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# Overrepresentation of Minorities in Special Education

## Abstract

Overrepresentation of minorities in special education is a growing problem in schools today. Research indicates that factors such as test bias, poverty, poor general education instruction, and insufficient professional development for working with diverse students can cause this overrepresentation. The purpose of my study was to determine if cultural barriers between teachers and students is the main cause of overrepresentation of minorities in special education. Electronic surveys were taken by 11 teachers in an urban school in upstate New York as well as ten teachers in a suburban school in upstate New York. Seven 7th grade students from the urban school also completed a paper survey. After analyzing the data, it was found that cultural barriers between the students and teachers in both the suburban school and the urban school were in fact present. Select responses demonstrated a lack of respect, acknowledgement of, and understanding of African American English. If schools are not culturally responsive, they will view behaviors and academic work from minority students as different from the "norm." Since the behaviors and "errors" in the students' academics and speech derives from their culture, they will continue to display these which may lead the teachers to view these as a deficit in the child, and refer them special education. It is crucial for schools and teachers to understand the aspects of different languages and behaviors from each culture in order for their students to be successful.

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Overrepresentation of Minorities  
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**Abstract**

Overrepresentation of minorities in special education is a growing problem in schools today. Research indicates that factors such as test bias, poverty, poor general education instruction, and insufficient professional development for working with diverse students can cause this overrepresentation. The purpose of my study was to determine if cultural barriers between teachers and students is the main cause of overrepresentation of minorities in special education. Electronic surveys were taken by 11 teachers in an urban school in upstate New York as well as ten teachers in a suburban school in upstate New York. Seven 7<sup>th</sup> grade students from the urban school also completed a paper survey. After analyzing the data, it was found that cultural barriers between the students and teachers in both the suburban school and the urban school were in fact present. Select responses demonstrated a lack of respect, acknowledgement of, and understanding of African American English. If schools are not culturally responsive, they will view behaviors and academic work from minority students as different from the “norm.” Since the behaviors and “errors” in the students’ academics and speech derives from their culture, they will continue to display these which may lead the teachers to view these as a deficit in the child, and refer them special education. It is crucial for schools and teachers to understand the aspects of different languages and behaviors from each culture in order for their students to be successful.

The topic I have chosen to research for my literature review is that of overrepresentation of minorities in special education. This topic is extremely significant because educational inequality for African American students has been an issue in schools for decades. Historically, African American students were forced to learn in overcrowded classrooms with limited resources (Jordan, 2005). This racial oppression led to African American students being subjected to poor instruction and low expectations. Assumptions were made by white Americans about the intellectual abilities of African Americans. Since a large portion of African American children were facing poverty, they were viewed as inferior and segregated into different schools (Jordan, 2005).

School systems developed “solutions” in an effort to help struggling African American students become successful in schools. Instead of looking at cultural differences or inequality of resources in schools, the idea of using special education placements arose. This practice continued through time and has led to the growing problem of overrepresentation of minorities in special education programs. African Americans are being assigned the most stigmatizing disability labels (Jordan, 2005). Research reveals that African American students are three times more likely than whites to be labeled with mental retardation. Additionally, they are two times more likely to be labeled emotionally disturbed and one and a half times more likely to be labeled as having a learning disability (Jordan, 2005). This disproportionality has a profound impact on the students and their future. Jordan (2005) states, “The 23<sup>rd</sup> Annual Report on IDEA to Congress indicates that during the 1998-1999 school year, African American students identified with disabilities dropped out of U.S. high schools at a rate of 33.7%” (p.135). This is an alarming number, which is why more research on this topic is significant.

There are many factors that contribute to the problem of overrepresentation of minorities in special education but which one has the greatest impact? Discussions continue around which factor contributes the most to this issue. Factors such as poor instruction in general education classrooms and test bias are causes for overrepresentation of minorities in special education classes (Algozzine, Maheady, Mercer, Towne & Ysseldyke, 1983). Other researchers focus on poverty and believe this is the only factor contributing to overrepresentation (O'Connor & DeLuca Fernandez, 2006). Additionally, research has found that schools have insufficient professional training for working with diverse students in a school which leads to misinterpretations of behavior and more referrals for minority students (A'Vant, Baker, Chandler, McKinney, Sayles & Sullivan, 2009).

In this literature review, I argue that it is because of cultural barriers between students and teachers that overrepresentation of minorities in special education occurs. The teaching profession still remains 85 % White and 75% female (Ford, 2012). If a White teacher does not understand the various cultures of the students that they are teaching, miscommunications and misinterpretations will occur, which will lead to the labeling of students who do not actually have a disability. They simply do not fit the norms of the White teacher that is teaching them. Professional development in schools on valuing and understanding cultures is crucial in order for this problem to be eliminated.

I conducted a study to determine if cultural barriers were the cause of overrepresentation of minority students in special education. Anonymous surveys were sent to ten teachers working in a suburban middle school in Upstate New York as well as ten teachers working in an urban middle school in Upstate New York. Through these surveys, questions were asked to determine if schools and teachers were being culturally responsive. Additionally, teachers were surveyed on

how they would interpret certain common behaviors and work samples from students of different cultures. Lastly, students in the urban middle school were surveyed to determine if they believe their school is culturally responsive and if they believe their culture is valued and celebrated at their school. After the surveys were returned, I analyzed the information that was given to me to see how teachers in the different locations responded to the questions and if in fact, they were being culturally responsive. Students' answers were also analyzed to determine if they felt their culture was valued at their school.

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Culture “as” Disability**

Culture has the power to disable an individual. McDermott and Varenne (1995) explain that once a person is unable to complete a certain task or is unable to handle a difficult problem, society labels them as disabled. The theory of Culture as Disability focuses on the fact that disability is not always directly related to the individual but instead the dominant culture in power. Norms are created by the dominant culture and if an individual does not meet those norms, then they are seen as disabled and different (McDermott & Varenne, 1995). McDermott and Varenne (1995) state, “We are arrogant to think we know better than people in other cultures and we are foolish to not appreciate how much is known by others in their own terms” (p.325). This practice is occurring in schools each day. Once the child enters the school, they must fit the norms created by the school. If they are unable to meet those norms, they are at risk of being placed in special education. Instead of using and building off of the child's primary discourse or culture, the school puts bans on the use of these which negatively impacts the child in a great way (Salas, 2009).

When society assumes that there is only one way to be in a culture, anyone that does not fit that way gets locked out and labeled (McDermott & Varenne, 1995). A school must create a community that is accepting of differences and open to different cultures. The attitudes of the individuals surrounding a person with disabilities have the power to disable or enable that person. It is crucial in schools that teachers help students view a person with disabilities as equal and still able to complete tasks. Instead of looking at what an individual may be lacking, teachers must find the strengths in their students. McDermott and Varenne (1995) explain that if a focus is always put on the differences in cognitive, linguistic, and social development of a child and ways to find out what is “wrong” with that child, it makes the situation even worse.

Schools have become the main source of creating inequality. The dominant culture in schools use labels for students that seem different. McDermott and Varenne (1995) explain, “Even if used sensitively by people trying to do the right thing for children apparently disabled, the term has a political life that involves millions of people operating on little information about the consequences of their work” (p.339). Teachers may be trying to help a child that is struggling and refer him or her to special education. The problem that arises is that the teacher may simply be misinterpreting the culture of the child or may be lacking an effective delivery of instruction, which is why the child is struggling. These factors are not investigated though, which is why the problem of overrepresentation continues to grow (McDermott & Varenne, 1995).

### **Research Question**

The United States has become extremely diverse, consisting of cultures from all around the world. Families place their children in schools trusting that their child will receive a proper education and be treated equally. The problem is that minority students are being labeled with



disabilities and are placed in special education programs (Jordan, 2005). I have been led to ask the following research question: What is the cause of overrepresentation of minority students in special education? Which factor contributes the most to this continuing problem? In the following synthesis of the research articles I read, I will explore how factors such as poverty, test bias, cultural barriers and lack of professional development and poor general education instruction cause overrepresentation of minorities in special education.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Poverty**

Jordan (2005) asserts that poverty is viewed as the sole reason for academic and social failure. Students that live in poverty tend to experience low educational performance expectations, safety issues, over-crowded classrooms and have access to fewer resources (Jordan, 2005). White middle class students do not have to experience these conditions or live in low socioeconomic neighborhoods filled with drug sales, violence, and unemployment. Additionally, the Theory of Compromised Human Development states that minority students are more likely to be poor and that “being poor increases exposure to social risks that compromise early development and increase the need for special services” (O’Connor & DeLuca Fernandez, 2006, p 6). O’Connor and DeLuca Fernandez (2006) propose that this theory may oversimplify the concept of development, though. This theory fails to look at development as culturally specific and instead makes development of children universal. The theory also places minority students against the white norms developed by the middle class and minority students’ development is then compared to those norms (O’Connor and DeLuca Fernandez, 2006). The Theory of Compromised Human Development views poverty as the main reason for overrepresentation of minorities in special education but neglects to see that the theory only marginalizes minority

students further (O'Connor and DeLuca Fernandez, 2006). According to this theory, students who are poor and at risk enter school with a disability. The school then is only a place for the child to be diagnosed (O'Connor and DeLuca Fernandez, 2006).

Tatum (2009) explains that intergenerational poverty is what most African Americans face at this point in time. He believes that their lives are being shaped by poverty, violence, gang influences, and dysfunctional households. Similarly, MacMillian and Reschly (1998) believe that poverty lowers the quality of life for that individual which can have a negative impact on his or her learning. These conditions lead to underexposure to resources needed in order for students to be successful in reading and writing. Tatum (2009) also explains how teachers feel powerless when it comes to teaching African American males living in high-poverty. He has been asked, "Is it reasonable to expect African American boys in high-poverty schools or from economically disadvantaged homes to perform as well as other students academically?" (Tatum, 2009, p. xiii). When children live in poverty, expectations may be lowered for them which harms the children and their futures. Evidence of this is found in this teacher's statement. This teacher is not confident that African American children can perform the same as White children, which is contributing to the issue of overrepresentation.

In contrast, research has found evidence which supports claims that poverty is not the only factor that impacts overrepresentation. Jordan (2005) explains,

African American males are almost four times more likely as African American females to be identified as ED. Therefore, poverty is an inadequate explanation in accounting for the differences in identification rates between African males and females as well as differences across minority groups. It merely provides a convenient explanation of school failure that absolves the school of responsibility. (p. 136)

If male and female minorities living in similar levels of poverty have varying identification rates, it demonstrates that poverty cannot be the only factor to blame when it comes to the problem of overrepresentation. O'Connor and DeLuca Fernandez (2006) agree with this idea and believe that it is schools, not poverty that place minorities at higher risk for special education placement.

### **Cultural Differences & Insufficient Professional Development**

Overrepresentation rarely occurs in low-incidence disabilities such as cerebral palsy or deaf blindness. These categories follow a medical definition which is easier to diagnose. Overrepresentation exists most often in the high-incidence disabilities. Arnold and Lassmann (2003) state, "High incidence disabilities require an extensive degree of 'professional judgment' to come to a consensus as the determination of disability" (p.231). Additionally, research indicates that high incidence disabilities such as mental retardation, learning disabilities, and emotional disabilities account for over 63% of students eligible for special education (A'Vant et al., 2009). These "judgmental" disability categories contain vague federal and state disability definitions which leads to minority students being evaluated based on white middle class norms. O'Connor and DeLuca Fernandez (2006) explain, "Schools determine who is more likely to be designated as disabled" (p.6). Many schools in the United States are structured to give the white students an advantage. Schools must understand that "Certain culture-specific standards or ideals for development should not be applied or generalized to other populations" (O'Connor & DeLuca Fernandez, 2006, p.7). It is imperative that schools understand cultural diversity while evaluating children.

Since there is insufficient professional training on working with diverse students in schools, students are labeled in order to "make sense" of the differences that some minority

students exhibit in schools (Jordan, 2005). For example, without proper training, teachers in schools will not be educated on the fact that African American English is actually a language with rules for grammar and pronunciations (Redd & Schuster Webb, 2005). Teachers simply hear words pronounced “incorrectly” and assume that African American students are unable to speak Standard English. If the student continues to pronounce words incorrectly it can lead to “gross educational injustices” because AAE speakers are placed in special education or speech therapy classes since they are not speaking the Standard English that white children are speaking (Redd & Schuster Webb, 2005, p.25). If African American English became the dominant discourse in schools and on standardized tests, then African American students would excel and be seen as proficient speakers while white middle class students, who are unfamiliar with the language, would fall behind and be seen as incompetent (O’Connor & DeLuca Fernandez, 2006).

Jordan (2005) confirms that teacher judgment plays a large factor in placement of students in special education. She explains that identification of disabilities is closely tied to the assumptions that teachers make regarding cultural backgrounds. The assumptions develop from the deficit thought which is too often found in schools. These thoughts are based on the belief that minority students, “lack motivation, possess limited intellectual ability, and come from inadequate home environments” (Jordan, 2005, p.130). Furthermore, Tatum (2009) explains that we must eliminate the assumption that African American boys do not want to be educated. These assumptions also disadvantage minority students in schools when it comes to making meaning of their behavior. Research shows that black students are referred for more subjective offenses when it comes to behavior. O’Connor and DeLuca Fernandez (2006) explain, “Even the most serious of the reasons for office referrals among black students, threat, is dependent on perception of threat by the staff making the referral” (p. 9). Teachers identify white boys’

misbehavior as “boys being boys” yet when black boys misbehave they are punished (O’Connor & DeLuca Fernandez, 2006). The external aggressive behaviors are interpreted instead of looking at the internal behaviors causing the aggressiveness, such as anxiety, which leads to the labeling of emotionally disturbed (O’Connor & DeLuca Fernandez, 2006). This argument was also made by Ford (2012) when she explains that behaviors viewed as disruptive or disrespectful by one teacher or decision maker may not be viewed in that way by another professional. Ford (2012) continues to make an extremely significant point when she states, “We must neither ignore nor negate cultural differences, we must not misunderstand cultural differences, and we must not penalize children for their cultural differences” (p. 400). If this idea is implemented in all schools across the country, it would lead to a decrease in referrals for special education.

Developing culturally relevant instruction is crucial for the success of minority students. Jordan (2005) explains, “Successful teachers explore and utilize the knowledge that children bring to school in order to help them achieve academically and to help them realize their value and worth” (p. 142). Similarly, Ford (2012) argues that becoming culturally competent is not optional at this point in time. Building relationships with students that extend beyond the classroom and include exploring their community will help build a strong connection and display to the students that they are valued. Additionally, a teacher must reflect on their assumptions about race and culture to ensure that those views are not impacting the curriculum or their discipline. Educators need to develop patience for students who are not yet proficient in English instead of becoming frustrated because they hold a belief that English should be the only language spoken in schools.

**Test Bias**

David Tyack analyzed urban education in the United States in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During this time, intelligence testing in schools became the sole method of classifying students (Jordan, 2005). The tests were used to, “channel students into classes and careers that matched their perceived intellectual and social competence” (Jordan, 2005, p.132). African American children were perceived as having low mental ability, and thus assigned classes for “defective children.” The problem with standardized tests and IQ tests is that they “rely heavily upon the values and experiences of the white, middle-class culture and, therefore, discriminate against persons from differing cultural backgrounds” (Maheady, Town, Algozzine, Mercer, & Ysseldyke, 1983, p. 449). Attempts were made to develop new testing practices which included culture-fair and culture-free tests, using adaptive behavior scales as well as the tests, and interpreting results using local group norms (Maheady et al., 1983). Even with these new attempts, it was found that overrepresentation did not decrease. This led researchers to believe that searching for the “fair” tests should not be the sole focus. Schools must focus on an effective way to instruct instead of simply assessing.

Court cases such as *Diana v. Board of Education* in 1970 and *Larry P. v. Riles* in 1972 fought for changes in procedures for placing a student in special education programs. The plaintiffs in the *Diana* case were seeking revisions and reform of assessment practices. The plaintiffs in *Larry P.* requested the elimination of all standardized tests when placing students (Brosnan, 1983). It was argued that black children were overrepresented in special education because of test biases and the fact that school personnel were inadequately trained to administer and interpret the tests (Brosnan, 1983). Additionally, it was discovered that teachers were especially lacking proper training in interpreting assessments taken by minority students. This

led to a growing number of low socioeconomic school districts labeling twice as many students with learning disabilities.

Multidisciplinary teams are crucial in order for a student evaluation to be successful. Brosnan (1983) explains that many schools lack these multidisciplinary teams. School psychologists, social workers, nurses, and counselors may be missing from meetings that determine if a student will receive services or not. Meetings at these schools still take place with the missing personnel, which may lead to misidentification of students. Professionals in each area need to attend these evaluations in an event that information is misinterpreted. Bias could also be present if a personality conflict exists between the teacher who made the referral and the student (Brosnan, 1983).

### **Poor General Education Instruction**

Beginning in the 1900's, African American schools experienced underfunding which led to inferior schooling for these students (Jordan, 2005). Bullock conducted a study which determine that, "during the 1914-1915 school year, expenditures for public education in the southern states exceeded \$72 million, but only a little over \$8 million was spent on the separate black schools" (Jordan, 2005, p.133). Teachers had to work with limited resources but were expected to achieve the same success as the white privileged students. Educational opportunity for some students was watered down. Students were not challenged but instead forced to learn through skill training, memorization, and worksheets (Jordan, 2005). Additionally, even if a black student attended a White school, they ended up being re-segregated and placed in remedial courses where they experienced low standards and poor instruction (O'Connor & DeLuca Fernandez, 2006).

Ford (2012) proposes that each group of individuals has a different culture and way of experiencing school and daily life. It is crucial that teachers differentiate to meet those needs. Differentiating will better meet the needs of the students resulting in fewer referrals to special education. This idea of prevention, rather than intervention, dominates the research because it is more effective to work towards preventing something from happening rather than intervening once the problem has occurred. Five programs which include: DISTAR, Exemplary Center for Reading Instruction, precision teaching, classroom-wide peer tutoring and the Adaptive Learning Environment Model, have been implemented in schools and have produced outstanding results (Maheady et al., 1983).

#### **Effective general education instruction programs.**

DISTAR is a program that uses small group, direct instruction and follows sequenced lessons in different subject areas such as English Language Arts and math. Classrooms that used this program referred fewer students to special education classrooms than traditional classrooms. The Exemplary Center for Reading Instruction helps teachers build effective instructional techniques and focuses on positive reinforcement. When this model was used in schools, minority students' reading levels rose to grade level or above grade level (Maheady et al., 1983). Precision Teaching focuses on data and measures the student's progress on a daily basis. The model guides instruction because the teacher can determine if their teaching practices are effective based on the daily data they receive from each child. Class-Wide peer tutoring increases the time that students spend directly practicing academic responses. This model helps students see their errors, and increases engagement in the classroom. Lastly, the Adaptive Learning Environment Model groups students by instructional level and uses a prescriptive curriculum which helps them stay engaged and practice their skills (Maheady et al., 1983).



General education classrooms must improve instruction in order to fit the needs of each child. General education classrooms must also be the first point to investigate before referring a child to special education, to determine if the “deficiency” is actually within the child or if in fact it lies within the teaching practices of the general education teacher. A study conducted by Shippen, Curtis, and Miller (2009) proves that general education teachers are not focused on this issue of overrepresentation. One participant stated, “It is what it is” and other staff members agreed (Shippen et al., 2009, p.231). Negative attitudes like this will only make the problem of overrepresentation continue on.

### **Implications & Conclusions**

Many factors contribute to the issue of overrepresentation of minority students in special education. It can be concluded that poor general education instruction and cultural differences have the greatest impact on overrepresentation. Schools cannot put all their time and effort into finding a “fair” test or blaming poverty for this issue. Schools need to focus on prevention strategies instead of intervention strategies, which starts with improving general education classes. Adequate training for teachers needs to be provided so that they are prepared to teach diverse students. Ford (2012) explains, “Special education teachers participate in formal, ongoing, and systemic preparation-via conferences, professional development, courses, and degree programs” (p.403). Teachers in all schools should be held to this standard when it comes to being trained to work with diverse students. Schools cannot afford for programs such as these to be optional. Teachers need to be culturally competent to continue in their profession (Ford, 2012).

Schools may face implications when it comes to finding adequate training for teachers. Some administrators may not know where to look for help and training. The cost of these programs could also be a problem. Also, unfortunately some teachers may not hold the same views as individuals running the training programs. This would lead to the administration having to create an accountability plan to ensure that teachers are being culturally responsive. In order for overrepresentation to decrease, the support of the district, schools, administration, and teachers needs to be present.

## **Methodology**

### **Context**

This study is taking place in a suburban school district in upstate New York as well as in an urban school district in upstate New York. These locations were chosen for my study in order to obtain data from teachers that work in different areas with different types of students. The suburban school district in upstate New York contains students who are predominantly white, while the urban school district in upstate New York contains students who are predominantly African American or Hispanic. My research will help me determine if cultural barriers between students and teachers are the cause for overrepresentation of minorities in special education. My research will allow me to conclude if teachers overall, are culturally responsive. I will determine how teachers interpret behavior and work samples from minority students. By collecting data from teachers in different locations, I will be able to determine if responses differ based on if teachers work with minority students on a daily basis or not.

Students in the urban school district in upstate New York will also be surveyed. I chose to survey these students to determine if they feel as though their school is culturally responsive.

Since most of these students are African American or Hispanic, I want to obtain data from their responses to conclude if they believe their culture is valued and celebrated at their school.

### **Participants**

The participants in my study include ten teachers from the urban school district as well as ten teachers from the suburban school district. The teachers work in elementary schools and middle schools in each type of district. Teaching experience, race, and sex of the teachers will vary. Additionally, five students will be surveyed in the urban school district. These students will be in 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade, are African American, and had the option to decline participating in my study. Pseudonyms were used to protect their identities.

### **Researcher Stance**

I graduated from SUNY Cortland with a Bachelor's in Childhood Education in 2009. I am currently a science teacher in a middle school in the city. I am currently working towards earning a Master's of Science in Special Education. My role in the study is to distribute the electronic surveys to my participants. I will also be guiding the group of five students through taking the survey. I will provide assistance to the students if they have questions while taking it.

### **Method**

The purpose of this study is to determine if cultural barriers between teachers and students are the main cause for overrepresentation of minorities in special education. I am trying to determine how teachers who work predominantly with white students respond to behaviors and work samples from African American students. I also will analyze the responses from teachers who work predominantly with African American students but are of a different race. The research will also allow me to see if schools and classrooms are culturally responsive.

To gather my data, I first reached out to my participants. I asked ten teachers in the urban school district and ten teachers in the suburban school district to participate in my research. Next, I developed my survey questions and prepared the survey by using the software program Qualtrics. The surveys, along with the consent letter, were sent out to all the teachers involved. Teachers were given ten days to complete the survey. The group of five students from the urban school district was given the survey during a free period during the school day. After all surveys were completed, the data was analyzed.

### **Informed Consent and Protecting the Rights of the Participants**

Teachers and students were given consent forms asking them to participate in my research. The electronic survey is anonymous to protect participants' confidentiality. Participants had a clear understanding of their rights and knew it was their choice to participate in the study. Pseudonyms for schools and students were used during analysis and discussions.

### **Data Collection**

Data was collected in the study through electronic surveys for the teachers. The surveys were created using the Qualtrics internet software. The survey included 15 questions that varied in format. Questions included teachers having to agree or disagree with statements, explain why they chose their answers, rate their classrooms and schools on a scale of one through five, and analyze student work samples (see Appendix A for the teacher survey). Students were given paper surveys that included five questions for them to answer (See Appendix B for the student survey).

## **Data Analysis**

After collecting my data, I did a close reading of the all the information and annotated the data. I first looked through the data to look at the responses from the teachers at the suburban schools. Next, I examined the responses from the teachers at the urban schools. I looked for similarities between the responses from the two districts. Next, I looked closely for differences between the responses from the two districts. I also looked further into the responses from individuals from each race and each sex. I reread all answers for questions where teachers had to explain why they chose their answers. Additionally, I examined the student responses by rereading their comments and separating their choices into different groups where I could look into them further.

## **Findings**

### **Urban and Suburban Teacher Surveys**

I collected data from a total of 21 teachers. I surveyed 11 teachers from an urban school district and 10 teachers from a suburban school district. Teachers indicated where they were employed in question one. Participants indicated their sex in question two. Four males and 17 females participated in my survey. For question three, participants indicated their race. Of the 21 participants, 18 were Caucasian, one was African American, and two identified themselves as other. No participants were Hispanic and no participants were Asian. All of the participants from the suburban school were Caucasian.

Question four asked participants to indicate how culturally responsive they thought their school is based on a scale of one through five, with five being very culturally responsive. One participant gave her school a one, two participants gave their school a two, two participants gave their school a three, four participants gave their school a four, and one participant gave her

school a five. Nine participants did not answer this question. Overall, 58% of the participants that answered this question indicated that their school was culturally responsive and gave their schools a four or a five. Twenty-five percent of participants that answered this question indicated that their school was not culturally responsive and gave their schools a one or a two. Seventeen percent of participants that answered this question gave their school a three which indicates they are neutral on this topic. After splitting the responses to this question into suburban and urban schooling the data is as follows. For the suburban school responses, four participants gave their school a four, one gave their school a three, one participant gave her school a five, and the last gave their school a two. For the urban school, one participant gave her school a one, one participant gave his school a two, one participant gave her school a three, and two participants gave their school a four.

Question five asked participants to explain why they chose their previous answer of indicating how culturally responsive they felt their schools are. Eighteen participants out of 21 answered this question. One participant from the suburban school explained, “We make every effort to honor students’ home culture and are sincerely sensitive to students’ differences. However, the similar backgrounds of our school staff makes it difficult to bring truly different perspective to the table.” A second participant from the suburban school explains that the majority of their students are white, but they do teach about other cultures in all grade levels. A third participant from the suburban schools explains that the ESOL teacher does a nice job with her students from various cultures, but only select teachers incorporate cultural diversity. She explains that social studies has been pushed aside, though, for months and state test preparation has filled that period. She believes that to administration, the students are merely test scores, and culture is pushed aside. A fourth participant from the suburban school explains, “If teachers

have had experience with individuals from other cultures, they tend to be more aware of issues that may face those. I don't think a lot of our teachers have this experience, though." The last four participants that answered this question from the suburban school believe their school is culturally responsive. They explain that their school responds to the cultural and socio-economic needs of their students and families. They believe they do see diversity in their school and it is welcomed and celebrated at each grade level. Lastly, they have annual cultural sensitivity training for staff, Unity Night, and are aware of minority distribution in classes.

Responses for question five from the urban schools are as follows. One participant believes that her school does the best it can to be culturally responsive but there are areas for improvement. A second participant states, "There are certain ways in which we expect children to act, not respecting their culture." Similarly, a third participant adds, "Curriculum and taxonomies target students' skill-based deficits. Unfortunately, students have emotional needs specific to low socioeconomic status, and we don't meet those needs. There are learning styles specific to African-American children that are not utilized at this school." A fourth participant from the urban school explains that the school's cultural responsiveness is geared more towards the African-American population but leaves other represented groups out, such as the Latino population. A fifth participant believes that being culturally responsive involves a series of steps that her school doesn't have the flexibility to use. She explains that schools must inform the practice of teachers in the tone and language they use with the students. Next, prejudices that are held by teachers based on personal experience have to be acknowledged and identified. This participant believes that her school strategically informs teachers but it is not always passed on to the students in a positive way. The last three participants from the urban school believe that their school is culturally responsive. They believe that their school is aware of the backgrounds that

the students come from which is mainly low income. Since their school's main goal is to have the students attend college, they are helping to break the cycle. Lastly, the participants discussed how at each professional development meeting, there is a conversation about how they must be compassionate and understanding of the outside factors affecting their students. The schools implement strategies for working with their toughest students and adjust these strategies if necessary.

Question six asked participants to indicate how culturally responsive they think their classroom and teaching is based on a scale of one through five, with five being very culturally responsive. Twelve out of 21 participants responded to this question. No participants rated their classrooms as a one, one participant gave her classroom a two, one participant gave her classroom a three, nine participants gave their classroom a four, and one participant gave her classroom a five. Overall, 83% of participants that answered this question indicated that their classroom is culturally responsive and chose a four or five for this question. Eight percent of participants that answered this question indicated that their classroom was not culturally responsive. Lastly, 8% of participants chose a "three" for this question which indicates they are neutral on this topic. After splitting the responses to this question into suburban and urban schools, the data is as follows. For the urban responses, three participants rated their classroom a four, and one participant rated her classroom a three. For the suburban responses, one participant rated her classroom a two, six participants rated their classroom a four and one participant rated her classroom a five. This displays that most of the suburban school teachers believe that their classroom is culturally responsive.

Question seven allowed participants to explain why they chose their answer to the previous question about their classroom being culturally responsive. Seventeen out of 21



participants responded to this question. One participant from the suburban school explains that many of her students speak other languages that she personally does not know a lot about, other than interacting with the families. A second participant explains that she used to have time to discuss students' backgrounds, global issues, and current affairs but does not have that time anymore because of state test preparation. A third participant from the suburban school who rated her classroom a two stated, "We keep things American, holiday celebrations, etc." The last six participants believe that their classroom is culturally responsive. The teachers are always aware of the backgrounds and social and emotional needs of their students. The participants explain that differentiation is key in order to best meet the diverse needs of their students. These teachers teach their students about many countries, religions, and ethnic groups by reading stories, learning different languages, and understanding different traditions.

Responses to question seven from the urban schools are as follows. One participant explains that because of the model and taxonomies of the school, he feels unable to meet the emotional needs of many of his students since addressing African American learning styles are all but completely discouraged. A second participant explains that she uses the system of the school in her classroom but knows there are other things she could do to be more culturally responsive. A third participant explains, "I try to be culturally responsive to my students. I try to see things from their "lens" and adapt as necessary." A fourth participant from the urban school explains how when she exposes her students to different concepts, she improves the cultural relevance by identifying real world connections that use life skills her students already practice. Lastly, the last participant explains that his classroom is culturally responsive; specifically in terms of expectations. Even in the special education setting at the urban school, he holds the

students accountable for the high expectations of their school. They provide accommodations and adaptations that fit their needs and culture.

Question eight asked participants to indicate if they believed African American English was an actual language with rules for grammar and pronunciations. Nineteen participants out of 21 answered this question. Eight participants, 42%, agreed with this statement while 11 participants, 58%, disagreed with this statement. Responses were split into suburban and urban schools. Four suburban teachers agreed with this statement while six teachers disagreed with this statement. Four urban teachers agreed with this statement while five teachers disagreed with this statement. Over half of the classes may not be respecting or recognizing students' cultures and languages.

For question nine, participants had to explain their reasoning for their answer to the previous question about African American English. Seventeen participants out of 21 responded to this question. Responses were analyzed by type of school (urban and suburban) and if the participants agreed or disagreed with the question. Beginning with the suburban teachers that disagreed with the statement, the responses are the following. The first participant didn't feel that African American English has as many grammar rules as English. The second participant was unsure if there were any "rules" but understands many words can be culturally changed. A third participant believes it isn't a language but instead just a different way to use words, accents, and sounds. A fourth participant explains that she just received work from an African American student in class and the work, "didn't make sense" and was in African American English. The last participant explains that students need to use English language for success in the job market, not African American English.

For the suburban teachers who agreed that African American English was a language, their responses included the following. One participant explains that many educational materials and evaluations are culturally biased with regard to cultural differences and don't take into consideration African American English. The second participant believes that all languages have structures and rules. The third participant believes that African American English should be recognized as a dialect. She explains:

Our notion of conventional, proper English is outmoded. In other countries, one standard language is established, but variations are recognized and accepted. The standardized testing language does not reflect the way real children (regardless of background) speak, think, or communicate. The state exams are designed to punish students and districts in need.

Lastly, the fourth participant explains that every language (whether it is Standard English or a dialect) has definite shape and texture.

Responses for the urban teachers that disagreed with the statement include the following. One participant explains that he does not believe there are a set of rules for African American English. A second participant explains African American English has no rules and is "lazy talk." A third participant explains that there are rules for the formal English language; however, African American English is a casual way of speaking and can be interpreted differently by individuals based on experience, location, and social trends. The fourth participant states that he understands and respects the differences in the languages spoken, but does not believe African American English has written rules for grammar or pronunciations.

The urban school teachers that agree with the African American English statement explained the following. One participant stated, "Although it may not be the same as Standard

English, there are rules for grammar and pronunciations.” The second participant had a similar stance on the topic and states:

I agree that African American English is a language because I believe it is the first language of most of my students. That’s why, even though correcting students’ language in an appropriate setting (as in school and workplace) I feel is necessary, this is a major part of their identity that I don’t want disrespected or stripped away from them.

A third participant explains that African American English seems to have specific grammatical rules and it simply takes research and work on the end of the teacher to understand what these rules are. Once a teacher looks closely at this, it makes more sense. The last participant discusses that each culture has their own way of speaking with each other. Each culture will have certain rules for speaking and listening.

Question ten asks participants to indicate the extent (on a scale from one to five) at which they agree with the statement, “Students should only be allowed to use Standard English in school.” Thirteen out of 21 participants answered this question. The responses have been grouped into the urban and suburban schools. One participant from the suburban school rated this statement as a one, thus strongly disagreeing with it. Two urban participants and three suburban participants chose two and disagreed with this statement. No participants chose three. One participant from the urban school and one participant from the suburban school chose four and agreed with this statement. Lastly, three urban teachers and two suburban teachers chose five and strongly agreed.

For question 11, participants had to explain why they chose their response to the previous question. Seventeen out of 21 participants responded to this question. Responses were grouped based on if the participant agreed or disagreed with the statement in each type of school.

Responses from the suburban school who agreed with the statement are reported first. One participant from the suburban school who agreed with the statement explains to her students that school appropriate language needs to be used for their writing and casual language is for when they are outside of school. The second participant explains that students need to know how to use Standard English to be successful. The third participant states, "It's important to learn Standard English even if it's not used 24 hours a day by individuals. School is the place we go to learn so it would be foolish to allow children to not speak properly in school." For the suburban teachers who disagreed with this statement, the responses included the following. One participant explains that exposure to standard English is important, but should not be considered the only option. The second participant explains that students should be able to express their own ideas in their own voice to help form and articulate their thoughts. This same participant also understands that using Standard English for academic purposes is also important since their future depends on this. The next participant believes that there is not only one way of speaking in school. She is open to many ways of expressing oneself.

The responses from the urban teachers who agreed with the statement are as follows. One participant explains that there is a time and place for both Standard English and a more causal form in the education system. She believes it is important to teach students when it is appropriate to use each. Individuals who master this skill will be successful. The second participant believes that since an individual must use Standard English when filling out a job application or participating in an interview, Standard English should be the sole focus of the school. The students at the urban school need these skills the most so Standard English needs to be enforced. The third participant also discusses college, interviews, and future jobs, and explains that it is the teacher's job to prepare the students with the "acceptable" way to speak to

be ready for the future. The fourth participant explains that school is a professional environment and students should be held to a professional standard. For the teachers in the urban school that disagreed with this statement, their explanations include the fact that they had mixed feelings on this topic. One participant explains:

I think that they should understand and be able to produce written and spoken Standard English as that is what will be expected of them in certain environments, however, they also need to learn how to communicate with their family and friends who may use more African American English.

The second participant who disagreed with this statement explains that every single moment is not purely academic in schools. There is time to build relationships and have joy and this participant feels that during those times, students' guard should be allowed to come down and they should just be who they are. During academic times, this participant believes Standard English is necessary but that teachers need to model that both forms are acceptable in schools.

Question 12 asks teachers to explain how well equipped they feel they are to teach students who consistently use African American English on a daily basis. They chose from a scale of one through five, five being very well equipped to teach these students. Eighteen participants out of 21 answered this question. For the urban teachers, four of them chose four as their response and five of the teachers chose five for their response. They feel well equipped to teach these students. For the suburban teachers, two of the suburban teachers chose one, three suburban teachers chose two, one suburban teacher chose a four and three suburban teachers chose five.

Question 13 allowed participants to agree or disagree with the following statement, “African-American students receive office referrals and harsh punishments at significantly higher rates than European-American students” (Monroe, 2006). Nineteen out of 21 participants responded to this question. Responses were divided into suburban and urban schools. Three suburban teachers agreed with this statement while seven suburban teachers disagreed with it. Five urban teachers agreed with this statement while four urban teachers disagreed.

Question 14 asked participants to explain their reasons for why they chose their previous answer. For the suburban teachers who disagreed with the statement, the results are as follows. One participant states that in over 20 years of teaching in public schools, in three districts, she does not see evidence for this statement. The second participant states that she does not see this to be true, however, in their suburban school; there are not as many African American students as there are white students. Participant three explains, “Behavioral standards should not be biased in how they are enforced, nor should minority students not be held to same behavior expectations to avoid looking biased.” The next participant explains she has not seen this at the elementary level or in her building. The last participants articulated that the behavior is what drives the referral, not the race of the child. The suburban teachers that agree with this statement explain that they have seen this situation first hand at their school. The next teacher explains that she agreed with the statement because of the news articles that she has read on the topic. She has not seen it in her experience, but from the media, knows it does go on.

The urban teachers that agree with this statement give the following evidence. The first participant believes that the statement is true, not appropriate, but true. Participant two explains, I agree with this statement because media and personal experience (or lack thereof) influences how we think or perceive others. Based on this, someone is less likely to give

an African American child the benefit of the doubt compared to the white child because of the experience of one person, a particular group, or misinterpretation of body language/response.

Participant three states that statistics prove it. Participant four states, "I believe this is true because African American students tend to come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and therefore are more likely to have behavior problems in school." For the urban school teachers that disagree with this statement, their explanations include the following. One participant states they see white students sent out of class just as much as black students. The second participant disagrees because she hasn't had the experience with the "European-American" student since she has only taught in the urban setting and there are few white students in this setting. The second participant explains that since schools are so segregated, white students in the suburbs and black students in the city, it is difficult to agree or disagree with this question.

Question 15 asked teachers to explain how they would edit an excerpt from a story that a student wrote. They also needed to explain how they would communicate the errors to the student. The responses were divided into suburban teachers and urban teachers. Participant one from the suburban school explains she would talk to the student about using quotation marks, the use of adding an "s" to make words plural or possessive, and focusing on the "to be+ing formation" so that all readers can follow what is written. This teacher also considers keeping the text the way it is so that the authentic voice of the author can be understood. The second participant corrected the text by adding quotation marks around what the boys were saying and then correcting the rest to match Standard English. She would explain to the student that they can use African American English when directly quoting but will need to use proper English in standard prose. The third suburban teacher said she would introduce the concept of quotation



marks but would keep the dialogue the same. The fourth suburban teacher would focus just on possessives and also do a mini lesson on using “their” instead of “they.” The next teacher would use a checklist to ensure that the student adheres to punctuation. She would have the students change some grammar but not the grammar in the conversation if that is how the student wants the characters to talk. The next participant states that she would have the student correct it for spelling and punctuation. She is fine with her students speaking this way but does expect them to write proper English. The next teacher discusses that she would have the student correct the first sentence but would leave the dialogue as is if the child used quotation marks.

The first urban teacher states that he would correct the entire excerpt so that it was in Standard English, even the dialogue. He would also tell the student that what they wrote was incorrect. The second urban teacher says she would correct all the mistakes for grammar and go over those rules with the student. She would also acknowledge that the student may speak a certain dialect, but in school they must adhere to Standard English conventions. The third participant would have the student tell the story to them orally and then they would both edit it into Standard English. The fourth participant would explain to the child that this is how we speak to each other, but when we write, we need to use proper grammar and punctuation rules. She would then help the student read through the story and edit it for punctuation. The next participant states that they would correct the story in Standard English. She would also correct the student’s English on a regular basis and model proper use of Standard English in her classroom. The next urban teacher would first explain to the student that there is nothing wrong with using African American English outside of school, but that in order to succeed in school, certain rules must be followed. He would have the student rewrite the story in Standard English to assess the real level of their understanding. The next urban teacher explains that they would

limit the “casual” speech to the dialogue not the description of the setting. She also states that knowing the correct use of the subject-verb agreement and English language is essential. She would also ensure that the use of “casual” writing and formal writing was consistent throughout the story because it is important to know the difference between the two. The next urban teacher would talk with the student about how they should interact and write in school versus how they should interact and speak outside of school. He states, “Just like there are clothes that we wear, songs that we listen to, even words that we say, outside of school, the way we communicate and write in school is different than the ways we communicate outside of school.” The last participant states that she would discuss with the student that there is a time and place to talk in this way and then would give examples. She would then edit the passage together using the rules of Standard English.

### **Urban School Student Survey**

Seven 7<sup>th</sup> grade students at the urban school answered a five question survey. Question one asked students to agree or disagree with the statement: “My school values and celebrates my culture.” Four students said they disagree with this statement and three students said they agree with this statement. Question two asked students to agree or disagree with the statement: “My school lets me express myself and speak in a way that makes me comfortable.” All seven students said they disagree with this statement. For question three, students had to explain what occurs if students do not speak proper English in school. Six students chose choice “b” which says, “I am corrected by the teacher telling me I am not speaking the right way.” One student chose “a” which says, “I am corrected by the teacher modeling Standard English.”

Question three continues by asking students the following: “How does it make you feel when the way you speak is corrected by the teacher?” Student one explains she doesn’t like it

when the teachers correct the way she speaks although she knows they are only trying to help her. Student two explains that it makes him feel like they are helping him but are “commanding him to do it or else.” Student three states it makes him feel bad because this is the way he speaks. Student four states, “I personally don’t like to be corrected all the time because that’s just me. However, every single time I make a mistake in my wording here goes a teacher correcting me and I don’t like that.” Student five discusses that when she is corrected it makes her feel like she is not smart enough. She says that when she speaks in class and is corrected, she thought she was right, but is always corrected. Student six says that being corrected makes her feel embarrassed because she should know how to talk and use proper English but does not all the time. Student seven says that being corrected makes him feel “irate” because it causes him to feel that the teachers think they know more than him.

Question four asks, “Do you believe your behaviors are ever misinterpreted in school by teachers?” Student one explains that she does feel like her behavior is misinterpreted a lot in school. She says that sometimes when she does something, the teachers don’t think it’s a good thing and yell at her. Student two says he does feel like his behaviors are misinterpreted in school because some teachers do not understand some of his actions. Student three says he believes his behaviors are misinterpreted because when he tries to tell someone how he feels, he is just told to stop talking and to be on task in class. Student four explains her behavior is misinterpreted because sometimes the way she sits or talks seems like she has a problem or attitude but she does not. Student five thinks her behaviors are not misinterpreted in school. Student six believes her behaviors are misinterpreted because sometimes she talks loudly and gets yelled at but that is just how she speaks with her friends. Student seven states he thinks his

behaviors are misinterpreted because he tries to behave nicely but some teachers think he is misbehaving.

Question five asks students to choose a subject that they are struggling with the most. Student one chose writing class because it is hard to transfer her thoughts to paper. Student two states that he struggles with writing because how he speaks does not match all the rules they learn about. Student three struggles with reading and writing because he does not understand the lessons fully. Student four struggles with writing the most because she cannot remember all the grammar rules they learn about. She gets frustrated when her work is always corrected but she thinks it is right. Student five says she struggles in reading because she is not confident when she has to read out loud. She finds the stories hard to follow. Student six says reading, writing, and math are difficult because the pace is too fast. Student seven struggles with reading because he cannot interpret the stories well and writing short responses is hard for him.

### **Discussion**

The data for questions four and five, which related to schools being culturally responsive displays that the majority of the urban school teachers do not think their school is culturally responsive. These teachers work in the urban schools which contain almost all minority students. If the school is not being culturally responsive, the behaviors and academic work of the minority students may be misinterpreted each day. If the school is not understanding of their culture and instead is simply trying to make these students fit the “norm,” then any student unable to fit the “norm” may be in danger of being classified for special education. The school may not be examining the student’s culture close enough and simply see the student as “struggling.” Instead, school administration should be examining their staff and teaching practices to ensure that collectively, they are addressing the needs of the minority students, not just using practices that help students fit the “norm.”

One urban teacher explained that there are learning styles specific to African American children that are not utilized at the school and teachers are all but completely discouraged from using them. If the school is teaching in a way that is not beneficial to the student, then little progress can be made, and more misinterpretations will occur since students may not understand the material. Another teacher at the urban school feels as though the way they expect their students to act does not respect their culture. Behavior plays an important role in a child's academics and if the student is expected to act in a way that does not match who he or she is, or his or her culture, then of course it will seem as though the student has a "behavior problem." These behavior problems may turn into a teacher referring the student to special education, when the real problem is the school personnel not understanding the culture of the child.

The majority of the suburban teachers believe that their school is culturally responsive. This is interesting because these suburban schools have almost all white students in them so there is not a great amount of cultural diversity. These teachers may think their school is culturally responsive because they are meeting the needs of all of the white students in their school. One suburban teacher explains that the similar backgrounds of the school staff, which is white, makes it difficult to bring a truly different perspective to the table when trying to honor students' home cultures. This is an example of a culture barrier between the students and teacher that I argue is contributing to the problem of overrepresentation of minorities in special education. If most of the teachers in this suburban school are white and most of the students are white, when a student from another culture enters the classroom, the teacher may not be well equipped to meet the needs of that child, since they lack cultural awareness. Another suburban teacher explains that only select teachers and the ESOL teacher incorporate cultural diversity into lessons and the classroom. This teacher is clearly more aware of this cultural issue

compared to the other teachers at the same school who say their school is very culturally responsive. The other teachers mention ‘Unity night’ and teaching about different cultures in social studies. While these practices are beneficial, I believe there is far more to being culturally responsive.

The majority of suburban teachers indicated that their classroom is culturally responsive for question six. One suburban teacher rated her classroom a two and explained that they, “Keep things American, holidays, etc.” It would be interesting to see if minority students were present in her classroom. If they were, then I do not believe she is able to meet their needs if she is keeping everything “American.” She may have underlying prejudices that she needs to acknowledge so that in the future she is ready to meet the needs of a minority student. This is another example of the cultural barriers between the student and teacher that could be contributing to the overrepresentation of minorities in special education problem.

The majority of the urban teachers indicated that their classroom is culturally responsive in question six. Since most indicated that the school is not culturally responsive, it is good to see that teachers are trying strategies on their own to meet the needs of their students the best they can. One teacher explains she tries to see things through her students’ “lens” and adapt as necessary. I believe this is very important for teachers to do. If the teachers truly understand their students, who they are and how they learn best, then the success will become more likely. Some teachers from the urban school admitted that they think their classrooms and instruction have areas where they can improve. By making this statement, it displays that they are willing to learn more about meeting the needs of minority students. It will be up to the school to make this possible by providing proper training for teachers to work with minority students.

More urban and suburban teachers disagreed with the statement that African American English is a language. I believe they disagree because they are unaware of what African American English actually is. The urban teachers work with the African American students each day and hear them speak this. The teachers stated that they see this type of speaking as “casual” which means they might not understand that it could be an actual language. One teacher indicated that it is “lazy talk” which displays a prejudice that needs to be acknowledged. The African American students may continue to speak in this way since this is what they use at home. If a teacher does not know about this language, then they will simply think the child does not understand the rules of Standard English, which may lead to a referral to special education. The teachers at the suburban school probably do not have a great amount of experience with African American English since the majority of their students are white. One suburban teacher received a work sample from an African American student and explained that what she read “didn’t make sense” since it was in African American English. This cultural barrier between the teacher and student is more evidence that this is the main reason for overrepresentation of minorities in special education.

The majority of urban school teachers indicated that they agree that Standard English should only be allowed in school while the majority of the suburban school teachers indicated that they disagree with this statement. I believe this difference stems from the difference in location and pressures that different schools face each day. The urban schools have almost all minority students who may not be speaking Standard English. The teachers have a more difficult task of almost having to teach some of these students a different language, Standard English. The urban teachers indicated that they know that students need to know Standard English in order to be successful, since college and job applications, future interviews, and further

education will require this skill. This is most likely the reason for why they believe only Standard English should be spoken in schools. The suburban schools do not deal with these same pressures. Their students come into school knowing Standard English, for the most part. They are more open to “free expression” because the teachers do not have to focus on teaching their students a whole other language each day.

Most of the teachers from the suburban school indicated that they do not feel well equipped to teach students who consistently use African American English on a daily basis. The majority of the urban teachers do feel well equipped to teach these students, though. This, again, stems from the differences in experiences with minority students. The urban teachers hear this language being used each day. They have more experience with hearing it and may have more knowledge on some of the rules and patterns. The suburban school teachers who do not teach many minority students will not have experience with hearing this so they will not be ready to teach a student who uses African American English frequently. This is alarming since there may be a few minority students in the suburban classrooms. They will not be receiving the proper help in order to be successful. If the teacher does not have experience with African American English, then they could also simply think the child does not understand what is being taught in class. This could also lead to the special education referral when in reality; it is just the unawareness of the teacher that is leading to the problem.

The responses for question 13 varied which could have occurred for many reasons. Five urban teachers agreed that African American students receive office referral more often while four urban teachers disagreed with the statement. One reason for this is because the urban teachers work in a school where almost all students are African American or minority students, so it is hard to respond to this question. Other reasons could include the fact that some of the



teachers, who agreed with this statement, have more background information on this topic. One teacher stated that statistics prove this statement, which means he has done research or read articles on this topic, so he is more aware of the issue. Some of the other urban teachers stated they have seen it firsthand which might mean they have had other experiences outside of the urban school that they are in currently. The African American teacher that answered this question explained that because of personal experience, she knows that the African American students will not be given the benefit of the doubt compared to a white student because of individual prejudices. This demonstrates further how the cultural barriers between the teacher and student could cause this growing issue of overrepresentation of minorities in special education.

The majority of the suburban teachers disagreed with the statement. One teacher indicated that in 20 years, she has not seen this occur in schools. On the other hand, another teacher at this same school, says she has seen it first hand at their school. This further proves that some teachers are completely unaware of cultural issues in the school. Another teacher discusses how she disagrees with the statement but because she has only taught students who are white. This teacher may not be prepared to teach a minority student since she will be unaware of certain behaviors that the student may display.

The last question on the survey had teachers edit a work sample from a student. The majority of the urban teachers would edit the work so that it fits the expectations of Standard English. I believe this occurred for the same reason as why most of the urban teachers wanted students to only speak Standard English in school. They know that they must prepare their students for state tests and their futures and Standard English is how that will be accomplished. Many teachers stated that they would explain to the student that the “casual” way of writing and

speaking is for outside of school. They wanted to still ensure that the students know they value and respect their way of speaking, but simply need them to write in Standard English to prepare for the future. One urban teacher's explanation was that what the child wrote was "wrong." This is alarming because if he simply sees it as wrong, he could be the teacher that refers the student to special education. The teacher may not understand that the child continues to write like this because of his cultural background.

The suburban teachers explained that they would allow the African American English to stay in the dialogue section of the work sample as long as quotation marks were added. They would correct the rest to follow Standard English rules. Some of the suburban school teachers said they would focus on spelling and conduct a mini lesson on possessives. The errors in the excerpt stem from the rules from African American English. The absence of plural and possessive -s is one of the features of African American English (Redd & Schuster Webb, 2005). If the teacher is unaware of this common feature and continues to see it in the child's writing along with other errors, they may assume there is a deficit in the student's skills, and refer him or her to special education.

### **Conclusion**

Cultural barriers between students and teachers in schools need to be eliminated in order to decrease the amount of special education referrals that minorities face. Professional development for teachers for working with diverse students needs to be provided in every school. The professional development should include information on African American English so that all teachers feel well equipped to teach students who use this on a regular basis. The suburban school teachers seem to be prepared to teach students who come from different cultures since the majority of their students are white. With the populations in schools becoming more and more

diverse, all teachers need to be familiar with differences in speech and cultural behaviors of each student. After hearing such alarming responses from the students in the urban schools, it is clear that a change needs to take place so that these students feel comfortable and appreciated in their school. Teachers need to be educated on African American English in all schools. How teachers talk to students and correct any “errors” the students are making when they write or speak needs to improve.

Next steps that can be completed in this study could involve the implementation of professional development on teaching diverse students in each school at least once a month. As teachers become more culturally aware throughout these trainings, surveys could be redistributed to the teachers to determine if they believe their school has improved. Students could also complete the survey again to see if changes have been made. The amount of office referrals and special education referrals for minority students in each school should also be tracked to determine if these have decreased because of the increase in awareness of school personnel. By helping schools and teachers become more culturally responsive, they will be able to better meet the needs of their diverse students, causing the misinterpretations of diverse students to decrease and fewer students will be referred to special education.

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## Appendix A

## Teacher Survey Questions

1. Please indicate the type of school in which you are employed.

- a. suburban middle school
- b. urban middle school

2. Sex

- a. male
- b. female

3. Race

- a. Caucasian
- b. African American
- c. Hispanic
- d. Asian
- e. other

4. To what extent do you believe **your school** is culturally responsive?

1-5 scale:

- 1 being not culturally responsive
- 5 being very culturally responsive

5. Please explain one (or more) reasons for why you chose your answer above.

6. To what extent do you believe **your teaching and classroom** are culturally responsive?

1-5 scale:

1 being not culturally responsive

5 being very culturally responsive

7. Please explain one (or more) reasons for why you chose your answer above.

8. African American English is a language with rules for grammar and pronunciations.

a. I agree with this statement

b. I disagree with this statement

9. Please explain one (or more) reasons for why you chose your answer above.

10. Students should only be allowed to use Standard English in school.

1-5 agree or disagree scale

11. Please explain one (or more) reasons for why you chose your answer above.

12. I feel well equipped to teach students who consistently use African American English on a daily basis.

1-5 scale

1 - I do not feel well equipped to teach these students

5- I feel very well equipped to teach these students

13. "African-American students receive office referrals and harsh punishments at significantly higher rates than European-American students" (Monroe, 2006).

a. I agree with this statement

b. I disagree with this statement

14. Please explain one (or more) reasons for why you chose your answer above.

15. Below is an excerpt from a story a student wrote in your class.

Two boy be walkin to Jamal house with they basketball to shoot hoops. Can't no body beat us says one boy. We gon win says the other.

Explain how you would edit this story and how you would communicate with the student their errors.



## Appendix B

## Student Survey Question

1. My school values and celebrates my **culture**.

a. I agree with this statement

b. I disagree with this statement

2. My school lets me express myself and speak in a way that makes me comfortable.

a. I agree with this statement

b. I disagree with this statement

3. If I do not use proper English in school, I am:

a. corrected by the teacher modeling standard English

b. corrected by the teacher telling me I am not speaking the right way

c. I am not corrected when I speak

How does it make you feel when the way you speak is corrected by the teacher?

4. Do you believe your behaviors are ever **misinterpreted** in school by teachers? Please explain your answer.

5. Which **subject** do you struggle with the most at school? Why?