assessment as “the gathering and integration of psychology-related data to make a psychological evaluation, accomplished through the use of tools such as tests, interviews, case studies, behavioral observation, and specially designed apparatuses and measurement procedures” (p. 6). School psychologists facilitate the assessment of individual children. They may conduct student assessments as the sole practitioner, or as part of a multi-disciplinary team. Psychological assessments are initiated through a request or referral process. This process may vary, but they typically require the involvement of school teams who have analyzed data to determine the nature of the referral or the referral question. Referrals may also be requested by a parent, and do not require that any intervention support or services have been provided to students before its consideration.

Upon acceptance of the referral, if a psychological assessment is conducted, best practices involve the school psychologist obtaining informed consent from a parent or guardian of a student. Informed consent assumes that the parent or guardian are both aware of the proposed assessment, its scope, potential outcomes, and are informed of their legal rights. Additionally, informed consent should allow parents or guardians an opportunity to ask clarifying questions and to receive the information in their native or chosen language.

Once informed consent is secured, the school psychologist either independently or as a part of a multi-disciplinary team conducts the assessment of an individual student. The school psychologist is tasked with using professional judgment regarding the types of assessment instruments and/or tools to be used, whether assessing in the area of sociological, emotional/behavioral, intellectual, achievement, or adaptive functioning. These assessment instruments and tools may be limited due to what has been purchased and/or permitted for use in a respective school district. However, school psychologists generally use clinical judgment to determine which of the available assessment tools will be used to conduct a student assessment. These tools may include intellectual/achievement assessment instruments, psychological protocols of individual rater forms, sociological interview forms, and computerized assessment instruments. Testing instruments undergo a series of norm referencing processes that identify the student groups in which the test results were used to norm and validate the assessment instrument. School psychologists are ethically responsible for verifying that the assessment instruments used to test individual students are appropriate based on their study norms.

School psychologists are also responsible for accurately scoring and interpreting the results of each assessment. While assessment instruments are generally equipped with guidance manuals that instruct assessment administrators on the parameters of scoring and interpreting the results of the instrument protocols, a significant amount of clinical judgment is required to analyze the results and formulate recommendations accordingly. Some assessment results may present with conflicting or inconclusive findings that the school psychologist must interpret using their expertise. School psychologists must also work as part of a multi-disciplinary team, when applicable, to ensure their findings are a part of a cohesive report of an individual student. Working in collaboration with additional assessment staff, school psychologists must endeavor to present a clear illustration of an individual student's academic, behavioral, social, and adaptive profile with corresponding recommendations.

School psychologists often utilize observations, interviews, and reviews of existing information to inform their student evaluations. Observations and interviews may range from highly structured protocols to informal processes and questions created by the school psychologist. Likewise, school psychologists are provided significant latitude in the determination of what information to include or exclude in assessment reports regarding existing student information, including medical history, sociological information, and previous assessment results. Ultimately, school psychologists carry a high degree of authority in the determination of the results and recommendations of an individual student assessment.

When a decision to change the placement of a student with disabilities is proposed due to the student's violation of the school code of conduct, IDEA requires that a

Manifestation Determination Review (MDR) meeting must be held. School psychologists are expected to conduct an MDR evaluation that will include an investigation to identify if the school: 1) failed to implement the Individual Education Plan (IEP), or 2) the student conduct is directly related to their disability. School psychologists generally utilize statements from involved parties, review of student academic and behavioral progress, and any additional relevant information to present findings to the MDR committee. The results of these informal processes to present findings significantly contribute to the determination of student outcomes of disciplinary placement and/or review of special education supports and services.

Professional Development of School Psychologists. School psychologists are tasked with the responsibility of supporting the emotional, behavioral, intellectual, achievement, and adaptive functioning of students in the school setting. These supports from school psychologists manifest through their contributions to schools in their work of assessments, interventions, and consultations. As individual professionals and/or working with a multidisciplinary team, school psychologists lend their expertise to support decisions made that may significantly impact short and long-term student outcomes. Accordingly, school psychologists must employ ongoing training and professional development throughout their careers.

In addition to the initial training expectations that school psychologists are expected to complete as part of their training program, a need for continued professional development remains. School psychologists engage in professional development for a variety of reasons. Some may participate based on the notion that as novice practitioners, they recognize the need to learn beyond the basics of their initial training. Other school

psychologists understand the need to keep pace with the evolving field of psychology to remain relevant and avoid professional obsolescence. Yet other school psychologists may simply desire to satisfy the ongoing and professional development requirements mandated by their licensing board, to retain their credentials. Either way, the ongoing training and professional development of school psychologists are considered an ethical tenant and obligation that centers on the concept of life-long learning in the profession.

In 1975, NASP established its first professional development program (Batsche, 1990). It began as a voluntary system that consisted of various types of professional development activities that could result in an earned certificate of completion (Armistead, 2008). In 1984, after limited numbers of school psychologists participated in the program and numerous states required continued professional development for the basis of license renewal, NASP concluded the program (p. 1976). In 1987, NASP developed its National School Psychology Certification System. Accordingly, NASP (2000) describes continuing professional development as “a process in which school psychologists actively participate and engage in activities designed to continue, enhance, and upgrade their professional training and skills and to help ensure quality service provision” (p. 59).

TSBEP requires all licensees to renew their license to practice psychology on a biennial basis, including school psychologists/LSSPs. Effective February 2019, Board rule 461.11 requires licensees to complete at least 40 hours of professional development during the two-year renewal period. Before this date, licensees were required to complete at least 20 hours of professional development annually. As these hours must be related to the practice of psychology, at least 6 hours must be in the area(s) of ethics,

Board Rules of Conduct, or professional responsibility. Additionally, at least 6 hours must be completed in the area of cultural diversity. TSBEP provides examples of what could be considered cultural diversity, including disability, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, language, national origin, race, religion, culture, sexual orientation, and social-economic status. If licensees do not complete and submit the required professional development hours as according to Board rule 461.11, their license will become delinquent and they will not be permitted to practice psychology in the State of Texas.

With the U.S. public school student population increasing in diversity, training in culturally responsive practices for all school psychologists is critical (Castillo et al., 2012; Grapin et al., 2015). However, shortages in the field of school psychology and the contrasting demographics of those in the profession compared to the students served to pose significant challenges to culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students (NASP, 2018). While NASP and state licensing agencies have prioritized and/or required training in the areas of cultural diversity and social justice for school psychologists, studies reveal that CLD students “benefit from exposure to educators who look like them” (Reschly, 2000). According to NASP (2018), school psychologists have improved their training in “culturally sensitive practices” and other researchers have affirmed that “training can increase the effectiveness of school psychologists in meeting the needs of CLD students” (Jones, 2014). Regardless, researchers acknowledge that “the increase in the proportion of school psychologists from diverse backgrounds has not kept pace with the increase in CLD students in our nation’s public schools” (Curtis et al, 2012; Grapin, Lee, & Jaafar, 2015). Based on results from the NASP 2015 Membership Survey, Part 1, the majority of school psychologists remain White (87%). However, “Overall, changes

in reported race/ethnicity over time reflect a steady increase in diversity, with a 7% increase in non-White school psychologists since 1990, when 94% of respondents were White” (NASP, 2018).

Additionally, Walcott & Hyson (2018) reported that school psychologists appear to collectively have limited access to professional development and mentoring. They assert that less than half (49.5%) of the respondents indicated that they “received systematic professional support, mentoring, and/or peer supervision for their professional activities.” Also, the majority of respondents (64.5%) endorsed limited time to participate in professional development activities outside those provided by their employment district. Because the majority (78.4%) indicated they did not receive financial reimbursement to cover the costs of their participation in professional development activities, more than 80% indicated cost reimbursement “affected their decision about whether to attend a conference or other professional development event.” Ultimately, they affirm the need for strategies to better match the needs of students served by school psychologists through the intentional recruitment of diverse professionals, especially in special education programs.

Relationship between Mental Health and Academic Achievement

Research evidence has found that mental health and academic achievement are interrelated (Jones, Brown, & Aber, 2011; Moilanen, Shaw, & Maxwell, 2010). Social-emotional learning (SEL) has been shown to increase the academic competencies of students by fostering positive mental health in students (Brackett, Rivers, Reyes, Salovey, 2012; Denham & Brown, 2010; McCormick, Capella, O’Connor, & McClowry, 2015). As a result, academic achievement and SEL have a reciprocal relationship (Datu & King,

2018). When the greater emphasis is placed on SEL, academic achievement has a greater and more positive impact (Zhai, Raver, Jones, 2015). Recently, school psychologists have been more involved in addressing concerns regarding the mental and behavioral health of students. NASP Strategic Goals for 2017-2022 include a focus on mental and behavioral health providers to “Advance the role of school psychologists as qualified mental and behavioral health providers (NASP, 2017).”

NASP (2020), based on the works of Defoe, Farrington, & Loeber (2013), asserts “The cascading effects between mental health and academic functioning can lead to spiraling negative effects.” Mental health diagnoses are generally categorized into internalizing or externalizing factors. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5) defines internalizing factors as disorders with anxiety, depressive, and somatic prominent symptoms. The DSM-5 defines externalizing factors as disorders with impulsive, disruptive conduct, and substance use symptoms. Upon the annual assessment of externalizing and internalizing problems, peer victimization, and academic achievement, externalizing problems were determined to result in both academic underachievement and increased experiences of peer victimization equally in girls and boys (van Lier et al., 2012). Peer victimization, as defined by the van Lier et al. (2012) study included examples of being called names, left out of play, teased, and/or physically assaulted. Specifically, the study signaled a conclusion of “a moderate role of social and academic failure in the joint development of externalizing and internalizing problems among young elementary school children.”

Bettencourt, Gross, & Ho (2016) conducted a study for the Baltimore Education Research Consortium to evaluate two cohorts of students from kindergarten through their

early first years of elementary school. The study that “by third grade, students assessed as not socially and behaviorally ready in kindergarten were significantly more likely to be retained in grade, receive services and supports through an IEP or 504 plan, and be suspended or expelled.” Findings revealed that male students were identified as significantly more likely to lack social, behavioral, and academic readiness when compared to female students. Among the study recommendations to address the lack of student school readiness, Bettencourt, Gross, & Ho (2016) identified the need for the availability of additional services and supports, and the allocation of “staff time to address behavioral incidents.”

Self-perceptions of students are significant factors when considering the outcome links between mental health and academics (NASP, 2020). Results from a multi-informant study conducted by Wang et al., (2014), concluded that mental health, a significant component of school climate, has a reciprocal relationship with academic achievement as evidenced by GPAs. When a school climate is poor, lower GPAs in both girls and boys result. When accounting for family structure, lower GPAs remain when the school climate is poor (O’Malley, Voight, Renshaw, & Eklund, 2014). In its summary of selected research linking mental health, including social-emotional competence, and academic achievement, NASP (2020) finds that:

Social-emotional programs were the most effective programs at addressing mental health concerns, compared to ones focusing on student behavior or teacher-student relationships, and they were shown to have the strongest effect on academic outcomes when they had teacher-focused components.

As school psychologists positioned to be salient contributors to both the mental and academic health of students, the profession must increase overall competency in this area.

School Discipline and Disproportionality in Special Education

Racial and socioeconomic disproportionality in the administration of school discipline has been widely researched, proven, and documented. Research findings regarding disproportionality in school discipline have been consistently evidenced in national, state, and local data. As more than ample evidence-based research exists that supports the significant educational, economic, and emotional disparities that correlate with cultural differences, school psychologists must carefully consider their role in the process of actively contributing to this dynamic through self-reflective practices that support cultural responsiveness.

The NASP (2018) research summary entitled *Effective School Discipline Policies and Practices: Supporting Student Learning* notes:

Effective school discipline policies and practices are critical to promoting students' successful learning and well-being. They strengthen students' behavioral skills by addressing the cause of their misbehaviors while preserving the integrity of the learning environment, ensuring the safety and dignity of all students and staff, and fostering progress toward long-term learning and behavioral goals. There are many barriers to effective school discipline, however, including the widespread use of punitive approaches and inconsistent policies and practices that students view as unfair and that often disproportionately impact minorities and students with disabilities.

Data from the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights regarding school climate and safety indicate that in 2015-16, nearly 2.7 million K-12 students received at least one out-of-school suspension (OSS) and another 127,000 students received expulsions, with or without educational services. These findings also revealed that students with disabilities and racial minorities were disproportionately represented in these school disciplinary practices. An unfortunate but common practice in many schools includes the criminalization of student misbehavior. Rosenberg, Bradshaw, & Leaf (2009) assert that despite years of investigation and reporting on the disproportionate representation of CLD students in office discipline referrals and special education, little progress has been made in reducing the documented disparities. Accordingly, the study recommends the engagement of school personnel in “the identification of cultural inconsistencies in disciplinary practices, and develop and maintain culturally responsive practices that facilitate improvements in student behavior.”

Skiba et al. (2011) examined how discipline practices in schools affect the social quality of each educational environment, and the availability of children to achieve academic and social gains considered essential for success in a 21st-century society. Findings that indicate an increased likelihood of minority students receiving office referrals, suspensions, and/or expulsions than their white peers for the same or similar problem behaviors. Accordingly, the authors present recommendations that include directed efforts in the areas of policy, practice, and research designed to address racial and ethnic disparities in school discipline. Wald & Losen (2003) present historical findings related to inequalities defined along lines of race and class that includes their corresponding impact on racial disparities. The study indicates that findings result in a

“prison track” or “school-to-prison pipeline.” Accordingly, the authors suggest that the school-to-prison pipeline is preventable, but challenging, requiring a “reversal of flow toward the school-to-graduation-to-postsecondary-education pipeline.”

In the State of Texas, Fabelo et al (2011) present an analysis of school and juvenile records from the largest public school system in the nation. Key findings were consistent with other studies, citing cultural disproportionality in-school suspensions, expulsions, classroom removals for disciplinary reasons, and higher rates of retention. Despite the compelling research-based on historically consistent data, punitive approaches to discipline persist in public school systems across the nation. Policies of zero tolerance have not demonstrated effectiveness in either reducing violence or the promotion of learning. Instead, they have been found to “inhibit academic achievement and increase problem behaviors and dropout rates among middle and secondary school students (APA, 2008). The Zero Tolerance Task Force and the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights found that zero-tolerance policies not only “negatively impact a disproportionately large number of minority students,” but identified that these practices are being used in prekindergarten settings. Based on a 2016 report, the Office of Civil Rights noted that 47% of African American preschoolers were suspended one or more times, despite comprising only 19% of preschool enrollment. In the past 50 years, the disparities between White and black students who receive OSS across the nation have nearly quadrupled (Losen, et al., 2015). Disproportionate administration of disciplinary measures like OSS and expulsion to students with disabilities and minority students outpace their enrollment in the public school system (USDOE, 2018). The results present

an increased likelihood of poor academic performance and high student failure (Magg, 2012).

The statistics regarding school discipline-specific to students with disabilities and minorities continue to be alarming. Eighty-five percent of youth incarcerated in juvenile justice facilities have disabilities, including a learning disability, emotional disturbance, or intellectual disability (National Council on Disability, 2015). Once incarcerated, the educational supports received by students with disabilities range from sub-par to absent (Burrell & Warboys, 2000). This lack of support keeps students further behind their peers upon release, setting them up for failure and recidivism (VanderPyl, 2015). The State of Texas ranked #1 in total numbers of days loss of instruction per 100 students due to OSS (TEA, 2018). A single OSS in 9th grade is associated with a 50% increase in dropping out of school and a 19% decrease in enrollment in postsecondary education (Balfanz et al., 2015). Controlling for other risk factors (e.g., antisocial behavior, deviant peer group), receiving an OSS is a significant predictor of future antisocial behavior (Lee et al., 2011). Additionally, the severity of exclusionary practices is related to the severity of long-term outcomes. OSS is more strongly related more to negative outcomes than ISS (Noltemeyer et al., 2015).

Interestingly, the effects of exclusionary discipline practices are not only seen for students receiving the exclusion. Schools with high rates of OSS have lower school-wide achievement and lower perceptions of school safety by the student body as a whole (APA, 2008). Additionally, exclusionary discipline practices are most often used for non-threatening problem behaviors. One study found that 34% of OSS were issued for non-violent behaviors, such as disruption or willful defiance (Losen et al., 2014). These

practices are also most frequently used with students of color, students with disabilities, and students in poverty and struggling academically. Losen et al. (2015) found that 7% of White students were suspended, while 11% of Hispanic/Latino students, 12% of American Indian students, and 23% of Black students were suspended. The study also found that 18% of students with disabilities were suspended and 1 in 5 districts in the country suspended over 50% of its Black males' students with disabilities.

Schollenberger (2015) presented that 1 in 3 students have been suspended at one point in their K-12 schooling. Among students that were suspended in August, September, or October, 72% received further discipline later in the year, indicating that there was little evidence of a deterrent effect for suspensions (Massar et al., 2015).

Repeatedly, research has found exclusionary discipline practices ineffective in changing student behaviors. While the practices can be reinforcing for school personnel, it generally leads to more inappropriate student behaviors. Green, Cohen, and Stormont (2018) propose that “Disproportionality is a moral and ethical concern that has been highlighted and designated a top priority several times by the U.S. Department of Education.” Despite the designation of a long-standing priority, education policymakers have only admired the problem by reviewing data and confirming that the phenomenon continues to exist. While most research studies present recommendations to address disproportionality, the breadth and scope of the issue are so broad and all-consuming, that many educators in a position to implement the proposed changes are reluctant to do so, or do so in a short-term manner.

Racial and ethnic disproportionality representation was identified among the top three priorities of the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA as defined by Congress (Albrecht,

Skiba, Losen, Chung, & Middelberg, 2012). Disproportionality, as defined by the IDEA reauthorization, requires states to monitor and report to the federal level any racial or ethnic disproportionate representation of 1) special education student disability identification, 2) special education placements, and 3) exclusionary discipline practices for individuals with disabilities. States have separate obligations to collect and examine data to determine whether significant disproportionality (SD) based on race or ethnicity is occurring in the state and the Local Education Agency (LEA), under 20 U.S.C. 1418 (d) and 34 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) §300.646, concerning the:

- identification of students with disabilities, ages 6-21, including identification of students with particular impairments; (Texas applies 3-21) (49 categories)
- placement of students in particular educational settings (14 categories);
- incidence, duration, and type of disciplinary actions occurring for students, including suspensions and expulsions (35 categories).

The Texas Education Agency (TEA) established the LEA risk ratio criteria for significant disproportionality of 2.5. LEAs identified with significant racial or ethnic disproportionality above the risk ratio of 2.5 are mandated to use 15% of its Part B federal grant funds on research supported coordinated early intervention services (CEIS). According to Skiba et al. (2008), LEAs should plan to review their local policies, practices, and procedures to resolve their disproportionality. However, Green, Cohen, & Stormont (2018) present that “administrators may find this last step daunting due to a lack of resources detailing how to begin reducing the disparities found within their schools.”

According to TEA, the required analysis and calculations that define significant disproportionality may occur in any of the 98 total categories. There are 7 race/ethnicity categories, 6 disability areas, 2 placement settings, and 5 disciplinary removal actions. A TEA administrator acknowledged in a panel presentation (Edwards, Finger, Webb, & Percy, 2020) at a state conference regarding disproportionality, during which the author was a presenting co-panelist, that discipline comprises 2/3 of all significant disproportionality identified in the State of Texas. The state data presented are consistent with a documented history of rates of discipline disproportionality by race/ethnicity that has increased over time.

Table 2: Significant Disproportionality (SD) Categories

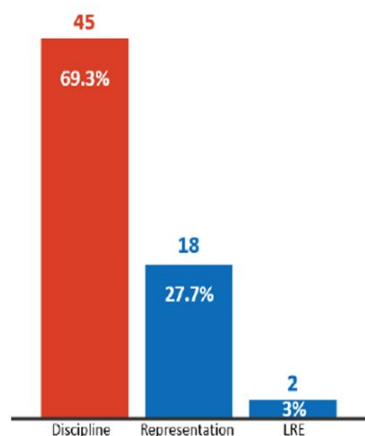
Racial/Ethnic	Disability Areas (Children ages 3-21)	Placement Settings (Children 6-21)	Discipline Removal Actions
Hispanic/Latino	Intellectual Disabilities	Regular class less than 40 percent of the day	OSS and expulsions of 10 days or fewer
American Indian or Alaska Native	Specific Learning Disabilities	Separate schools and residential facilities	OSS and expulsions of more than 10 days
Asian	Emotional Disturbance		ISS and expulsions of 10 days or fewer
Black or African American	Speech or Language Impairments		ISS and expulsions of more than 10 days
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	Other Health Impairments		Total disciplinary removals (ISS, OSS, expulsion, and DAEP)
White	Autism		
Two or more races			

Source: Texas Education Agency

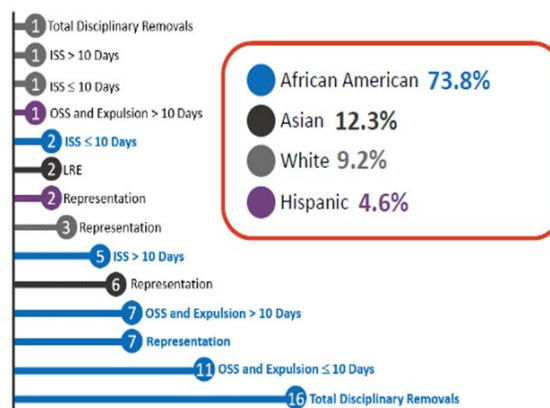
Figure 1: Texas Education Agency Significant Disproportionality Year 3 Data

Significant Disproportionality Year 3 Data

Discipline comprises more than 2/3 of significant disproportionality



Almost three-fourths of all SD occurrences included African American students.



Disaggregate of Significant Disproportionality (SD) 3 Data (2019-20 Reporting Year)

Figure 2: Required and Recommended LEA Actions for Significant Disproportionality

REQUIRED SD (Year 3)	Expected/Recommended SD (RP), SD (Year 2), or SD (Year 1),
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Review and, if appropriate, revision of policies, practices, and procedures to ensure compliance with IDEA; 2. publicly report on the revision of policies, practices, and procedures; and 3. set aside 15 percent of its IDEA, Part B (sections 611 and 619) funds to provide comprehensive coordinated early intervening services (CCEIS) to address factors contributing to the significant disproportionality. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review Sources of Data • Identify Priority Areas • Develop Problem Statement(s) • Conduct Root Cause Analysis • Define Annual Goal(s) • Develop Strategies for Implementation • Define Implementation Activities • Monitor and Report Progress – Internal/External

According to Skiba (2002), the persistent and unresolved issue of minority disproportionality in special education provides a strong rationale for ensuring that assessment is culturally appropriate and sensitive. In the quantitative and qualitative study presented by Kerns (2005), school psychologists responded to a paper-and-pencil survey about their perceptions of the disproportionate representation of black students in

special education. Because school psychologists are often considered “doorkeepers of special education,” a salient goal of the study was to understand their beliefs. The results of the study indicated that respondents identified principle factors of the disproportionate number of black students in special education as “lack of parent involvement and broadly defined cultural disadvantage, the failures of both regular and special education systems, and pressures from parents and teachers to place African American students.”

Bias and Equity. Researchers have categorized bias in two main forms: explicit bias and implicit bias (McIntosh, Girvan, Horner, & Smolkowski (2014). Explicit racial bias is defined as a form of “conscious discrimination against other groups in ways that perpetuate inequities.” Due to their conscious nature, these types of biases should be addressed directly through policy (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Conversely, “implicit bias is a form of unconscious and unintended discrimination that includes overreliance on stereotypes to make decisions” (PBIS, 2015).

A pattern where disproportionality is consistently high across all situations indicates the effects of explicit bias or systematic discrimination. A pattern where disproportionality is higher in some situations and not as high in others may indicate the effects of implicit bias, the unconscious and unintended use of stereotypes in decision making. (Lai, Hoffman, Nosek, & Greenwald, 2013)

All individuals possess implicit biases. They include both positive and negative attitudes that operate outside of conscious awareness. Implicit bias is most likely to impact behavior when conditions are vague, complex or unfamiliar, a fast decision is required, when multitasking, or when personal resources are depleted (Gilliam, et al., 2016).

McIntosh et al. (2014) describe the situations that generally lead to disproportionality as “vulnerable decision points” based on potential bias influencing the decisions to either create a student office referral or suspension. Accordingly, the identification of these vulnerable decision points is critical to facilitate intervention strategies that will successfully reduce disproportionality. Subjective student behaviors in classrooms have been found to yield more biased decision-making practices by school staff, particularly at the beginning of the school day (Smoklowski, Girvan, McIntosh, Nese, & Horner, 2016). While these patterns may vary from school to school, school teams interested in addressing discipline disproportionality must investigate accordingly (McIntosh, Ellwood, McCall, & Girvan, 2018). The utilization of a “self-review routine just before making a discipline decision may neutralize the effects of implicit bias” (Lai et al., 2013). Consequently, frequent self-assessments of adult decision-making practices may lead to less bias-based disciplinary actions.

School policies generally contain references to an explicit commitment to equity-related to both general and special education. However, policies must “have clear steps to achieve equity and accountability for taking these steps” (Devine, Forscher, Austin, & Cox, 2012). Clear, actionable procedures designed to enhance equity should serve as the basis for effective school policies. When hiring staff, applicants who demonstrate a commitment to educational equity should be vetted and evident. The *PBIS Disproportionality Policy Guide* (2015) published by the OSEP Technical Assistance Center recommends that equity policies include the following elements:

- Specific Commitment to Equity
- Family Partnerships in Policy Development

- Focus on Implementing Positive, Proactive Behavior Support Practices
- Clear, Objective Discipline Procedures
- Removal or Reduction of Exclusionary Practices
- Graduated Discipline Systems with Instructional Alternatives to Exclusion
- Procedures with Accountability for Equitable Student Outcomes

A school district in Texas has implemented the above steps regarding its disciplinary policies. The San Antonio Independent School District (SAISD) recently updated its 2019-20 Student Code of Conduct to reflect policies that align with equitable and restorative practices. Accordingly, SAISD included a Student Bill of Rights and a section that highlights a commitment and clear steps designed to achieve equity through responsive and restorative practices.

Cultural Responsiveness

Cultural responsiveness includes (a) holding high expectations for all students, (b) using students' cultures and experiences to enhance their learning, and (c) providing all students with access to effective instruction and adequate resources for learning (Klinger et al., 2005). Two strands of educational research, with distinct differences, when compared to multicultural education, have emerged to address how to effectively teach diverse student learners. Geneva Gay (1975, 1980, 2002, 2010, 2013) focused on culturally responsive teaching with an emphasis on teacher practice. Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994, 1995, 2006, 2014) focused on "teacher posture and paradigm" through culturally relevant pedagogy (Aronson & Laughter, 2016). Despite differences in their concepts regarding teaching and pedagogy, both culturally responsive teaching and

culturally relevant pedagogy are undergirded by the foundational underpinnings of social justice and social change within the classroom setting.

Gay (2010) defined culturally responsive teaching “as using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them” (p. 31). Culturally responsive teaching rests on six dimensions:

- Culturally responsive teachers are socially and academically empowering by setting high expectations for students with a commitment to every student’s success;
- Culturally responsive teachers are multidimensional because they engage cultural knowledge, experiences, contributions, and perspectives;
- Culturally responsive teachers validate every student’s culture, bridging gaps between school and home through diversified instructional strategies and multicultural curricula;
- Culturally responsive teachers are socially, emotionally, and politically comprehensive as they seek to educate the whole child;
- Culturally responsive teachers are transformative of schools and societies by using students’ existing strengths to drive instruction, assessment, and curriculum design;
- Culturally responsive teachers are emancipatory and liberating from oppressive educational practices and ideologies as they lift “the veil of presumed absolute authority from conceptions of scholarly truth typically taught in schools.” (Gay, 2010, p. 38)

Gay (2013) asserted that the four essential actions needed to implement culturally responsive teaching include:

- 1) Replacement of deficit perspectives of students and teachers,
- 2) Increase of teacher confidence and competence in culturally responsive teaching by increasing teacher awareness and understanding of critics to its implementation,
- 3) Support teacher understanding of how and why differences and culture are essential to culturally responsive teaching, and
- 4) Ensure teachers are making “pedagogical connections within the context in which they are teaching” (Aronson & Laughter, 2016).

Ladson-Billings (1994) defined culturally relevant pedagogy as one “that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (pp. 16–17). Ladson-Billings (1995) provide an outline of culturally relevant pedagogy based on three components:

- Culturally relevant pedagogues think in terms of long-term academic achievement and not merely end-of-year tests. After later adopters of culturally relevant pedagogy began to equate student achievement with standardized test scores or scripted curricula, Ladson-Billings (2006) clarified what more accurately described her intent: “‘student learning’—what it is that students know and can do as a result of pedagogical interactions with skilled teachers” (p. 34).
- Culturally relevant pedagogues focus on cultural competence, which “refers to helping students to recognize and honor their own cultural beliefs and

practices while acquiring access to the wider culture, where they are likely to have a chance of improving their socioeconomic status and making informed decisions about the lives they wish to lead” (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 36).

Culturally relevant pedagogues understand that students must learn to navigate between home and school, and teachers must find ways to equip students with the knowledge needed to succeed in a school system that oppresses them (Delpit, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Urrieta, 2005).

- Culturally relevant pedagogues seek to develop sociopolitical consciousness, which includes a teacher’s obligation to find ways for “students to recognize, understand and critique current and social inequalities” (Ladson-Billings, 1995b, p. 476). Sociopolitical consciousness begins with teachers recognizing sociopolitical issues of race, class, and gender in themselves and understanding the causes before then incorporating these issues in their teaching.

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) promotes a commitment to cultural competence and culturally responsive practices. NASP defines these practices as “an essential tool that informs all professional activities and an area of skill that must be reinforced through professional preparation and training programs” (Ortiz, Flanagan, & Dynda, 2008). They present that “competence in being able to provide psychological services to children and families from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds is not merely a desirable skill but a necessity” (p. 1721). The NASP Best Practices in School Psychology (2008) support the emphasis of three areas in cultural competence: knowledge, communication, and awareness.

Knowledge encompasses understanding both school culture and family culture. Because learning in the school setting goes well beyond what is taught in books, the impact and influence of school culture should not be minimized (Ortiz, Flanagan, & Dynda, 2008). Schools set the tone for how students engage with one another, how staff engages with students, how staff engages with each other, and how staff engages with parents and the community. School culture permeates consciously and subconsciously and is generally pioneered and perpetuated by campus leadership. Politics even influences the school culture. The former public education federal policy of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) set a course for school-level accountability of the learning and progress of every student. However, because of the scrutiny associated with the degree of accountability, and schools identified as missing the mark of NCLB, school culture of some campuses and districts shifted toward test-preparation centers instead of institutions of learning. Ortiz, Flanagan, & Dynda (2008) note that “Best practices dictate that school psychologists fully understand the learning context that exists in every school and recognizes that the context will differentially affect the learning and development of every student.”

Family systems can be categorized as cultures unique to themselves. For school psychologists to appropriately design and select educational supports and services for students, they must fundamentally understand how family culture operates (Ysseldyke et al., 2006). School psychologists are positioned to regularly interact with families, particularly when a child of the family either has or is suspected to have a disability. “School psychologists may find themselves in a better position to provide culturally relevant services to families of different cultural backgrounds if they can understand the

fundamental cultural aspects of family systems and function accordingly” (Ortiz, Flanagan, & Dynda, 2008). Tseng & Hsu (1991) propose that the most salient aspects for school psychologists know of family systems include “marriage, residence, kinship, structure, power, and roles.” Ortiz, Flanagan, & Dynda (2008) state that equally important are concepts of “economic, political, ecological, social, and historical conditions that play a role in shaping a family’s unique cultural patterns.”

Communication in the field of school psychology, as in many other fields, is critical to the provision of services to children and families. School psychologists are more apt to deliver more effective interpersonal interactions with families that speak the same language (Ortiz, Flanagan, & Dynda, 2008). While much attention and values are often placed on verbal exchanges, nonverbal interactions are generally overlooked in comparison to importance. Nonverbal interactions and gestural cues may vary significantly from family to family – culture to culture. Contrary to support that can be provided through language interpreters to remove barriers for cultural differences, nonverbal communication requires the use of a general knowledge base of cultural differences and “perhaps even some cultural training from an individual familiar with the culture of the child and/or family to be served” (Rhodes et al., 2005). Ortiz, Flanagan, & Dynda (2008) assert the importance of observations of family communication patterns by school psychologists to best “determine what level of context the family uses to communicate” (p. 1732). The use of interpreters, while at times is necessary, may contribute to difficulty in facilitating effective translation between all parties. Ultimately, school psychologists must aim to understand the best manner in which to communicate with families based on the perspective of the family’s worldview.

The practice of cultural awareness involves the self-assessment of “how one’s values, beliefs, experiences, attitudes, languages, and customs have been molded by culture” (Ortiz, Flanagan, & Dynda, 2008). This awareness is critical to the ability to effectively working with diverse families as the process allows the recognition of differences in one’s view versus those of others. School psychologists have an ethical responsibility to value the differences in the cultures of the students and families served. Ortiz, Flanagan, & Dynda (2008) propose:

Clearly, the extent to which a school psychologist’s own cultural values differ from those of other cultures as well as the extent to which adhering strictly to those values affects service delivery to diverse children and families is a necessary requirement for engaging in best practices. Honest and genuine cultural self-awareness and appraisal provides the foundation from which the cultural elements of others can be best understood and brought to bear on improving personal and working relationships with diverse students and families. (p. 1734)

They add that when gathering student and family data, school psychologists should adhere to the following principles: 1) Establish rapport and build trust, 2) Identify the presenting concerns, 3) Learn the family system, 4) Evaluate one’s own cultural biases, and 5) Determine the influence of previous cultural information. Ultimately, the application of culturally responsive practices in school psychology is an “intentional and challenging process that requires individuals to take risks, lower their defenses, and set aside their own beliefs in an attempt to appreciate another’s point of view” (p. 1736).

Conclusion

School psychologists bear the professional and ethical responsibility to monitor the degree to which they employ the ongoing practice of cultural responsiveness in the school setting. Research indicates that several factors of consideration influence this dynamic, including the training and professional development of school psychologists, the relationship between mental health and academic achievement, school discipline, including disproportionality in special education, bias and equity, and culturally responsive practices. As school psychologists wield a significant amount of direct and indirect influence in this regard and given the history of significant disproportionality in the U.S. public school system, this research study examines several important factors that contribute to the overall perceptions of school psychologists as it relates to culturally responsive practices.

Chapter III

Methodology

Currently practicing school psychologists in the State of Texas are required to maintain continuing education in the area of multicultural competence. However, current school psychology graduate programs have adjusted their training to reflect and address the controversy regarding the deficit approach of cultural competence and have thus shifted to cultural responsiveness. Accordingly, school psychology graduate training programs significantly emphasize the promotion of equity, diversity, restorative approaches, and culturally responsive assessment and practices as a foundation of current training programs. As school psychologists wield a significant amount of direct and indirect influence in this regard and given the history of significant disproportionality in the U.S. public school system, this research study aimed to address the perceptions of school psychologists regarding cultural responsiveness.

Research Design

This research project was designed to assess the dispositions of three to six school psychologists regarding their perceptions and interpretations of culturally responsive practices. These school psychologists included three practicing school psychologists in school districts, with at least one school psychologist from a recent university-training program, all in a large urban metropolitan area. The dispositions of practicing school psychologists were predicted to be significantly different in interpretation than those who recently entered the profession of school psychology regarding their perceptions of culturally responsive practices. However, all school psychologists who participate in the

research project were predicted to collectively increase their self-awareness of culturally responsive practices upon their active participation and completion of the study.

Each study participant engaged in a total duration of three interactions. These interactions included the completion of a self-assessment, interview, and participation in a focus group session. The total duration of an individual subject's participation in the study was two (2) hours. This included approximately 30-minutes to complete one self-assessment, 30-minutes for an individual interview, and participation in a one-time 1-hour focus group. It took one-day to enroll all study subjects, as the criteria were explicit and the subjects were identified based on social networks. The investigator completed this study 1 week after its inception.

Target Population

A qualitative study involving triangulation analyzed the perceptions of school psychologists regarding cultural responsiveness. Accordingly, the research exclusively studied three currently practicing school psychologists who support students in large metropolitan school districts in the Greater Houston area. The minimum age of the participants was twenty-five years old. Subjects of the research study were screened based on the provision of:

- Proof of Licensed Specialist in School Psychology (LSSP) documentation as issued by the Texas State Board of Examiners of Psychologists (TSBEP) and current school year District ID badge, or
- Proof of enrollment in a university graduate training program for school psychology and current LSSP internship log documentation signed by their supervisor at a large urban school district.

The following special populations were excluded as subjects in the proposed research study:

- Adults unable to consent
- Individuals who are not yet adults (infants, children, teenagers)
- Pregnant women
- Prisoners
- Students for whom you have direct access to/influence on grades
- Economically and/or educationally disadvantaged persons

The research study did not involve individuals who were vulnerable to coercion or undue influence.

The total number of subjects accrued locally to complete all aspects of the study were three adult participants. However, six subjects initially enrolled in the study, but three did not complete all of the research procedures. The number of subjects was based on the concept of single-subject research, also known as single-case experiments. This type of research was applied because of its popularity in the fields of special education and counseling, which was the profession of the subjects as school psychologists providing counseling, assessment, and other related services to students who received special education support in the school setting. This research design was also useful when the researcher was attempting to change the behavior of an individual or a small group of individuals and wished to document that change. The researcher documented the perceptions of a small group of three school psychologists who participated in the research study that included a self-assessment tool, interview, and focus group. Changes in perceptions were documented in the group.

Research subjects were recruited based on personal and professional network connections. The researcher sought recommendations of participants from known others and solicited their “expert recommendations.” Preliminary meetings were scheduled with persons who possessed expertise in the field of school psychology, including Directors of Special Education in local school districts, to gain recommendations of currently practicing school psychologists to participate in the research study. Additionally, gatekeepers who held administrative positions or possessed in-depth information about school psychology, including professors of school psychology training programs, provided access and recommendations to current graduate students of school psychology to participate in the research study. Subjects of the potential study included currently practicing school psychologists in local school districts in the Greater Houston area, and current school psychology graduate students.

Procedures

A qualitative study involving triangulation analyzed the perceptions of school psychologists regarding culturally responsive practices. Informed consent was obtained from each research participant. Informed consent took place before the start of the research study and was conducted in person or via online conferencing, based on the discretion of the participant. A 24-hour waiting period was available between informing the prospective subject and obtaining the consent. The research study followed SOP: Informed Consent Process for Research (HRP-090) of the University of Houston IRB Committee.

Three school psychologists who supported students in a large metropolitan school district in the Greater Houston area were administered the Self-Assessment Checklist for

Personnel Providing Behavioral Health Services and Supports to Children and their Families. This self-assessment measurement tool with a Likert scale was completed individually and submitted to the researcher anonymously. This Likert scale self-assessment served as an instrument to examine school psychologists' perceptions of cultural responsiveness. The instrument was used to frame an interview protocol that was conducted with all participants to better understand school psychologist perceptions. The data collected from the individual interviews were analyzed to determine common patterns and emerging themes about beliefs about cultural responsiveness concerning school psychologists.

Focus group questions were developed based on the emerging themes from the individual interview data. Finally, all three research participants were invited to participate in a focus group to discuss their perception of their assessment results and overall experience. Qualitative findings of their collective dispositions regarding cultural responsiveness were reported. Qualitative methods included the researcher exploring identified themes as related to field notes and other data that provide triangulation.

Instruments

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) developed a self-assessment checklist, the Self-Assessment Checklist for Personnel Providing Services and Supports to Children and their Families (Goode, 2002). The Self-Assessment Checklist for Personnel Providing Services and Supports to Children and their Families includes 40 self-assessment questions that provoked cognitive awareness of the values and practices that fostered an environment for culturally competent practice (Jones, 2007). Principles of self-determination and cultural competence assured that consumers

were integrally involved in processes to plan, deliver, and evaluate the services they receive. These principles extended beyond the individual to the community as a whole. Self-assessment solicited and valued the experiences and perspectives of consumers and families who received services. Similarly, opinions were sought from key stakeholders and constituency groups within the broad integrated service delivery system.

An inclusive self-assessment process may forge alliances and partnerships that have long-lasting benefits for the organization and the larger community. Accordingly, individual practitioners, including practicing and entering or intern school psychologists were provided volunteer opportunities to complete a self-assessment instrument to assess their degree of cultural responsiveness. They also voluntarily participated in a focus group to provide qualitative data regarding their awareness of personal culturally responsive practices.

Research Questions

The primary research question of this study focused on addressing the following: How will practicing school psychologists across a variety of experience levels collectively inform their involvement in and interpret the importance of culturally responsive practices in their current role? Additional questions addressed in this study included: What constitutes relevant and applicable culturally competent education, training, and support for practicing school psychologists and special education staff? Are the culturally responsive practices of practicing school psychologists lower than entering school psychologists due to an emphasis on promoting diversity and cultural responsiveness in school psychology graduate training programs?

Data Collection

Data collected from the participant self-assessment measurement tool measured their perceptions of culturally responsive practices. This data supported the development of themes and patterns that were used to develop interview questions. Data gathered from individual interviews was used to guide the development of questions for the focus group session. Qualitative methods were used to identify themes that provide triangulation.

The research used study codes on data documents (e.g., completed self-assessment). All data collected and individual responses from research participants were identified individually for quality control. A separate document was kept that linked the study code to the subject's identifying information locked in a separate location with restricted access to the document. A copy of the data will be stored for three (3) years at the University of Houston at Farish Hall 236 and maintained by Dr. Cameron White. Upon the completion of the study, all data collected will be destroyed. Only the researcher will have access to the document containing subject study codes. The researcher was responsible for the receipt or transmission of the data. The researcher transmitted data locally through the use of electronic filing systems. However, the research did not engage in a multi-site study, and data will not be banked for future use.

Data Analysis

Collective assessment data were analyzed using qualitative methods. Question responses were grouped by category and assigned a numeric value based on the five response options of the Likert scale. Aggregate group scores were reported for each subsection of the study participants' assessments. Comparative analysis of the assessment

scores was conducted using data collected from the participant interviews, assessments, and focus group. Narrative information shared during all phases of the research study by each participant was analyzed and reported based on the research question.

Chapter IV

Results

The primary research question of this study focused on addressing the following: How will practicing school psychologists across a variety of experience levels collectively inform their involvement in and interpret the importance of culturally responsive practices in their current role? Additional questions addressed in this study included: What constitutes relevant and applicable culturally competent education, training, and support for practicing school psychologists and special education staff? Are the culturally responsive practices of practicing school psychologists lower than entering school psychologists due to an emphasis on promoting diversity and cultural responsiveness in school psychology graduate training programs?

School psychologists can leverage a substantial degree of subjectivity in their findings, conclusions, and recommendations that may greatly contribute to the determinations of identification, placement, and discipline of students with disabilities. Consequently, school psychologists wield a significant amount of direct and indirect influence regarding the identification, placement, and disciplinary consequences of students eligible for special education supports and services. Given the history of significant disproportionality in the U.S. public school system, several factors were important to examine that contributed to the overall perceptions of school psychologists as related to culturally responsive practices directly linked to student outcomes. Accordingly, the theoretical framework of the Critical Race Theory (CRT) and a review of the literature with a focus on themes that emerged based on this topic, were critical to the development of the study design that addressed the research questions.

CRT provided a historical and current perspective of the research study findings and established a broader context in which to deconstruct the understanding of the problem, purpose, significance, research questions, methodology, and data analysis. The themes that emerged were explored in a previous chapter, including the training and professional development of school psychologists, the relationship between mental health and academic achievement, disproportionality in special education, school discipline, bias and equity, and cultural competence and responsiveness. CRT and a review of literature based on these themes greatly contributed to the shaping of the research design and methodology of the research study. Accordingly, research participants engaged in three parts of the study, including the online completion of a self-assessment, interview, and focus group discussion. While, six participants submitted consent forms to participate in the research study, only three participants completed all aspects of the research study.

Participant Demographic Information

Informed consent was provided to six potential study participants to complete the research study. Five study participants completed the self-assessment, four completed the interview, and three completed the focus group discussion. Demographic information was collected during the self-assessment checklist portion of the research study. A corresponding participant code was identified and assigned based on participation in the study. All study participants were females. White females in the age range of 25-34 represented 60% of the study participants. The remaining participants were Black/African American and Hispanic. Most respondents indicated that they have practiced in the field of school psychology for 1-3 years. The remaining respondents endorsed 8-15 years of school psychology practice. All respondents indicated that they

were employed in school districts with more than 40,000 enrolled students. The majority of respondents identified their roles as serving as an itinerant school psychologist on a district assessment team. The other respondents endorsed their roles as campus-based staff.

Self-Assessment Checklist

Five research participants completed the online Self-Assessment Checklist for Personnel Providing Services and Supports to Children and their Families (Goode, 2002). The Self-Assessment Checklist for Personnel Providing Services and Supports to Children and their Families included 40 self-assessment questions designed to provoke cognitive awareness of the values and practices that foster an environment for culturally competent practice (Jones, 2007). Study participants responded to a series of statements on the self-assessment checklist based on the following categories: Physical Environment, Materials and Resources, Communication Styles, and Values and Attitudes. Participants responded to each statement using a Likert scale represented by the following statements: 1 – Things I do frequently, 2 – Things I do occasionally, and 3 – Things I do rarely or never. A fourth non-applicable (N/A) response option was added by the researcher with a zero associated on the Likert scale.

Physical Environment

In general, the majority of respondents indicated that their beliefs were frequently in line with the concepts of cultural responsiveness as evidenced by their selection of “Things I do frequently” in response to the item statements. However, the majority endorsed responses to reflect “occasional” or “rarely/never” when presented with items that inquired about their actual actions associated with culturally responsive practices.

All statements in the subgroup “Physical Environment, Materials and Resources” asked respondents to inform their actual practices regarding cultural responsiveness. The majority (60%) of research participants endorsed that they rarely or never displayed pictures, posters, and other materials that reflected the cultures and ethnic backgrounds of children and families. Similarly, while 20% of study participants reported that they frequently used videos, films, and other media resources, 60% of the respondents reported that they only used them occasionally.

Communication Styles

Study participants endorsed beliefs and some actions about communication styles that were consistent with the ideals of culturally responsive practices. Most respondents (60%) indicated that they either frequently or occasionally attempted to learn and use keywords with children who speak other languages or dialects other than English. They reported that they have done this in efforts to more effectively communicate with children during assessment administration, counseling, or other interventions. The majority of respondents (80%) also indicated they either frequently or occasionally attempted to determine any familial colloquialisms used by children and families that may have impacted assessment, counseling, or other interventions.

The vast majority of respondents (80%) endorsed that they used visual aids, gestures, and physical prompts in their interactions with children who had limited English proficiency. More than half (60%) of study participants indicated that they used bilingual staff members or trained/certified interpreters for assessment, counseling, and other interventions with children who have limited English proficiency. All participants reported that they did the following:

- Used bilingual staff members or trained/certified interpreters during assessments, counseling and intervention sessions, meetings, and for other events for families who required this level of assistance;
- Always kept in mind that limitation in English proficiency was in no way a reflection of their level of intellectual functioning and that their limited ability to speak the language of the dominant culture had no bearing on their ability to communicate effectively in their language of origin when they interacted with parents who had limited English proficiency; and
- Recognized the necessity to use alternatives to written communications for some families, as word of mouth as a preferred method of receiving information.

When they interacted with parents who had limited English proficiency, 60% of study participants informed that they always kept in mind that they may or may not be literate in their language of origin or English, while 80% endorsed that they ensured that all notices and communicate to parents were written in their language of origin.

Values and Attitudes

The last section of the self-assessment centered on concepts related to values and attitudes. Respondents were prompted to identify and endorse responses based on their values and attitudes related to beliefs and practices of cultural responsiveness as school psychologists. All study participants reported that they avoided imposing values that conflicted or were inconsistent with those of cultures or ethnic groups other than their own. However, only 20% of participants reported that they frequently discouraged children from using racial and ethnic slurs by helping them understand that certain words

can hurt others in group therapy or counseling situations. The majority of respondents endorsed that they frequently screened books, movies, and other media resources for negative cultural, ethnic, or racial stereotypes before sharing them with the children and their parents. However, the vast minority (20%) reported that they frequently intervened appropriately when they observed other staff members or parents within their program or agency who engaged in behaviors that showed cultural insensitivity, bias, or prejudice. All participants endorsed that they frequently understood and accepted that family is defined differently by different cultures (e.g., extended family members, fictive kin, godparents). Similarly, all respondents informed that they frequently accepted the family/parents as the ultimate decision-makers for services and supports for their children, even though their professional or moral viewpoints may differ.

Summary of Self-Assessment Checklist Findings

The majority of study participants (60%) endorsed that they frequently recognized and accepted that individuals from culturally diverse backgrounds may desire varying degrees of acculturation into the dominant culture. The majority (80%) also reported that they frequently accept and respect that male-female roles in families may vary significantly among different cultures (e.g., who makes major decisions for the family, play, and social interactions expected of male and female children). 80% of respondents endorsed that they frequently understand that age and life cycle factors must be considered in interactions with individual families (e.g., the high value placed on the decisions of elders or the role of the eldest male in families) and recognize that the meaning or value of education and special services may vary greatly among cultures. The same participants reported that they frequently recognized and understood that

beliefs and concepts of emotional well-being varied significantly from culture to culture, understood that beliefs about mental illness and emotional disability were culturally-based, and accepted that responses to these conditions and related treatment/interventions were heavily influenced by culture. They also endorsed that they frequently accepted that religion and other beliefs influenced how families respond to illnesses, disease, disability, and death, and recognized and accepted that folk and religious beliefs influenced a family's reaction and approach to a child born with a disability or later diagnosed with a physical/emotional disability or special health care needs. These respondents (80%) similarly endorsed that they frequently understood that families from different cultures had different expectations for their children for acquiring toileting, dressing, feeding, and other self-help skills, and accepted and respected that customs and beliefs about food, its value, preparation, and use were different from culture to culture. The majority (60%) of study participants informed that they either occasionally, rarely, or never sought information from family members or other key community informants that assisted in service adaptation to respond to the needs and preferences of culturally and ethnically diverse children and families they served. Finally, all respondents informed that they rarely or never advocated for the review of their school or district's mission statement, goals, policies, and procedures ensure that they incorporated principles and practices that promoted cultural diversity and cultural competence.

Research Interview

After the completion of the self-assessment instrument, study participants were invited to complete a series of interview questions. Participants were informed that they were selected to engage in the research interview based on their identification as someone

who had a great deal to share about school psychology in this area. They were also informed that the research project as a whole focused on the dispositions of school psychologists regarding culturally responsive practices, with a particular interest in understanding perspectives on the shift from multicultural competence and its implications in the field of practice. Participants were made aware that the study did not aim to evaluate their techniques or experiences. Rather, the focus of the study attempted to learn more about the perspectives of school psychologists as it related to their awareness of their role in cultural responsiveness and about corresponding psychological practices to help improve student learning in schools. The series of interview questions were categorized based on the following: 1) Interviewee Background, 2) Culturally Responsive Practices Perspective, 3) Assessment, 4) District and Discipline, and 5) Teaching and Learning. Four out of the five study participants who completed the self-assessment checklist opted to complete the research interview.

Interviewee Background. Based on information obtained in the Interviewee Background section of the interview, three of the four participants informed that they have worked as a school psychologist for less than five years. The remaining participants indicated they served as a school psychologist for more than 10 years. Study participants were asked to briefly describe their roles as it relates to school psychology (e.g., How are you involved in school psychology? How did you get involved?). The first participant indicated their current role as an LSSP on the initial intake team testing children ages 2 through 5. The participants added that she began her career as a speech-language pathologist assistant initially and moved over after a few years. The second participant informed that she supports the completion of psychological and psychoeducational

evaluations within her school district. She also shared that initially, she completed the research while enrolled in undergraduate school. As a result, she applied to school psychology graduate programs.

The third participant shared that she became an LSSP after taking a marked interest in AP psychology courses in high school. After pursuing a BA in Psychology, she explained that she quickly realized that the long hours and low pay of someone at a BA level were not in her best interest. Thus, she pursued a Master's program in a field she thought would be of interest but also would accommodate her goals of having a family and supporting herself financially. She informed that she has been an LSSP and served in multiple roles, all about child and adolescent mental health, over the last 13 years. However, she shared that her primary role has been as a campus-based LSSP at an elementary/middle school campus. This participant noted that she currently serves on a middle school campus of approximately 750 students.

The fourth participant explained that she currently serves at secondary campuses part-time as a contractual employee. In this capacity, she conducts consultation, counseling, MDRs, completes related correspondence (including behavioral goals, counseling goals, and BIPs), and participates in staffing and ARD meetings. This participant explained that she went into the school district setting as an LPC when there was a need for counseling following Hurricane Katrina. She noted that she learned about the LSSP licensure during her practicum experience. This participant expressed a love of the counseling field and accordingly, turned down the offer of being a Diagnostician following her counseling field experience. She mentioned that her desire to go into the school district to gain clarity in what and where the gaps were in the schools. However,

she noted that it was important for her to wait for an opportunity that allowed her to do what she loved, which was counseling.

Culturally Responsive Practices Perspectives. Participants were asked to describe their motivation to use culturally responsive practices as an LSSP. The first participant shared that she was primarily motivated by wanting to do the right things for children rather than evaluate them based on data that may or may not be relevant to their life. The second participant expressed that she was motivated to use culturally responsive practices as it allowed her to make informed decisions when completing an evaluation that provided valuable insight into possible functions of behavior. The third participant explained that she began her work in the field of school psychology in a very low SES area, primarily comprised of minority groups. She noted that working with people outside of her race, SES, religion, age, sex, etc. was gratifying; but most importantly, it opened her eyes to a whole world that she never knew existed. This participant expressed that she began to feel like people who did not "fit in" with the standard norm from which she was used to needing a voice. Accordingly, she began to feel like her career choice was her way of helping others and growing herself at the same time. As a result, this participant noted that she still uses her voice to speak for others who may not have the same opportunities. The fourth participant identified her motivation as the beautiful differences of people, accepting that you cannot know all especially if you do not ask or create a platform to understand, and the intriguing dynamics of cultural influences.

Participants were then asked to identify their current perspective regarding how culturally responsive practices relate to their field of practice. As appropriate, they were asked to explain if their perspective is it working with an explanation of why or why not.

The first participant shared that it is important to understand that there are vast differences, especially in very young children, about expectations of independence and social interactions across cultures. She added that this has come up during several evaluations that she has completed with her team. The second participant expressed that she did not think culturally sensitive practices were working. She explained that an overwhelming amount of students meet the IDEA disability criteria for Emotional Disturbance. From her perspective, the number of referrals for emotional disturbance is overwhelming due to the perspective of others.

The third participant had some conflict with the response to the question. She replied “Yes and No.” This participant explained that there is so much to learn because cultures are forever growing, changing, and developing. She shared her belief that the standard practices (understanding differences, respecting differences, etc.) are certainly helpful. However, when she considered things like assessment tools, normative data, etc., she realizes that we aren't advanced as we should be. This participant clarified that as a profession, school psychologists struggle to understand what culturally responsive practices are. She also noted that school psychologists are only required to complete 3 hours of CEUs on cultural competence every year. She emphatically shared, “Three hours! That's nothing.” The fourth participant seemed eager to respond to the question, stating “Good question!” She explained her belief that it is in the effort to understand and change old constructs that make it a work in progress. This participant clarified that culturally responsive practices are not a destination, but an ever-changing and evolving process as well as mindset. She continued by adding, “Influencing awareness is the first action step to change. What often prevents culturally responsive practices from not

working or suffocating its potential is fear, lack of compassion and empathy, judgment, privilege, security in old constructs and patterns, poor leadership, lack of self-awareness, not wanting to appear incompetent, as well as learned personal patterns, beliefs, and influences.”

Interview participants were asked to identify what resources are available to school psychologists for improving the practice and implementation of culturally responsive practices in schools. The participants noted a variety of resources, including annual ethics and diversity training, NASP and TASP communication and professional development opportunities, and resource manuals. Participants expressed similar responses when asked to identify rewards that school psychologists receive for engaging in culturally responsive practices and strategies. None of the participants identified tangible rewards for engaging in culturally responsive practices. They noted rewards may include potentially stronger evaluations that are culturally responsive, self-gratification, and happier and more invested parents and families. One participant identified the “intrinsic reward when you see a child or parent feel seen and understood or appreciative of the experience of the attempt to engage in those practices.”

Participants were asked if they saw a widening of the circle of school-based staff who implement culturally responsive practices in their district. Two participants expressed that they did see a widening of staff who are implementing culturally responsive practices. One participant shared that she works with multiple evaluators from diverse backgrounds and collaborates with them as needed. Also, she shared that the district she currently works in requires knowledge of different cultures to help influence the evaluation process. The remaining two participants indicated that they do not see a

widening of staff implementing culturally responsive practices. One of these participants identified that this dynamic may be related to the particular campus in which she is located. She added that “campus staff is sort of set in their ways around here.”

Participant responses varied when asked to identify any changes regarding culturally responsive practices in school psychology in their district/campus. One participant shared that she did not believe that change was happening in her district/campus. She stated, “I certainly attempt to collaborate with teachers, administrators, etc. about culturally appropriate recommendations, behaviors, values, etc. whenever I am working on individual cases. Some are receptive. Others are not.” Another participant stated that due to the nature of the diversity of the district, the staff is “focused to make adaptations.” Another participant shared that her district is advocating for addressing language concerns when completing an evaluation for second language learners. She added, “I have also noticed a bigger push in helping me understand when sociological/cultural factors influence the outcome of an evaluation. For example, a student does not qualify due to exposure to violence in the household.” Overall, interview participants expressed a lack of involvement in campus-based initiatives regarding the promotion of culturally responsive practices. While one participant was able to share some details of a campus-based initiative, the other three participants were unaware of any initiative taking place within their campus or district.

In response to the question posed regarding what kinds of networks the participants see with culturally responsive practices, three participants shared that they had not seen networks of that type. However, one participant identified that their campus has social networks on the web and administrative groups on campus. Interview

participants were also asked if they had observed a shift from the practice of multicultural competence to cultural responsiveness and what that looked like. One participant indicated that she had not observed a shift in practice. But another interview participant shared that she noticed an increased understanding and practice among her peers not to assume that cultural differences exist or do not, rather ask the family/child what is expected for the situation being discussed. Another participant noted, “Yes, in some instances.” She described a shift toward acceptance of the differences between people and their values, beliefs, and practices. She further explained that in her work environment, it looks like trying to understand differences and then putting those differences into practice. She identified her efforts to learn common introductions in other languages (Spanish and Vietnamese) to better communicate with some of the families she works with.

Participants were asked if they or their colleagues have encountered any resistance to the shift from multicultural competence to culturally responsive practices and how they handled it, if applicable. Three participants indicated that they had not experienced any resistance, but one participant shared that she had. She explained that she had a teacher state that “she didn’t care what was appropriate for the student in the home setting or his family culture as his behavior was not appropriate for her classroom.” The interview participant stated that she handled the situation by “having a real conversation and validating her thoughts and opinions as much as possible while still being a voice for the child and family.” The participant added that she also provided the teacher with examples of what was socially appropriate in her own home and how her children might not understand other approaches if they were not specifically taught.

Assessment of Culturally Responsive Practices. When participants were asked to share how they assessing whether students, parents, and staff receive culturally responsive support from them in your role as a school psychologist, three of the four participants indicated that they did not informally or formally assess this aspect. One participant identified that she typically asks if there is anything she needs to take into consideration. However, she noted that this is the only thing she does in this regard. Participants also identified that interviews, observations, and review of existing records are the assessment techniques that tell them the most about the degree of culturally responsive practices those whom they support receive. They were also asked to explain what kinds of assessment most accurately capture culturally responsive techniques and supports they use. One participant identified that play-based assessments when parents are present tend to help facilitate a conversation about expectations. She added, “My partner (speech pathologist) speaks another language, so we do many evaluations in her native language. This assists with understanding cultural considerations in that particular culture.” Other participants identified assessment tools of record reviews, interviews, and parent and school-wide satisfaction surveys. None of the interview participants indicated they had any involvement in evaluating culturally responsive practices at either the department or campus level. Similarly, none of the participants expressed awareness of how the assessment of culturally responsive practices contributed to the improvement of teaching and learning.

Interviewees were asked to identify their perspective of the major challenges and opportunities their district faces in attempting to shift from multicultural competence to culturally responsive practices. Regarding challenges, participants identified a lack of

willingness to be open to change and new techniques, lack of time and sufficient prioritization, tolerance, perceptions of privilege, and teachers and administrators being overwhelmed with other responsibilities. Participants described opportunities to include the ability to learn from different people, understand a new culture from the perspective of that individual, and increased training opportunities. While one interviewee participant indicated that culturally responsive practices are evaluated in her district through completed special education initial evaluations, other participants expressed that they were not aware of how culturally responsive practice-related activities evaluated in their districts, if at all. Three of the four interview participants indicated that culturally responsive practices are not valued within their discipline of school psychology.

Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning Practices. Interviewees were asked to describe how teaching, learning, and assessment practices are improving in your district. Two participants explained that they were unaware of teaching or learning practices, but hoped that assessment practices were improving as learning is advanced about new tools, norms, cultural differences. However, one participant expressed concern, “that we are still over-identifying students with disabilities without taking into account cultural differences.” Other interviewees expressed that they see more awareness of staff, particularly when it comes to language differences. Another participant reported improvement based on the solicitation of feedback after training sessions. She shared that her supervisors provide training opportunities from others in the community and ask, “what trainings we would like to utilize or be able to attend.” She added, “This allows us to stay up to date on new techniques being used in the field.”

Regarding their practices of cultural responsiveness, interview participants were asked to describe what specific new culturally responsive practices they have implemented in their district/campus. Two participants identified that they had not implemented any new practices. However, the other two participants identified the creation of discussions on different ethnicities with other evaluators to broaden cultural knowledge, self-reflection, continuous examination of data, and raising difficult and sometimes awkward questions about why some students succeed and others do not. All interview participants noted that there are particular characteristics that they associate with school psychologists who are interested in innovative culturally responsive practices. They identified characteristics to include a willingness to change their minds and an openness to things and people that are different even if it may be uncomfortable or challenge their preconceived ideas. They added that characteristics they associate with school psychologists who are interested in innovative culturally responsive practices include a variety of traits. Accordingly, these school psychologists are often passionate, empathetic, an influencer, an out of box thinker, are open to learn and acknowledge when wrong or could do better, collaborate with others, and are willing to agitate when necessary for the benefit of the whole. Additionally, they shared that school psychologists in this category are generally pro-active, open-minded, considerate, child-first minded, genuine, responsible, analytical, and understanding.

Focus Group

After the completion of the interview portion of the research study, common themes were analyzed, and focus group questions were formulated accordingly. Three of the interview participants completed the focus group portion of the research study. These

participants were asked to respond to five questions to promote further exploration of their collective interview responses.

The first question that participants were asked was: *After completing the self-assessment questions related to your own culturally responsive practices, what new insights, if any, did you gain regarding your strengths and/or any opportunity areas?*

Participants presented reflective responses to this question. One participant indicated that she believed the self-assessment process highlighted the relevance of cultural responsiveness and the vast ways a person can play a part/advocate. She added, “It elevated me to the space of mindfulness about the self as well as district-wide actions/responsibility.” Another participant shared that she realized that there are opportunities for her to take advantage of at the campus level to help better promote cultural sensitivity and practices at school. She explained that she also reflected on and realized that while she does feel as though she is very culturally sensitive, she is only partially engaging in culturally responsive practices due to a general lack of understanding/knowledge regarding the ever-changing population. She added,

“This is further exacerbated by a lack of testing instruments that are not culturally responsive, and quite frankly it not being on the top of my priority list. I hate to say that, but the nature of this job is about deadlines and crises. I feel like I am on the go 100% of the time, with limited time to devote to other equally important areas.”

Participants were also asked if the process of directly responding to the interview questions in a narrative and individualized format increased their awareness and/or served as a change agent in their practices. One focus group participant responded that

the interview process, “definitely heightened my awareness of multicultural competency versus culturally responsive.” Another participant shared that the belief that “responding to these questions has increased my awareness, or at the very least, brought more attention to the fact that I need to be more cognitive and proactive about engaging in culturally sensitive practices.” The final participant reported, “I don’t stop often to think about it so it is good that it was brought to my attention.”

When asked to what degree they planned to discuss any of the insight, if any, with colleagues that they have gained through the reflection of completing the two previous study activities, one participant shared that she likely would not share her insights with colleagues. The other two participants reported that they either planned to initiate “thoughtful conversations” with colleagues to pulse their actions, or when working to support a student from a different cultural background. Focus group participants were informed that a theme in the interview responses emerged that identified the lack of specific guidelines regarding the completion of ongoing culturally responsive training to maintain an LSSP license. Accordingly, they were asked to identify the most important next steps toward addressing this issue. One participant shared her belief that continuing education training should be offered that is specifically geared to cultural responsiveness not just general multicultural training. She added that the board that governs LSSP licenses should implement targeted guidelines. Another participant agreed, stating that “the licensing board should perhaps be made aware of the concern for a lack of guidelines or at least consider culturally sensitive practices be a topic of training more widely available from professional organizations such as TASP or NASP.” The last participant responded, “A shift in the way that those of different cultures are perceived.”

Finally, participants were asked: *Given that the scope of this study solely focuses on the dispositions of school psychologists regarding cultural responsiveness, what do you believe would be important to consider for future research?* The research participants had varied priorities, but all noted that future research is an important consideration. One participant cited the importance of a longitudinal study to see the progression of change in 3, 5, or 7 years. Another participant indicated that the exploration of the disposition of school staff (i.e., administration especially about discipline) would be an important consideration for future research. Another research participant reported that, “establishing tests that better serve this population, especially in areas, like Houston, that is very diverse” would be essential to consider for future research.

Analysis of Results

Research findings of this triangulated qualitative study to determine the dispositions of school psychologists regarding cultural responsiveness in the field are strikingly similar to those of the collective studies and trends regarding school psychology as reported in the Literature Review of this study. The demographics of this research study are reflective of the demographics of the field of school psychology. Like the vast majority of those practicing school psychology, White females also represented the majority of the research study participants. Similarly, the research study, while small in sample size, reflected the same concerns identified in the annual National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) Member Survey (2015) regarding the trends of school psychology practice and concerns.

Walcott & Hyson (2018) reported that school psychologists appear to collectively have limited access to professional development and mentoring. They assert that less than half (49.5%) of the respondents indicated that they “received systematic professional support, mentoring, and/or peer supervision for their professional activities.” Also, the majority of respondents (64.5%) endorsed limited time to participate in professional development activities outside those provided by their employment district. Participants in this research study noted similar responses, expressing that their time to pursue professional development in the area of culturally responsive practices or any other area, for that matter, are subservient to their primary job responsibilities – conducting assessments for special education disabilities.

While they collectively acknowledged and affirmed that culturally responsive practices should be prioritized in their profession and among their peers, none of the participants of this research study indicated their knowledge of involvement in the district or campus-wide support practices. All participants who completed the three aspects of the study, including the self-assessment checklist, interview, and focus group, noted that they were more enlightened about their own beliefs and practices of cultural responsiveness. While two participants indicated that they planned to transfer this newfound or refreshed awareness about culturally responsive practices and their role in its implementation, one participant shared that she did not plan to share her insights with her colleagues.

Conclusion

Research participants engaged in three parts of the study, including the online completion of a self-assessment, interview, and focus group discussion. Qualitative data was obtained by the administered self-assessment checklist was comprised of 40 closed-ended questions. Five participants completed the checklist. Of those who completed the checklist, four participants participated in a 30 to 50-minute interview. Qualitative data was obtained by these interviews with 25 questions. Interviewees were provided access to the questions in writing and given the option to respond in writing, based on their preference. The responses to the interview questions were used to identify common patterns and themes that emerged from the answers of the school psychologists. These themes were used to develop five focus group questions. Overall, three participants completed all aspects of the research study. Research findings of this triangulated qualitative study to determine the dispositions of school psychologists regarding cultural responsiveness in the field are strikingly similar to those of the collective studies and trends regarding school psychology as reported in the Literature Review of this study. Collective findings from this research study have significant implications for future studies. Limited information was identified in the literature review that outlined the decisions of school psychologists to champion their personal beliefs to further the promotion of culturally responsive practices.

Chapter V

Discussion

As school psychologists have a significant amount of influence on the educational outcomes of students, it was imperative to study how these professionals view these concepts as a practice that contributes to the identification of students with disabilities, their placement recommendations, and findings related to discipline. Accordingly, the primary research question of this study focused on addressing the following: How will practicing school psychologists across a variety of experience levels collectively inform their involvement in and interpret the importance of culturally responsive practices in their current role? Additional questions addressed in this study included: What constitutes relevant and applicable culturally competent education, training, and support for practicing school psychologists and special education staff? Are the culturally responsive practices of practicing school psychologists lower than entering school psychologists due to an emphasis on promoting diversity and cultural responsiveness in school psychology graduate training programs?

School psychologists wield a significant amount of direct and indirect influence regarding the identification, placement, and disciplinary consequences of students eligible for special education supports and services. Many assessments and services administered by school psychologists allow for a high degree of professional judgment and subjectivity, notwithstanding the findings of culturally biased assessment instruments. Accordingly, findings and recommendations submitted by school psychologists can present an inaccurate depiction of student performance and ability, particularly if a cultural gap exists between the student and the school psychologist that is

not acknowledged and accounted for. According to Skiba et al (2002), the ability to cognitively and emotionally assess ethnically, linguistically, and culturally diverse children is a significant concern for school psychologists, educators, and parents. Ultimately, school psychologists bear the professional and ethical responsibility to monitor the degree to which they employ the ongoing practice of cultural responsiveness in the school setting.

The premise of the research in this study is based on my interest and experience as a school psychologist. In my current role as Special Education Director of Programming and Campus Support in a different large suburban school district, I am directly accountable to our district rates of identification, placement, and disciplinary disproportionality. Accordingly, I am charged with developing systems and plans to address said disproportionality, which has been recently identified as significantly disproportionate concerning In-School and Out-of-School Suspensions (ISS and OSS) for black and special education students. Directly linked to disproportionality, according to past and current research, are underlying beliefs that are premised in historically accepted educational practices. School psychologists play a significant role in addressing the areas defined in significant disproportionality.

My collective professional, educational, and personal experiences have resulted in a combination of knowledge of and passion for education in urban and suburban communities. I plan to translate this experience, knowledge, and passion into contributions to the field of study by conducting targeted research in the areas of culturally responsive practices and any other major contributing factors involving disproportionality in education. I am eager to add to the field of research and believe that

my recall of experiences with disproportionate resources in my community will add a unique perspective to my findings.

Several factors were important to examine that were identified to contribute to the overall perceptions of school psychologists as it relates to culturally responsive practices that directly link to student outcomes. These factors included the role of school psychologists, historic and current demographic trends of school psychologists, training requirements and expectations of school psychologists, the tools/techniques used in the profession, the potential for the subjectivity of their work, and factors that actively contribute to the realization of culturally responsive practices. The primary roles of school psychologists in traditional practice can be categorized into three areas: assessment, intervention, and consultation. Accordingly, school psychologists wield significant authority and the resulting impact on student outcomes, particularly of students with disabilities in the area of disability identification, placement of services, and disciplinary consequences.

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) charges school psychologists to deepen their work to support not only the academic achievement of students but to include the promotion of systems of support that extend beyond the classroom to include the support of diverse learners (NASP, 2015). Based on the NASP Position Statement: *Racism, Prejudice, and Discrimination* (2004), within Domain 7 – Family-School Collaboration Services and Domain 8 – Diversity in Development and Learning, school psychologists should “work to enhance understanding and acceptance of diverse cultures and backgrounds and to promote the culturally competent practice.” Ortiz (2008) asserts that significant evidence exists that when practitioners fail to address

the linguistic and cultural differences of students and families, assessment activities, and students' performance on achievement tests are negatively impacted. However, a recent NASP Research Report using member survey data acknowledged:

Although the vast majority of school psychologists are still White and speak only English (87%), there have been noticeable increases in the number of Black, Asian, and Hispanic school psychologists, and a corresponding increase in the proportion of school psychologists who report fluency in languages other than English (Walcott & Hyson, 2018).

Additionally, Walcott & Hyson (2018) reported that school psychologists appear to collectively have limited access to professional development and mentoring. They assert that less than half (49.5%) of the respondents indicated that they “received systematic professional support, mentoring, and/or peer supervision for their professional activities.” Also, the majority of respondents (64.5%) endorsed limited time to participate in professional development activities outside those provided by their employment district. Survey results reveal that the primary role for school psychologists continues to be engaged in individual student evaluations. Significantly fewer school psychologists reported participating in a more broad range of services as recommended in the NASP Practice Model (McNamara, Walcott, & Hyson, 2019).

Historical consistencies of shortages of school psychologists have been maintained across the United States. It is predicted that these shortages will not only continue, but will increase through 2025 (Castillo, Curtis & Tan, 2014; Curtis, Grier, & Hunley, 2004, and NASP, 2017). Shortages in school psychologists are problematic due to their unique levels of expertise regarding the combination of education and mental

health. Over nearly 40 years, graduate programs in school psychology have only increased by 9% (Rossen & von der Embse, 2014). Additionally, a significant percentage of school psychologists are likely to retire soon – nearly 20% (Castillo et al., 2014), and more school psychologists (16%) have expressed interest in leaving the profession soon or immediately (Bocconi, Weisz, & Lefkowitz, 2016).

School psychologists are required to complete a specialized training program and maintain ongoing professional development to provide services to students as a licensed professional. These professionals must complete initial training in a graduate program for school psychology that will yield a specialist-level or doctorate in psychology. Each state also maintains an established set of requirements for licensure and certification as a school psychologist. These requirements must be satisfied and maintained on the basis and increment as determined by the respective State. In the State of Texas, the Texas State Board of Examiners of Psychologists (TSBEP) acts as the licensing and governing state agency that oversees and regulates the practice of psychology.

TSBEP requires all licensees to renew their license to practice psychology on a biennial basis, including school psychologists/LSSPs. Board rule 461.11 requires licensees to complete at least 40 hours of professional development during the two-year renewal period. As these hours must be related to the practice of psychology, at least 6 hours must be in the area(s) of ethics, Board Rules of Conduct, or professional responsibility. Additionally, at least 6 hours must be completed in the area of cultural diversity. TSBEP provides examples of what could be considered cultural diversity, including disability, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, language, national origin, race, religion, culture, sexual orientation, and social-economic status. If licensees do not

complete and submit the required professional development hours as according to Board rule 461.11, their license will become delinquent and they will not be permitted to practice psychology in the State of Texas.

Traditional school psychologists provide services and support in three primary areas, including assessment, intervention, and consultation. As current trends indicate, the significant majority of the time spent by school psychologists is through the provision of assessment services. The school psychologist is tasked with using professional judgment regarding the types of assessment instruments and/or tools to be used, whether assessing in the area of sociological, emotional/behavioral, intellectual, achievement, or adaptive functioning. School psychologists often utilize observations, interviews, and reviews of existing information to inform their student evaluations. School psychologists are provided significant latitude in the determination of what information to include or exclude in assessment reports regarding existing student information, including medical history, sociological information, and previous assessment results. Ultimately, school psychologists carry a high degree of authority in the determination of the results and recommendations of an individual student assessment.

When a decision to change the placement of a student with disabilities is proposed due to the student's violation of the school code of conduct, IDEA requires that a Manifestation Determination Review (MDR) meeting must be held. School psychologists are expected to conduct an MDR evaluation that will include an investigation to identify if the school: 1) failed to implement the Individual Education Plan (IEP), or 2) the student conduct is directly related to their disability. School psychologists generally utilize statements from involved parties, review of student

academic and behavioral progress, and any additional relevant information to present findings to the MDR committee. The results of these informal processes to present findings significantly contribute to the determination of student outcomes of disciplinary placement and/or review of special education supports and services.

Due to the nature of their work, school psychologists must guard against the possibility of subjective practices that fail empirical validation. When school psychologists act in opposition to scientific evidence, they run the risk of allowing their own biases, anecdotes, and/or clinical judgment to inform decisions that will influence the outcomes of individual students. Magnavita (2016) notes that while the human species has the most well-developed ability to make decisions that have been honed since birth, we are equally more likely to biases and cognitive errors. Magnavita & Lilienfeld (2016) assert that it is the responsibility of the clinician to avoid the cognitive traps of bias and should possess a “duty to know.”

School psychologists may present biases and subjectivity in their analysis, interpretation, conclusion, and recommendations of individual student assessments. This occurrence may take place more particularly in situations when students represent differences between the school psychologist and the student (e.g., gender, ethnicity, religion, body type, sexual orientation). Accordingly, it is important to explore how subjective practices and biases influence school psychologists and ways in which to reduce their effect.

While it is widely endorsed as a practice in the field of education and is embraced in guiding ethical practices of school psychology, the actual employ of culturally responsive practices by school psychologists are not part of a measured set of evaluation

criteria determined for successful practice. Culturally responsiveness has been defined as a philosophy and practice that include (a) holding high expectations for all students, (b) using students' cultures and experiences to enhance their learning, and (c) providing all students with access to effective instruction and adequate resources for learning (Klingner et al., 2005). Ortiz, Flanagan, & Dynda (2008) identify the skill of being able to demonstrate competence in the provision of psychological services to children and families of "diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds" a "necessity."

The Critical Race Theory (CRT) supports the importance of culturally responsive practices through its established tenets. Accordingly, this theory was selected to serve the basis of this research study. CRT embraces the importance and awareness of social change and acknowledges the challenges of cultural disadvantage. CRT provided the historical and current perspective of the research study findings and established a broader context in which to deconstruct the understanding of the problem, purpose, significance, research questions, methodology, and data analysis.

School psychologists bear the professional and ethical responsibility to monitor the degree to which they employ the ongoing practice of cultural responsiveness in the school setting. Research indicates that several factors of consideration influence this dynamic, including the training and professional development of school psychologists, the relationship between mental health and academic achievement, school discipline, including disproportionality in special education, bias and equity, and culturally responsive practices. As school psychologists wield a significant amount of direct and indirect influence in this regard and given the history of significant disproportionality in the U.S. public school system, this research study examined several important factors that

contribute to the overall perceptions of school psychologists as it relates to culturally responsive practices.

Upon completion of the data analysis, information from the self-assessment checklists, interviews, and focus groups provide ample evidence that while school psychologists hold beliefs that culturally responsive practices are essential to the effective fulfillment of their role to support students and families, many barriers exist to their ability to provide services in this manner. Overall, findings from the study indicate that school psychologists perceive that they bear the professional and ethical responsibility to monitor the degree to which they employ the ongoing practice of cultural responsiveness in the school setting. However, they collectively noted that they lack the capacity and support in their current roles to perform this function. Study data revealed that several factors influenced this dynamic, including the role, training, and professional development of school psychologists, their relationship with mental health and academic achievement, school discipline, including disproportionality in special education, bias and equity, and the practicality of culturally responsive practices.

Similar to results from the NASP Membership Survey (2015), the research participants of this study provided responses that indicated their beliefs were in line with the concepts of cultural responsiveness. However, these same participants responded to the study that reflected limited involvement when presented with items that inquired about their actual actions associated with culturally responsive practices. Participants acknowledged the importance of and shared reasons for why they were motivated to use culturally responsive practices as a school psychologist. Among these reasons included, wanting to do the right things for children, desiring to make informed decisions when

completing an evaluation that provides valuable insight into possible functions of behavior, or using their voice to speak for others who may not have the same opportunities. Participants cited that it is important to understand that there are vast differences, especially in very young children, about expectations of independence and social interactions across cultures. However, all respondents informed that they rarely or never advocate for the review of their school or district's mission statement, goals, policies, and procedures to ensure that they incorporate principles and practices that promote cultural diversity and cultural competence.

Regarding their practices of cultural responsiveness, research participants described new culturally responsive practices they have implemented in their district/campus if any. Some participants identified that they had not implemented any new practices. However, other participants identified the creation of discussions on different ethnicities with other evaluators to broaden cultural knowledge, self-reflection, continuous examination of data, and raising difficult and sometimes awkward questions about why some students succeed and others do not.

Participants presented reflective responses to this question: *After completing the self-assessment questions related to your own culturally responsive practices, what new insights, if any, did you gain regarding your strengths and/or any opportunity areas?*

One participant's response indicated that her participation in the research study highlighted the relevance of cultural responsiveness and the vast ways a person can play a part/advocate. She added, "It elevated me to the space of mindfulness about the self as well as district-wide actions/responsibility." Another participant shared that she realized that there are opportunities for her to take advantage of at the campus level to help better

promote cultural sensitivity and practices at school. She explained that she also reflected on and realized that while she does feel as though she is very culturally sensitive, she is only partially engaging in culturally responsive practices due to a general lack of understanding/knowledge regarding the ever-changing population. She added, “This is further exacerbated by a lack of testing instruments that are not culturally responsive, and quite frankly it not being on the top of my priority list. I hate to say that, but the nature of this job is about deadlines and crises. I feel like I am on the go 100% of the time, with limited time to devote to other equally important areas.”

Another participant shared that the belief that “responding to these questions has increased my awareness, or at the very least, brought more attention to the fact that I need to be more cognitive and proactive about engaging in culturally sensitive practices.” The final participant reported, “I don't stop often to think about it so it is good that it was brought to my attention.” However, when asked to what degree they planned to discuss any of the insight, if any, with colleagues that they have gained through the reflection of completing the two previous study activities, one participant shared that she likely would not share her insights with colleagues. The other two participants reported that they either planned to initiate “thoughtful conversations” with colleagues to pulse their actions, or when working to support a student from a different cultural background.

The results of this study suggest that school psychologists can pursue a role of advocacy toward cultural responsiveness to increase its prioritization in the field. However, steps toward advocacy will require shifts in focus from student assessment to whole child support. Although this study revealed findings related to dispositions of school psychologists regarding cultural responsiveness, limitations exist in survey

studies. Validity threats, including subjective recall and social desirability bias, may have occurred due to the self-report techniques used in this research study. Additionally, as only three school psychologists who were recruited through personal contacts completed all components of the study, findings may not represent a cross-sample of all school psychologists. However, the research study successfully identified the dispositions of three school psychologists related to culturally responsive practices.

Implications and Suggestions from Study

Implications for future study include:

1. The identification of ways in which school psychologists can reduce barriers to practice cultural responsiveness.
2. A longitudinal study to see the progression of change in 3, 5, or 7 years regarding the implementation of culturally responsive practices in school psychology.
3. The exploration of the disposition of school staff (i.e., administration especially about discipline) as it relates to cultural responsiveness.
4. The impact of culturally responsive assessments in school psychology.

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