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**Investigating the Overrepresentation of Ethnic Minorities in Special Education**

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Debates on the overrepresentation of minority students, particularly African- Americans, are not new in special education and have characterized research in this field for over three decades. Regardless of time, legislative debate and a host of research theories, this problem remains. “In general, research has supported the public concern but the picture is unclear because studies have varied so much with respect to definitions of minority representation in findings across ethnic groups and technical methods (Coutinho & Oswald, 1999, p. 66). It is on the definition of minorities, the methods used to calculate data and the identification of minority students that most studies focus in an attempt to address this overrepresentation. The purpose of this paper is to identify the concept of overrepresentation, discuss the factors that cause it and recommend strategies to address it.

### **The Nature of the Problem**

The underlying assumption of overrepresentation among all minority groups is that, when represented accurately, the proportion of different ethnic groups in any category or program should be equal to the proportion of the same group in the general school population. When an ethnic group features two disproportionate groups in the school population, whether it is on a district, state or national scale, overrepresentation occurs. Similarly, Oswald, Coutinho, Best and Singh (1999) defined overrepresentation as “the extent to which membership in a given ethnic group affects the probability of being placed in a specific disability category” (p. 198). In addition to this, MacMillan and Reschly (1998), indicated that it is important to note that ethnic proportions in clearly biological determined disability categories (e.g. blind or deaf) and in those cases of

mental retardation considered sever and profound do not yield dramatic deviations from proportions that one would expect.

With this definition in mind, data have shown that the proportion of minority students served in special education has varied over the past few decades. African-American children were 2.3 times more likely to be identified by their teachers as having mental retardation than their white counterparts. The overall proportion of black students in districts sampled was 25.8% in 1980 and 16% in 1990. However, in 1990, 21% of students were receiving special education services thus showing that a disproportionate amount of African- American children were being served in special education (Oswald et al., 1999). While African- American children make up the most misrepresented category, other ethnic groups are also disproportionately represented. Data from the 22<sup>nd</sup> Annual Report to Congress show that for all ethnic groups across al disabilities, American Indian and Alaskan students are also over represented and that the Asian/ Pacific Islander groups and Hispanics are underrepresented in all categories (Zhiang & Katsiyannis, 2002).

The percentages of students with disabilities included in general education classrooms are also disproportionate. Statistics from the New York state education department show that more than 56% of White children and 51% of Asian children are fully included, only 44% of Hispanic and 40% of Black disabled students are similarly integrated (What Works in Teaching and Learning, 2002). African- American males are overrepresented in special education categories and typically receive services in segregated classrooms or buildings (Patton, 1999).

Disproportionate date for minority children's placements in special education has been studied for over three decades and the same issues seem to reappear in most cases

when accounting for this phenomenon. Lloyd Dunn was one of the first researchers to call national attention to disproportionate representation of students with mild mental retardation in self-contained classrooms in 1968 (Zhiang & Katsiyannis, 2002). Dunn argued that the identification and placement in special education of socioculturally deprived children with mild learning problems was of concern because of the nature of these settings, the questionable benefits of these placements and the detrimental effects of labeling. Since 1968, the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) has received and investigated complaints associated with placement of minority students for mental retardation and serious emotional disturbance; equal access of minority students to pre-referral programs, lack of access to minority students to general education programs and issues associated with students with limited English proficiency. Landmark cases during this period include *Diana vs. State Board of Education* (1970), dealing with non-biased assessments in native language, *Larry P. vs. Riles* (1979, 1984), which stopped IQ being the sole basis for assessment and *Marshall et al. vs. Georgia* (1984) (Oswald et al. 1999).

### **Accounting for Overrepresentation**

The data provided does show that an overrepresentation of minority students exists in special education. One of the main reasons for this overrepresentation is to do with the variation of studies on this topic. Differences have been noted in disability condition, definition of minority representation and technical method. “The result of this body of work been an unclear picture of the proportions of racial and ethnic groups in special education” (Oswald et al., 1999 p. 195). Studies are drawn from national, single state or geographical regional sources, which causes variation in results. Another contributory

factor to this variation is the technical method used for calculating rates of disproportionality among ethnic groups. Oswald et al., (1999) found a number of different calculation methods, which produced different results and one study, Carlson et al., (1996), actually showed underrepresentation. This only adds confusion to the debate on how proportionate the numbers in special education are.

Poverty has been noted as a cause of overrepresentation of minority groups. An interesting aspect of the poverty analysis shows different trends for different disabilities. As the poverty rate increased, more African- American students were identified as having mild mental retardation, but the opposite applied for children with serious emotional disturbance. The most affluent students were identified as having these emotional problems, indicating that wealthier communities are more tolerant of behavioral diversity in African- Americans than of differences of learning characteristics (Oswald et al., 1999). This theory has been echoed by MacMillan and Reschly (1998) who state “ethnicity and poverty are inextricably interwoven in our society” (p. 20). Poverty, especially in extreme forms, may also block other preventative interventions from being implemented. Treatments such as pre- and post-natal nutrition may place a child at greater risk of disabilities (Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002).

One of the bases for disproportionate representation is inappropriate identification of students. The 23<sup>rd</sup> Annual Report to Congress (2001) found that although the number of children from diverse backgrounds in the nation’s schools is increasing significantly, many do not receive a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) as mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), 1997. Minority children with disabilities who live in urban and high poverty environments are believed to be at

particularly high risk for educational failure and poor outcomes because of inappropriate identifications and placement services. Coutinho and Oswald (1999) found that “although America’s student body is becoming more and more diverse, children who are nonwhite, non- native English speaking or poor continue to be overidentified as having disabilities and to be served in more segregated placements than their peers” (p. 66).

One interesting theory about this overrepresentation of minorities in special education is the deliberate underachievement of African- Americans (Townsend, 2001). She discovered that students tended to adopt their own racial barriers to academic achievement “by adopting racial identities in opposition to school expectations and codes” (p. 227). This claim is based on research by Ford and Harris (1997) and Fordham and Ogbu (1986). They found a stigma associated with achievement in peer groups as they sought to avoid accusations of “acting White”. Teaching strategies aimed at boosting self- esteem and aimed at cultural diversity between minority groups could help produce an alternative to these behaviors which warrants further investigation.

Differences in eligibility requirements between states are also blamed between states are also blamed for placing more African- American children in members of other ethnic groups. This led Coutinho and Oswald (1999) to claim, “there is enormous state-by-state variation in the numbers of students served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act” (p. 66). Indeed, it is reasonable to expect that a state with more stringent eligibility criteria would have a lower prevalence of disabilities and that this accounts for the variation in percentages served in special education. Table 1 shows the extent of the variance between states. Definitional considerations can account for some variability and demographic factors and help to explain variance between states.

However, MacMillan and Reschly (1998) suggest that profiles characterizing many children classified as learning disabled in some states lower overall representative rates of mental retardation dismiss these definitional considerations as “judgmental categories” (p. 20). When data are cumulatively assessed on a national scale, the variance between states becomes obscured. Other variables within states that could influence representation include state expenditures on education, state level regulations regarding verification processes. These variables require further analysis in order to accurately measure their impact on overrepresentation of ethnic minorities.

The methods used that determine placement in special education have been linked with causing overrepresentation. Naglieri and Rojahn (2001) studied students who were assessed using both the WISC III and Cognitive Assessment System tests. They found that Black students consistently earned lower mean Full- Scale IQ scores than their White peers. They concluded that these differences did not constitute a test bias but that it did result in a disproportionate placement of African- American students. Should the Cognitive Assessment System be used as a common classification instrument, the number of students eligible for special education would drop by 30%. This study (Naglieri and Rojahn, 2001) requires replication in order to increase its reliability. Maker (1995) revealed that 80% of foreign-born US residents were European, but that by 1993, it was down to 20% and that the total foreign-born population has increased to 40%. Despite these demographic changes, the instruments that assess intellectual ability have not changed to take into account the changes in the children whose intelligence they are measuring. Townsend (2001) criticized the standardized tests that children take. She argues that the tests have long been considered unfair and biased against students from



ethnic minority backgrounds because they are based on the experiences of middle class Americans.

### **Is Overrepresentation Really a Problem?**

There are a number of benefits that come from being placed in special education that suggest that placing children in such programs actually benefits them. Indeed, some researchers (MacMillan and Reschly, 1998; Zhang and Katsiyannis, 2002) highlighted the positive associations with special education placement. These associations include low teacher pupil ratio, individualized programming, legislative mandates to protect students' rights, guaranteed funding for student services and specialized teacher training. However, the contrary view is that the negative implications that result from withdrawal from general education services tend to outweigh these positive effects. Special education is criticized as being ineffective and the stigma of the label attached to children receiving services bears heavily on the minds of parents and children. Patton (1998), added that students can be appropriately placed and "fail to receive a quality and life enhancing placement as a result" (p.25) of this stigma.

African- Americans have been found to be overrepresented in other educational fields, yet the same attention has not been given to these data. Children from this minority group are also overrepresented in Head Start, Follow Through and Chapter 1 programs, to an extent as great as the overrepresentation of minority students in special education if not more (MacMillan Reschly, 1998). This echoes the claims that it is the stigma of the label associated with withdrawal from general education services that is the

real issue at hand as opposed to racial bias, differences in classifications or other factors in explaining why so much attention has been given to this issue over the years.

Artiles and Trent (1994) say that despite this evidence, this overrepresentation still constitutes a problem. They maintain that the fact that disproportionate numbers of minority students are placed in special education classrooms questions the efficacy of professional practices and challenges the basic notion of diversity. Providing explanations about the occurrence in minority student overrepresentation is controversial. MacMillan and Reschly (1998) cautioned against drawing causal inferences from what descriptive data relating race/ ethnicity to placement in disability category. Patton (1998) recommended, “qualitatively different knowledge producers, who are culturally and interculturally competent, are needed to bring resolution to this persistent challenge (p.27).

### **Preventing Placement in Special Education**

A number of important factors have been identified in assisting children with disabilities who are otherwise eligible for special education. Early Detection and Primary Prevention have been identified as mechanisms for preventing children from even getting to the stage where they need intervention (Serness, Forna & Nielsen, 1998). Early Detection involves identification of a condition before it can reach the referral stage. It suggests the need for systematic school wide screening as well as primary rather than secondary prevention. Early Detection allows for Primary Prevention to be used to address any potential developing problems. This strategy is composed of a number of developmental stages and is meant to pre-empt emotional and academic problems in children. This

method emphasizes universal interventions such as parent or teacher instructional training, which is delivered in school. For example, Serna et al. claimed that this model promotes interventions before the identification of emotional or behavioral difficulties, minimizes labeling effects and creates a more favorable environment.

Another crucial element in combating underachievement and subsequent potential eligibility for special education services is effective instruction in general or special education settings. As well as academic and social competence, resiliency and promoting self-determination, Lambert (1998) suggested that district, state and national level administrators should monitor special education placements and the nature of instructional services offered with particular attention to racial concerns. Through such measures, teachers may be able to teach social competence, resiliency and self-determination skills so that children can advocate self-independence and exhibit behaviors that promote success in school and family settings.

The ethnic backgrounds of the professionals responsible for producing the knowledge base in special education have, according to one theory, (Patton, 1998), not included African-Americans, especially those directly affected by overrepresentation. “There exists in special education, a mismatch of chasm proportion between the social, political and cultural backgrounds and experiences of its knowledge producers and those African-American learners studied, placed and overrepresented in special education classes “ (Patton, 1998, p.27). This claim rests on the belief that both knowledge and its production is far from culture free and that those producers of this knowledge shape the boundaries and definitions of issues such as paradigm formation, definitional contrasts, theory development and choice of research methods, all of which characterize the

overrepresentation debate. The cultural identities of the knowledge producers shape the notions of what is 'real', 'true' and good, which create a 'pseudo objective' nature of knowledge production. Should this be accurate and the absence of objectivity in knowledge production influence overrepresentation of minorities, then this is a serious problem in need or address. It would perhaps require an increase in the number of knowledge producers from the ethnic groups affected by it, but as a result, the scales of subjectivity could end up tipping the other way, which would not appropriately address the problem. Patton's (1998) theory requires a much more detailed analysis than can be provided here, but it is an interesting one which could perhaps yield some productive conclusions.

### **Discussion**

There are vast number of factors that contribute to the overrepresentation of ethnic minorities in special education. These factors have been influential for over three decades and they will continue to affect the number of children being served in special education unless they are addressed. Many different definitions of the problem and various methods have been employed to investigate the overrepresentation, limiting the interpretation and generality of findings because of varying samples, unclear or questionable assumptions about disproportionality and inadequate technical methods. Many studies have used some form of a percentage to describe overrepresentation (e.g., Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002), but the use of percentage figures can be confusing. A school district with African- American children forming 10% of its overall population in which 15% of the students with

disabilities are African-American might have its overrepresentation described in two ways (Coutinho & Oswald, 1999):

$$(1) 15\% - 10\% = 5\%$$

$$(2) (15\% - 10\%) / 10\% = .50 \text{ equals } 50\%$$

The extent to which each of these factors contributes to the overrepresentation of minority students is unknown, but collectively, they account for a problem that has characterized special education since the 1960s. Variation in methods and definitions alone do not explain this trend and studies must show that poverty and the contributions that students themselves make (e.g., deliberate underachievement) must also be taken into consideration.

The issue of whether overrepresentation in special education alone actually is a problem will remain part of this debate. The benefits of special education such as specialized teacher training, low pupil to teacher ratio and individualized programming have become overshadowed by the stigma attached to being withdrawn from general education settings and taught away from peers. Programs that do not have this stigmae, but where African- Americans are overrepresented (e.g. Head Start) do not face the same attention. The use of inclusion to facilitate learning in the general education classroom as a tool to remove this stigma could be an effective method of addressing overrepresentation of minorities. This is an area that obviously needs more research.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the information provided by previous research that has been conducted over the years, it is clear that there are areas within this issue that needs attention. The recommendations that follow are intended attempt to address those needs.

A set of universal definitions that apply to aspects of this issue should be devised so as to limit differences in reports that have the same goal of identifying and addressing overrepresentation. Concepts such as what exactly constitutes overrepresentation and an agreed method of calculation for measuring its levels are two examples of these necessary definitions. Agreement on these terms will help remove inconsistencies in the information that becomes the focus of research and debate.

Overrepresentation can be prevented by early intervention strategies, aimed at preventing disabilities from significantly influencing a child's life, academically and socially. Initiatives such as the Abecedarian Project or Perry Preschool Project have proven that minority children from low-income families still have the ability to succeed when appropriate environments and instruction are provided. Therefore, preventing the problem before it manifests itself is a very viable alternative that would limit problems later in life for children from all and not just minority groups.

Townsend (2001) advocates the need for school reform in an attempt to address overrepresentation. This is needed to improve school success of African-American learners. However, these reforms, should not, as the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) requires, be based on student performance in standardized tests, which contribute to overrepresentation and actually meant that African-American children do get left behind. School reform should therefore be aimed at being a strengths-based model, more closely

connected with the instructional process, teacher expectations that are consistent with students' capabilities and attitudes and increased familiarity with racial identity for African-Americans (Townsend, 2001).

Further research in this field should pay attention to analyzing the differences of attainment on IQ tests (WISC III and Cognitive Assessment System) and how this impacts overrepresentation. If the initial research Naglieri and Rojahn (2001) proves accurate after replication, then the problem that is the overrepresentation of minorities could be solved, or at least be less substantial than it currently is. Also, should there be a change in the ethnic background of knowledge producers, as suggested by Patton (1998), it would be interesting to note how this changes the attitudes towards overrepresentation and this change would also bring about a change in overrepresentation statistics.

The overrepresentation of minority groups, particularly members of the African-American community is a problem in urgent need of address. It has continued almost unattended since it was highlighted by Lloyd Dunn and can no longer continue to incorrectly place children in educational settings in environments that are inappropriate. Agreement amongst most researchers and effective classroom instruction methods are key factors in preventing this trend continuing for another 30 years.

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