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The Overrepresentation of African American Students in Special Education: A Review of the Literature

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The Overrepresentation of African American
Students in Special Education:
A Review of the Literature

by

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Table of Contents

Chapter	Page
I. Introduction	1
Historical Background	2
Theoretical Background	3
Focus of the Review	5
Rationale	6
Definition of Terms	7
II. Review of the Literature	9
Overrepresentation History	9
Measuring Overrepresentation	12
Early Overrepresentation Research	15
Established Patterns	18
Donovan and Cross' Federal Report	21
Zhang and Katsiyannis	23
Blackorby et al.	26
Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of <i>IDEA</i>	26
Overrepresentation in Restrictive Educational Settings	30
Overrepresented and Over-Referred	33

Chapter	Page
III. Conclusions and Implications	35
Overrepresentation, a Pervasive Problem	36
Factors Linked to Overrepresentation	37
Strategies to Address Overrepresentation	38
Implications	40
References	44

Chapter I: Introduction

Four decades after the inception of special education, the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education programs continues to be an issue (Oswald, Coutinho, Best, & Singh, 1999; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Skiba, Simmons, Ritter, Gibb, Rausch, Cuadrado, & Chung, 2008; Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, & Ortiz, 2010; Ford, 2012). Data from the *30th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* reveal that African American students are placed in special education programs at rates up to 2.8 times higher than all other cultural groups combined (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Despite increased focus on African American overrepresentation through educational reforms, legislative actions, and Federal monitoring, this destructive trend continues today (Zhang, Katsiyannis, Ju, & Roberts, 2014).

Overrepresentation in special education is operationally defined as the representation of a cultural group in special education that exceeds the representation of that group in the total student population (Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002; Skiba et al., 2008). Special education placement data consistently reveal the overrepresentation of African American students in the high-incident disability categories: emotional/behavioral disabilities, intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, and speech/language disabilities (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Zhang et al., 2014). High-incident disabilities are assigned within the context of students' educational performance and are not necessarily observable outside of the classroom (MacMillan & Reschly, 1998; Donovan & Cross, 2002). Diagnoses of these high-incident disabilities, also called judgmental disabilities, involve school personnel subjective opinions which cause inconsistencies in identification

(MacMillan & Reschly, 1998; Artiles et al., 2010). Conversely, disproportionate cultural patterns do not exist in biological based, low-incident disabilities, such as visual impairment, deafness, and orthopedic impairment (MacMillan & Reschly, 1998; Donovan and Cross, 2002).

Additionally, African American students with disabilities are more likely than all other cultural groups to be removed from the general education classroom and given instruction in more restrictive settings, even within the same disability category (Fierros & Conroy, 2002; Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Gallini, Simmons, & Feggins-Azziz, 2006).

This paper provides an overview of the overrepresentation of African American students in special education programs. Three questions guide this review. First, how pervasive is the overrepresentation of African American students in special education programs? Second, what factors contribute to the overrepresentation of African American students in special education? Finally, what specific strategies effectively interrupt patterns of over-identifying African American students for special education services?

Historical Background

Dunn (1968) cast national attention for the first time on disproportionate special education placement rates; he stated that segregated classes for students with intellectual disabilities consisted of 60-80 percent of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and cultural minority groups. In the wake of the Civil Rights movement, a great number of professionals viewed these specialized educational programs as school districts' attempts at a new kind of segregation (Patton, 1998; Donovan & Cross, 2002). Today, both the United States Office for Civil Rights (OCR) and the United States Department of Education, Office of Special Education (OSEP) monitor special education placement data to guard against discrimination

(Oswald et al., 1999; Artiles, Harry, Reschly, & Chinn, 2002; Albrecht, Skiba, Losen, Chung, & Middelberg, 2012).

Each decade following Dunn, researchers analyzed special education placement statistics (Chinn & Hughes, 1987; Artiles & Trent, 1994; Skiba et al., 2008; Zhang et al., 2014). Their findings along with comprehensive Federal reports (Heller, Holtzman, & Messick, 1982; Donovan & Cross, 2002) consistently demonstrate that since the Federal Government enacted special education, African American students have been overrepresented. To address overrepresentation, the Federal Government has amended and reauthorized special education law (Albrecht et al., 2012).

The courts have been a forum for overrepresentation advocacy groups. Landmark cases have continuously challenged special education assessment, eligibility, and placement practices as discriminatory (Reschly, 1997). For example, *Diana v. California State Board of Education* (1970), *Guadalupe Organization v. Tempe Elementary School District No. 3* (1972), *Larry P. v. Riles* (1972/1974/1979/1984), *Parents in Action on Special Education (PASE) v. Joseph P. Hannon* (1980), *Marshall v. Georgia* (1984), and *S-1 v. Turlington* (1986) set the precedent for special education regulation (Reschly, 1997).

Theoretical Background

Research supports the belief that the overrepresentation of African American students in special education stems from a collection of complex factors (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Skiba et al., 2008; McKenna, 2013; Zhang et al., 2014). Artiles et al. (2002) state that “Explanations range from the pervasive impact of poverty on minority children’s development to institutionalized discrimination that may result in lower expectations, over-referrals, and overidentification” (p.

5). The intricate interplay between child, systematic practices, school environment, and teacher all work together to shape the problem (Donovan & Cross, 2002).

A primary explanation for overrepresentation is low socioeconomic status (Artiles et al., 2010). Many argue that the risk factors associated with poverty (e.g. inadequate access to health care, improper nutrition, parental unemployment, poor housing conditions, increased family mobility, and overall neighborhood, housing, and family instability) during crucial developmental years lead to academic underachievement and emotional/behavioral problems (Artiles et al., 2002; Skiba et al., 2008; Whiting, 2010). Supporters of this argument state that African American students are disproportionately exposed to poverty, which naturally causes a greater need for special education services (Artiles et al., 2010). However, Artiles et al. (2002) point out that, “we know little about the potential mediating forces of the duration, timing, context, and various definitions of poverty on special education placement” (p. 8).

Generalizations have also been made about the inequitable characteristics of urban schools, whose populations typically consist of large numbers of African American students. The differences in opportunity and quality of education experienced at these urban educational settings are viewed by some to create performance gaps that ultimately land students, particularly African American students, in special education (Artiles et al., 2002). Disparities include inferior facilities and resources, ineffective teaching strategies and instruction, inequitable school funding, and inexperienced and uncertified staff (Artiles et al., 2002; Kozol, 2005).

Another explanation views systematic educational practices as the cause for overrepresentation. Many argue inequities exist in the referral, evaluation, and placement processes (Myer & Patton, 2001; Artiles et al., 2002; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Skiba et al., 2008). As evidence, some researchers point to the well-documented overrepresentation patterns

of African American students in judgmental disability categories (emotional/behavioral disorders, learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities, speech/language disabilities) and the subjective nature used to determine if eligibility criteria is met (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Artiles et al., 2010). McKenna (2013) argues that “Without clear guidelines, a reliance on professional judgment and personal perceptions may lead to false positives and the overrepresentation of African American students” (p. 207).

“Another compelling mediating force is society’s notion of ‘difference’ and the ways in which the educational system responds to ‘different’ people” (Artiles et al., 2002, p. 8).

Overrepresentation literature acknowledges the disconnect between staff and students and the implications are being discussed with great intensity (Meyer & Patton, 2001; Artiles et al., 2010; Ford, 2012). A majority of the teaching force is middle class, European American, and female, which is inherently different than African American culture (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Ford, 2012). Many feel that the attitudes, perceptions, and expectations held by the majority of educational staff lead to cultural-specific behaviors being misunderstood as disabilities (Artiles et al., 2010; Ford, 2012).

Focus of the Review

The overrepresentation of African American students in special education programs has been a reality for more than four decades. Consequently, a large index of research examines special education placement data. This paper reviews this research to demonstrate the consistent pattern, define the concept of overrepresentation, identify factors that contribute to it, and discuss strategies educators can use on a daily basis to address overrepresentation.

Rationale

My interest in the overrepresentation of African Americans in special education stems from my current experience in the profession. For four years, I have been employed by Osseo Area School District at a junior high in Brooklyn Park as a full service special education teacher. African Americans comprise 50 percent of the school population at my building, yet account for 85 percent of students receiving special education services. Every day, I live the reality that African Americans are overrepresented in special education programs.

My principal makes cultural equity work a priority. We continuously engage in personal and professional development that promotes cultural conversations and learning. These experiences have ignited my cultural journey, and I am now aware of how cultural differences affect life experiences. At every staff meeting, we use the agreements and protocols of Courageous Conversations to structure honest conversations about the educational experience of students of color within our building. Through this equity lens, I engage in my daily work, and I am always aware of the cultural differences that I bring into my classroom.

Also through this equity lens, I reflect upon the state of special education in my building. The students in special education at my school continually underperform on all measures of academic achievement compared to general education students. The reality of my school building is that European American females represent 80 percent of the teaching staff but only 15 percent of the student population. The majority of struggling students characterized as disruptive, insubordinate, lazy, or failing and therefore referred to special education are African American. At a great disservice to students, the system does not allow for all factors of students' lives to be intervened before assigning a disability label. Special education feels like a lifetime placement as I have witnessed only one student in four years exit special education services.

Patterns continue unless individuals are intentional about disrupting them. I am pursuing this research in an attempt to change socially constructed perceptions and processes that lead to the overrepresentation of African American students in special education. Exploration of the research will allow me to implement specific strategies that effectively reduce the over-identification of African American students for special education services. For forty years, special education has grappled with the overrepresentation of African American students; we must become culturally competent and create counter-narratives for African American students.

Definition of Terms

General Education. General education refers to the standard educational setting where schools provide instruction based on state academic standards. Special education programs service students at different rates in and out of the general education.

Special Education. Special education refers to the educational services provided to students ages 3-21 under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), who meet the eligibility criteria in one of thirteen qualifying disabilities. The categories of disabilities are: autism, deaf-blindness, deafness, hearing impaired, mental retardation, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, serious emotional disturbance, specific learning disabilities, speech or language impairment, traumatic brain injury, visual impairment including blindness, and other health impairment.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act is the United States Federal law that governs the education and related services provided by states and public agencies to children ages 3-21 with disabilities.

African American. In this paper, I refer to students as African Americans when they are Americans of African descent, but not Latino or European American.

Disproportionate Representation. The term disproportionate representation indicates that a discrepancy exists between the percentage of students from a cultural group receiving special education services and the percentage of that group in the total school population. It is a broader term than overrepresentation and includes patterns of over- and under-identification of cultural groups.

Overrepresentation. The term overrepresentation refers to the representation of a cultural group in special education that exceeds the representation of that group in the total student population; it simply means too many.

Composition Index. A measurement technique that compares a cultural group's representation percentage in special education to its representation percentage in the total school population.

Risk Index. A measurement technique that describes the probability of special education placement based upon membership in a particular cultural group.

Relative Risk Ratio. A measurement technique that compares the risk index of the population under study to the risk index of a base population. A relative risk ratio that exceeds 1.0 indicates overrepresentation, while a risk ratio of less than 1.0 indicates underrepresentation.

Chapter II: Review of the Literature

In this section, the extent research available in peer-reviewed, academic journals that analyze the issue of African American overrepresentation in special education programs is examined. I used the following keywords to locate articles on this topic: *disproportionate representation, disproportionality, overrepresentation, over-identification, Special Education, African American, students of color, minority students, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Federal policy, and educational inequity*. Fugitive studies were located through bibliographic branching.

Overrepresentation History

Given the social context of Dunn (1968), people viewed specialized educational programs as school districts' attempts at segregating cultural minority students (Patton, 1998; Donovan & Cross, 2002). Consequently, in 1968, the United States Office for Civil Rights (OCR) began monitoring special education placement to guard against discrimination. This effort continues today as the OCR examines states' placement data every two years and requires corrective plans where cultural disproportionality exists (Oswald et al., 1999; Artiles et al., 2002; Whiting, 2010; Albrecht et al., 2012). Additionally, the United States Department of Education, Office of Special Education (OSEP) monitors states' implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Albrecht et al., 2012).

Dunn (1968) sparked special education placement research for decades to follow (Chinn & Hughes, 1987; Artiles & Trent, 1994; Skiba et al., 2008; Zhang et al., 2014).

Overrepresentation literature, including comprehensive Federal reports (Heller et al., 1982;

Donovan & Cross, 2002), consistently demonstrates that since the Federal Government enacted special education law in 1975, African Americans have been overrepresented. This trend persistently surfaces in the high-incident disability categories (Artiles et al., 2010; Zhang et al., 2014).

Landmark cases have continuously challenged special education assessment, eligibility, and placement practices as discriminatory (Reschly, 1997). Early cases primarily focused on the overrepresentation of minority students in intellectual disability programs. *Diana v. California State Board of Education* (1970) and *Guadalupe Organization v. Tempe Elementary School District No. 3* (1972) were the first court cases to directly contest disproportionate cultural minority representation in special education, arguing that biased assessment practices created overrepresentation in intellectual disability programs (Reschly, 1997). Court rulings ushered in assessment reforms, such as the requirement to test in students' primary language, to use nonverbal tests to measure ability with students whose primary language is not English, to use extensive supporting data (not merely cognitive ability test scores) in placement decisions, and to implement procedural safeguards (i.e. informed consent) (Reschly, 1997; Artiles et al., 2002; Coutinho & Oswald, 2006). *Larry P. v. Riles* (1972/1974/1979/1984) also contested special education assessment practices arguing these procedures caused the overrepresentation of African Americans in programs for students with intellectual disabilities within San Francisco Public Schools. The court banned the use of cognitive ability test scores as the sole basis for special education identification and placement (Reschly, 1997). Contradicting the *Larry P.* decision, the courts ruled in *Parents in Action on Special Education (PASE) v. Joseph P. Hannon* (1980) that cognitive ability tests were not biased and did not lead to the observed overrepresentation of African American students in Chicago's special education programs.

However, shortly after the court's decision, the Chicago Public Schools Board of Education reformed their assessment practices by eliminating the use of cognitive ability tests in Chicago schools (Reschly, 1997). *Marshall v. Georgia* (1984) and *S-I v. Turlington* (1986) again challenged the overrepresentation of African American students in intellectual disability programs. Despite statistical evidence and procedural violations, in both cases the courts did not find sufficient evidence to prove discriminatory practices (Reschly, 1997). Regardless of specific court outcomes, these cases set the precedent for special education regulation.

The Federal Government addressed overrepresentation through the 1991 and 1997 amendments of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and again with the reauthorization in 2004 (Albrecht et al., 2012). In 1991, Congress used IDEA (P. L. 101-476) to increase school districts' focus on the educational success of cultural minority students with disabilities (Coutinho & Oswald, 2006). In attempts to resolve overrepresentation, the amendments in 1997 (P. L. 105-17) set forth more aggressive initiatives requiring for the first time continuous state-level monitoring, reporting, and corrective action plans (Oswald et al., 1999; Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002; Albrecht et al., 2012). Despite these efforts overrepresentation trends continued, prompting Congress to reauthorize IDEA in 2004 with explicit steps to address cultural disproportionality in special education programs (Albrecht et al., 2012). Today, states must have "policies and procedures designed to prevent the inappropriate overidentification or disproportionate representation by race and ethnicity of children as children with disabilities, including children with disabilities with a particular impairment ..." [Section 612 (a)(24)] (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004). Zhang et al. (2014) summarized the reauthorize by stating that "States must also collect and examine data to determine if significant disproportionality based on race and ethnicity is occurring in (a) the

identification of children for special education; (b) the placement patterns of such children; and (c) the incidence, duration, and type of disciplinary actions, including suspensions and expulsions [Section 618(d)(1)]” (p. 120). If significant disproportionality is found, states must follow a stringent corrective action plan, and they risk the loss of government funding (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004).

Measuring Overrepresentation

Overrepresentation in special education is operationally defined as the representation of a cultural group in special education that exceeds the representation of that group in the total student population (Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002; Skiba et al., 2008). The terms *disproportionate representation* and *overrepresentation* appear regularly in research. Ford (2012) distinguishes between the two words stating that disproportionate representation is the umbrella term that suggests a pattern of discrepancy; overrepresentation specifically addresses the concept of too many.

Calculating disproportionate representation is a complicated matter in practice. Due to varying measurement techniques used in analyzing placement data, controversy exists as to the severity of overrepresentation of African American students in special education programs (Oswald et al., 1999; Artiles et al., 2002; Hosp & Reschly, 2003). In attempts to standardized measurement, two common techniques used by researchers are the composition index and the relative risk ratio (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Hosp & Reschly, 2003; Coutinho & Oswald, 2006; Skiba et al., 2008; Albrecht et al., 2012). The basic assumptions and limitations of each model must be understood to interpret the data properly. Additionally, regardless of which method is used, appropriate inputs must be used in order to draw proper conclusions about the population under study. The greatest issue with both methods is that conclusions formed about the extent of

overrepresentation are left to individual opinion as there is no specific threshold that identifies *significant* overrepresentation (Coutinho & Oswald, 2006; Skiba et al., 2008).

The composition index compares a cultural group's representation percentage in special education to its representation percentage in the total school population (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Hosp & Reschly, 2003). Under this method, disproportionality is determined by comparing the expected representation to the actual representation (Skiba et al., 2008). For example, Donovan & Cross (2002) report that in 1998 African American students ages 6-21 accounted for 17.0 percent of the United States student population, and yet, they represented 33.0 percent of the students in this age group receiving special education services for intellectual disabilities, 26.0 percent for emotional/behavioral disabilities, and 18.0 percent for learning disabilities.

To create meaning from the composition index, the percentage of membership in special education and the percentage of membership in the total school population must be contrasted (Donovan & Cross, 2002). Comparisons across different schools, districts, and states without knowing both the cultural ratios of the special education and total school population are difficult (Coutinho & Oswald, 2006). Data produced from this method may be spurious because composition numbers can appear quite large, but the actual risk is relatively small (Reschly, 1997). Reschly (1997) provided the example that an overwhelming majority of elementary school teachers are women, yet most women are not elementary teachers. In other words, even though their composition index is high, the chance a woman will be an elementary school teacher is small (Reschly, 1997).

A risk index describes the probability of special education placement based upon membership in a particular cultural group (Skiba et al., 2008). For example, the United States

Department of Education (2011) reports that in 2006 African American students ages 6-21 had a risk index of approximately 12.2 percent for general special education placement, 1.7 percent for an intellectual disability, 1.3 percent for an emotional/behavioral disability, and 5.5 percent for a specific learning disability. In order for this data to be meaningful in measuring overrepresentation, however, one must consider the *relative* risk ratio. This ratio simply compares the risk index of the population under study to the risk index of a base population (Hosp & Reschly, 2003; Coutinho & Oswald, 2006). A relative risk ratio that exceeds 1.0 indicates overrepresentation, while a risk ratio of less than 1.0 indicates underrepresentation (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Skiba et al., 2008). Again, based on data from the United States Department of Education (2011) which used students in all other cultural groups combined for the base population, in 2006 African American students ages 6-21 were 1.5 times more likely to be placed in special education, 2.8 times more likely to be served for intellectual disabilities, 2.3 times more likely to be served for emotional/behavioral disabilities, and 1.5 times more likely to be served for specific learning disabilities.

One issue in using the relative risk ratio to evaluate disproportionality in special education is that there is no set practice of which cultural group to use for comparison (Hosp & Reschly, 2003; Coutinho & Oswald, 2006; Skiba et al., 2008). Often, researchers use European American students as the comparison group. However, in cases where European Americans do not make up the majority of the population, it is not a proper anchor (Coutinho & Oswald, 2006). Also, merely viewing the end result without understanding the inputs is detrimental to evaluating the extent of the problem as drastically different statistics can yield similar risk ratios. Skiba et al. (2008) report “although both 30% of Blacks versus 15% of Whites in a [disability] category

will provide the same RR [risk ratio] (2.0) as 2% of Blacks and 1% of Whites in that category, the meaning of those discrepancies varies greatly” (p. 268).

To use these measurement techniques, researchers rely on statistics from large databases. Concern arises over the reliability of these special education placement figures because a plethora of factors skew the collection of the information (MacMillan & Reschly, 1998). Variability in data collection practices, the complications of measuring culture, the subjective process in disability identification, differences in states’ eligibility criteria, and Federal funding tied to placement numbers all impact the quality of data used to measure disproportionality (MacMillan & Reschly, 1998; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Artiles et al., 2002). Additionally, large databases can obscure trends of inequity at the building level simply because individual building results are buried in volumes of data (Artiles et al., 2002). To gain a comprehensive view, researchers suggest studies need to utilize statistics broken down at the district and building levels (Oswald et al., 1999). Although there are limitations to large databases, Donovan and Cross (2002) suggest, “They [large databases] provide an indicator of school placement rates in various categories of disability over time. While any individual figure may be imprecise, consistent patterns over time are informative” (p. 42). Essentially, the broad observations provided by large databases indicate a concern and justify further exploration (Zhang et al., 2014).

Early Overrepresentation Research

Dunn (1968) cast national attention for the first time on disproportionate placement rates. Using his years of experience and observation, Dunn (1968) stated that:

In my best judgment, about 60 to 80 percent of the pupils taught by [teachers in intellectually disabled classes] are children from low status backgrounds—including Afro-Americans, American Indians, Mexicans, and Puerto Rican Americans; those from

nonstandard English speaking, broken, disorganized, and inadequate homes; and children from other non-middle class environments (p. 6).

Dunn (1968) suggested that the placement of students with mild learning disabilities into segregated settings raised significant civil rights and educational concerns. Dunn (1968) argued that the imprecise and subjective nature of intelligence tests dug the “educational graves of many racially and/or economically disadvantaged children” and that the special education label of intellectually disabled became a “destructive, self fulfilling prophecy” (p. 9).

To address overrepresentation in special education programs, Dunn (1968) recommended changes in two broad areas: systematic procedures (e.g. diagnosis, placement, and instruction) and curricula. Dunn (1968) felt that every attempt should be made to educate struggling learners in the general education through a collaborative effort between general and special education teachers: “the special educator would begin to function as part of, and not apart from, general education” (p.14). Dunn (1968) strongly asserted the use of early and intensive interventions to address the needs of struggling learners, especially those from poor socioeconomic backgrounds.

Mercer (1973) documented the special education overrepresentation of cultural minority students in Riverside, California public schools. Using composition indices, Mercer (1973) observed the percentage of African American students placed in special education classes for students with intellectual disabilities was three times greater than their percentage in the total school population. Conversely, European American students composed 81.0 percent of the total school population, yet only 32.0 percent of individuals placed in classes for students with intellectual disabilities (Mercer, 1973).

Similar to Dunn’s (1968) observation, Mercer’s (1973) study found a strong relationship between low socioeconomic status and placement in special education programs for students with intellectual abilities, especially among cultural minority groups. Mercer (1973) believed

that the subjectivity involved in disability identification resulted in the significant overrepresentation of cultural minority students.

Chinn and Hughes (1987) analyzed special education placement data published between 1980 and 1986 by the Office of Civil Rights. Using composition indices as their method of measurement, Chinn and Hughes (1987) defined disproportionate representation as “percentages exceeding plus or minus 10% of the percentage expected on the basis of the school-age population” (p.43).

Chinn and Hughes (1987) reported that in 1978 African American students accounted for 15.7 percent of the total school enrollment, yet 38.0 percent of the students labeled as intellectually disabled (ID). Each year under study revealed a similar trend in this disability category: 45.3 percent ID versus 20.1 percent total enrollment (1980), 54.0 percent ID versus 25.8 percent total enrollment (1982), and 48.3 percent ID versus 24.5 percent total enrollment (1984) (Chinn & Hughes, 1987). Chinn and Hughes (1987) found that African American students were also overrepresented in the emotional/behavioral disability category as they accounted for 24.4 percent of students receiving services for emotional/behavioral disabilities in 1978, 28.6 percent in 1980, 32.4 percent in 1982, and 30.8 percent in 1984. Conversely, Chinn and Hughes (1987) observed that in the learning disability category and speech/language impairments, African American representation was proportionate to their total school enrollment.

Chinn and Hughes (1987) believed that African Americans possessed higher rates of poverty than European Americans. They argued that poverty hindered basic needs for healthy development, and thus placed African American children at greater risk for disabilities, but this relationship needed further examination. Chinn and Hughes (1987) strongly recommended that

teacher pre-service and in-service programs must be strengthened to adequately train school personnel to work with cultural minority students.

Established Patterns

Through their review of the United States Department of Education's *Eighteenth Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*, MacMillan and Reschly (1998) found extreme variability across states in the placement rates of all students in high-incident disabilities. For example, Massachusetts identified 3 times more students as learning disabled than Georgia; New Jersey identified 3 times as many students with speech/language disabilities than Georgia; Alabama identified 10 times as many students with intellectual disabilities than New Jersey; and Connecticut identified 41 times as many students with emotional/behavioral than Mississippi (MacMillan & Reschly, 1998). These examples demonstrated the inconsistencies subjective placement processes create and bring into question the differences in culture between states.

MacMillan and Reschly (1998) also reviewed special education placement data for the years 1978, 1986, and 1990 published by the United States Office of Civil Rights (OCR). In the three years under study, African American students were placed in special education programs at the highest rate compared to all other cultural groups (MacMillan & Reschly, 1998). Using composition indices from 1990, MacMillan and Reschly (1998) reported that African American students accounted for 16.0 percent of the total school enrollment; however, they represented 34.6 percent of individuals in the intellectual disability category, 21.5 percent of emotional/behavioral disabilities, and 16.6 percent of learning disabilities. MacMillan and Reschly (1998) concluded that students' socioeconomic status was a greater contributor to

special education placement disparities than students' cultural identity, especially in the intellectual disability category.

Oswald et al. (1999) constructed odds ratios using data from the *Fall 1992 Elementary and Secondary School Civil Rights Compliance Report* survey published by the Office of Civil Rights. Oswald et al. (1999) used the following criterion for measurement in their study, "The degree of disproportionate representation is the extent to which membership in a given ethnic group affects the probability of being placed in a specific special education disability category" (p. 198). Their results indicated that 1.4 percent of African American students were identified as intellectually disabled compared to 0.6 percent of students from all other cultural groups (Oswald et al., 1999). Similarly, 1.0 percent of African American students were identified as emotionally/behaviorally disabled compared to 0.7 percent of students from all other cultural groups (Oswald et al., 1999). These figures translated into odds ratios of 2.4 and 1.5 respectively, which means African American students were 2.4 times more likely to be identified as intellectually disabled and 1.5 times more likely to be identified as emotionally/behaviorally disabled than peers from all other cultural groups combined (Oswald et al., 1999).

Oswald et al. (1999) found that various factors outside of the learner proved to be significant predictors of disproportionate representation and influenced special education identification in different ways. For example, the overrepresentation of African American students in the intellectual disability category increased as school poverty levels increased (Oswald et al., 1999). Conversely, African American students were more likely to be overrepresented in the emotional/behavioral disability category as the school poverty level decreased (Oswald et al., 1999). Oswald et al. (1999) suggest that "These data may indicate that wealthier communities are more intolerant of behavioral diversity in African Americans than of

differences in cognitive or learning characteristics” (pp.203-204). To better understand the influence of factors that contribute to disproportionate representation, Oswald et al. (1999) recommended more research is needed at deeper levels, for example, the community, school building, and classroom. Also, Oswald et al. (1999) called for systemic change as they believed that isolated corrective action plans for districts with disproportionate rates were unlikely to solve the issue.

Parrish (2002) calculated relative risk-ratios using the United States Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs data to compare the special education placement rates of cultural minority students and European American students. Parrish (2002) defined overrepresentation as relative risk ratios exceeding 2.0. Parrish (2002) found African American students were significantly overrepresented in various disability categories in forty-five states. In the intellectual disability category, African American students were overrepresented in thirty-eight states (Parrish, 2002). Most severely, African American students had 4.0 times the risk of being labeled intellectually disabled than European American students in the states of Connecticut, Mississippi, North Carolina, Nebraska, and South Carolina (Parrish, 2002).

Among all cultural groups, African Americans possessed the highest relative risk ratio in the intellectual (2.9) and emotional/behavioral (1.9) disability categories and second highest in learning (1.3) disability category (Parrish, 2002). In attempts to identify a link between poverty and overrepresentation, the study also looked at the relative risk ratio of African Americans in the low-incident disability categories (e.g. visual impairment, deafness, and orthopedic impairment) with the assumption the effects of poverty would cause increased rates of these disabilities too (Parrish, 2002). The national relative risk ratio for African American students in

the low-incident disability categories combined was 1.2, meaning their risk was nearly proportional to European American students' risk (Parrish, 2002). Thus, the data failed to indicate poverty is solely responsible for overrepresented rates of African American students in special education (Parrish, 2002).

Parrish (2002) recommended that special education should be changed into a set of services and not the place for students with learning difficulties. To address the issue of overrepresentation, Parrish (2002) asserted that schools must implement the use of multiple, intensive interventions as early as possible to address students' individualized academic and behavioral needs. Additionally, Parrish (2002) suggested that special education identification criteria should be made more clear to ensure greater consistency across states, that special education referrals involving cultural minority students should be closely examined, and that states should enforce stricter corrective action plans.

Donovan and Cross' Federal Report

Minority Students in Special and Gifted Education (Donovan & Cross, 2002) reported the findings and recommendations of the United States National Research Council Committee on Minority Representation in Special Education. The book examined 1998 special education placement data published by both the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) and the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) and found African American students were significantly overrepresented in the intellectual disability and emotional/behavioral disability categories (Donovan & Cross, 2002). Only OSEP collects data on all thirteen disability categories recognized under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (Donovan & Cross, 2002). OSEP data provided no evidence that African American students were disproportionately placed

in the low-incident disability categories as their rates of placement were consistent with their representation in the total school population (Donovan & Cross, 2002).

African American students were the most at risk cultural group for intellectual disability identification with risk indices of 2.6 percent (OCR and OSEP) (Donovan & Cross, 2002). Their odds ratios were 2.2 (OCR) and 2.4 (OSEP), meaning African American students were more than twice as likely to be identified as intellectually disabled than European Americans (Donovan & Cross, 2002). Composition indices revealed that African American students accounted for 33.0 percent of students receiving special education services for intellectual disabilities, but only 17.0 percent of the total school enrollment (Donovan & Cross, 2002).

In the emotional/behavioral disability category, the data revealed African American students had the highest risk for emotional/behavioral disability identification than any other cultural group (OCR = 1.5 percent and OSEP = 1.6 percent) (Donovan & Cross, 2002). The odds ratio calculated by both the OCR and OSEP was 1.6, which indicated African American students were about one and a half times more likely than European American students to be classified as emotionally/behaviorally disabled (Donovan & Cross, 2002). African American students accounted for 26.0 percent of students in the emotional/behavioral disability category, but only 17.0 percent of the total school enrollment (Donovan & Cross, 2002).

Data revealed that African American students had a learning disability risk index of 6.5 percent (OCR) and 6.6 percent (OSEP) (Donovan & Cross, 2002). However, the odds ratio calculated by OCR and OSEP (1.1) showed that African American students were proportionally identified as learning disabled when compared to European American students (Donovan & Cross, 2002). African American students accounted for 18.0 percent of students in the learning

disability category, which was close to their 17.0 percent of the total school enrollment (Donovan & Cross, 2002).

The National Research Council presented numerous recommendations to address the disproportionate representation of cultural minority students in special education programs. The following list highlights their recommendations: improve health care for families in poverty, provide universal early screening followed by intensive interventions for individuals most at-risk for educational failure, address cultural minority students' tendency to have behavioral issues and deficits in reading skills, emphasize more effective academic and behavioral interventions in general education classrooms, implement a tiered intervention system to support struggling learners before special education, reform special education eligibility criteria and evaluation practices, stress exit from special education, and restructure special education to a set of services brought to students in general education classrooms (Donovan & Cross, 2002). Donovan and Cross (2002) stress that "There is substantial evidence with regard to both behavior and achievement that early identification and intervention is more effective than later identification and intervention" (p. 6).

Zhang and Katsiyannis

Zhang and Katsiyannis (2002) analyzed data published by the Federal Government to study cultural representation in special education programs. The researchers were also interested in the relationship between regional special education placement and state poverty rates. Data sources included the *22nd Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (1998-1999 school year), *National Center for Education Statistics: Statistics in Brief*, and *Poverty in the United States*.

The results indicated that nationally during the 1998-1999 school year, African American students were overrepresented in all disability categories under study: total special education placement, learning disability, emotional/behavioral disability, and intellectual disability (Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002). Furthermore, African American students were placed in these disability categories at the highest rate among all other cultural groups (Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002). Regional placement rates for African American students' in the intellectual disability and emotional/behavioral disability categories varied, sometimes drastically (Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002). African American, American Indian/Alaskan Native, Asian/Pacific Islander, and European American students' representation in the emotional/behavioral disability category were found to be negatively correlated to state poverty rates (Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002). This means that in states with higher poverty rates, fewer students from these cultural groups were identified as having an emotional/behavioral disability (Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002).

To address the overrepresentation of cultural minority students in special education, Zhang and Katsiyannis (2002) recommended that schools use evidence-based instructional and behavioral interventions within the general education with special attention to the needs of students from culturally-diverse backgrounds. They also stressed the need for special education evaluation teams to be thoroughly trained on cultural differences and use nonbiased identification and placement processes (Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002).

Zhang et al. (2014) investigated the status of cultural minority groups' representation in special education from 2004 to 2008. The researchers were especially interested in this time period given recent Federal mandates to reduce overrepresentation of cultural minority groups. The researchers also examined the relationship between state poverty levels and cultural minority special education placement. The source of data included the U.S. Census Bureau's Small Area

Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE) program and the Data Accountability Center funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs.

Their analysis indicated that nationally African American students received the highest rates of special education services during 2004-2008 with representation rates ranging from 14.8 to 15.5 percent (Zhang et al., 2014). African American students were heavily represented in the intellectual disability category compared to all other cultural groups; however, their representation rate decreased 0.1 percent every year under study (Zhang et al., 2014). The study also found that African American students had the highest representation in the emotional/behavioral disability category and second most in the learning disability category during this time period (Zhang et al., 2014). These results are similar to their study ten years prior (Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002). Additionally, this current study revealed that the special education placement of African American students in the learning disability, emotional/behavioral disability, and intellectual disability categories decreased in higher poverty states and increased in affluent states (Zhang et al., 2014). To reduce the disproportionate representation of cultural minority students in special education programs, Zhang et al. (2014) recommended improving the overall quality of special education, implementing evidence-based instructional and behavioral interventions, focusing on the prevention of special education placement by using early intervention strategies (e.g. school-wide, tiered academic and behavioral intervention program for struggling learners), and refining the assessment process by enhancing the capacity of school personnel to perform eligibility decisions that minimize cultural, linguistic, and racial bias.

Blackorby et al.

Patterns in the Identification of and Outcomes for Children and Youth with Disabilities (Blackorby, Schiller, Mallik, Hebbeler, Huang, Javitz, Marder, Nagle, Shaver, Wagner, Williamson, 2010) was part of the national assessment of the Individual with Disabilities Act (IDEA). Blackorby et al. (2010) analyzed patterns of special education placement along with the academic and developmental outcomes for students with disabilities from 1998-2005. Data sources included the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs' (OSEP's) Data Analysis System (DANS), which is the primary collection source for the annual data mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and the U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data.

Blackorby et al. (2010) reported that in 2005, African American students ages 6-21 received special education services at the highest rate (16.7 percent) compared to all other cultural groups. Additionally, from 1998 to 2005, the percentage of African American students ages 6-21 receiving special education services increased 0.1 percent (16.6 percent in 1998 to 16.7 percent in 2005) (Blackorby et al., 2010). Other cultural groups experienced the following changes in membership percentage from 1998-2005: 1.1 percent increase for American Indian students (14.7 percent to 15.8 percent), 0.2 percent increase for European American students (13.9 percent to 14.1 percent), 1.0 percent decrease for Hispanic students (12.8 percent to 11.8 percent), and 0.3 percent increase for Asian students (6.0 percent to 6.3 percent) (Blackorby et al., 2010).

Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of IDEA

The United States Department of Education is required to make public the current progress of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) through an annual report to

Congress (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). These annual reports also fulfill the IDEA amendments in 1997 (P. L. 105-17), which set forth aggressive initiatives aimed at reducing cultural minority disproportionality in special education programs by requiring continuous state-level monitoring and reporting (Oswald et al., 1999; Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002; Albrecht et al., 2012). The primary data source for these reports is the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs' (OSEP's) Data Analysis System (DANS), which is the system that collects states' annual data mandated by IDEA (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

Additional information comes from other Federal agencies and studies (e.g. OSEP's National Assessment of the Implementation of IDEA, the National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data, the U.S. Census Bureau, the National Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center, and the Department's Institute of Education Sciences).

The 27th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2005 (U.S. Department of Education, 2007) and the *30th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2008* (U.S. Department of Education, 2011) examined data from the years 2003 and 2006, respectively. In 2003, African American students ages 6-21 had a risk index of approximately 12.4 percent for general special education placement, 2.0 percent for an intellectual disability, 1.4 percent for an emotional/behavioral disability, and 5.6 percent for a specific learning disability (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). These figures remained consistent in 2006: 12.2 percent for general special education placement, 1.7 percent for an intellectual disability, 1.3 percent for an emotional/behavioral disability, and 5.5 percent for a specific learning disability (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Relative risk ratios comparing African American students' risk index to the risk index of all other cultural groups combined were calculated.

During 2003, African American students ages 6-21 were 1.5 times more likely to be placed in special education, 3.0 times more likely to be served for intellectual disabilities, 2.3 times more likely to be served for emotional/behavioral disabilities, and 1.4 times more likely to be served for specific learning disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). Again, in 2006 the figures were relatively similar: 1.5 times more likely to be placed in special education, 2.8 times more likely to be served for intellectual disabilities, 2.3 times more likely to be served for emotional/behavioral disabilities, and 1.5 times more likely to be served for specific learning disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

The Annual Report to Congress also includes information on the educational environment for students ages 6-21 served under IDEA. In 2003, only 38.6 percent of African American students with disabilities were educated in the general education classroom for most of the school day, making them the least likely cultural group served in this educational environment (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). While this percentage increased to 44.8 percent in 2006, it was still the lowest among all other cultural groups to be educated in the general education classroom for most of the school day (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). For both years, European American students with disabilities were the most likely to be educated in the general education classroom for the majority of the school day (54.7 percent in 2003 and 57.7 percent in 2006) (U.S. Department of Education, 2007; U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Furthermore, African American students with disabilities were most likely to be educated in more restrictive, separate environments (5.2 percent in 2003 and 6.4 percent in 2006) (U.S. Department of Education, 2007; U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

The 34th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2012 (U.S. Department of Education, 2014) and the *36th Annual*

Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2014 (U.S. Department of Education, 2014) examined data from the year 2010 and 2012, respectively. These reports provided a risk index for only general special education placement. In 2010, African American students ages 6-21 had a risk index of approximately 11.4 percent for general special education placement (U.S. Department of Education, 2014), which remained nearly constant two years later at 11.3 percent in 2012 (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Relative risk ratios revealed African American students ages 6-21 were 1.4 times more likely to be placed in special education than all other cultural groups combined in both 2010 and 2012, ranking them as the third highest cultural group behind American Indian or Alaska Native students (1.8 and 1.7) and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander students (1.6 both years) (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

In 2010, educational environment placement rates showed that 53.4 percent of African American students with disabilities were educated in the general education classroom for most of the school day, and in 2012 this figure grew to 55.6 percent (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). European American students with disabilities continued to be the most likely cultural group educated in the general education classroom for the majority of the school day (63.6 percent in 2010 and 64.5 percent in 2012) (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Furthermore, African American students with disabilities were most likely to be educated in more restrictive, separate environments (6.4 percent in 2010 and 6.1 percent in 2012) (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

These annual reports to Congress reveal encouraging trends. First, the risk index of African American students ages 6-21 for general special education placement decreased from 12.4 percent in 2003 to 11.3 percent in 2012 (U.S. Department of Education, 2007; U.S.

Department of Education, 2014). However, their relative risk ratio of 1.4 in 2012 is nearly the same as in was in 2003 (1.5) showing a concern still exists (U.S. Department of Education, 2007; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Each year the percentage of African American students with disabilities educated in the general education classroom for most of the school day increased from a low of 38.6 percent in 2003 to a high of 55.6 percent in 2012 (U.S. Department of Education, 2007; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Finally, an alarming pattern in each annual report was that African American students with disabilities were the most likely cultural group to be educated in more restrictive, separate environments (5.2 percent in 2003, 6.4 percent in 2006, 6.4 percent in 2010, and 6.1 percent in 2012) (U.S. Department of Education, 2007; U.S. Department of Education, 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

Overrepresentation in Restrictive Educational Settings

Fierros and Conroy (2002) examined the relationship between disability category and the level of restrictiveness in educational setting. Fierros and Conroy (2002) explained that “The term *restrictive* describes the extent to which students with disabilities are educated outside of regular classrooms and isolated from their nondisabled peers” (p.39-40). Data sources included the United States Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (2002) and the United States Office of Civil Rights (1998).

Fierros and Conroy (2002) reported that 55 percent of European American students with disabilities received instruction in inclusive educational settings (less than 21 percent of the school day outside of the general education), while only 37 percent of African American students with disabilities were in these same settings. Conversely, 33 percent of African American students with disabilities were educated in separate educational settings (greater than 60 percent of the school day outside of the general education), while European American students with

disabilities accounted for only 16 percent of students in separate settings (Fierros & Conroy, 2002). Next, Fierros and Conroy (2002) reported that students in the intellectual disability and emotional/behavioral disability categories experienced the greatest level of educational setting restrictiveness. According to the Office of Civil Rights, in 1997-1998 82.0 percent of students with intellectual disabilities and 70.0 percent of students with emotional/behavioral disabilities were placed in educational environments greater than 21 percent of their school day outside of the general education classroom; these figures were consistent with the data published by the Office of Special Education Programs for the 2000-2001 school year (86.0 percent for intellectual disabilities and 74.2 percent for emotional/behavioral disabilities) (Fierros & Conroy, 2002).

Fierros and Conroy (2002) demonstrated two dominant trends. First, African American students with disabilities were removed from the general education classroom and placed in more restrictive educational settings at higher rates than European American students. Second, African American students were overrepresented in the intellectual disability and emotional/behavioral disability categories, which are the two disability categories isolated from the general education classroom at the highest rate. They strongly asserted that school buildings should be required to publically report special education identification and educational setting data by cultural group and disability category. This transparent reporting will ensure greater accountability and identify schools needing corrective action plans due to disproportionate cultural patterns in disability categories and educational settings (Fierros & Conroy, 2002).

Skiba et al. (2006) investigated the service of African American students in more or less restricted educational environments. Skiba et al. (2006) hypothesized that African American students were disproportionately placed in more restrictive environments due to their

overrepresentation in disability categories predominately served outside of the general education (i.e. intellectual disabilities and emotional/behavioral disabilities) (Skiba et al., 2006). The study examined Indiana's 2001-2002 special education placement rates in the general education and separate class settings across five disability categories: moderate intellectual, mild intellectual, emotional/behavioral, learning, and speech/language (Skiba et al., 2006). Indiana defines general education as the removal from the general education for less than 21 percent of the school day, while separate class placement is considered removal from the general education setting for more than 60 percent of the school day (Skiba et al., 2006).

Using data collected by the Indiana Department of Education, Skiba et al. (2006) calculated relative risk ratios that compared African American students' placement in disability categories and educational settings to all other cultural groups. Skiba et al. (2006) found that African American students were overrepresented in the mild intellectual (3.3), emotional/behavioral (2.4), and moderate intellectual (1.9) disability categories, while underrepresented in the speech/language (0.7) disability category, and about proportional in the learning (0.9) disability category. Furthermore, Skiba et al. (2006) reported:

In Indiana, African Americans represent around 13% of students served in special education, a figure that is close to proportionate with respect to their overall percentage of enrollment. Yet African American students with disabilities represent only 8.4% of students in the general education setting, and over 27% of those served in separate class settings. Expressed in terms of a risk ratio, African American students with disabilities are only .71 times as likely to be served in general education settings as other students, and almost three times as likely to be served in a classroom outside of general education 60% or more of the school day (pp.419-420).

Skiba et al. (2006) found that the overrepresentation of African American students in more restrictive environments actually increased as the severity of the disability decreased (Skiba et al., 2006). This finding did not support the hypothesis that disproportionality in educational environments is simply an effect of overrepresentation in disability categories associated with

more restrictive environments (Skiba et al., 2006). Ultimately, African American students with disabilities are more likely than other students to be removed from the general education classroom and given instruction in more restrictive settings, even within the same disability category. Skiba et al. (2006) concluded that African American students' overrepresentation in more restrictive settings is due to other factors than the severity of the disability, and this phenomenon urgently needs further exploration.

Overrepresented and Over-Referred

Hosp and Reschly (2003) researched the rate at which European American, African American, and Hispanic students were referred for special education assessment or intervention, an important predictor of future special education placement. The researchers intended to establish a connection that would offer a greater understanding of disproportionate cultural representation in special education programs (Hosp & Reschly, 2003). According to Hosp and Reschly (2003), "Quantitative synthesis of this research may allow for a better understanding of overall referral rates and the processes involved. This will provide a basis for future research aimed at identifying or ruling out various factors of risk of bias" (p. 71). Their hypothesis was that referral rates for different cultural groups would reflect the rates at which those groups received special education services.

Hosp and Reschly (2003) found that the referral rates of these three cultural groups varied significantly. As predicted, referral rates closely reflected the special education eligibility rates of each cultural group (Hosp & Reschly, 2003). The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) reported that during the 1998-1999 school year, African American students ages 6-21 were 1.2 times more likely to receive special education services than European American students; similarly, Hosp and Reschly (2003) found that on average African American were 1.3 times

more likely to be referred for special education assessment or intervention than European American students. Hosp and Reschly (2003) asserted their results should encourage the standard practice of reporting referral rates, mandate the disaggregation of data at state and district levels to more accurately determine patterns of over-referring and over-identifying cultural minority groups, and inspire the examination of other variables that affect disproportionate representation in special education programs.

Chapter III: Conclusions and Implications

The Federal Government created special education to honor the educational rights of individuals with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). Special education is designed to provide specially designed instruction to meet the unique needs of individuals with disabilities in the most inclusionary educational setting (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). On the surface, special education offers a number of positive attributes: small class sizes with additional instructional support staff, individualized programming that is continuously monitored and delivered by specially trained teachers, student and guardian rights protected by Federal law and other advocacy groups, and significantly higher expenditures per student compared to general education (MacMillan & Reschly, 1998; Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002).

While special education promises a fruitful experience, many question its effectiveness in closing the achievement gap with general education students (MacMillan & Reschly, 1998; Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002; Artiles et al., 2010; Whiting 2010). This achievement gap is consistently revealed across the country as special education students score significantly lower on academic standards of measure, for example, literacy and mathematics skills (Blackorby et al., 2010). Students in special education also exhibit higher dropout rates, lower enrollment rates at institutions of post-secondary education, higher unemployment rates, lower wages, and higher rates of criminal activity (Blackorby et al., 2010; Aron & Loprest, 2012). Other negative implications include lowered expectations from teachers and family members, harmful stigma associated with being labeled as disabled (particularly to those whose cultures hold different perspectives on disabilities than the American education system), and missed learning

opportunities due to removal from the general education curriculum (MacMillan & Reschly, 1998; Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002; Whiting 2010). Patton (1998) strongly asserts that removal from general education means students in special education “fail to receive a quality and life-enhancing education” as they “miss essential general education academic and social curricula” (p.25). Special education placement also carries a sense of permanency as exit rates are extremely low. The percentage of students who exited special education services was only 17 percent in 1999 for students ages 6-12 in all cultural groups combined and merely 5 percent in 2000 for students ages 13-16 (Blackorby et al., 2010). These realities make special education placement a serious matter and pose an extreme disservice to those individuals inappropriately placed.

Overrepresentation, a Pervasive Problem

Special education placement for African American students is particularly controversial as they have been overrepresented in special education since the inception of these programs (Oswald et al., 1999; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Artiles et al., 2010; Ford, 2012). For over four decades, special education placement data consistently reveal the overrepresentation of African American students in the high-incident disability categories: emotional/behavioral disabilities, intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, and speech/language disabilities. Some studies show placement rates up to 2.8 times higher than all other cultural groups combined in the these disability categories (Donovan & Cross, 2002; U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Related research also reports African American students are referred for special education assessment or intervention at the highest rate among all other cultural groups (Hosp & Reschly, 2003). Lastly, once placed in special education, African American students are the most likely cultural group to

receive instruction in restrictive educational settings and isolated from their non-disabled peers (Fierros & Conroy, 2002; Skiba et al., 2006).

Factors Linked to Overrepresentation

The literature insists that overrepresentation stems from a collection of complex factors (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Skiba et al., 2008; McKenna, 2013; Zhang et al., 2014). The intricate interplay between child, systematic practices, school environment, and teacher all work together to shape the problem (Donovan & Cross, 2002).

A primary explanation for overrepresentation is individuals' low socioeconomic status and high poverty areas (Artiles et al., 2010). Much of the support for this explanation stemmed from early literature on disproportionate representation, which argued African Americans possessed higher poverty rates and thus a greater need for special education services (Dunn, 1968; Mercer, 1973; Chinn & Hughes, 1987; MacMillan & Reschly, 1998; Oswald et al., 1999). However, recent research concludes that low state poverty levels do not necessarily mean increased special education placement (Parrish, 2002; Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002; Zhang et al., 2014). Nonetheless, discrepancies in students' experiences and subsequent background knowledge impact the ease of school success (Green, 2005). Similarly, some feel that the differences in opportunities and quality of education at urban schools contribute to African American students' overrepresentation (Artiles et al., 2002; Kozol, 2005).

Other explanations view systematic processes and social perceptions as the cause for overrepresentation. Many argue inequities exist in special education referral, evaluation, and placement processes (Myer & Patton, 2001; Artiles et al., 2002; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Skiba et al., 2008). Likewise, a dominant hypothesis asserts that the attitudes, perceptions, and expectations held by the majority of educational staff lead to cultural-specific behaviors being

misinterpreted as disabilities (Artiles et al., 2010; Ford, 2012). Others perpetuate the issue through their unawareness that African American overrepresentation in special education even exists (Green, 2005).

Strategies to Address Overrepresentation

The literature overwhelmingly concludes that the cause of overrepresentation is a multifaceted issue; likewise, multiple strategies are required to interrupt overrepresentation (Donovan & Cross, 2002). While insufficient research exists on effective strategies to address overrepresentation, researchers have drawn upon the best practices in education to present recommendations (Skiba et al., 2008). Their recommendations often involve systematic change in the referral, evaluation, and placement processes (Dunn, 1968). Systematic change is necessary because isolated action plans are less likely to resolve the issue (Oswald et al., 1999). The evaluation process can be enhanced by using culturally appropriate assessment tools and increasing the capacity of school personnel to perform eligibility and placement decisions that minimize cultural bias (Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002; Zhang et al., 2014). States should also continue to clarify and align eligibility criteria to ensure greater consistency (Parrish, 2002; Donovan & Cross, 2002). Additionally, researchers urge states, districts, and buildings to report special education referral rates and educational setting data by cultural group and disability category to better track disproportionality and create greater accountability (Fierros & Conroy, 2002; Hosp & Reschly, 2003).

The literature emphasizes the most effective strategy to address overrepresentation is through multiple, early, intensive interventions that address students' individualized academic and behavioral needs before special education is considered (Dunn, 1968; Parrish, 2002; Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Skiba et al., 2008, Zhang et al., 2014). Green

(2005) establishes that early intervention is not the same strategy as pre-referral special education interventions, which are “often described as a pipeline to special education” (p. 38). Instead, early interventions should be intense, short-term supplementary services provided in the general education with the purpose of quickly closing achievement gaps through high-quality instruction (Green, 2005). Once identified for special education, researchers stress that struggling learners must be educated in the general education environment to the fullest extent possible (Dunn, 1968; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Zhang et al., 2014). Donovan and Cross (2002) strongly recommend that special education be reformed to a set of services brought to students in general education rather than a place largely apart from the general education curriculum.

Another dominant recommendation in overrepresentation literature involves increasing cultural competency among policy makers and school personnel through improved pre-service programs and ongoing in-service training (Chinn & Hughes, 1987; Green, 2005; Skiba et al., 2008; Artiles et al., 2010; Ford, 2012). According to Harris, Brown, Ford, and Richardson (2004), cultural training requires individuals to:

- (a) engage in critical self-examinations that explore their attitudes and perceptions concerning cultural diversity, and the influence of these attitudes and perceptions on diverse students’ achievement and educational opportunities;
- (b) acquire and use accurate information about culturally diverse groups, that is, African Americans (e.g., their histories, cultural styles, norms, values, traditions, and customs) to inform teaching and learning;
- (c) learn to infuse multicultural perspectives and materials into the curriculum and instruction so as to maximize the academic, cognitive, social-emotional, and cultural development of all students; and
- (d) build partnerships with African American families, communities, and organizations (pp. 325-326).

Increasing African American community and family involvement is also a key strategy to address overrepresentation (Skiba et al., 2008; Brandon & Brown, 2009). Green’s (2005) framework for schools to interrupt overrepresentation begins with awareness of the issue and increasing understanding of African American culture. The involvement of cultural brokers is the focus of the solution (Green, 2005). Gay (1993) defines a cultural broker as, “one who

thoroughly understands different cultural systems, is able to interpret cultural symbols from one frame of reference to another, can mediate cultural incompatibilities, and knows how to build bridges or establish linkages across cultures that facilitate the instructional process” (p. 293). A perpetuating attitude between home and school appears to be that African American “Parents do not feel welcome, and educators believe that parents’ lack of involvement signals apathy” (Brandon & Brown, 2009, p.87). Cultural brokers can interrupt these harmful attitudes by empowering African American families and creating meaningful, collaborative partnerships between African American homes and schools (Green, 2005). According to Brandon and Brown (2009), “This partnership involves the solicitation by the school of the full involvement of African American parents and the removal of institutional barriers (e.g., meeting times, paperwork) and psychological barriers (e.g., mistrust, powerlessness) that may be impeding the participation of these parents and families” (p.89).

Implications

For over forty years special education has grappled with the overrepresentation of African American students, and this destructive trend will continue unless educators are intentional about disrupting it. While a clear need exists for systematic change initiated from the top (i.e. policy makers), my research and experience reveal practical, effective strategies all educators can implement. Creating counter-narratives for African American students begins with increasing educators’ cultural consciousness and competency and utilizing a relationship-based approach with students and their families.

Educators must overcome the myth that educating students of color through a colorblind perspective effectively enhances their educational experience. Effective educators acknowledge that different cultures exist among their students, and this awareness affects every word,

interaction, and strategy used in their classrooms. Cultural consciousness begins with awareness that one's culture impacts one's lived experience. Effective educators value culture differences and create a space in which all students experience a sense of belonging.

Cultural competency turns cultural consciousness into action. Educators' mindfulness about curriculum and classroom management techniques benefits African American students. Educators should consistently use curriculum that reflects and affirms African American culture and requires students to use higher-level thinking skills. For example, merely introducing a text that highlights a historically impactful African American is not enough. Instead, educators must regularly incorporate curriculum that presents multiple cultural perspectives, not just the European American viewpoint, and empowers students to create their own meaning.

Culturally competent classroom management is characterized by clear expectations and a firm, direct stance. To provide consistency and structure, educators must explicitly teach routines and procedures. When students' learning preferences, physical appearances, or communication styles clash with dominant European American norms, they should not be perceived as negative, threatening, or disrespectful. Instead, educators should use a cultural lens to create space in their instructional practices for different styles to succeed and view challenging behavior as an opportunity to teach social and emotional skills.

My school district invites speakers, requires professional development workshops, and regularly holds staff meetings to engage in ongoing cultural conversations and education. These opportunities create the expectation that the topic of culture is always on the table. We are intentional about analyzing and discussing the performance of our students of color. As a result, I am more adept to use culturally responsive instructional methods and behavior management

techniques. I also view behavior from a cultural perspective and teach social and emotional skills when confronted with behavior that impedes learning in the school environment.

To be culturally conscious and competent does not mean to sacrifice expectations or standards. Effective educators believe all students can achieve high academic and social standards, and their cultural consciousness and competence increases academic rigor and behavioral standards for students. Students excel when provided a sense of belonging in a nourishing learning community. Cultural competency also provides educators with the knowledge and skills needed to create deeper and more meaningful relationships with students and families.

Relationships are crucial to elevating students' success as they increase teacher expectations as well as student motivation and achievement. Students' chances of success increase dramatically when they feel their teachers genuinely care for them and are concerned for their academic and social achievement. Educators must build relationships with all students in their classroom. Parents must too experience a sense of belonging to enter into a trust filled partnership. A clear link between home and school would allow for more powerful interventions on factors that may cause a learner to struggle, for example, school environment, teacher characteristics, home-life concerns, socioeconomic factors. The education system may not have the capacity to cure every stressor in students' lives, but once identified, educators and families can better implement interventions to meet students' basic needs and develop positive coping skills.

Most importantly, I believe special education is a service and not a place for students with learning or behavior difficulties. Every educator should implement early interventions for struggling learners, become culturally conscious and competent, utilize cultural brokers, build

relationships with students, and nurture home-school partnerships. When multiple, early interventions prove unsuccessful and special education becomes a valid intervention, each student must be viewed on an individual basis and a fluid program should be designed with a clearly identified exit plan upfront. Special education decisions must stem from teams that are committed to reducing overrepresentation and include all cultural perspectives. While some students' unique needs warrant separate educational settings, those with mild academic and behavioral challenges need to be in the general education classroom. Although the overrepresentation of African American students in special education is still a problem, each and every educator can make a difference.

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