

Taking a Look at the Racial Imbalance of African American Children in Special Education Classes

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Abstract

This literature review examined disproportionality of African-American children in special education classes. The issue of disproportionality of African-American children has been well researched and continues to be a problem for the education community. The purpose of this literature review was to understand the causes of disproportionality, the purpose of special education, and limitations in this research. The critique of articles allowed for a better understanding into this matter. The finding of why disproportionality exists among African-American children was linked to institutional racism.

Keywords: Racial Imbalance; Special Education; African-Americans

Introduction

In American schools, kids are sometimes placed in classes for discipline, behavioral, and emotional problems. Most of the kids placed in these classes are of color. Special Education is a system designed for students who may have learning problems, however, kids of color are placed there for other reasons. Sometimes kids of color are looked at differently than other races and causes them to be set aside from other kids. This problem of kids of color being placed in special Education classrooms is known as misrepresenting African-American children. Overrepresentation occurs when the percentage of students with specific characteristics (e.g., race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, language background, gender, etc.) is higher than their proportion in the general population. African-American children have been over-represented in special education classes in the school system. This overrepresentation has caused a disproportion of more African-American children in these classes than Caucasian children or other ethnic groups. Seeing that this is a problem based on this disproportionality, there has been a call to action to stop this from continuing. For decades, the National Association of Education [1] has stated that there have been many debates on questions such as: What factors contribute to the disproportionality of African-American children in special education programs? Are African-American children placed in special education to meet their needs or for other reasons? How does the placement of African-American children in special education programs become a problem? Even with research being conducted, some of these questions have yet to be resolved.

There have been studies conducted that have studied the unequal placement of African American children in special education [2]. Studies have assessed the nature of this problem and reviewed many causes of disproportionality that will be discussed in this paper [2]. In schools across the country, African-American children are being educated in special education programs at a higher rate than their representation in the general population of the school [3,4]. African-American sometimes only make up 14% of a school's population, but somehow, make up 27% of special education services [3,4]. Since there seems to be a racial disparity with African-American children, there has been a sparked interest in the education community on this matter.

The goals of this paper are to provide societal factors of disproportionality including: race, gender, poverty, and cultural insensitivity and school related factors including: teacher referral and teacher expectations.

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Causes of Disproportionality

Disproportionality is defined as a students' representation in special education programs or specific special education categories exceeding their proportional enrollment in a school's general population [5]. The overrepresentation of African-American children placed in special education programs results from many factors that function both separately and jointly [6]. Bollmer, et al. [6] explained that gaining more knowledge about causative factors will allow for a better understanding of the disproportionality. Some of the factors that contribute to this problem include race, gender, poverty, teacher referral, lack of cultural awareness, and teacher expectations.

Race: These authors found that African-American students were at a higher risk for placement into special education than other ethnic groups [1]. The United States Department of Education identified, more than a year ago, unequal minority representation in special education as a serious problem affecting African-American children. The IDEA of 1997 documented alarming statistics: although African-Americans represented only 16% of elementary and secondary students in the United States, they constituted 21% of total enrollment in special education. In addition, poor African-American children were 2.3 times more likely to be identified by their teacher as having mental retardation than their White counterparts. This finding enabled researchers to take effort in preventing the escalation of problems to the mislabeling of minority children with disabilities.

In essence to the IDEA regulations for federal, state, and local educational agencies, overrepresentation of African-American children continues to be a problem. Black students 6 through 21 years of age were found to be 1.5 times more likely to receive special educational services under IDEA than other students of the same age (IDEA, 2005). The national data was even more consistent when specific categories of special education were closely assessed. Black students between the ages of 6 and 21 were 2.86 times more likely to receive special education services under IDEA for mental retardation, and 2.28 times more likely to receive services for emotional disturbance than same age students of all other races combined (IDEA, 2005).

Gender: Piland [4] discussed how gender played a possible role for African-American males to be placed in special education. The researcher reported that a higher percentage of male students are being placed in special education programs in comparison to their white and female counterparts.

Under the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), approximately 66% of the students who are receiving special education services are boys (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). There is a disproportion that exists between boys and girls and is astonishing in the areas of mental retardation and emotional disturbance.

Thus far, researchers have not found a clear explanation for the gender differences that are seen in special education programs. The researchers cannot pinpoint whether gender differences are appropriate or if boys are overrepresented and/or if girls are under-represented.

Poverty: Losen and Orfield [5] contend that poverty contribute to African-American males disabilities. The effects of poverty leave these males students exposed to stressors that may be of the environment and cause them to be "less" prepared for school. Researchers claim that because minority students are exposed to disadvantaged environments disproportionality, it seems likely that poverty would contribute to the unequal displacement of African-American children in special education programs [5]. What has been consistent in research according to Losen and Orfield [5] is that other variables are involved when examining the relationship between poverty and the displacement of African-American males in special education programs. An explanation alone of disproportionality cannot explain the findings that disproportionality is greater in categories such as emotionally disturbed, mentally retarded, and learning disabled than in biological based disability categories [5]. Multiple studies have previously shown that a child's race significantly impacted the probability that he or she would be referred to special education services and identified inappropriately as disabled [5,7].

Teacher Referral: Placement of students in special education services is first identified by the student's teachers, counselors, or principals who are referring the student to special education services. When a student shows difficulties in the classroom on the general curriculum based on behavior problems or poor academic performance, a referral is made. Seventy-three to ninety percent of African-American males are found eligible for special education services because of academic achievement. Studies have also shown that teachers

refer minority students for behavioral rather than academic issues (Gottlieb & Trongone, 1991). In addition, African-American students are overrepresented in disciplinary actions when it comes to classroom penalties such as suspensions, expulsions, and verbal reprimands [8,9]. Sometimes the behavioral problems that arise are contributed to a child being referred to special education services. A study was conducted on a group of students in grades 2 through 4 by Mc Millan, Gresham, Lopez, and Bocian [10] who were identified for referral intervention and found that, in addition to poor academic achievement; the students demonstrated more behavioral problems than other students their age. African-American males were at a higher risk for placement into special education because of behavioral problems [10]. Although there have been no studies confirming this hypothesis directly, investigations of behavior, race, and discipline have yet to provide solid evidence that African-American students misbehave more than their white counterparts. Conclusions that have been drawn about why this is the case is that some researchers think that teachers are more biased towards Whites in classroom settings, teachers have higher expectation for other races that are not African-American, and teachers have more prejudicial attitudes toward African-American males than any other race and gender.

Cultural Insensitivity: The lack of knowledge of cultural differences is also a factor in contributing to the unequal placement of African-American children. Hilliard [11] concluded education professionals view cultural differences among African-American students as an indicator of deficiencies. This viewpoint can lead to one seeing a student identified as being below normal measures of adaptive behaviors. The education environment of the regular classroom setting is not set up to meet the needs of culturally different students and that causes African-American students to become misdiagnosed and misplaced in special education (Gilbert & Gay, 1985).

Teacher expectations: The expectations of teachers, even when based on flawed information, can influence the academic performance of children, especially African-American children [12]. It has been pointed out that a student's academic achievement is directly related to the teacher's expectations [13]. The researcher further contended that this issue leads to teachers holding certain perceptions and expectations of students from certain demographic groups. Lumsden [14] claimed that all schools hold expectations that are very high for all students, however, in truth, what is acknowledged is not always practiced. Lumsden further stated that some schools and teachers maintain high expectations for all students, others have "great expectations" for particular demographic groups and minimal expectations for others. Since disproportionality exists among African –American children and their placement into special education services, an examination of the intent of special educational services need to be observed.

The Misuse of the Purpose of Special Education

Special education was perceived to provide educational support that was not being given in the general education curriculum for students who suffered from disabilities. Beginning at its origin, special education was not a place or location but rather a service delivery structure [15]. This service delivery structure was thought to provide personalized instruction to students who were known as having disabilities on the basis of an objective referral, assessment and evaluation, eligibility determination, placement, and exit process [16]. Once the student received the necessary educational support that he or she needed, the student would integrate back into the general education setting. However, for African-American children, special educational services has become a place of segregation from the mainstream education [15-18]. Special education has become an asset to keeping African-American students from receiving equal education in the general education environment [5]. As a result, researchers [5] have stated that special education is a new legalized form of structural segregation and racism. This statement leads to different discoveries and conclusions that have been drawn to explain why this may be happening among African-American children and what are possible approaches to eliminating this problem.

Limitations in this Research

When examining different research articles and studies on disproportionality of African –American children in special education, there were limited articles. There have been studies that have been conducted, however, not all studies are of easy access. Some research material pertaining to this topic had to be bought and that produced a small strain. There has not been too many current research studies done to show how this gap exists among African-American students and other students. Since there hasn't been hardly any recent research within the last 10 years, some of the data and statistics could be a little off. There could be an increase in the disproportionality of African-

American children in special education programs or possibly a decrease. More research needs to be conducted in order to gain a better understanding of this problem in today's time and possible solutions to ending this problem also needs to be assessed.

Conclusion

Special education placement can be beneficial to students when used appropriately. However, students who are misdiagnosed and inappropriately placed often suffer more than they benefit. Instead of receiving the individualized, special education they need and deserve by law when diagnosed properly, they are often lost in the special education crowd. From this paper, it can be concluded that there is a dehumanizing effect of a system that misdiagnoses large numbers of African-American children and places them in special education services. Nevertheless, the federal government and local school districts need to address disproportionality and bring forth equality of representation among racial groups. However, the cycle of disproportionality will likely continue in the face of IDEA unless there is an acknowledgement to the underlying cause of why this is happening: institutional racism.

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