Factors Impacting the Special Education Classification of Students Comparing Urban to Rural School Districts

Jessica Derwin
St. John Fisher College

How has open access to Fisher Digital Publications benefited you?
Follow this and additional works at: http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/education_ETD_masters

Part of the Education Commons

Recommended Citation

Please note that the Recommended Citation provides general citation information and may not be appropriate for your discipline. To receive help in creating a citation based on your discipline, please visit http://libguides.sjfc.edu/citations.

This document is posted at http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/education_ETD_masters/60 and is brought to you for free and open access by Fisher Digital Publications at St. John Fisher College. For more information, please contact fisherpub@sjfc.edu.
Factors Impacting the Special Education Classification of Students Comparing Urban to Rural School Districts

Abstract
With the understanding that special education classification rates vary depending on whether or not a district is located in an urban versus a suburban or rural district, the following action research study focused on the factors that are considered when special education committees make decisions to classify students. The goal of this study was to determine if there were other factors besides student ability that play into the classification of students for special education services. The focus of many research studies has determined race, socioeconomic status, family makeup, and access to early educational opportunities to be factors affecting the classification of students in urban districts. This study looked to see if similar trends existed in rural school districts as well, in order to determine if there were other biases that play into the classification of student into special education programs. To implement my research, I formulated the following questions: • Does a correlation exist between where a school district is and the reasons for special education classifications? • Does a correlation exist between a student's race and their likelihood of being classified as having a special need or disability? • Does a correlation exist between a student's socioeconomic status and their likelihood to be classified as having a special need or disability? • Does a correlation exist between the available resources to school districts and the rate of special education classification?

Document Type
Thesis

Degree Name
MS in Special Education

Department
Education

First Supervisor
Susan M. Schultz

Subject Categories
Education

This thesis is available at Fisher Digital Publications: http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/education_ETD_masters/60
Factors Impacting the Special Education Classification of Students
Comparing Urban to Rural School Districts

By

Jessica Derwin

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
M.S. Special Education

Supervised by
Dr. Susan M. Schultz

School of Education
St. John Fisher College

April 28, 2010
Factors Impacting Special Education Classification

Abstract
With the understanding that special education classification rates vary depending on whether or not a district is located in an urban versus a suburban or rural district, the following action research study focused on the factors that are considered when special education committees make decisions to classify students.

The goal of this study was to determine if there were other factors besides student ability that play into the classification of students for special education services. The focus of many research studies has determined race, socio-economic status, family make-up, and access to early educational opportunities to be factors affecting the classification of students in urban districts. This study looked to see if similar trends existed in rural school districts as well, in order to determine if there were other biases that play into the classification of student into special education programs.

To implement my research, I formulated the following questions:

- Does a correlation exist between where a school district is and the reasons for special education classifications?
- Does a correlation exist between a student’s race and their likelihood of being classified as having a special need or disability?
- Does a correlation exist between a student’s socioeconomic status and their likelihood to be classified as having a special need or disability?
- Does a correlation exist between the available resources to school districts and the rate of special education classification?
Factors Impacting Special Education Classification

Table of Contents
Disproportionality of Special Education Students in Urban Schools .................. 3

Review of Literature
The Effect of Racism on Special Education Classification ....................... 4
The Effect of Poverty on Special Education Classification ..................... 10
The Effect of an Inequity of Resources on
  Special Education Classification ............................................ 13

Method .................................................................................. 16
Data Results ............................................................................... 17
Discussion ................................................................................ 25

Conclusion: Determining What Causes Disproportionality in
  Special Education Classification ............................................. 29

References .............................................................................. 31
Factors Impacting Special Education Classification

**Disproportionality of Special Education Students in Urban Schools**

When examining the classification of special education students and the growth of special education programs in school, questions of equity and available resources to provide for these students become more apparent. This is especially critical when analyzing the prevalence and success of special education programs in urban versus suburban and rural school districts. Research has often pointed to the disproportionality of special education students in urban districts compared to suburban and rural districts. More often then not, students attending urban schools have a higher chance of becoming classified as having a disability then students in suburban and rural districts. This has led many educators to search for the reasoning behind the disproportionality of special education classifications in urban over suburban or rural school settings. Many attribute the disparity in classifications to be due to inherent racial biases, arguing that special education is serving the function of segregation. Others point to the high prevalence of poverty in urban districts and the far-reaching implications poverty and similar factors can have on the educational development of children. Bouck (2005) found that the location of a school district (rural, suburban, and urban) has a direct impact on both the level of curriculum being presented, the learning environment in which students have access to, available funding, and access to technology (p. 18). This has lead many to argue that the disparity of special education classifications in urban school districts over suburban or rural school districts is related more directly to the differences in equity and therefore education of students in these different types of districts.
Review of Literature
The Effect of Racism on Special Education Classification
Some scholars argue that the main reason for disproportionality of special education classification in urban schools compared to suburban or rural schools is in large part due to racial bias. When examining the racial make-up of urban districts compared to suburban or rural districts, urban districts are more likely to have a higher population of minority students (Blanchett, Mumford, and Beachum, 2005). Blanchett (2006) points out that while African American students only make up 14.8% of the population, they account for 20% of the special education population. Blanchett (2006), further points out that black students are 2.41 times more likely than white students to be classified as having mental retardation, 1.13 times more likely to be classified as having a learning disability, and 1.68 times more likely to be classified as having an emotional or behavioral disorder. These numbers become even more dramatic in the context of an urban school district. As pointed out by Bollmer, Bethel, Garrison – Mogren, and Brauen (2007), overrepresentation of minority students in special education suggest that assessments are “not applied equally to all racial and ethnic groups” (p. 186). This disproportionality becomes even further troubling when it is considered, that once labeled “special ed,” African American students make educational gains significantly below their white counterpart (Blanchett, 2006).

Although sheer numbers help to paint a picture of racial disproportionality in urban schools, it is important to consider how disproportionate numbers are created based upon race. Valenzuela, Copeland, Huaqing Qi, and Park (2006) all attribute high numbers of minority students in special education to “stigmatizing labels” and “restricted access to general education settings.” Therefore, as a result of these negative labels and settings, minority students in urban settings are “overrepresented” in intellectual and learning
Factors Impacting Special Education Classification

disabled, as well as emotional disturbance labels (Valenzuela, et al., 2006). Blanchett (2006) points to similar reasons behind high numbers of minority students classified as “special ed” in urban schools. Disproportionate numbers are due to the “subjective referral and eligibility determination process,” in which all students are compared to “white” standards or “norms” (p. 27). As a result, everything different or “deviant” is considered not normal (Blanchett, 2006). O’Conner and Fernandez (2006), agree with Blanchett’s (2006) findings by claiming that “blackness is relegated to deviance, and whiteness is normalized” (p. 9). Cullinan and Kauffman (2005) cite two explanations for the overrepresentation of emotional disturbance classification among black students: racial biases by the instructor and “differences by race in students’ maladaptive behavior and emotions” (p. 394). Cullinan and Kauffman (2005) further point out that as a result, teachers may be “less tolerant of deviant of aversive emotions and behaviors exhibited by a black student, [and] overstate the severity of them” (p. 398). Therefore, racial biases can permeate not only the special education assessment process, but referral procedures as well.

These racial biases become even more troubling especially in the context of proficiency tests, which many African American and minority students have trouble passing because they are written for the general “white” population (Blanchett, 2006). Interestingly enough, racial biases in the special education process can swing in the opposite direction. As Bollmer, et al. (2007) point out there is an overwhelming “underrepresentation of Asian/Pacific Islander students” in special education programs. In the same respect that African Americans are viewed as deviant, often Asians are stereotyped as having high intellectual capabilities, and therefore meet the “white norms.” These tests expose the cultural bias that still exists in the United States, as they expose what our society deems normal and healthy as
Factors Impacting Special Education Classification

being very similar to what it means to be white. Yet, even more troubling they expose the subjectivity of these tests in determining if something is “wrong” with a child, rather than evenly applying the same standards to all children regardless of race and culture. Through the analysis of discipline referrals written by teachers in urban districts, O’Conner, et al, (2006) found that black students were referred for less serious offenses than white students and were described in a more subjective language, based a perceived threat by a teacher. By allowing subjectivity to permeate the referral process, a growing racial disparity in special education has begun to emerge.

Racial bias in the referral process, however, is not the only issue researchers attribute to the disproportionality of minority students in special education. O’Conner et al. (2006) further explain the racially biased referral process as being problematic to the process and success of special education when over – classified “minority youth disproportionately attend underfunded, under – resourced schools” (p. 9). Valenzuela, et al. (2006) concur with these findings by explaining that African – Americans were “more likely than white students to attend schools lacking critical components of educational opportunity,” including such services as “counseling and therapy,” as well as “ inclusive placements and vocational classes.” Therefore, not only do minority students who attend urban school settings have a higher likelihood of being classified, but also they are less likely to receive the appropriate services to help them overcome their perceived disabilities. According to Valenzuela, et al. (2006), students who are apart of the minority population as also more likely to be “segregated” to receive their educational services that their “dominant culture peers.” As a result, these students are made to feel even more like they don’t meet the “norm” by separating them from the rest.
Factors Impacting Special Education Classification

Perhaps more troubling to understand than the numerical disproportionate representation of minority students in special education are the reasons why minority students are more likely to be classified. Valenzuela, et al. (2006) attributed the disproportionality of minority students in special education to “racism” and “white privilege.” It is through both of these societal structures, Valenzuela, et al. (2006) argued, “individual, structural, political, economic, and social forces served to discriminated against and disadvantage people of color” (p. 438). Blanchett, et al (2005) draw comparisons between the segregation of African – Americans before and after the Supreme Court ruling Brown v. Board of Education, suggesting that the disproportionality of African Americans in special education is a new form of “re – segregation.” According to Blanchett, et al (2005), urban schools fail because of the continuing and persistent history of segregation, which still exists today, but operates under the banner of special education.

Rather than blatantly segregating minority students based on the color of their skin, as in the past, minority students are now being compared to their white peers and expected to meet the same standards. Any differences in achievement between “white norms” and minority attainment, is seen not as a cultural difference to be embraced, but rather as a weakness to be separated. This is due largely to the fact that many “people of color” are located in urban schools that through “failing institutions, housing patterns, white flight, and lack of political and social capital are products of design” (Blanchett, et al, 2005, p. 70). Blanchett, et al. (2005) presents counter arguments against those who point the finger at failing schools as placing emphasis on “individual schools or students as the primary problem,” because it ignores the ongoing “context for a failing urban school system” (p. 74). Rather than accepting the notion that minority students are failing to meet white standards
Factors Impacting Special Education Classification

because of discrimination, many people look to other issues to place the blame. As a result of this ignorance, “people of color are the ones who bear the brunt of the criticism and suffer the most in these situations” (Blanchett, et al., 2005, p 74). Therefore, as Blanchett et al. (2005) concludes, the “struggles over special education and achievement in urban school districts are only symptoms of a larger problem within urban districts; the unfinished dream of integration” (p. 75). Cartledge and Kournea (2008) concur with these findings by calling on schools to meet the needs of culturally diverse students by recognizing the “corresponding need to increase [the] understanding of the integral relationship between culture and social behavior” (pg 352). Therefore it is increasing important to understand that as our country and subsequently school districts become more culturally and linguistically diverse, that educators look to view the behaviors and achievement of students in an objective cultural context (Cartledge and Kournea, 2008, pg 351 – 352). Minority students cannot truly be integrated and succeed in a school system that continually places value in “white norms” while ignoring the cultural differences that separates us intellectually.

Using segregation and the failure of integration as explanations of disproportionality of minority students in special education is only a portion of the equation. Biases in the referral and assessment process can also be used to explain the disproportionality. As Gravois and Rosenfield (2006) point out, “cultural variables,” biases in assessments,” and effectiveness of services prior to special education classification” can all lead to inappropriate labeling of students (p. 44). Gravois and Rosenfield (2006) base their claims on extensive research performed on the effectiveness of special education classification when the process was “systematic [and] collaborative” (pg 48). Their findings suggested that inappropriate referrals, biased assessments, and ineffectual instruction have a direct
Factors Impacting Special Education Classification

correlation in “disproportionate placement of minority students in special education” (Gravois and Rosenfield, 2006, pp. 48 – 50). Expecting minority students to achieve under biased assessments is like comparing apples to oranges, resulting in minority students not meeting the standards every time.

Many researchers focus on the motivations and biases behind the assessment, which all students are expected to perform under, again sighting racism as an underlying current. Blanchett, et al. (2005) concludes that education in the United States follows the model of capitalism, “creating a class system that includes docile content workers and a small group of elite leaders” (p. 73). Simmons, Ritter, Kohler, Henderson, and Wu (2006), agree with the notion that placing “middle – class values and expectations on another group and another culture,” can be dangerous and detrimental to the assessment of the special needs of students (p. 1435). Skiba, et al (2006), suggest that one of the main reasons for the dominance of “middle – class” culture, is that a majority of teachers are both white and from the middle class, resulting in the varying cultural needs not being met. As a result a school system is created where those in power determine what the norms will be and what behavior is considered valuable. Those who are different are not asked to share their value, but rather to conform to the established norms. This points to the argument that disproportionality of special education classifications in urban districts is primarily due to the fact that there are a higher percentage of African Americans in urban school districts. Therefore, classifications are based more on racial bias and stereotypes instead of actual disability. These biases, as a result stem from a history of persisting racism and segregation that has taken on a new form in the 21st century.
The Effect of Poverty on Special Education Classification

While many studies point to the disproportionality of special education classifications in urban school settings as a result of racism and segregation, other scholars have focused on the impact of poverty. Often in urban settings students come from homes of lower socio-economic status or from single parent homes, where the parent or siblings has more than one job. O’Conner and Fernandez (2006) refer to the “Theory of Compromised Human Development” which explains how both race and poverty are combining factors in high representation of minority students in special education. According to the “Theory of Compromised Human Development,” poverty is explained as having a negative impact on the educational development of children, especially minority students because minority students are more likely to be poor. As a result, being poor increase one’s “exposure to risk factors,” and therefore obstructs students from being intellectually prepared for school when they begin (O’Conner and Fernandez, 2006). However, accepting this theory on its own can paint a convoluted picture. As O’Conner and Fernandez (2006) explain, the “Theory of Compromised Human Development” reduces the issue just to economic terms; essentially ignoring an impact culture may have on the situation. This creates a situation once again where white, middle – class children are placed as the norm against which all other children, both minority and poor are compared to, creating a hierarchy of educational and societal value (O’Conner and Fernandez, 2006).

The findings of Skiba, Poloni – Staudinger, Simons, Feggins – Azziz, and Chung (2005) also concur with the “Theory of Compromised Human Development,” in many ways, as they point to the combination of both poverty and race as the catalyst for special education referrals in the urban school setting. Skiba, et al (2005), suggest that high rates of special education students in urban schools are “linked less to race than to educational deficits
Factors Impacting Special Education Classification

among poor students of color that are created by socioeconomic disadvantage” (p. 130). The reason for this prevalence in minority students becoming classified as having special needs, especially in urban settings, is that minority students are more likely to be exposed to poverty. This, in turn, places them developmentally behind other students in school, causing them perform at lower levels in comparison to their peers, thus becoming apart of the special education system. (Skiba, et al, 2005) Skiba, et al (2005), draw comparisons in poverty rates between whites, which compromise 14.4% of people living in poverty to African – Americans and Latinos, which compromise 30.4% and 29.2% respectively (p. 132). These numbers in of themselves can be telling of the problem of poverty that exists in the United States, but when used in the context of education, may not fully explain the disproportionality of special education classifications in urban schools, but may “magnify already existing” differences (Skiba, et al, 2005, p. 141).

A large majority of students, who attend urban schools, also come from poverty settings. As Kutash and Duchnowski (2004) point out, “28% of children with disabilities live in families whose total annual income is below the federal poverty level” (p. 237). However, according to Gottlieb, Alter, Gottlieb, and Wishner (1994), the majority of students who are labeled as having a learning disability in urban special education settings are not truly “disabled” but rather are “suffering the many ravages of poverty.” These effects range in every aspect of family life from “health productivity, physical environment, emotional well - being, and family interaction” (Kutash and Duchnowski, 2004, p. 237). Students who come from homes living at or below the poverty line have less access to both physical and mental health care, a safe, consistent living environment that promotes early learning, emotional stability, and positive, consistent interaction with parents or siblings. As a result the early
Factors Impacting Special Education Classification

educational development of these students suffers, as families focus more on the stress of providing an income. Some other factors that stem from poverty that can contribute to low student achievement is the prevalence of single family homes, parents who are rarely present, family mobility from different homes or districts, and households that have languages other than English (Gottlieb, et. al, 1994). Skiba, et al (2006), also discuss some of the influences that exist outside of the home in poorer, urban areas, such as regular occurrences of violence and the acceptance of “high transience.” Skiba, et al (2006), suggest that these factors can lead to the development of aggressive “survival skills,” that conflict with skills deemed appropriate for the schools settings, and are often “artifacts of poverty” that make “both academic and social continuity [in the school setting] more difficult” (p. 1432).

Despite the fact that poverty can be a powerful contributing factor in high incidences of special education classification in urban schools, some scholars do not feel that is the sole contributor. Blanchett, et. al, (2005) attributes the combination to racism and poverty in high incidences of special education classifications in urban school settings. Blanchett, et. al (2005) argue that that students in urban schools, who are predominately “students of color” and live in poverty, do not have the same access to quality education are their peers in middle and upper class, suburban schools. This is a result of both educational and economic segregation that still exists in our society, but now has infiltrated the system of special education (Blanchett, et al, 2005). Consequently, a system is created where minority students come from an environment of poverty. As a result, they have less access to educational opportunity prior to their education, leading them to be classified in special education.
The Effect of an Inequity of Resources on Special Education Classification

The impacts of poverty and racial biases are important factors to consider when taking into account the reasons behind the disproportionality of special education classifications in urban settings compared to suburban or rural settings. However, the inequity in resources in urban school settings also contributes to the ineffective classification and implementation of special education students. Valenzuela, et al (2006), points to unqualified “leadership and instruction of inner – city schools” as contributing factors to the “disproportionate placement of culturally and linguistically diverse children into special education” (p. 427). As a result students who come to school unprepared either due to poverty or disability are not being taught or classified by the most qualified and trained professionals in the field. Therefore, instead of helping students to move forward in their educational career, students with perceived or actual disabilities fall further behind their peers in districts with high quality educators. Funding for resources and teachers are other major issues that urban schools face that can also lead to inaccurate classification or ineffectual programs for special education students. As Skiba, et al (2006) point out, available school resources in urban schools are constantly shrinking, resulting in less social workers, teachers aides, special program assistants, or other paraprofessionals, who are specialized in delivering the services required for students with special needs to learn and function in the school setting. A lack of resources can translate into many different detrimental effects for students with special needs, let alone all students. Not only does a lack of resources mean fewer professionals to help carry out effective instruction, but as Skiba, et al (2006) point out it also makes it difficult for teachers to “effectively manage disruptive behavior,” which can often drive teachers to make special education referrals (p. 1437). Therefore, lack of resources and teaching personnel can inadvertently translate into
Factors Impacting Special Education Classification

inappropriate referrals and as Skiba, et al (2006) suggest as “disparity in the process and objectivity” of the referral process (p. 1437).

Another important impact of dwindling resources in urban schools is the high ratio of students to teachers. Gottlieb, et al (1994) discusses the present make–up classrooms in urban schools where class size ranges from twenty-five students and upwards. This is due primarily to lack of funding for appropriate personnel. As a result, teachers are unable to help “low – ability and low achieving students” (Gottlieb, et al., 1994). Skiba, et al (2006) agree with these findings on the importance of class size to student success, by suggesting the positive impact lower student to teacher ratios could have on the ability of teachers to attend to the needs of students with special needs (p. 1435). However, the reality of the situation is that often many of the students who need support services or more individualized instruction the most, are often the ones found in urban school settings in classrooms of twenty-five students or more. This leaves many students who are lacking in basic skills to fall further behind and to be more likely to be classified in the special education setting. This perpetuates the problem of students being classified as having a learning disability, when in fact they are just not receiving the resources needed to help them become successful learners (Gottlieb et al., 1994). However, it is also important to consider that in urban districts where resources and available personnel are decreasing in size, classroom sizes are increasing leading to more referrals. This is mainly due to the fact that teachers are unequipped to deal with all of the needs of various learners; therefore special education can often be the only available avenue in helping students to become successful. Skiba, et al (2006) point out that in a district deprived of other options, special education become the saving grace in
Factors Impacting Special Education Classification

providing resources to students in need (p. 1441). Unfortunately this leads to a situation in which inappropriate resources equal inappropriate referrals.

Lack of funding and resources in urban school settings creates a situation where students who come from households and communities that do not have access to early childhood education start school already behind. When these already “weak” students attend schools with “weak” supports, a system is created where students fall so far behind they are deemed as having a disability. The reality is, according to Bollmer, et al, (2007), is that students are not “receiving the services they need to help them achieve positive educational outcomes” (p. 186). As Reschly (2009) suggests, “much is known about prevention [of learning difficulties] that typically is not implemented,” such as early education programs like pre – school, Head Start, and Success for All programs. However, in urban settings often times the access to these programs is limited. In a study performed by Kutash and Duchnowski (2004), often times students with disabilities or special needs demonstrated signs early on, but due to lack of resources in schools or early educational opportunities, their needs went unmet until much later. On average, students who exhibited emotional disturbance symptoms at age 5 did not receive services until at least age 7 (Kutash and Duchnowski, 2004). The same study also pointed out that seventy – two percent of students who had mental health – related issues needed to receive their services at school, yet the school was not properly equipped to carry – out those services and help those children (Kutash and Duchnoski, 2004). Unfortunately this is often the case in urban districts where teachers are overwhelmed with students and case – loads that they miss the warning signs of learning difficulties until much later, or they are not properly trained to carry – out all of the services that students need in order to be successful.
Factors Impacting Special Education Classification

The issue of having enough resources to make accurate classifications and program decisions often plagues urban districts as well. According to Bollmer et al (2007), the “Disabilities Education Improvement Act” of 2004 mandated that data be collected and analyzed to decide if disproportionality in special education classifications is occurring. However, what the act does not provide districts, especially under-funded and under-resourced districts are how to improve the data (Bollmer, et al, 2007). As a result schools are not able to effectively improve. The same can be said with under-resourced schools and their capacity to effectively identify students with disabilities. As Gottlieb et al (1994) points out, the process for classifying students with learning disabilities lack a “stringent, numerically, quantifiable definition.” As a result there is “wide latitude in deciding who is learning disabled,” thus opening the floodgates for subjective assessment and bias (Gottlieb et al, 1994, p. 459). This becomes even more problematic when considering that those educators who may be making classification decisions in urban settings lack in training, experience, or resources.

Method

The following study was based on information that I received through the distribution of surveys to educators in a rural school district. Responses from teachers and administrators were compared to findings in urban school districts based on the literature review to determine if there was a disparity in opinion about the factors impacting the classification of special education students in regard to race, socioeconomic status, and available resources for children in urban and rural districts.

Thirteen educators, ranging from grades 7 – 12, in a rural school district, located in southwestern upstate New York were surveyed. Of these educators, seven were content area schoolteachers, four were special education teachers, and two were
Factors Impacting Special Education Classification

administrators. Surveys were distributed via Internet and were completed anonymously. The school district in which the survey was distributed is located in a small rural community that is predominately comprised of families from middle and lower socioeconomic backgrounds. The community itself is very small, however, the entire district spans many miles outside of the district, and accommodates many of the rural settings families live within. The district has a total enrollment between 1000 and 1100 students. Within the district there are approximately 34% of students who live in poverty. Of this 34% approximately 20 – 30% of families living within the district receive public assistance through the many services, and approximately 19 – 20% of students enrolled in the school district receive free or reduced lunches. The school district is comprised of approximately 1100 students, 98% of which are white.

**Data Results**

The teacher responses from the surveys were analyzed and compared with the data in the literature to determine if the findings were consistent. Responses also were compared between urban and rural districts to see if the results were consistent.

Educators surveyed were asked to rate a list of factors as being very important, somewhat important, or not important in the role of classifying students for special education services. As seen in Table 1, the factors included the following: race, socioeconomic background, gender, number of parents during childhood, access to early educational opportunity, ability of student, and educational resources available at school for students. Ten educators deemed the race of the student to not be important in the classification of a student for special education services, while three educators viewed race as being somewhat important. Three educators viewed socioeconomic status as not being important to the classification of a student for special education services, while six
Factors Impacting Special Education Classification

Educators felt that it was somewhat important, and four educators felt that it was very important. In considering the importance of the number of parents who are actively involved in raising a student, seven educators felt that it was not important in the classification of students for special education services, while five educators felt it was somewhat important and one saw it as very important. When asked to rate the importance of access to early educational opportunities for students, one educator viewed it as being unimportant in the classification of students for special education services, while five educators viewed it as being somewhat important, and seven felt it was very important. When asked to rate the role the ability of the student plays in the classification of students for special education services, twelve educators polled viewed this factor as being very important, while one educator viewed it as being somewhat important. Seven educators viewed gender as not being important to the classification of students for special education services. However, six educators felt that gender was somewhat important. Lastly when educators were asked to rate the role of educational resources available to students at school in the special education classification process, one educator viewed this factor as being unimportant, while five viewed it as being somewhat important, and seven educators viewed it as being very important. These results can be seen in Table 1.
Factors Impacting Special Education Classification

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors Impacting the Classification of Students for Special Education Services</th>
<th>Educators Who Viewed Factor as Very Important</th>
<th>Educators Who Viewed Factor as Somewhat Important</th>
<th>Educators Who Viewed Factor as Not Important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Race of Student</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socioeconomic Background of Student</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Parents Raising Student</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to Early Educational Opportunities for Student</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability of Student</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender of Student</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Resources Available at School of Student</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Educators surveyed were asked to rank race, gender, socioeconomic background, location of school district (ie rural, suburban, urban), access to early education opportunities, and ability of student in order of importance of impact in the classification of students for special education services. Eight educators ranked ability as being the most important factor in classifying students for special education services, while two educators viewed socioeconomic background, one educator viewed race, and one educator viewed access to early educational opportunities as being the most important factor impacting the classification of students for special education services. When asked to rank the factor that has the second most important impact on the classification of students for special education services, nine educators ranked access to early education
Factors Impacting Special Education Classification

opportunities, two ranked the location of the school district, and one ranked socioeconomic background. In ranking the third factor impacting the classification of students for special education services, six educators found socioeconomic background, three educators found location of school district, one found access to early education opportunities, one found ability, and one found gender to be the third most important factor. When ranking the fourth important factor of six factors impacting the classification of students for special education services, five educators reported the location of school district. Three educators reported socioeconomic background, two educators reported ability, one educator reported race, and one educator reported gender as being the fourth factor of six in importance of impacting the classification of students for special education services.

Eight educators ranked gender as being the fifth factor of six in importance of impact on special education classifications, while two educators viewed race, one educator viewed location of school district, and one educator viewed access to early educational opportunities as being the fifth of six factors impacting the classification of students for special education services. Lastly, eight educators viewed race as being the least important factor impacting the special education classification process, while two educators ranked gender, one educator ranked location of school, and one ranked ability as being the least importance factor.

As seen in Table 2, which denotes the mode of answers for each of the following factors as ranked from one to six, one being the most important and six being the least, eight educators rank ability as being the most important factor impacting the
Factors Impacting Special Education Classification

classification of students for special education services, while eight educators rank race as being the least important factor.

Table 2

| Ranking of Factors Impacting the Classification of Students for Special Education Services |
| Mode of Responses |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the second portion of the survey, educators were asked to respond to the following questions about factors impacting the classification of students for special education services:

1) What role do you think race has on a student’s likelihood to be classified as needing special education services?

2) What role do you think gender has on a student’s likelihood to be classified as needing special education services?

3) What role do you think the socioeconomic background of a student has on a student’s likelihood to be classified as needing special education services?

4) What role do you think the location of a school district (i.e. rural, suburban, urban) has on a student’s likelihood to be classified as needing special education services?
Factors Impacting Special Education Classification

5) What role do you think access to early educational opportunities has on a student’s likelihood to be classified as needing special education services?

6) What role do you think the ability of the student has on a student’s likelihood to be classified as needing special education services?

8 of 11 educators responded to the role of race on the special education classification process as having very little impact. However, although 8 educators indicated that they felt race had little direct impact on the special education classification process, 3 educators alluded to the role race can have on socioeconomic status and location in relationship to educational opportunities. Other educators also indicated that while they personally did not feel race should play a role in classifying students for special education services, that in some instances it did. Lastly, some educators responded to the question of the relationship between race and special education classification, as being difficult to measure because they did not work with a racially diverse population.

In response to the issue of the role gender has on a student’s likelihood to be classified as needing special education services, many educators initially asserted that there was no correlation. 6 of 11 educators polled, stressed that they felt gender should have no impact on a student’s classification. However, upon further explanation 5 educators felt that despite their personal convictions about gender not having an impact on special education classifications, that in their experiences boys were more likely to be classified as requiring more special education services then boys.

8 of 11 educators indicated in their responses to the relationship between socioeconomic background and classification of students for special education services as
Factors Impacting Special Education Classification

being positive. Responses emphasized that in many of their experiences, the lower the socioeconomic background of a student, the more likely the student was to be classified because students who lived in poorer homes were also synonymous with lower value on education and were also not exposed to higher vocabulary and educational resources. 5 educators indicated that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds had difficulties in terms of education, because their parents tended to not be as educated in comparison to those parents of higher socioeconomic standing. These same educators referred to a link between low socioeconomic status in homes and value on education, which in turn led to delays in education and the development of learning disabilities.

When distinguishing between the location of a school district and the likelihood of a student being classified as requiring special education services, the 11 educators who commented had varying responses. 7 educators indicated a correlation between high rates of special education classifications and rural and urban school districts. The reasons, as denoted in many responses, attributed high special education classifications to family issues, low socioeconomic status, low parental education levels, low value of education, which were felt to be prevalent in mostly rural and urban settings. Of these 7 educators, 4 responses implied that special education classifications were dependent on available monetary resources in a school district, indicating that rural and urban school districts were often in positions of not having enough resources to meet their students’ needs, whereas suburban districts often had more resources to implement early intervention.

In considering the role access to early educational opportunities has on the likelihood of a student being classified as requiring special education services, all
Factors Impacting Special Education Classification

responses were unanimous in that the earlier educational opportunities were provided to students, the less likely that they will become classified. 8 of 11 educators reasoned that early education could give students a head start in the learning process, yet could also help in early identification and intervention for learning disabilities. 4 of these educators elaborated further in their responses by pointing out that early identification and intervention could help students adapt and overcome any learning difficulties they might have, leading to higher success rates and declassification in the long – run.

Lastly, educators responded to the association between student ability and the impact it has on a student being classified as requiring special education services. All 11 educators indicated that ability was an important determining factor in classifying students. All responses pointed out that focusing on ability was the most objective and authentic way of assessing students to determine their needs. These 11 educators pointed to testing and data driven by student ability as being the most important and reliable factor driving special education classifications.

Lastly, educators surveyed were asked to identify if they felt satisfied, neutral, or dissatisfied with the identification of students in need of special services, implementation of special education services, student access to early education opportunities, and availability of resources for implementation of special education services in their school district. As seen in Table 3, five of thirteen educators reported being dissatisfied with the identification of students for special education. While four educators reported being neutral and four reported being satisfied. Several expanded upon their responses by explaining that they were frustrated with the length of time it took to complete the classification process, as well as the inconsistencies of family and administrative support.
Factors Impacting Special Education Classification

during the process. Seven of thirteen educators, as seen in Table 3, indicated that they were satisfied with the implementation of special education services, while four educators reported feeling neutral, and two reported feeling dissatisfied. In regards to student access to early educational opportunities, nine educators reported feeling neutral about the process, while four reported feeling satisfied. Finally, in regards to the availability of resources for implementation of special education services, six educators reported feeling satisfied, while four reported feeling neutral, and three felt dissatisfied. This information can be seen in Table 3. When asked to elaborate on their responses, two educators indicated feeling that when a lack of resources presented itself, it was difficult to know where to go to obtain assistance.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Dissatisfied</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Satisfied</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identification of</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students in Need of</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Services</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implementation of</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Services</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Access to</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Educational</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Availability of</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources for</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implementation of</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Discussion**

Based on the data from my survey, it became clear that there were many factors that contributed to the classification of students for special education in rural districts. Although a majority of educators who participated in the survey seemed to unanimously
Factors Impacting Special Education Classification

agree that ability was the major contributing factor in determining whether or not a student required special education services, many were willing to concede that there were also other contributing factors such as socioeconomic background, gender, role of parents, access to early educational opportunity, and educational resources available at school district.

When asked to consider the relationship between race and its impact on special education classification, many educators initially indicated that they did not feel that race should play a role in the classification process. However, upon further elaboration many responses seemed to allude to that while they did not feel that race should play a role in special education classification, it invariably did. Responses pointed to the idea that race was often linked to low socioeconomic status, which invariably had an effect on special education classification. Similarly to the responses on the correlation between race and special education classification, many educators who were polled initially asserted that although they were personally did not feel that gender should be associated with special education classification, it ultimately was. Most educators reported a trend of having more boys than girls as being classified for special education services. This data indicated that in a comparison between rural and urban school district settings, educators in both settings seem to acknowledge that factors other than ability, such as race and gender have an impact on the classification of students for special education. Although, the data in this present situation doesn’t point to how race and gender impacted the classification process, it does suggest that educators do feel it has an impact in someway.

In analyzing the data on the relationship between the socioeconomic background of students and their likelihood to be classified for special education services, many
Factors Impacting Special Education Classification

educators acknowledged that there was a strong link. Many responses made the
collection between low socioeconomic status and low education of parents. This
collection was similar to research presented from previous studies in urban districts.
Although there was no data from the present survey to suggest that this was true, many
educators surveyed relied on this explanation as proof of a link between low
socioeconomic status and special education classifications. Responses from educators
further indicated that as a result of low socioeconomic status and thus low parental
education background, education was ultimately not valued in these same households,
thus fostering a ground for poor performing students and ultimately learning disabilities.
This same assumption of the link between low socioeconomic status and special
education classifications in rural districts was consistent with findings in urban settings.

In evaluating the data, when asked to explain if there was a correlation between
location of school district and the probability of a student being classified as needing
special education services, most responses indicated a relationship. Most educators
indicated that in urban and rural school districts there was a link between fewer resources
to help students who were in need of special services and location of school district.
Some educators indicated that in rural and urban districts, resources were limited,
resulting in a limited inability to provide appropriate services to students who were
classified as needing special education services, or who would benefit from being
classified. Many responses also indicated that suburban districts were able to better
provide resource to their students, such as in classifying them earlier, or in providing
adequate educational resources to help students with learning needs. These findings vary
slightly from research done in urban school settings, which suggested that students were
Factors Impacting Special Education Classification

more likely to be classified as requiring special education services because of lack of early education resources.

These findings correlate with the data presented on the relationship between early education opportunities and the likelihood of a student in need of special education services. All respondents from the survey unanimously agreed that access to early educational opportunities had a positive impact on the education of a student. Educators indicated that as students were exposed earlier to economic interventions they were also either less likely to require special education services, or they were more likely to be identified earlier and receive special education services. These findings correlated with the responses on the relationship between location of school district and special education classification from a review of the literature. Both indicated that early intervention and access to early educational opportunities were important in helping students perform well. However, both responses also indicated that rural and urban school districts often did not have the financial resources to provide these early educational opportunities to students. These findings were consistent with information found in literature on the special education classification of students from urban school settings.

Lastly, the data from the survey distributed based on the impact ability had on the classification of students for special education services suggested that most educators felt ability played the most important role. Responses indicated that a majority of students were classified as requiring special education services because at some point their ability indicated need. However, it can be said that although all educators polled, unanimously agreed that ability played the most important factor in the special education classification
Factors Impacting Special Education Classification

process, they also indicated that other factors played a role in the process. These findings
were consistent with findings in urban school districts.

**Conclusion: Determining What Causes Disproportionality in Special Education Classification**

In determining the reasons for a disproportionality of special education classifications
in urban school settings versus suburban and rural settings, it is important to determine a
number of factors. Some researchers point to the prevalence of racism and cultural bias that
still persists in the educational system today. These scholars suggest that special education in
many ways is a new form of segregation aimed at keeping minority students separated from
the rest of society and subsequently as a way to limit their access to educational attainment.
Other researchers look at the far-reaching effects of poverty on the intellectual development
of young children. These scholars conclude that the impact of poverty on the family, in turn
has a negative impact of educational achievement. Students who grow – up in poorer areas
are more exposed to single – parent homes, financial stress, violence, and fewer early
instructional programs. Lastly, many researchers point to the lack of resources that have
come to be synonymous with urban schools in the United States. These scholars found that
urban schools were more likely to have fewer trained teachers and paraprofessionals, high
student to teacher ratios in classrooms, and low access to technology and other curriculum
enrichment. All three outlined causes have clear connections to high numbers of special
education students in urban school districts.

In comparing the data presented from both the survey distributed during this research
study and the data reviewed from other literature, it becomes quite clear that there are many
factors, aside from student ability, impacting the classification of students for special
education services. However, what is more important to note is that one of the causes cannot
Factors Impacting Special Education Classification

fully be explained without considering other factors. While many researchers focused on just
one aspect of the causes of disproportionality of special education in urban school districts,
the full measure of the problems cannot be explained without considering the effects of
racism, poverty, inequity of resources, location of district, and the ability of the student on
special education classifications.
Factors Impacting Special Education Classification

References


Factors Impacting Special Education Classification


