

Title: The Overrepresentation of African Americans In Special Education Programs: A Literature Review

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Abstract:

Opportunities to interact with their school-aged peers gives young people an avenue for learning the social skills necessary to build healthy relationships, to interact at an acceptable level in a group structure and respect for the individual differences of others around them. These skills take on a greater importance after high school due to their value as important “soft skills” related to workplace success. The purpose of this study is to examine the inclusion of physically disabled youth in regular education programs with their non-disabled peers.

According to The National Longitudinal Study (Wagner & Shaver, 1989) substantial numbers of students with disabilities are unemployed, live at home, and have fewer friends following their high school experience. Where 56% of all students participate in post-secondary education programs, only 15% of students with disabilities participate(Wagner 1989).The conundrum for regular education teachers is how to successfully teach the disabled student and ensure that he/she is a successful member of a diversified classroom environment. In the 1989 Lou Harris survey, A Report Card on Special Education, the conclusion was made that “the majority of both principals and teachers have not had adequate training in special education, and many are not very confident in making decisions concerning handicapped children.”

For parents, teachers and administrators the challenges of

successfully including physically disabled youth in the regular classroom are many. The fears of regular classroom teachers concerning their limited training in special education, the lack of curriculum content expertise of special education teachers, as well as the variance in schools physical accessibility are but a few. The IDEA Amendments of 1997 contain “requirements that will strengthen progress toward inclusionary practices (Moore & Gilbert, 1998, p. 9). Every effort possible to successfully include the physically disabled youth in the regular classroom is necessary to meet the requirements of federal mandates.

Introduction

The overrepresentation of African-Americans in special education programs has continued as an issue even after more than twenty-five years of recognition. The purpose

of this paper is to review literature related to the issue of overrepresentation of African-American youth in special education programs. Overrepresentation will be looked at from a historical perspective as well as the various perspectives of the many stakeholders involved.

According to the National Council on Children with Disabilities (NCD, 1989) in fiscal year 1986-1987 nearly two million children were identified as learning disabled. The documentation of overrepresentation of African American children in special education programs appears to have spillover effects in other issues, for example underrepresentation in gifted programs, vocational rehabilitation services and others. Schuck (2005) study of black-white disparity in maltreatment practices was viewed from a sociological perspective. She concluded that structural covariates of maltreatment vary by race and that differences in female-headed families in poverty can explain some, but not all of the Black-White disparity in child maltreatment. The impact of race on access to vocational rehabilitation services will be considered for it's relation to bias and disproportionality as determined by Giesen, Cavanaugh, and Sansing (2006) in their research.

The qualitative literature on overrepresentation of African-American students in special education programs also reveals an underrepresentation in other programs. Kathy Sarouphim (2004) reported that the underrepresentation of African-American students in gifted programs and the inequalities in the nomination process for gifted programs are additional issues that need to be addressed. Reasons for disparity are diverse. McBee (2006) found that these reasons contribute to disparities in placement of African-American students in special education and gifted programs.

Arnold and Lassmann (2003) provided an overview of the professional literature related to the overrepresentation of minority students in special education programs. An additional purpose of the article is to review the literature on the remedies used in court ordered remediation programs. This review outlines reasons for overrepresentation of minority students in classes for students with various learning disabilities and the underrepresentation of these same students in classes for students who are gifted. The authors state that in low incidence disability categories such as severe mental retardation, cerebral palsy, deaf/blindness and high incidence disabilities, such as mild mental retardation, the minority students are not overrepresented, but in fact, are underrepresented.

Issues of misdiagnosis of minority students in special education and the misdiagnosis of mental retardation in African American students have dominated the courts and the literature since the passage of P.L. 94-142. According to researchers, because there was a concern for unconscious bias, many remediation programs contained mechanism for addressing the issue. They further explain that a second consideration in the court ordered remediation program was the identification of specific sources of bias in the referral to placement process. Based on the researchers' review of information collected from special education referral forms they were able to make an assessment of certain policy decisions and this influence on the educational placement. Through a review of the documentation related to the referral phase the researchers were able to ensure that action was taken within the required period of time, enabled the researchers to determine which teachers made referrals and the outcomes of their referrals, and allowed the researchers to make comparisons among teachers if several teachers have referred the

same student (Arnold and Lassmann et al, 2003).

The researchers stated that the assessment phase of the referral process provides additional descriptive information about the possible sources of bias. A review of records at this stage reveals a pattern of regularity and frequency of evaluations and reevaluations; the level of credentials held by professionals participating in the referral process, the number, the source, and the type of assessment used; whether scoring is accurate and whether scores are accurately reported. When records are reviewed at the placement phase of the referral process, it is of crucial importance that the student and/or family members are present. It is suggested that further research is needed which documents the ways in which various ethnic groups are inappropriately placed in special education programs (Arnold and Lassmann et al).

Blanchett, Mumford, and Beachum (2005) discuss the state of urban schools in post-*Brown* era, special education in the post-*Brown* era, the disproportionality and resegregation of African Americans students, double jeopardy of disproportionality and urban school failure, the reasons why *Brown* is not working from the perspectives of urban community leaders, and recommendations for fulfilling the promise of *Brown*. Their article review uses narratives, comments, and interviews to gather data on the issues of urban school failure and its relationship to disproportionality and resegregation of individuals of color.

This article contains accounts of protecting the civil rights of African Americans and those individuals with disabilities. The plaintiffs in *Brown v Board of Education* case wanted the same thing for their children more than 50 years ago that many parents still want for their children today- the best possible education (Knappman, 2001). Fifty

year after *Brown v Board of Education* (1954) case, urban education is in a strange and paradoxical state. There seems to be many positive changes such as limited integration through busing and other transportation strategies, but at the same time, educational policies and practices have created a new system of segregation. Prior to court-ordered desegregation, African American students with disabilities – particularly those with mild disabilities – often attended segregated Black schools with their brothers, sisters, and neighbors without disabilities. Advocates of special education fought to develop special education programs, because general education was often not meeting their educational needs.

The challenges to the existing segregated educational system came in the form of several court cases such as *PARC v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* and *Mills v. District of Columbia*. Rulings in these cases stated that separate but equal were unconstitutional especially for students with disabilities. These rulings paved the way for the passage of the Educational for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, currently known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990. Although few would disagree with the significant changes in public education for individuals with disabilities brought about with the passage of IDEA, the benefits of special education have not been equally distributed (Losen and Orfield, 2003).

Dunn (1968), Mercer (1973), and other researchers noted that a significant number of African American students and Mexican American students were being labeled as having MMR and their representation in programs for special education far exceeded the rates that would be expected given their proportion in the general population of school aged students. The work of these researchers helped to end the use

of intelligence tests as the sole criterion for determining special education eligibility and played a role in securing safeguards guaranteed by IDEA. This research also provided the legal basis for parents and advocates to challenge special education referral, evaluation, and placement decision making and prompted the establishment of many national committees such as the Harvard Civil Rights Project and the convening of two National Academy of Science (NAS) commissioned studies for addressing the problem of overrepresentation and disproportionality of minorities in special education programs.

Although *Brown v Board of Education* (et al), celebrating 50 years of legislature restructuring of American education, schools in large metropolitan areas and smaller central cities in the United States are more segregated than they were before the early 50s. A number of issues have contributed to this resegregation of American schools. These include inequitable educational resources and while flight to the suburbs, leaving large concentrations of poor families behind (Kozol, 1992). Literature related to urban school failure and the problem of disproportionality of Black students in special education have been offered by researchers from a wide range of venues including education, law, sociology, and psychology. But with any research, many of the contributors are so far removed from the problem of disproportionality and resegregation of students of color through special education referral and placement. It has been suggested that many of the individuals who do this type of research are themselves are part of the power struggle that has created, ignored, and maintained the problem of disproportionality (Patton, 1994).

“Promising Prevention and Early Intervention Strategies to Reduce Overrepresentation of African American Students in Special Education” (Green, 2005),

presents culturally responsive prevention and intervention strategies that are specific to African-American learners. According to this study, more than 2.2 million children of color were receiving special education services in schools across the United States based on data from the U. S. Department of Education. The article further documents that African-American students were almost three times as likely as White students to be labeled as mentally retarded, two times as likely to be labeled emotionally disturbed, and 1.3 times as likely to be labeled as having a learning disability. The author reports that according to the National Institute for Urban School Improvement (2001) African Americans are significantly overrepresented in the two special education categories of high incidence disabilities and emotional/behavioral disorders. The author addresses the issue of disproportionality as being not just a problem of numbers, but rather an issue of misdiagnosis of disability and placement in special education programs that are unnecessary. The author list nine issues of overrepresentation that are pervasive in the literature. Those issues are difficulty in constructing instructional programs that address students' unique learning strengths and needs (Council for Exceptional Children [CEC], 2002); ineffective procedures and processes used to refer and classify students for special education (CEC); lack of knowledge that a problem exists and, subsequently, how to resolve it (CEC); basic assumptions, beliefs, epistemologies, and worldviews employed by the major "script writers" in the field (Patton et al, 1998); teacher's perceptions and attitudes toward students with special needs (Grossman, 1995; Harry, 2002; Utley & Mortweet, 1999); the opportunities students have, or have not, had to learn (National Institute for Urban School Improvement, 2001) disconnection in most schools between race, culture, and class of teachers and that of their students (National Institute

for Urban School Improvement); high reliance on high-stakes assessment (Grossman; Harry; Townsend, 2003); and a greater disparity between a cultural/familial interpretation of a child's behavior and the school's interpretation of that behavior (Ishii-Jordan, 1997).

Many federal initiatives to improve the quality of schooling for African American learners promised success but fall short. The *Brown v Board of Education* decision promised to eliminate inequities in public education resulting from racial segregation. Today, 50 years later, we're still waiting for the delivery of the promise. African American students continue to be disproportionately placed in special education (Burnette, 1998; Losen and Orfield, 1997; Patton et al, 1998), are suspended and expelled at higher rates (Ishii-Jordan, 2002; Neal et al, 2003; Townsend, 2000), have higher dropout rates, and are achieving at lower levels (U.S. Department of Education). One of the recent education initiatives to address underachievement, the No Child Left behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), raises the performance bar, and includes promise that 100% of students will perform above the bar in reading and math by 2014 (Harvey, 2003). It places demanding performance accountability on schools and leaves achievement decisions in the hands of tests (Elmore, 2003 & Harvey, 2003). Over the course of the last 5 decades, we've embarked on educational equity and school reform strategies that have generated the same results-African American learners continue to be left behind (Harvey et al, 2003).

In this essay the researcher explores a range of perspectives on African American education with particular focus on three works; "Black American Students in Affluent Suburb"; "A study of Academic Disengagement", by social anthropologist John Ogbu; "African-centered pedagogy; Developing Schools of Achievement for African American

Children”, by teacher education expert Peter Murrell, and “African American Literacies” by Elaine Richardson, professor of English and Applied Linguistics (Lynn et al). The author posits that the works of Ogbu, Merrill, and Richardson signal an important shift in the study and analysis of African American education. First, they suggest that we can adopt and use multiple lenses through which to explore the perennial problems facing African Americans and develop comprehensive research-based solutions. Ogbu puts more emphasis on the role of the African American community while Murrell and Richardson draw from African American culture to develop useful frameworks that can be employed to transform teaching and learning in classrooms populated by African American students. Never the less, there is an even greater need for research and theory that analyzes, frames, and exposes both the historical underpinnings and current manifestations of racist thought and practice in American society.

Marks and Tonso (2006) argue that offering African American students an African-centered education is one way to promote social justice in public education. They begin their article with a summary of the inadequate educations offered to many African American students, and go on to use philosophical interpretations of equal educational opportunity to delineate the requirements of participating in a democracy. The stated purpose of the essay is to investigate the effect of public “schooling” has on the “education” of African Americans. Relative to the stated purpose of the article, the authors lay out a theory of social justice (equal educational opportunity) appropriate to modern educational practices used with African American students. They examine two ways in which our present educational system functions as an oppressor of African American students through the use of the “melting pot” theory. These are promoting

assimilation and melting-pot values (cultural imperialism) and annihilation of social justice by providing students with unequal educational opportunities.

Ford, Harris III, Tyson, and Trotman (2002) address a central question in gifted education: How can we recruit and retain more African American students in our gifted programs? Persistent underrepresentation of Black students in gifted education and the factors affecting this issue are reviewed by the authors. Diverse students' access to gifted programs is hindered by a deficit orientation held by educators is the major purpose stated by the authors. It is the researchers contention that educators must move beyond a deficit orientation in order to recognize the strengths of African American students. The authors of the study review the literature on the identification and placement of Black students into programs for gifted learners. The authors discuss two theories that appear to capture the strengths, abilities, and promise of gifted Black learners; Triachic Theory of Intelligence and Gardner's (1983) Theory of Multiple Intelligences.

Cheryl Mills (2003) article "Race, Gender, and Class," aims to contribute to the developing discourse on overrepresentation of African American students in special education. This article examines the role of current educational ideology and highlighting challenge and opportunities for the social work profession and school social work professionals relevant to establishing professional boundaries and navigating the education system. The author reports that throughout the literature, the identification and assessment processes, IQ Test, and practitioner bias are most frequently cited as contributing to overrepresentation. The author concludes that social workers have both the responsibility and opportunity to reduce overrepresentation of economically disadvantaged and minority youth. In addition, school social workers must engage in

preventive activities by assisting teachers in responding to student behaviors before they reach the “problem behavior threshold.”

In a document from the U. S. department of Education, Office of Special Education (et al, 2006), data for enrollment in the 13 major disability categories are reported for the years 1995 and 1999-2004. From the year 1995 to 1998, there was a 9% increase of the total number of individuals being placed into special education programs. From 1998 to 1999, there was a 10% increase in the total number of individuals being placed into special education. From 1999 to 2000, the rate of increase was 9%. During the period from 2000 to 2001, the rate of increase for placement into special education was 10%. From 2001 to 2002, the increase in placement numbers was 10%. From 2002 to 2003, the placement increase was 10%. From 2003 to 2004, the rate of increase for the enrollment for individuals being placed in the 13 categories of disabilities was 10%. From this census report, it can be concluded that individuals being placed in special education has increased steadily in the public school systems in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, OSEP, 2004).

The risk of school failure and high incidence of negative post school outcomes are critical concerns for the education of youth with emotional and behavioral disorders. Results from the National Longitudinal Transition Study of Special Education Students indicated that 55% of youth with ED drop out of school compared to 36% of all students with disabilities over the same time frame (Wagner, 1995). Study participants included 144 ninth graders randomly assigned as the treatment or control group. African American (67%) males (82%) comprised the sample. The majority of youth were followed for 4 years, with a sub sample followed for 5 years. Educational equity can be

framed in terms of both equal opportunities and outcomes (Nieto, 1996), including both the contexts in which students participate in educational experiences and the extent in which those experiences enable their academic growth.

Theoretical Framework

Sinclair, Christenson, and Thurlow (2005) highlight the impact of deficit-oriented psychoeducational practices and their cultural applicability to the African-American school-aged child by reviewing school-based assessment programs and their impact on disproportionate placement of African-American students in special education programs. Marks and Tonso et al. (2006) suggested strategies and policies to relieve overrepresentation of African-American students. Alleviation strategies related to the issue of overrepresentation as examined by Dykes (2005) and Green (2005) provide clarity on considering alternate intervention strategies. Alleviation strategies are prereferral intervention, operating guidelines, staff development, extended day programs, and early intervention programs.

A review of bias, disproportionality, and inequalities impacting overrepresentation will be investigated. Sarouphim et al. (2004) and Green, McIntosh, Cook-Morales, and Robinson-Zanartu (2005) explore disproportionality with insights into the biasness of assessment practices. Kearns, Ford, and Linney (2005) analyze the perspectives of school psychologist to determine causes and solutions relative to disproportionality. Additional viewpoints from general education will be represented in Gresham and Vinquist's (2005) quantitative-qualitative study. Enacted legal remedies addressing biasness, disproportionality, and inequality (IDEIA, 2006) provide insight into the historical nature of these issues. It is essential that reliable information be available

as it relates to the disproportionality in special education placement of African-American students; thus ensuring current practices be evaluated to determine their appropriateness for solving these issues.

Patton et al. and Lynn et al. conducted their literature review from a Critical Theory perspective because it relates to the education and treatment of African American youth. Patton notes that a body of literature has been developed that links school structures and processes to include those used in special education. These processes are heavily influenced by the values and attitudes of educators that reflect the dominant social, economic, and political groups in this nation (Apple, 1981; Cherryholmes, 1988; Katz, 1971; Lipsky & Gartner, 1989; Skrtic, 1991). These critical or conflict theorists hold that education, and, thus special education, mirror structured power relationships. These are designed to serve the interests of the dominant social, political, and economic classes which in turn place African Americans in a devalued position. As such the structures, processes, assumptions, and beliefs of the dominant classes are deeply embedded in the special education knowledge base and its knowledge producers, thus undermining its theory, research, and practice. These theories, assumptions, and practices also are enormously resistant to change. This coupling of special education with the preconceptions of the dominant social, political, and economic classes in society have resulted in the maintenance of a special education system that is unjust to African Americans. Many of those major knowledge producers or “gods” in the field of special education have played an essential role in maintenance of this injustice. In his article, “Race, Culture, and the Education of African Americans” Lynn et al. reports that the authors Daniel Solorzano and Tara Yosso argue that Critical Race Theory (CRT) in

education begins to create a discourse that articulates the ways in which teachers of color can initiate the process of ending racial subordination.

Critical race pedagogy is grounded in three tenets: (1) the scholarship on Black teachers; (2) culturally relevant pedagogy; and (3) critical pedagogy, particularly the works of Paulo Friere, Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren, and Barry Kanpol (1970). CRT can be defined as a way of interpreting, analyzing, and calling to attention the influence of race, racialism, and racism in society; racism being the overt action of biasness against an individual because of their race and racialism being the embedded psychological biasness held against a race of people. Racialism is CRT borrows from various traditions, including Marxism, feminism, nationalism, and postmodernism. CRT begins with the notion that racism is a natural and necessary part of society that is founded on white supremacist principles. Within this framework, the history of education for African Americans is not a story of liberation and prosperity but one of struggle and disappointment. A critical race perspective starts with the notion that education was never intended to have liberatory consequences for African Americans. The intent of schools and schooling practices in the white United States has always been to serve and further support the unequal system of privileges conferred upon whites (Lynn et al).

Kearns, Ford, and Linney (2005) employ “Lack of cultural Exposure Theory” in these works to help explain the representation of African American students in special education. They suggest that cultural disadvantage as one of the reasons often cited for the high identification rates of minorities in special education. Students from impoverished backgrounds are considered to be at-risk for learning problems partly because of a lack of exposure to various aspects of mainstream culture. Children living

in poverty may not have many opportunities to engage in cognitively stimulating experience that have been correlated with a higher intelligence quotient and school achievement. Thus, it might be said that numerous African American children may lack cultural exposure at a point in their lives when exposure to new ideas and education programs is critical.

Marks and Tonso et al. discuss the “melting-pot theory” as one of the factors contributing to the oppression of African American learners in public education. The term “cultural imperialism” is used in conjunction with the term “melting-pot theory.” Cultural imperialism is defined as a form of oppression designated to perpetuate cultural assimilation and authority. The authors state that the melting-pot theory posited by proponents like Hirsch, Schlesinger, and Ravitch encourages the assimilation of “minority” groups into the dominant group and is antithetical to an African-centered approach. Advocates of the melting-pot theory propose the status quo of educational institutions is to uphold the existing social orders of racism and classism, propelling their values into dominance. The melting-pot concept encourages members of other groups to abandon their cultural heritage and assimilate to that of the entrenched dominant group. This manner of thought personifies the values and beliefs of racial supremacy, and violates the principles of a democratic nation.

The overrepresentation of minority students placed in special education in certain disability categories continues to be one of the most persistent and complex topics of discussion in the field of special education and has received a great deal of attention over the past 20 years (Chinn & Hughes, 1987). Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Gallini, Simmons, and Feggins-Azziz (2006) investigated the extent in which the overrepresentation of

African American students in more restrictive special education settings is attributable to their overrepresentation in disability categories more likely to be served in more restrictive educational environments. Analyzing data from the Office for Civil Rights 1998 compliance report, Fierros and Conroy (2002) found that among students with disabilities, 55% of European American students as compared to only 37% of African American students were educated in inclusive settings (defined as spending less than 21% of the school day outside of the general education classroom). Conversely, 33% of African American students with disabilities received services in substantially separate class placements, compared to only 16% of European American children with disabilities. Given the social consensus regarding inclusion, disproportionality in restrictiveness of educational environments may represent a more serious challenge than disproportionality in disability categories (Skiba et al, 2006).

Methodology

Selected literature on the issue of overrepresentation of African-American students in special education included twelve qualitative articles, twelve quantitative articles, and two mixed-study articles. The common themes among the qualitative articles are disproportionate or overrepresentative placement of African-American students in special education. Alternatives to traditional assessment practices of African-American students for special education and gifted education programs are noted in two of the qualitative studies. Strategies for correction and alleviation of overrepresentation of African-American students are cited in two of the studies. Historical accounts of the issues related to overrepresentation of African-Americans in special education are examined by three of the qualitative studies.

Perspective differences and other relevant alternative assessment practices are noted in the qualitative studies by Green et al, Dykes and Frank (2005), Marks and Tonso et al, and Fore III, Burke, and Martin (2006). Differences in theoretical explanations (Lack of Cultural Exposure Theory, Critical Race Theory) of the issues related to overrepresentation are offered by Kearns (2005) and Lynn (2006). Reviews focusing on historical and conceptual understandings of children of color (Hopson and Obidah, 2002) support the results of focus group studies by Blanchett, Mumford, and Beachum (2005). The GAO'S 2005 report (www.gao.gov) focuses on issues related to Autism, which is only one of the disability categories addressed in the IDEIA Final Regulations (et al).

Three of the quantitative studies reviewed used ANOVA's to evaluate the data collected. Hosp and Reschly (2002) used correlational ANOVA to investigate bias in decision making concerning restrictiveness of placement between African-American and Caucasian students. Sarouphim (et al, 2004), in her examination of the validity of the DISCOVER performance-based assessment, used ANOVA and 2x3 MANOVA. A re-visitation of disproportionate representation of minority students in special education was done by deValenzuela, Copeland, Huaquang Qi, and Park (2006) using a standard ANOVA to assess their data.

The impact of race and ethnicity on access to vocational services (Giesen et al, 2004) was assessed quantitatively using a multi-stage probability design and a z-test. Descriptive statistics was used to evaluate the research on the evolution of psychoeducational assessment and its contributions to the issues of overrepresentation (Green et al) and explanations of Black-White disparity (Schuck et al). Gresham and Virginist (2005) used a descriptive study to survey general educators about their

perceptions of factors affecting overrepresentation of elementary-aged black males in special education. Sinclair's (2005) study on the effectiveness of intervention programs for emotionally disturbed and behaviorally disordered youth utilized a quantitative research design to aggregate the collected data. Descriptive analysis was used by McBee (2006) to derive conclusions about inequalities in the nomination processes for gifted education programs. The disproportionality of African-American students with disabilities in general education programs was assessed quantitatively using a composite index, a risk index, and a relative risk ratio (Skiba et al).

The differences in the use of quantitative research methods are evidenced by the use of ANOVA's. Their use to investigate bias in decision making, validity of performance-based assessment instruments, and a re-visitation of disproportionate representation of minority students in special education programs highlights different applications of the method. Descriptive research was utilized to evaluate the impact of race on access to services for African-American youth, as well, as to evaluate surveys of general educators on their perceptions of factors affecting overrepresentation. Additionally, the selected literature reviews a study which used descriptive statistics to evaluate the effectiveness of intervention programs for specific categories of special education students.

Further explanation of the qualitative articles begins with Patton et al. (1998). In his article, "The Disproportionate Representation of African Americans in Special Education," he uses a critical-theory mode of inquiry to discuss how certain basic assumptions, world views, beliefs, and epistemologies used by some special education knowledge producers serve to perpetuate the disproportionality drama. The purposes of

this article are to look behind the special education ontological, axiological and epistemological “curtain” and address the overrepresentation of African American learners in special education classes. The special education ontological view is that those who create, manufacture, and produce the knowledge base in special education have not included African Americans, especially those directly affected by overrepresentation. The special education axiological view is that the knowledge that is produced is not culture free. The special education epistemology view is that the knowledge producers have attempted to understand and explain the behavior and life experiences of African Americans through their own cultural/ethnic perspectives.

Patton begins by briefly discussing the persistent patterns embedded in the overrepresentation of African Americans in mildly disabled and emotionally disturbed programs. This discussion serves to provide a convenient context, or marker, for issues discussed throughout the article. Through the use of a critical theory mode of inquiry Patton et al discusses how the basic assumptions, beliefs, epistemologies, and world views employed by the major “script writers” in the field often serve to perpetuate the disproportionality drama. A related narrative examines special education knowledge producers and the role that these script writers play in perpetuating overrepresentation. Solutions to the problem of overrepresentation are addressed by the author’s ethical narrative. In his review of the literature related to overrepresentation Patton et al makes it clear that the literature reveals these problems. One point is that given the ambiguity and subjectivity embedded in the mild disabilities categories, teacher judgment in the referral process combined with the inherent biases of the assessment process contribute to the disproportionate referral and special education placement of African American students.

Patton et al further states that there appears to be enough theoretical and statistical evidence suggesting that intelligence tests are biased and harmful to many African American learners. The researcher notes from a critical theorist perspective that education, and, thus special education, grounded in structured power relationships, is designed to serve the interests of the dominant social, political, and economic classes.

According to this researcher, this structure places African Americans in a disvalued position. From the researchers' perspective, an important and missing context is provided by this narrative. The context disclosed by the researcher is that a new set of enlightened cultural filters and discourses is needed to replace the current language and narratives used to maintain the legitimacy of current special education social and political arrangements. The researcher concludes his article but suggesting a need for a system in special education that nurtures, develops, and allows for the voices of African American knowledge producer to be heard, confirmed, and affirmed.

“African American Students Representation in Special Education Program”, a study done by Kerns, Ford, and Linney et al. (2005) supplies explanation to the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education from a selected group of school psychologists. A goal of this study was to understand school psychologists' beliefs about this issue. It has been argued and questioned whether overrepresentation is really a problem (Heller, Holtzman, and Messick, 1982; Reschly, 1988). Regardless of one's perspective on this issue, African American students receive special education serviced at a disproportionately high rate in relation to their overall population in public schools (Obiakor, 1999). School psychologists are educational professionals who provide assessments, consultation, systems intervention, and

counseling in ways to support schools, teachers, students, and families. For African Americans and other ethnic minority students in particular, school psychologists can work to potentially prevent abuse of special education referral system (Frisby, 1992).

The mixed (qualitative/quantitative) study by Lo and Cartledge (2006) “FBA and BIP: Increasing the Behavior Adjustment of African American Boys in Schools,” used Functional Behavior Assessments and Behavior Intervention Plans as a means to prevent disproportionality of African American boys. Based on the results of the Functional Behavior Assessments, the authors developed interventions for four elementary students to include skill training, differential reinforcement, and a self-monitoring program. The ages of the study participants were 7, 7, 8, and 9. Two of the participants had been diagnosed with ADHD and two of the participants had disruptive problem behaviors.

The study was conducted in a Midwestern, urban public elementary school with an 82% African American student population. The first author of the study was the primary experimenter, trainer, and observer. Each student was exposed to a series of descriptive assessments; a structured teacher interview, a review of school records, a behavioral rating scale and questionnaire, structured student interviews, a reinforcement preference assessment, a scatter plot, and A-B-C- recordings. The Behavior Intervention Plans were evaluated using a multiple baseline across subjects design. Limited generality is observed in the variability of data across conditions. One limitation of the study was that it failed to precisely determine whether limited behavior changes in generalization settings were due to lack of generality effects or a result of inaccurate identification of the behavioral functions. A second limitation of the study

was that one of the participants' medication intakes made it difficult for the experimenter to assert that off-tasks reductions were solely the function of the BIPs.

Gresham et al. (2005) dissertation abstract "General educator's perceptions about the overrepresentation of elementary-age black males identified as students with emotional disturbance, whose purpose of the study was to investigate their perceptions of factors affecting the overrepresentation of elementary aged Black males in classrooms for students with emotional disturbance. The subjects for the study were 158 elementary school general education teachers.

Dykes et al. (2005) dissertation abstract; "Reducing overrepresentation of African Americans in special education programs in East Texas elementary schools: A multi-case study", examined the strategies, policies, and procedures being implemented to alleviate the overrepresentation of African Americans in special education programs in schools identified by the Texas Education Agency. Using case study qualitative method, the experiences of special education administrators, principles and teachers were collected and analyzed. Using within-case analysis, narratives of the participants were developed to document their lived experiences. Cross-case analysis was used to determine the emergent themes.

In Hosp and Reschly's qualitative study (et al, 2002), "Predictors of Restrictiveness of Placement for African-American and Caucasian Students", they explored differences in the special education programming of African-American and Caucasian students. Using school records of 230 3rd- through 5th- grade students identified as having a learning disability from four school districts in Delaware, the authors analyzed 102 variables related to special education referral, identification, and

placement. Analyses of variance were used to identify main effects each variable had on race interactions. From this analysis, a pattern was found to exist that related to the restrictiveness of placement. This study was exploratory in nature and the intent was to identify variables that might suggest bias in decisions about restrictiveness of placements. Demonstrated by this study, Hosp and Reschly et al justified that there is a clear need to look at the processes that are used to refer, assess, classify, and place individuals if we are to generate a clearer understanding of the issue of disproportionate representation.

Giesen, Cavanaugh, and Sansing (2004) investigated access to the state-federal vocational rehabilitation (VR) service delivery system based on race and minority status. This study used data from the National Health Interview Survey (1994 & 1995), Disability Supplement, and Title VII of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which was conducted to provide policy-relevant data on disabilities. This study used a multistage probability design, was nationally representative, and had a response rate of 93%. The data collected contained race variables, detailed information on racial and ethnic categories, and because the instrument used was a nationally representative survey, the data collected can be considered a population, not a sample. It was found that African Americans access VR at a higher percentage rate than their percentage in the population of those who are visually impaired (Steinman et al, 2003). Although a higher access percentage rate may exist, other researchers have suggested that higher participation rates are related to the social disadvantages experienced by racial and ethnic minorities (Bolton and Cooper, 1980).

“DISCOVER in Middle School: Identifying Gifted Minority Students” by Ketty Sarouphim (2004) is a study which examines the validity of students in 6th – 8th grade

who were assessed with DISCOVER. This assessment instrument is a performance-based test used to identify giftedness in minority school students and reducing their underrepresentation in programs for the gifted. The sample consisted of 395 middle school students, predominantly Mexican Americans and Native Americans belonging to lower socioeconomic classes, from schools in Arizona. Ford (2002) argued that the main reason for minority underrepresentation is a “deficit perspective” that has influenced directly or indirectly the access of culturally diverse students to gifted programs. Questions examined the alignment between DISCOVER and Gardner (1983) theory of multiple intelligences and assessed gender and ethnic differences. Results supported a good fit between DISCOVER and multiple intelligence. Students identified as gifted in one intelligence were not necessarily identified in other intelligences. This 2 x 3 MANOVA (gender by ethnicity) showed no significance interaction between the two variables. In summation, 12.4% of the participants in this study were identified as gifted, suggesting that using alternate assessment tools such as DISCOVER might diminish the long-standing problem of minority underrepresentation in gifted programs (Sarouphim, 2004).

Testing has always been a point of frustration when it comes to minority placement in certain programs. Green, McIntosh, Cook-Morales, and Robinson-Zanartu (2005) article, “From Old Schools to Tomorrow’s Schools – Psychoeducational Assessment of African American Students”, this testing frustration is supported. African American students who are overrepresented in special education have higher dropout rates, are suspended and expelled at a higher rate, and are subject to persistent education inequity. The role of assessment of difference and disability has contributed to the

persistent misidentification and overrepresentation of African American students in special education.

A survey conducted by Gresham et al in a dissertation contributes to the body of knowledge of overrepresentation of African Americans in special education through a literature review. His topic examined perceptions of factors affecting the issue of overrepresentation. The subjects of this study were 158 elementary school general education teachers. The instrument used was a researcher-designed survey developed to determine perceptions of teachers about causal factors for overrepresentation. The instrument was created, pilot tested and validated, and administered in a Maryland public school system to general education teachers. The data was collected, coded and analyzed.

Sinclair, Christenson, and Thurlow et al used a longitudinal experimental research design with random assignment of students to treatment. This model is conceptual grounded in a broad base of research in student engagement, school dropout, resiliency, and social competence, as well as home school collaboration. This study examines the effectiveness of a targeted, long-term intervention to promote school completion and reduce dropout among urban high school students with emotional or behavioral disabilities. Another study attempted to analytically assess a structural level of racial disparity in child maltreatment. The author used data from Florida counties (1998-2001) and the 2000 census, the effects of poverty, concentrated poverty, and female-headed families in poverty on Black, White, and the difference between Black-White rates of child maltreatment. The sample size was 67 participants. Data were assessed and analyzed. From this analysis, results were formulated.

De Valenzuela, Copeland, Huaqing Qi, and Park et al conducted a study to examine several key aspects of educational opportunities – disproportionate enrollment in special education, disproportionate access to general education settings, and disproportionate access to ancillary services-in one large, southwestern school district. Continued concern about educational equity for minority students require looking beyond analysis of enrollment in primary disability categories to additional issues of educational opportunity for students receiving special education services. This study examined the relationship between student ethnicity and language proficiency status with (a) number and type of disability labels, (b) access to the least restrictive environment, and (c) ancillary services using data from a large southwestern school district. Data quality was also examined as a part of this study using SPSS software. The data were analyzed for relationships between student ethnicity and language proficiency status and (a) type and number of disability labels, (b) access to the least restrictive environment, and (c) number of ancillary services reported.

Despite the vital role of the referral as the “gatekeeper” process through which students become eligible for official evaluation for entry into gifted programs, it remains poorly understood. In the study done by McBee et al. (2006), gifted nomination status, and gifted identification status for all elementary school students in the state of Georgia were studied. The relevant variables for the dataset used were (a) students race, (b) whether or not the student received free or reduced price lunch, (c) whether the student had been nominated for participation in the gifted program, (d) the source of the nomination, and (e) whether or not the student had been identified. The overall sample size for the dataset was 1,820,635. Of these, all students in grades 1 through 5 were

selected

Findings

School psychologists in the study revealed three primary factors perceived to have the most influence on African American underachievement in regular education and disproportionate representation in special education. Those three factors included a lack of parental involvement and broadly defined cultural disadvantage; the failures of the regular education and special education systems; and pressures from parents and teachers to place African American students in special education. The results from the data viewed cultural disadvantage and low parental involvement in education as the two most influential factors affecting the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education. School psychologists perceived that failure to perform assessments that were ecological in nature (took in account the student's environment, history, cultural influences, family and school influences) also resulted in inadequate assessment results (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). Rather, a battery of tests, including observations, interviews, and review of student work should be used to conduct the psych-educational evaluation. The psychologists also asserted that as long as African American families faced poverty and limited opportunity, problems like disproportionate representation would persist (Billingley, 1992; Hale-Benson, 1986; Harry, 1992).

Ford, Burke, and Martin et al. (2006) article, "Curriculum-Based Measurement: An Emerging Alternative to Traditional Assessment for African American Children and Youth", the authors' purpose was to provide readers with an overview of curriculum – based measurement. The authors further state that assessment reform is needed that emphasizes reliable and valid alternative assessment, linkages to the curriculum, and

progress monitoring. The authors propose that the current model of “test and place” using IQ and achievement tests for determining a disability, particularly a learning disability, should be replaced with a needs-based approach—an approach that focuses on the use of a problem-solving instrument, such as curriculum-based measurement (CBM; Shinn, 1998; Shinn & Tindal, 1988). In support of the need for a study providing an overview of Curriculum-Based Measurement, the authors provide evidence of discrepancies between current methods of testing students for special education placement and results determined from the use of curriculum-based measurement.

Gresham’s (et al, 2005) dissertation abstract “General educator’s perceptions about the overrepresentation of elementary-age black males identified as students with emotional disturbance, whose purpose of the study was to investigate their perceptions of factors affecting the overrepresentation of elementary aged Black males in classrooms for students with emotional disturbance. The results of the study showed that while general education teachers considered environmental, teacher perception, and school related variables to be influential in the overrepresentation of Black Males in ED classroom, environmental factors were most frequently noted as being causal in nature for black students being identified as ED. The results also indicated that while general education teachers considered environmental, teacher perception and school related variables to be influential to the overrepresentation of black males in ED classrooms, environmental factors were most frequently noted as the being causal in nature for black students being identified as ED.

De Valenzuela, Copeland, Huaqing Qi, and Park et al conducted a study to examine several key aspects of educational opportunities – disproportionate enrollment in

special education, disproportionate access to general education settings, and disproportionate access to ancillary services-in one large, southwestern school district. This study results indicates that overrepresentation research and policy changes should consider both the influence of environmental factors on identification rates and the power that ethnicity has on teacher perception. The results also suggest that minority students and English Language learners were disproportionately enrolled in special education and placed in more segregated settings. A trend toward increased disability labels for minority students was also identified.

Schuck et al study of black-white disparity in maltreatment practices was viewed from a sociological perspective. She concluded that structural covariates of maltreatment vary by race and that differences in female-headed families in poverty can explain some, but not all of the Black-White disparity in child maltreatment. The results also suggested that increasing programs that focus on reducing poverty among female-headed Black families and the exposure of Black families to concentrated poverty should decrease some of the overrepresentation of Black children in the child welfare system. The results suggested that the structural covariates of maltreatment vary by race and that differences in female-headed families in poverty can explain some, but not all, of the Black-White racial disparity in child maltreatment.

Sinclair, Christenson, and Thurlow et al in their research examined the effectiveness of a targeted, long-term intervention to promote school completion and reduce dropout among urban high school students with emotional or behavioral disabilities. Results of program outcomes included lower rates of dropout and mobility, higher rates of persistent attendance and enrollment issues in school, and more

comprehensive transition plans. From a policy perspective, the results of this study suggest that inequalities in nomination, rather than assessment, may be the primary source of the underrepresentation of minority and low socioeconomic status students in gifted programs.

Conclusions

Many disagree regarding the placement of African American students in special education programs. Much literature exists addressing the issues of overrepresentation in certain disability categories and underrepresentation in gifted programs. A review of the literature reveals the impact of disproportional placement on school and life success of African American students. In particular, there is literature that highlights patterns of disproportionate placement of African American males in sub-standard diploma tracks (Ford, Burke, & Martin, 2006; Arnold and Lassman, 2003; Kearns, Ford, & Linney, 2005). This literature also makes comparisons on lengths of time spent in special education programs. These comparisons reveal that a Black-White disparity does exist in child maltreatment (Schuck, 2006). In the referral process, bias exists relative to particular minority groups (Arnold & Lassman, 2006). This bias continues in the assessment and the referral (Green, McIntosh, Cook-Morales, Robinson-Zanartu, 2005; & Patton, 1998), led by teachers and administrators of dominant racial groups.

Although a large quantity of literature does address negative issues surrounding disproportionality, several authors do address positive outcomes (Sinclair, Christenson, and Thurlow, 2005; Ford, Harris, III, Tyson, & Trotman, 2002). The themes that emerged from the literature related to factors contributing to overrepresentation, underrepresentation, and disproportionality include: bias in assessment, prereferral

interventions, staff development, and socioeconomic status.

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