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# The Overrepresentation of African American Students in Special Education

Kelsey Kihle  
kkihle02@hotmail.com

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**The Overrepresentation of African American Students in Special Education**

by

Kelsey J. Kihle

A Starred Paper

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Starred Paper Committee:  
Bradley Kaffar, Chairperson  
Jennifer Christensen  
Semya Hakim

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Currently, today's educators and schools are responsible for meeting the needs of a wide range of diverse learners with unique needs. Throughout the United States there is an overrepresentation of minority students enrolled in special education programs that has been dated back to the late 1960s. Overrepresentation occurs when the percentage of minority students in special education exceeds the percentage of these students in the total student population (Zhang, 2002). It is our job as educators and administrators to understand why this overrepresentation is occurring and how we can ensure that it does not continue to happen in the future. This issue is of critical importance and is a very complex situation. Reports from the U.S. Office of Civil Rights and Office of Special Education Programs have continued to document this problem. We need to advance our awareness of this topic to ensure we understand the complexity of this overrepresentation (Arnold & Lassmann, 2003).

Many researchers have looked into this topic and have conducted numerous research reports as to why this overrepresentation is continuing to occur. Some research argues that there is a bias within the special education process including the referral, assessment, and placement processes (Arnold & Lassmann, 2003). Other professionals in the field argue that racial bias in teacher perception of student disability could have an impact on the overrepresentation (Cooc, 2017). Some say that a child's background and socio-economic status may lead to a child being further behind in their education (Cooc, 2017). Lastly, other researchers blame the overrepresentation on unfair testing that could be geared towards one specific type of child, and that students coming from different backgrounds may not know how to approach the test or even how to provide their answers (Arnold & Lassmann, 2003). The number of factors that go into labeling a child with a disability is sizable, thus making it difficult to pinpoint why the

overrepresentation of minority students in special education continues to occur in the United States.

### **Research Question**

One research question guides this review of the literature:

1. What is contributing to the overrepresentation of African American students qualifying for special education services?

### **Focus of Paper**

The purpose of this paper was to review the literature and research that examines the overrepresentation of African American students enrolled in special education programs and give reasons as to why this overrepresentation continues to occur. To begin my research on this topic, I utilized the Academic Search Premiere and ERIC to gather information and sources. During my search, I used keywords, such as *overrepresentation, disproportionality, minority, special education, referral, assessment, placement, systemic bias, racial disparities, teacher perceptions, student disabilities, and universal screening*. By using the above-referenced sources and keyword descriptors, I found approximately ten studies that provided me information that I felt pertained to my chosen topic. The different articles were selected for review based upon the date that they were published and by relevance toward my topic.

The review of literature in Chapter 2 includes studies with participants who are African American students and who are labeled as having an Emotional or Behavioral Disorder that has enrolled them in a special education program within their school. The studies aimed to show whether or not minority children are really in need of special education programs or are they being mislabeled and placed in special education programs for other reasons. Since I am a special education teacher, I am interested in this trend and understanding why it exists. I chose

to do my research at the elementary level because that is when most students are identified with a disability. Additionally, I work in an elementary school, so I thought it would be beneficial to see how other school systems operate.

### **Historical Background**

The topic of the overrepresentation of minority students in special education programs has dated back to the late 1960s. Lloyd Dunn, in 1968, brought to light the subject of the disproportionate number of minority students placed in segregated classrooms. Dunn debated that the identification and placement in special education of socio-culturally disadvantaged children with mild learning difficulties were of great alarm due to the placement of these children into segregated settings (Zhang, 2002). A few years later, in 1970, Evelyn Deno created a model that to this day remains the blueprint for educational services. Deno's educational model highlights specific ways to place and serve students in special education programs. The influences made by these two child advocates helped to shape the education system into the way it is today. Even though over 35 years have passed, many of the problems brought to our attention by Dunn and Deno remain issues in the current education field (Artiles & Trent, 1994).

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, also known as IDEA, is a four-part piece of American legislation that requires that students with a disability are equipped with Free Appropriate Public Education that is designed to their individual needs. IDEA (2004) was amended twice, once in 1997 and 2004. The act was amended to provide greater clarity regarding the disproportionate overrepresentation in special education. The amendment also gave the state's ways to monitor for state trends in disproportionality, and this includes a standard formula and "reasonable thresholds" (Morgan et al., 2018). One shortcoming that has been presented about IDEA is that it is typically teachers, social workers, and school

psychologists that often have to make subjective decisions on whether a child should be referred and receive special education services. This allows room for the biases of those that have referred students for evaluation, and teachers may be unaware of or misinterpret cultural cues (Herzik, 2015).

### **Importance of the Topic**

The controversy of the overrepresentation of minorities is of utmost importance due to the fact that it has been a continuing issue for over 50 years. IDEA regulates that as special education teachers and administrators we need to be finding the correct placements for students where they will be most successful. Being labeled with a disability can have both positive and negative impacts on students. Due to these impacts, we need to be certain that we are labeling students correctly. It is important to be continually asking ourselves, “Is overrepresentation a problem?” I hope that this paper offers additional clarity and insight into the topic of disproportionality.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Disproportionate Representation:** Disproportionate representation means that a group’s representation in special education is different from that group’s proportion of the overall population and that a group's proportion in special education is different from that of a comparison group (Wiley, Brigham, Kaufmann, & Bogan, 2013)

**Emotional or Behavioral Disorder:** Students who need specialized services for emotional or behavioral supports for a wide range of complex and challenging emotional or behavioral conditions. Medical, biological, and psychological conditions, as well as genetic dispositions, can affect these students' ability to learn and function in school (Minnesota Department of Education, 2012).



**Overrepresentation:** Overrepresentation occurs when the percentage of minority students in special education programs exceeds the percentage of these students in the total student population (Zhang, 2002).

## Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

The purpose of this literature review was to examine the dilemma of overrepresentation of minority students in high incidence disability categories, more specifically, the overrepresentation of African American students being serviced under the disability category of Emotional or Behavioral Disorders. Chapter 2 examines peer-reviewed articles that analyze the issue of African American overrepresentation in special education programs. The studies within this chapter are presented in chronological order, beginning with the oldest study.

The research of Zhang and Katsiyannis (2002) focused on data that was drawn from three publications of the federal government. These publications included the *22<sup>nd</sup> Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*, *National Center for Education Statistics: Statistics in Brief*, and *Poverty in the United States*. The racial groups included in this study included American Indian/Alaskan Native, Asian/Pacific Islander, African American, Hispanic, and White. The data were extracted from all 50 states and the District of Columbia and focused on school-age children ranging from the ages of 6 to 21 years of age.

For their research, Zhang and Katsiyannis (2002) extracted the following data from the *Annual Report*:

1. The number of students in each racial group for all disabilities by state;
2. The number of students with learning disabilities (LD) by racial group and state;
3. The number of students with mental retardation (MR) by racial group and state;
4. The number of students with emotional-behavioral disorders (EBD) by racial group and state.

Correlation coefficients were then calculated to investigate the relationship between minority representation and state poverty rates. For the 20 group-category pairs, six statistically significant correlations emerged. Of the significant associations, African Americans being serviced under the Emotional or Behavioral Disorder (EBD) were all positively correlated with state poverty rates. In states with higher poverty rates more students from the African American group were identified as having EBD. The findings from the study support the concerns for African Americans in special education and show that African Americans continue to have the highest representation of all groups.

One limitation of this research study is the significant regional variations in minority representation for EBD. State expenditures on education, state-level regulations regarding verifications processes, family structure, attitudes toward education, racial biases, and unemployment rates could be possible factors that could account for such variation. There is a need for further district-level data to be analyzed to understand minority representation more fully.

The study by Hosp and Reschly (2004) utilized economic, demographic, and academic variables to assess the prediction of representation of students from different minority racial/ethnic groups. Data were gathered from three different sources: The Elementary and Secondary Schools Civil Rights Compliance Report data set, the Common Core of Data, and district level achievement data. From the data that was gathered, the following research questions were addressed:

1. What proportion of the variance in ratios of representation rates is accounted for by blocks of academic, demographic, and economic variables both independently and incrementally? (Hosp & Reschly, 2004)

2. Does academic achievement account for substantial proportions of that variance?

From the data, 25 variables were coded: the number of students from each of the five-federal race/ethnicity categories (African American, American Indian, Asian/Pacific Islander, Latino, and White) in each of three categories reported (Learning Disability, Emotional Disturbance, Mental Retardation) and the total number enrolled. Next, a series of multiple weighted least squares regression models were analyzed using the relative risk ratios as the response variables. Predictor variables were enclosed in one of three blocks: (a) academic, (b) demographic, and (c) economic.

The results of this study exhibit that the influence of economic status and demographic patterns for African American students is different for the various category disability; the demographic block being a stronger predictor for both the ED and LD models. This trend may be the result of the strong relationship between poverty and intellectual ability or performance. Also, this trend could likely be due to the importance of the reference group in judging behavior and referring students for behavioral concerns.

The limitations of the study begin with the fact that this study does not indicate that achievement differences cause disproportionate representation; they only suggest that the two are related. Further research needs to be confirmed and examined to better understand and predict the variables that predict disproportionate representation. Lastly, the data for this study was at the district level, and analyses have also been conducted at the state level. Although both these levels are important to examine, research also needs to be conducted at the individual level.

The findings of Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Gallini, Simmons, and Feggins-Azziz (2006) examined to what extent the overrepresentation of African American students in more restrictive special education settings is attributable to their overrepresentation in disability categories more

likely to be served in more restrictive educational environments. The researchers utilized information on individual records of all students with disabilities in Indiana throughout the 2001-2002 school year. Two hundred ninety-five school districts in the state of Indiana were included in the study, where the researchers investigated educational environments for special education students. This study focused on disproportionality for African American students because the overrepresentation and service are most consistent and severe across numerous disability categories.

From the results, it was found that African American students with disabilities are significantly underrepresented in general education classroom placements and significantly overrepresented in separate classroom settings. Within the state of Indiana, 13% of students served in special education are reported to be African American. However, African American students with disabilities make up 8.4% of students in the general education setting and over 27% of students who are served in separate class settings. In almost all disability categories, African American students were more likely to be placed in more restrictive placements than their peers.

Limitations in this study suggest that evidence of bias could have occurred among decision-makers when calculating referral data differing by race. Also, additional research is needed to determine the magnitude to which classroom management problems or decision-making processes for special education eligibility contributes to racial disparities across special education environments. Lastly, the research was conducted solely in the state of Indiana. We cannot assume that the research will generalize to all states.

The research by Aharm, Fergus, and Noguera (2011) studied the overrepresentation of Black and Latino students in special education. Their research suggests a merging of two

distinct processes: (1) assumption of a cultural deficit that result in misguided or unclear conceptualizations of disability and (2) the subsequent labeling of students in special education through a pseudoscientific placement process. This article analyzes how the social construct of the “normal child” became racialized through the special education referral, classification and placement process, and subsequently produces disproportionality.

The research was conducted in the state of New York and utilized two multiracial suburban school districts that were both identified as having an overrepresentation of students of color. Within the two designated school districts, teachers and administrators were the participants of the study. Significant technical assistance was provided to these districts to identify the root causes of disproportionality and was subsequently followed by customized professional development. These overarching activities of technical support were: observing in classrooms in each of the school districts; providing root cause analyses of disproportionality; and providing culturally responsive professional development. This research used mixed methods in collecting district data, conducting technical assistance sessions with districts to pinpoint the factors contributing to disproportionality, and designing different 3-year professional development plans to address overrepresentation.

As a result of this research, two key findings were brought to light. The first being that the teacher and student interactions that began the processes that led to the disproportionality are mired in teachers’ cultural deficit thinking. Second, school practices can interrupt the influence of deficit thinking. In examining teachers’ beliefs around the cause of disproportionality within the context of teachers’ perceptions of Black and Latino students, it becomes apparent that racial and cultural factors influence teachers' perceptions of student ability.

The most significant limitation of this study was that the researchers only looked at the cultural deficit thinking in the classrooms, but did not provide interventions to aid in changing the teachers' notion of student ability. Without a focus on addressing teachers' beliefs, disproportionality may morph, and new and more insidious forms of discrimination may take its place. Interventions need to be implemented to diminish the overrepresentation of Black and Latino students in special education.

The findings of Sweller, Graham, and Bergen (2012) took a unique look at the disproportionality in one region of Australia. The participants in this study included 13 years of enrollment data from the state of New South Wales, as well as, statistical bulletins. The research examined data for the total statewide enrollments and broke this down into five enrollment types. The five different enrollment types that the researchers looked at included:

1. Total enrollments across all kinds of classrooms;
2. Enrollments in mainstream classrooms;
3. Support classes in elementary schools;
4. Support classes in secondary schools;
5. Schools for specific purposes.

Next, the study converted student enrollments in mainstream and separated special education settings to a percentage of total enrollments across all classrooms. Then they carried out a series of curve estimates with time as the independent variable to fit linear trends to enrollments in each category for all enrollments. Lastly, follow up analyses were conducted to compare the slopes for each regression; this was done to determine whether enrollments were increasing or decreasing at significantly different rates across settings.

Conclusions from this study support the research that has been conducted on the disproportionate representation of minority groups in the United States. The findings support that disproportionality is not an issue that is unique to North America. Enrollments of indigenous students in special education settings are increasing at a faster rate than indigenous enrollments in the mainstream. The research shows that indigenous students are being enrolled in separate settings faster than students in any other group. These discoveries indicate that there is a crucial need to launch definitive protocols that referrals for different programs follow through, and a process to eliminate potential bias.

One major limitation of this study is that it shows a considerable need for additional research on the topic of disproportionality. Further research is needed to understand more about the characteristics of students entering support classes at the secondary school level. Also, research needs to be done to focus on what factors play into indigenous students entering special classrooms. Once further research is conducted, the findings of this study would be made stronger.

The study by Wiley et al., (2013) examined disproportionality in Emotional Disturbance (Emotional or Behavioral Disorder) at the national level. The research was conducted by looking at two ethnic groups of students, African American and Hispanic. The different variables that the researchers assessed included: measures of ethnic representation in the special education category of Emotional Disturbance (ED), measures of ethnic representation in child poverty, conservatism, and the percentage of K-12 students who were Caucasian. Using the publicly available national databases for each of the 50 states and the District of Columbia, data were extracted for each of the variables listed above.



Overall, by using a complex model, the researchers found that disproportionate poverty was positively associated with the representation of both African American and Hispanic students in the Emotional Disturbance classification. The representation of African Americans under the ED category was negatively correlated with levels of conservatism for a state while poverty more greatly affected Hispanic students.

One notable limitation in this study would be that the researchers included data that was provided by agencies of the government and private research companies, both of which could be open to question. Another limitation is that the research in this study is introductory and exploratory. To continue the investigation in the topic of disproportionality, further research should include more analyses at multiple levels.

The study by Bean (2013) was designed to understand if mothers, teachers, and African American children in special education rate children's externalizing behaviors differently and begin to understand what factors influence the externalizing behaviors of students in special education. According to the study, African American children are disproportionality diagnosed with disabilities that are linked with various externalizing behaviors, such as aggression, hyperactivity, and oppositional defiance. Due to the disproportionate diagnoses, African American students are more frequently placed in special education classrooms. Participants in Bean's study consisted of African American students that were 12 years of age. More than half of the students in Bean's study were male (62.7%).

The results of this study are consistent in that the research found African American boys are more likely to experience externalizing behaviors than girls. The literature demonstrates that an increase in the number of interventions is needed to improve the externalizing behaviors of African American students. The study also emphasized that very little is known about what

causes are affecting externalizing behaviors of African American students receiving special education services.

The limitations of this study begin with the fact that the study utilized a small sample size of participants who volunteered. Volunteer participants may differ from participants who chose not to participate in the study. Therefore, it is not certain whether this study can be generalized. Also, the sample of African American students receiving special education services in this study is unique because they attended a public metropolitan school in Memphis, Tennessee, that is segregated by race. This school may suggest that the students in the sample have little interactions with students of other race in their school.

Zhang, Katsiyannis, Ju, and Roberts (2014), focused on minority representation and the current status in special education. The authors pinpoint trends during the five years from 2004 to 2008. Data on the state poverty rates in 2004 were retrieved from the U.S. Census Bureau's Small Area Income, and Poverty Estimates program. Growth rates of representation were compared, and growth trajectories were graphed to examine 5-year changes of representation for the African Americana, Hispanic and white groups.

Findings indicate that some improvements have been made on the topic of minority representation from 10 years ago. Overall, the percentages of Alaskan, Asian, African American, and White students in special education increased from 2004 to 2008. Hispanics were the only group that did not grow in the five years. African Americans were the most represented, with rates ranging from 14.79% to 15.45%. African Americans continue to have the most significant representation among all groups. When examining racial representation in the disability categories of Emotional Behavioral Disorders and Intellectual Disabilities, African Americans were found to have the highest representation in both categories.

The most substantial limitation of this study was that the information used in the research was comprised mainly of data from national databases. Therefore, the research claims identified in the study may be inaccurate. Also, to understand the topic of overrepresentation in special education fully, further research needs to be completed and collected from both school and student levels. Data from different levels would allow for careful examination of specific factors that could have an impact on overrepresentation. Lastly, the national database only delivers data on race and does not provide specific information about diversity beyond race.

The review of the literature by Harry and Fenton (2016) summarized qualitative research on the topic of understanding the processes that may lead to the overrepresentation of poor and minority students receiving special education services. The review consists of 15 qualitative studies. The studies utilized various forms of questioning to discover the perspective of education practitioners and parents. Mixed-method studies were completed, using the terms overrepresentation, disproportionality, and special education as keywords.

Eleven of the studies utilized statistical surveys of perspectives, with the addition of questions that were analyzed qualitatively. Four of the studies consisted of interviews, in field observations, surveys, and reviews of student documents. As a result of the interviews, specific important themes were found in common across the open-ended responses. The three key themes being:

1. Concerns about low parental involvement;
2. The need for greater educational/professional resources;
3. Misunderstanding related to cultural differences and the meaning of disproportionality.

Overall findings from the research indicate an overlap in reasons for disproportionality; these reasons include poverty, family issues, intrinsic child deficit, and school-based issues. Lastly, the article urges researchers to conduct more qualitative research to discover the core causes of disproportionality.

The most important limitation of this study is that it is comprised mainly of information that was gathered from questioning teachers and parents on the topic of disproportionality. The study lacked statistical approaches and data-based evidence to support the researcher's claims. More data is needed to back the claims of the research and to strengthen the study. Lastly, a limitation of this study is that the researchers relied on records of information that were unable to present information on potential influential factors that possibly occurred informally or were not recorded.

The research of Cooc (2017) examined teacher perception of student disabilities of minority students. The article uses survey information from teachers about their students. The study provided additional insight into teacher perception of student disability by accounting for student background, teacher traits, and school characteristics. Cooc's study used data on a nationally representative sample of high school sophomores from the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002. Logistics regressions models were used based on the data that was gathered from the teacher surveys. The regressions models were used to model the relationship between teacher perception of student disability and student race, controlling for background components relevant to identification for a disability.

Based on Cooc's (2017) research, he found that while teachers were more likely to perceive Black, Hispanic, and Native American students as having a disability compared to White students, controlling for individualized background characteristics and school factors

often resulted in an under identification. The one exception being Asian American, who were consistently less likely to be perceived by teachers as having a disability. Overall, the results bring to light concerns about whether or not racial minority students are appropriately identified for services.

Cooc's (2017) study has several limitations, the first being that the questions in the teacher surveys had the potential to be misleading and be framed as an opinion. Additionally, the questions in the survey grouped physical, emotional, and learning disabilities into one category, which could have resulted in confusion and measurement errors. A third limitation of the study is that it cannot assess whether teachers act on their perceptions of student disability and refer students for special education services. Lastly, the participants in the study were tenth-grade students. This is problematic because at this later grade teachers may be less likely to take additional steps to refer students for special education.

Ten studies were chosen for review that assessed the overrepresentation of minorities in special education programs. Table 1 presents these studies in the same chronological order in which they appeared in Chapter 2.

Table 1

## Summary of Chapter 2 Findings

AUTHOR(S)	STUDY DESIGN	PARTICIPANTS	PROCEDURE	FINDINGS
Zhang & Katsiyannis (2002)	Quantitative	Data in this study were drawn from three publications of the federal government.	The study pulled the following information: the number of students in each racial group for disability by state, the number of students with learning disabilities by racial group and state, the number of students with mental retardation by racial group and state, and the number of students with emotional-behavioral disorders by racial group and state.	The findings from the study support that African Americans are being overrepresented in special education programs; especially in the area of mental retardation.
Hosp & Reschly (2004)	Quantitative	Data was gathered from three sources. Twenty-five variables were arranged: the number of students from each of the five-federal race/ethnicity categories in each of three categories reported and the total number enrolled.	Predictor variables were included in one of the three blocks: academic, demographic, and economic. The proportion of variance was computed for each block independently and in increments.	The influence of economic status and demographic patterns for African American students is different for the various category disability; the demographic block being a stronger predictor for both the ED and LD models.
Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Gallini, Simmons, & Feggins-Azziz (2006)	Quantitative	Data was collected in the state of Indiana from 295 school districts.	Data were used to construct a set of disability-environment variables for African American students and similarly for other students.	From the results, it was found that African American students with disabilities are significantly underrepresented in general education classroom placements and significantly overrepresented in separate classroom settings.

Table 1 (continued)

AUTHOR(S)	STUDY DESIGN	PARTICIPANTS	PROCEDURE	FINDINGS
Ahram, Fergus, & Noguera (2011)	Quantitative	Administrators and teachers within the two identified districts were the participants in this study.	Mixed methods were utilized in collecting district data. Assistance sessions were used to offer technical assistance that would pinpoint specific factors that was contributing to disproportionality. Three-year professional development plans were then created.	The teacher and student interactions that begin the processes that lead to disproportionality are mired in teachers' cultural deficit thinking. Although teachers' beliefs about students may change at a slow rate, effective school practices can interrupt the influence of deficit thinking.
Sweller, Graham, & Bergen (2012)	Quantitative	School enrollment data published in NSW DEC annual reports and statistical bulletins.	The study examined total data for the total statewide enrollments and broke this down into five enrollment types. Next, they carried out a series of curve estimates with time as the independent variable to fit linear trends to enrollments in each category for all enrollments.	Enrollments of indigenous students in special education settings are increasing at a faster rate than indigenous enrollments in the mainstream.
Wiley, Bringham, Kauffman, & Bogan (2013)	Quantitative	Data on African American and Hispanic students in all 50 states and the District of Columbia.	The research examined ethnic representation under the emotional disturbance special education category, in child poverty, and other variables. Data was taken from a national database for each of the 50 states, as well as, the District of Columbia.	Child poverty and state level conservatism was found to be unrelated to minority representation in the emotional disturbance special education category.

Table 1 (continued)

AUTHOR(S)	STUDY DESIGN	PARTICIPANTS	PROCEDURE	FINDINGS
Bean (2013)	Quantitative	Participants in Bean's study consisted of African American students that were 12 years of age in Memphis, Tennessee.	The study by Bean was designed to understand if mothers, teachers, and African American children in special education rate children's externalizing behaviors differently and begin to understand what factors influence the externalizing behaviors of students in special education.	The results of this study are consistent in that the research found African American boys are increasingly likely to experience externalizing behaviors than girls.
Zhang, Katsiyannis, Ju, & Roberts (2014)	Quantitative	Data on the state poverty rates in 2004 were retrieved from the U.S. Census Bureau's Small Area Income, and Poverty Estimates program.	Growth rates of representation were compared, and growth trajectories were graphed to examine 5-year changes of representation for the African Americana, Hispanic and white groups.	Growth rates of representation were compared, and growth trajectories were graphed to examine 5-year changes of representation for the African Americana, Hispanic and white groups.
Harry & Fenton (2016)	Qualitative	A synthesis of six studies.	The studies utilized various forms of questioning to discover the perspective of education practitioners and parents.	Specific key themes were common across the open-ended responses: concerns about low parental involvement, the need for greater educational/professional resources, and misunderstandings related to cultural difference and the meaning of disproportionality.



Table 1 (continued)

AUTHOR(S)	STUDY DESIGN	PARTICIPANTS	PROCEDURE	FINDINGS
Cooc (2017)	Quantitative	Data were collected from 752 public and private schools in 2002 with follow-ups later.	Sophomore high school students were utilized as the participants of the study. Research was extracted from the Education Longitudinal study of 2002. The data set included surveys that asked teachers about their students, including whether they perceived them to have a disability.	The findings present that while teachers were more likely to perceive Black, Hispanic, and Native American students as having a disability in comparison to White students, controlling for individual background characteristics and school contextual factors often resulted in under identification. The exception is Asian Americans, who were regularly less likely to be perceived to have a disability.

### **Chapter 3: Conclusion and Recommendations**

The purpose of this paper was to examine the overrepresentation of African American students receiving special education services. In addition, potential reasons as to why overrepresentation continues to occur were examined. In order to accomplish these two tasks, I reviewed 10 studies in Chapter 2. In this chapter, I discuss the findings and implications of these studies, as well as give my own conclusions and recommendations for future research.

#### **Conclusions**

Additional and continued research on the disproportionate overrepresentation of African American students in special education is essential for appropriate services and placements to occur. Four of the studies that were reviewed utilized a quantitative approach and were consistent in their findings. The research of Zhang et al. (2002), Hosp et al. (2004), Skiba et al. (2006), and Wiley et al. (2013) support the concerns for African Americans in special education and indicate that African Americans continue to have the highest representation of all groups. The findings also show that African American students with disabilities are significantly overrepresented in separated classroom settings.

Two of the studies chosen for review examined teachers' beliefs and perceptions of student abilities. Aharm et al. (2011) and Cooc (2017) both conducted research that provided additional insight into teacher perception of student disability by examining student background, teacher traits, and school characteristics. Throughout both studies, it became apparent that racial and cultural factors influence teachers' perceptions of student ability. It was found that teachers were more likely to perceive Black, Hispanic, and Native American students as having a disability compared to White students.

The overall conclusions from the studies support the previous research that has been conducted on the topic of African American disproportionate representation in special education. The literature concludes that disproportionality is an issue that is not unique to one state and is not unique to North America specifically (Sweller et al., 2012). The research by Harry et al. (2016) provides reasons as to why disproportionality continues to occur. These reasons include poverty, family-based issues, intrinsic child deficits, and school-based issues.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Throughout the research it has become increasingly evident that additional updated research needs to be conducted on the topic of disproportionate representation of special education students. Further research needs to be conducted and examined to better understand and predict the variables that results in disproportionate representation. Also, more research needs to be completed to focus on what factors play into African American students entering separated classroom settings.

There is an apparent need for further district-level data to be analyzed to understand minority representation more fully. Research has been conducted at both the district and state level. Although both of these levels are important to examine, research also needs to be conducted at the individual level. Supplementary research should include more analysis at multiple levels. Additionally, research needs to be completed and collected from both school and student levels. Data from different levels would allow for careful examination of specific factors that could have an impact on overrepresentation.

Increased research is needed to figure out the magnitude to which classroom management problems or decision-making processes for special education eligibility contributes to racial disparities across special education environments. Interventions need to be identified and put

into place to monitor the special education referral process. Further research is needed to better understand the characteristics of students entering support classes at all educational levels.

Lastly, in terms of culturally responsive thinking and teachers' perceptions of students, more interventions need to be identified and utilized. The research did not provide interventions to aid in changing teachers' notion of student ability. Interventions need to be implemented to diminish the overrepresentation of African American students in special education.

### **Implication for Practice**

As a special education teacher, I am a part of a Special Education Professional Learning Committee and a Student Success Team (SST). The purpose of these committees is to develop and implement interventions and potential solutions to aid in maximizing students' potential. After completing my research on the topic of disproportionate representation of special education students, I can now bring the information I know on the topic back to my team and be mindful of it when problem solving student concerns.

Additionally, throughout my personal and professional career I can further scrutinize data regarding disproportionate representation of minority students in special education. I can also raise awareness on the topic of disproportionate representation by ensuring my friends, family, and co-workers have current updated research on the topic. Furthermore, I can be an advocate for change by spreading the word through the use of educational events, service projects, and by empowering and connecting others.

Lastly, I hope to utilize the knowledge I have gained on the topic to construct and incorporate interventions into my district's special education referral process. An increase in the number of interventions put in place can promote positive change and mindfulness. Added

interventions and awareness has the potential to dramatically decrease the amount of disproportionate minority representation.

### **Summary**

This review of literature on the topic of the overrepresentation of African American students in special education programs supports the claims of previous research that has been completed on the topic. The literature concludes that disproportionate minority representation is not an issue that is unique to one state or country. Additional research needs to be conducted on the topic at a variety of levels in order to be most beneficial. I believe the issue of minority overrepresentation will continue to grow at an alarming rate unless addressed further and interventions are implemented.

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