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Overrepresentation of Minority Students Enrolled In Special Education

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Overrepresentation of Minority Students Enrolled In Special Education

Abstract

As studied in recent years, there is a growing number of minority students who are enrolled in special education around the country. In many schools, the percentage of minority students in special education compared to the total number of minority students is surprisingly high. The purpose of this study was to determine if this was true for schools in the Rochester, New York region. As a teacher, I wanted to learn more about why the high percentage of minority students in special education existed so that I can better serve the students that I work with. If we know why this happens, we could potentially prevent and/or create a more effective learning environment for these students. In order to study this trend, I collected information about special education programs in different elementary schools around the Rochester, NY area. Since students are most often labeled with having a disability in elementary school, I chose to focus my research on data collected from elementary schools. I interviewed school administrators and professionals to discuss their special education programs. Finally, to add to my research, I went to a summer school program that was aimed at students with disabilities and/or students who receive Academic Intervention Support (AIS) during their regular school year.

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Introduction

Schools today are held accountable for a wide range of learners and their various needs. However, a reoccurring trend throughout the United States is a strong overrepresentation of minorities in special education programs. If the goal of our education system is to reach every student, then why does it appear as though minority students are at a disadvantage?

Many schools across the country report a high percentage of minority students who require special education services. Many researchers have their own opinions as to why this happens. Some blame a child's background saying that a child coming from a low-income home will be further behind in their education. However, would this be the case if the child was Caucasian? Others blame unfair testing that was created only for a specific type of child. Students coming from different backgrounds may not know how to approach the test or how to answer the questions. The person administering the test could also play a role. There is a potential for that person to have a bias against the students race. There are so many factors that go into a student being labeled with a disability that it is hard to pinpoint a specific reason why this continues to happen. Are minority children really in need to special education or are they being mislabeled and placed in special education for other reasons?

As a special education teacher, I was interested in understanding this trend and why it exists. I chose to do my research at the elementary level because that is when most students are labeled with a disability. I also work in an elementary school, so I thought it would be interesting to see how other schools operate.

The Overrepresentation of Minority Students in Special Education

In today's special education programs across the country, minorities make up an alarming percentage of the total students who receive special education services. It is a common theme for school districts across the country to have a very high percentage of minority students enrolled in special education programs. As this trend continues, educators, administrators, and district officials should be concerned. Either minority students are in fact trailing behind other students, or they are being mislabeled. Case studies have suggested that many minority students are being mislabeled and placed into special education programs unnecessarily. Many case studies have been carried out in an effort to determine different reasons why this disproportionality exists.

The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) was created to be sure that all students with disabilities are receiving a free and appropriate education, individualized education programs, and education in the least restrictive environment. The act was designed for all students to receive equal treatment in the educational setting, however "Since the beginning of special education, students of color and those from impoverished setting have been the primary consumers of special education services." (Harry & Anderson, 1994, p.206)

History

Disproportionality is assumed to be a symptom of a larger inequality in a racially stratified society (Artiles, 2008, p.6). Throughout United States history, minorities have struggled to gain equality. Some researchers attribute this ongoing inequality to the overrepresentation of minorities in special education because, "Traditionally, the social construction of race and disability has presented images of deficiency and genetic

inferiority” (Block, Balcazar, & Keys, 2002, p.35).

In his study, Artiles suggests that, “the disproportionate representation of minority students in special education is problematic in part because the assumptions about difference that underlie this debate reify long-standing oppressive perceptions and practices that affect these students” (2008, p5). Overrepresentation of minorities in special education is suggested to be a result of a racist society. According to this theory, until racism ends completely, there is always going to be a risk of a minority student being inappropriately labeled by a white evaluator.

For over forty years, educators and professionals have watched the number of minority students in special education continue to increase. The growing trend has caused much debate over the process involved in labeling a student with a disability.

Data

Across the United States, minorities make up a large percentage of students in special education. This dilemma includes the overrepresentation of minority students in high incidence disability categories. It also includes an under-representation of minorities in gifted and talented programs (Artiles, 2008, p.4).

In a study conducted in twelve elementary schools, Beth Harry and Janette Klinger (2007) focused on minority students in special education. The school populations represented a range of races, income, and rates of special education enrollment. Throughout their study, Harry and Klinger observed several conditions that may have hindered the labeling process. They found that there was a lack of adequate classroom instruction before the student was brought to the Committee for Special Education (CSE) (2007, p. 16). This means that teachers weren’t even attempting to modify their lesson to

teach to the child, but rather they were looking for a “quick fix” to help a child who may be struggling. Unfortunately, this is a common theme that can be observed in schools throughout the county.

In their study, Harry and Klingler (2007) also found that there were many inconsistencies in policy implementation (2007, p.16). Administrators and teachers were inconsistent in their approach to special education programs. This resulted in different students receiving services that were not equal. While unlike students are going to require different services, the implementation of those services should be uniform to ensure fairness.

Perhaps the most enlightening fact that was suggested by their study was that “students in poor neighborhoods were at risk of receiving poor schooling, which increased their risk of failing and of being placed in special education” (Harry & Klingler, 2007, p.16). This cycle sets up the student for failure. Since they are not properly educated they are seen as falling behind their peers and referred for special education. This discovery suggests that there is a strong need for evaluators to observe the teacher just as much as they observe the student. Rather than judge the student, look at other reasons why the student may be struggling in school.

Another study conducted by Julie Bethel, Roberta Garrison-Mogren, and Marsha Brauen (2007) found similar results. In a study of elementary schools in three different states, black students were labeled as having Mental Retardation almost three times more than students from other races. Their study found that in three states, the risk ratios for black students being labeled as having mental retardation was 3.02, 2.55, and 1.95. This is drastically higher than white students in the same states whose risk ratios were found to

be at 0.43, 0.41, and 0.70 (Bethel, Bollmer & Garrison-Mogren, 2007, p.188). This data clearly shows a disproportionality between white and minority students and their participation in special education.

Socio-economic Status

Students who come from literacy-rich homes are often a step ahead of their peers when it comes to reading and writing ability. Studies have shown that most students coming from these types of environments do very well in school. Artiles suggests that racial status and poverty are strongly connected. In their study, Deleire and Kalil focused on minority students from low-income families and their success in school. They studied middle school student from various family backgrounds and incomes. They found that the “developmental outcomes of low-income African American middle school students who lived in multigenerational families were akin to or better than the outcomes of their counterparts living in two parent households.” This study shows that there is a correlation between a student’s background and their success in school.

As far as students living in poverty there is not a lot of convincing evidence that they cannot succeed in general education. Research suggests that “poverty makes a weak and inconsistent contribution to the prediction of disproportionality across a number of disability categories” (Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Simmons, Feggins-Azziz & Chung, 2005, p.130). A longitudinal study showed students from low income housing achieving at a rate that was equal to their middle class peers.

Behavior

Some researchers have pointed to behavior issues as a reason for students being mislabeled with a disability. Students act out for various reasons including need for

attention, work avoidance, and/or the existence of peer issues. In some cases, these behavior concerns can be interpreted as academic problems. Students who struggle socially may not be able to perform in the classroom up to the same standards as their peers. When teachers refer these students to CSE, they may be diagnosed with a disability, when in fact they have behavior issues rather than academic ones.

Evaluator Bias

Studies have suggested that minority students are more likely to be found in special education categories where the evaluator takes a subjective view. This raises the question of how fair and accurate the evaluation process is. (Sideridis, Antoniou, Padeliadu, 2008).

In the process of diagnosing a disability, a student will undergo a variety of tests. These include observations, IQ tests, and other intelligence indicators. Some case studies have suggested a possible test bias throughout this process. The general IQ tests are “tests of general achievement, reflecting broad, culturally rooted ways of thinking and problem solving” (Donovan & Cross, 2002, p.284). As suggested by Beth Harry and Janette Klingler (2007) in their article “Discarding the Deficit Model,” it is not surprising that students without this “broad knowledge” will not do well on the IQ tests, simply because they lack the basic skill set to complete the test. “If we measure intelligence this way, then groups with inadequate exposure to the skills and knowledge required to do well on these tests will score lower than their mainstream counterparts” (Harry & Klingler, 2007, p.18).

In addition to the test itself, there may also be a bias with the evaluator giving the test. It is virtually impossible for a person to not have some sort of pre conceived idea of

the student they are going to be testing. Whether based on color, performance in school, or family life, the person giving the test is very likely to have an idea about the student before they even administer the test. Those prejudices can alter the outcome of the tests. Along with raw scores, test administrators will keep anecdotal notes. Those notes might change if the evaluator has a strong feeling, positive or negative, about the student they are testing. (Sideridis, Antoniou & Padeliadu, 2008)

As stated in his article, “The Next Generation of Disproportionality Research,” Alfredo Artiles (2008) explains that, “The examiners assumptions about how a child’s second language might mediate performance are not reported. Similarly, how a history of racial tensions in a community might shape the interactions between white examiners and Latino or African American children during the testing are not considered or addressed in the assessment results” (Artiles, 2008, p.5). This shows that there are various factors that should be considered during testing. These other factors including a child’s community, family life, or personal feelings towards certain races are not always taken into consideration when interpreting test results.

Achievement Gap

These different theories raise the question of what we can do for these students to end their overrepresentation in special education. In order to close the growing achievement gap, the educators need to examine the high percentage of minorities enrolled in special education. There is no definite cause of the achievement gap within schools, but there are many cultural, genetic and structural factors that have contributed to it. Some researchers suggest that academic achievement is tied to race and socioeconomic status. (Erikson, 2001).

What Can We Do?

Minority student disproportionate representation in special education has been debated and increasingly studied in the United States for the past 40 years. While it is known that this problem exists in the education systems nationwide, there is not a quick fix to turn the problem around. Researchers, teachers, and administrators struggle to pinpoint an exact cause and rectify the problem of minority overrepresentation in special education.

Some researchers look to high school graduation rates as a way of measuring student success (Conderman & Katsiyannis, 2002). For years, high school graduation has been a key indicator in educational achievement, especially for students with special needs. The success stories for students with disabilities, however, are few and far between. In 1998, only 22.5% of students with disabilities graduated with a standard diploma and 16% of students with disabilities dropped out all together. (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). In the United States, students who do not graduate high school have fewer opportunities for employment later in life. With a high correlation between high school drop out rate and unemployment rate, it is important for this issue of minority overrepresentation to be evaluated. Because high school success is so crucial for success, “it is critical that students with disabilities...are afforded greater access to the general education curriculum and high qualified teachers prepared to address their academic, social, and personal development” (Conderman & Katsiyannis, 2002). Students with disabilities should have access to the same curriculum as their non-disabled peers and given the supports needed to succeed. Altering their academic path can hinder their future.

Transition services help a child with a disability move from grade to grade, school to school, and eventually from high school to a “real world” setting. These services are provided to give students with disabilities the same opportunities as their non-disabled peers. Transition services play a major role in special education programs. “The lack of transition services is particularly acute in urban and rural settings where issues such as teacher shortages and limited resources and supports contribute to the differential placement of students with disabilities and the quality of programming providing in these settings” (Sheehey & Black, 2003). In their article, Sheehey and Black suggest that more work needs to be done in the area of transition services in order to provide more comprehensive and complete special education programs.

Under IDEA, schools are required to provide “high quality teachers” in addition to other services to their students with disabilities. General and special education teachers play major roles in providing instruction to students with disabilities. According to research conducted through various case studies, “teacher quality and student outcomes are inextricably linked (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 1999). Teachers not only need the academic background and certification to be a teacher, but they should also receive training on how to teach students from different cultures and ability areas. “Highly qualified” needs to encompass a wide range of ability and compassion, not just a certificate stating that someone is a teacher. The United States Department of Education has projected that by 2009, 40% of students and only 12% of the teaching force will be from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (United States Department of Education, 2001a).

Methodology

In order to learn more about minorities in special education programs, I started by looking at special education in different elementary schools around the Rochester, New York area. I went to four different elementary schools that allowed me to visit and observe students in their special education placements. The settings ranged from self-contained classrooms with students who had very severe mental and physical disabilities to general education classrooms that included students with learning disabilities.

In all four schools, I observed the types of students who were receiving special education services and what their disabilities were. For many students, I was able to determine their disability based on my knowledge of the different characteristics of disabilities. For some students, I spoke with their teacher about what disability they had. I also gathered information about the total student population of each school compared to the special education population.

When I entered the schools I explained that I was a graduate student doing observations of special education programs. Unless someone specifically asked me, I did not share my hypothesis that minority students are overrepresented in special education programs. I did not want the teachers I talked to alter or feel like they needed to defend their enrollment numbers. All four schools I visited allowed me to observe students in different classroom settings. I was also able to find figures of how many students total were in their school as well as how many students were in special education through internet resources. I visited the New York State education website at www.nysed.gov to view the schools' report cards from previous years. The report cards showed information regarding special education services provided by each school district. I was also able to find how many students were receiving special education services in the different school

districts I was studying.

I also sent a survey to various administrators throughout Monroe County. To do this, I simply went to school websites and found emails for principals, teachers, school psychologists, etc. I sent emails explaining my research and asked them to answer a few questions about their own special education programs at their schools. After the surveys were complete, they were emailed back to me. I made sure to send the survey to schools in the city of Rochester as well as its surrounding suburbs. I wanted to see if the location of the school in an urban or rural area made a difference in the answers I received. I also explained that their answers were confidential and all names and schools would be eliminated from my research.

Findings and Discussion

When I visited the four schools, I had similar experiences in all of them. I was allowed to briefly observe in a few special education rooms. I also spoke with either a principal or teacher to get the information regarding student enrollment. Table II (see Appendix B) shows the number of students in the four schools. The name of each school has been changed to a color in order to maintain confidentiality of the staff and students.

Between the four schools the data was consistent in terms of the number of students from each race. They all had a majority of Caucasian students with 63%- 90% of their students identifying as Caucasian. One result that I expected and observed was that the Red School, which was in an urban area, 63% of their population was Caucasian. At the Yellow School, which was located in a middle class suburban area, 90% of their students were Caucasian. I anticipated this would be the case based on my own experiences in various urban and suburban schools. I learned through this research that

Rochester schools have a very small American Indian population. It would be interesting to find out if that is consistent with other parts of New York State as well as other parts of the country.

Total Student Population in Four Elementary Schools

	Green School	Blue School	Red School	Yellow School
Total Student Pop.	376	759	455	569
White/Caucasian	305 (81%)	575 (76%)	288 (63%)	510 (90%)
African American	39 (10%)	41 (5%)	71 (16%)	25 (4%)
Am. Indian	5 (1%)	1 (0.01 %)	3 (.01%)	0 (0%)
Hispanic	26 (7%)	32 (4%)	19 (4%)	12 (2%)
Asian	1 (0.03%)	110 (14%)	74 (16%)	22 (4%)

In an effort to learn more from these numbers, I focused in on one school in particular. I used the number I obtained from the Red School to test my hypothesis that minority students are greatly overrepresented. The table below shows the total number so student enrolled in special education at the Red School. The total is then broken down by students' race.

Total	52 (100%)	
Causasian	24 (46%)	
African American	18 (35%)	
Hispanic	9 (17%)	
Asain	1 (2%)	
Am. Indian	0	

One would assume that if race played no role in labeling these students, the percentage from each race would look similar to the percentages of total students in the building. For example, if there were a low percentage of African American students then it would make sense to have a low percentage of African American students in their special education program. Looking at these numbers raises some interesting points. One thing that jumped out at me right away was how there were about the same number of African American and Asian students at the Red School, however looking at their special education population, there are far more African American students receiving services than Asian. Although my hypothesis was that minority students are overrepresented it doesn't stand true with these findings. African American students were clearly overrepresented; however Asian students, who are also minorities, were underrepresented. Perhaps my hypothesis should have been more specific and stated that African American students in particular, are overrepresented.

After looking at my data from the different schools, I wondered what the same type of data would look like in a summer school setting. The summer school program where I observed was designed specifically for students who receive special education or AIS services during the regular school year. The following table shows the demographics of three different classrooms that were part of this summer school program. Each of the classrooms was a general education setting that included students with special needs.

Summer School Spec. Ed. Enrollment			
	room 1	room 2	room 3
total sp. ed	6	3	1
Caucasian	2	2	0
African Ame	2	1	1
Hispanic	1	0	0
Asian	1	0	0

Looking at the table, it is clear to see that this was a much smaller scale. I was interested to see if the fewer number of students would have an impact on the data. In room number one, there were six students receiving special education services. Only two of those students were Caucasian. The other four students identify as African American, Hispanic, or Asian. Classroom three only had one student out of the total population receiving special education and the student happened to be African American.

Even though this data was gathered on a much smaller scale, it is consistent with what I found at the four elementary schools. The students came from a number of different schools to be a part of this program, so I would have liked to know more about their previous school(s).

Although this data does support my hypothesis, I felt as though the scale was too small to gather concrete ideas and findings. There was no substantial evidence that the minority students were actually represented unfairly.

As an extra bit of research, I sent out surveys to twenty-five various school administrators, teachers, and professionals around the Rochester area. I was not surprised to only receive back eight completed surveys. From my own experience as a teacher, I understand that people are busy and don't have the free time to complete a survey. I was disappointed that the surveys I did receive back did not really give me any strong support. There was no survey that really supported or went against my hypothesis. It seemed that people are very hesitant to share their thoughts about special education and minority students as these subjects can be very controversial in schools today.

One survey however stood out to me above the rest. It came from an elementary

school principal. One of the questions on my survey asked, “Is there a chance of possibly mis-labeling students?” In his answer he mentioned how important it is for teachers to “think like a parent.” When testing and labeling students with disabilities he encourages everyone involved to think like that student’s parents. A parent would never place their child somewhere that they shouldn’t be and that shouldn’t happen in special education either. While this is a nice way to think, he also mentioned that realistically, there are students who seem to fall through the cracks and are placed in settings where they don’t belong.

Overall, the surveys were not particularly helpful in trying to understand why minority students are so commonly overrepresented in special education programs. Many of the participants took it as an opportunity to share their own opinions in a few brief sentences. Their answers were very vague, which could also be a sign that I wasn’t asking the right questions. The vague answers also lead me to believe that they just weren’t comfortable talking about minority students in their own special education programs where they work.

Next Steps

After reading multiple journal articles on the topic, I was eager to get into schools and see if minority students are overrepresented in special education programs. I found that this trend does continue into some schools in the Rochester area. Going into schools and getting the number of minority students was fairly easy as the information was readily available. The difficult part was looking beyond the numbers. I was more interested in learning about why the student was classified with a disability. The next steps to my research would be to take a more in depth look at the numbers.

More in depth research could take place by looking at minority students and how they came into special education. Family background, socioeconomic status, or education levels of parents can all play a role in a student's education. Looking at these aspects of life for the students who are in special education may shine a light on what exactly causes them to require special education. It is possible that there is a common thread causing these minority students to be mislabeled.

The next step to my research would be looking at schools nationwide. It would be interesting to see if the same trends I found in Rochester, New York also take place in other regions. Does location play a role in all of this? Are urban schools more likely to mislabel students than rural schools?

Another area that could be further researched is the testing process. The tests themselves could be looked at to determine the effectiveness. Some researchers suggest that the tests are unfair. Some students may not be able to accurately complete the tests because of their own background or ethnicities. It is also possibly that the person administering the test has a bias against a particular race and unfairly judges the student while testing.

Overall, there are many ways in which this research can be continued. There are so many factors that play a role in the testing, labeling, and schooling of a child with special needs. All of these factors could be researched individually to pinpoint one specific area that is causing the overrepresentation of minority students. Without knowing these things about the students I was observing, it was difficult to come to a conclusion about why they may be misplaced in a special education program.

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Appendix A

Table I. Interview Questions

The following questions were sent as a survey to 25 various school administrators, teachers, and professionals throughout the Monroe County area. Their answers have been omitted to maintain confidentiality. Each participant was given the same questions and was asked to answer to the best of their knowledge.

1. What is your position within your school district? Daily routine, duties, etc.
2. What special education programs do you have available to students and families?
3. What steps are involved in the process of labeling a student with a disability?
4. There is a high number of minority students in special education programs nationwide. Does this exist at your school? If it does, can you explain why?
5. Is there a chance of possibly mis-labeling students?

Appendix B

Table II. Student demographics from various elementary schools in Monroe County

	Green School	Blue School	Red School	Yellow School
Total Student Pop.	376	759	455	569
White/Caucasian	305	575	288	510
African American	39	41	71	25
Am. Indian	5	1	3	0
Hispanic	26	32	19	12
Asian	1	110	74	22

Appendix C

Table III. Enrollment of Students with Disabilities at Red School

Caucasian	51%
African American	24%
Hispanic	23%
Asian	1%
Am. Indian	1%

Appendix D

Table IV. 2009 Summer School Enrollment of Student With Disabilities in Three Special Education Classrooms

Summer School Spec. Ed. Enrollment			
	room 1	room 2	room 3
total sp. ed	6	3	1
Caucasian	2	2	0
African Ame	2	1	1
Hispanic	1	0	0
Asian	1	0	0