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The Disproportionality of African Americans In Special Education

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Abstract

The research study addresses the overrepresentation of African American students in special education in an urban setting. This study analyzed the reasons why African American students were overrepresented in special education from the perspective of parents/guardians who have a child classified, as well as from the perspective of teachers and administrators, who work in an urban elementary school. To gather data for this study, I interviewed seven parents/guardians, three teachers, and two administrators. Based upon a careful analysis of the interviews, it was found that parents/guardians, as well as teachers and administrators, acknowledge that African American students are more greatly represented in special education than other groups; however, parents/guardians cited different reasons for the overrepresentation than teachers and administrators. The findings of this study has implications for urban districts as it is necessary for administrators and teachers to address student needs through varying options prior to classifying students.

The Disproportionality of African Americans in Special Education

Overrepresentation of African American students in special education is not a new issue; however, due to the overwhelming number of African American students labeled with disabilities, there are questions and concerns about how this educational deficiency has gotten out of control. Blanchett (2006) notes that “disproportionality exists when students’ representation in special education programs or specific special education categories exceeds their proportional enrollment in a school’s general population” (p.24). This topic has great significance because African American children are being “placed in high-incidence special education categories of mental retardation, emotional or behavioral disorders and learning disabilities” (Blanchett, 2006, p.24).

African American students that are labeled carry the stigma imprinted by the label throughout their lives and it hinders their growth academically, socially and financially. Considering the cultural differences of African American children to their White counterparts and educators, African American students are frequently misunderstood which makes them susceptible to biases due to culture, language and socioeconomic demographics (Blanchett, 2006). According to Curtis, Miller, and Shippen (2009):

Research indicates multiple causes of this phenomenon [disproportionate number of African American students who are classified], which include poverty, teacher bias, testing bias, cultural bias, inadequate access to research-validated instruction and institutionalized racism...though the exact cause of the complex nature of overrepresentation of minorities in special education, the federal government has

mandated through IDEIA [Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act] that school districts take immediate action. (p.226)

Although districts in our country are mandated to address and eradicate this problem, very little if anything is being done. Calahan, Muller, and Shifrer (2001) agree with Curtis, Miller, and Shippen (2009) by writing:

disproportional identification with a learning disability occurs among groups that are already socially disadvantaged – racial/ethnic minorities, language minorities and students of low socioeconomic status. Disproportionality raises concerns about the validity and reliability of the label *learning disabled* and/or suggests that placement in special education may function as a tool of discrimination. (p.246)

Therefore, as stated by Calahan et al. (2001), students that are minorities tend to be classified as students with a disability which implies that their minority status is what is leading to the classification. As illustrated throughout the introduction, the overrepresentation of African American students in special education is an essential concern that the field of special education needs to analyze. Due to its significance, the purpose of this study was to analyze the reasons why African American students were classified as students with disabilities. In order to gain insight to this question, parents of African American students in an urban school district in upstate New York were interviewed. Also, teachers and administrators in this school district were also interviewed. The findings of the interviews suggest that there are multiple possible reasons for the overrepresentation of African American students in special education, and that these reasons differ among parents and school officials.

Theoretical Framework

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Critical race theory is a focus in which studies a topic or issue as it relates to race and its impact on society. Ceja and Yosso (2007) explain:

The basic CRT model consists of five elements focusing on: a) the centrality of race and racism and their intersectionality with other forms of subordination, (b) the challenge to dominant ideology (c) the commitment to social justice (d) the centrality of experiential knowledge and (e) the trans disciplinary perspective. The critical race theory framework for education is different from other CRT frameworks because it simultaneously attempts to foreground race and racism in the research as well as challenge the traditional paradigms, methods, texts, and separate discourse on race, gender and class by showing how these social constructs intersect to impact on communities of color. (p.63)

Race plays a major role in society today, as it did pre civil rights era. Though education should be equitable, there is still a divide in the quality and level of education forwarded to African America children. Looking through the lens of CRT helps clarify how race and privilege play a major part in how African American children are perceived from the moment they step into the classroom. Critical race theory introduced the role of white privilege and racism in the public school systems. Blanchett (2006) explains the role of white privilege in public education:

White privilege as it exists in American society or in the American educational system as any phenomena, whether individual (biased teacher attitudes/perceptions), structural (curricular and pedagogical practices geared towards White middle class students) political (educational policies) economic (school funding formulas that contribute to

inequity), or social (social constructions and race and disability) that serve to privilege Whites. (p.24)

Having worked in a predominantly white school district, there was evidence of white privilege in how white middle schools perceived the future of their students. Funding was granted for programs to assist with college readiness and college fairs were held quarterly starting in tenth grade. On the other hand, in the urban districts, most African American students are not exposed to the possibility of college until their senior year, and they have limited exposure to what college has to offer. The expectation level of white middle classed students to attend college is higher than that of African American students. Assessment is key when considering who is placed in special education services. If the tests have hidden biases, then the results will also be biased. In accordance, if teachers have a biased perception of knowledge, then their instruction may reflect in terms of how they teach African American children, as opposed to how they teach middle classed white children (Shippen, Curtis, & Miller, 2009).

Literature Review

The Negative Impact of Labeling: What is a Label?

Labels and classifications are the foundation of special education services and are structured with the plan to improve the skills and abilities for students with these labels. We must be mindful that the intent established by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvements Act (IDEIA) was to provide a service for a correct, evidence-based diagnosis. But what happens when the label is wrong? What happens to the child who has been mislabeled? Researchers Gold and Richards (2012) define the concept of labeling as the following:

The assignment of a descriptor to an individual based on selected behavioral and/or physical characteristics. By design, a label can serve the discriminatory purpose of distinguishing the individual from the rest of society and provide information about the individual regardless of its accuracy. Howard Becker's (1963) labeling theory asserts that labels influence the perceptions of the individual and other members of society. (p.144)

In other words, a negative label will make an individual assume the characteristics of the label and he or she will begin to exude those negative behaviors. Furthermore, there is a process that determines the label that also needs to be considered. According to Gold and Richards (2012) "the process of determining a student's eligibility to be placed into one of these categories may be divided into four major steps: (1) referral (2) assessment (3) eligibility determination and (4) placement" (p.147). Though guidelines are stipulated for the identification of relevant characteristics, all four of these determining factors are subject to biased outcomes. As posed by Artiles and Harry (2006) "... as human beings we're naturally ethnocentric. Its automatic that what I'm accustomed to... I've known, and... I value are the way I do things, and I naturally tend to judge other people by those beliefs and those standards" (p. 229). In spite of guidelines and assessment tools, labeling can be unfair and biased, which can hinder African American students from succeeding academically (Artiles & Harry, 2006; Gold & Richards, 2012; Shippen, Curtis, & Miller, 2009). Zhang and Katsiyannis (2002) also found that "more restrictive placements often result in fewer opportunities for students to access postsecondary education and in fewer employment opportunities" (p. 184). Therefore, based upon the research conducted by Zhang and Katsiyannis (2002), students who are placed in special educations settings can be more at risk for not making successful academic gains upon graduation. Hence, as implied by Artiles and Harry (2006), Gold and Richards (2012), Shippen et al. (2009), and Zhang and

Katsiyannis (2002), African American students in self-contained settings may have difficulties making strides in higher education and in the workforce.

Language and Culture: How Standard is English?

Based upon personal experiences, as well as Au (2009), the need to be understood is vital in any relationship. The student- teacher relationship is primarily based on information given by the teacher, and the student receiving, processing and storing that information to reach higher levels of learning. However, when the language spoken by the educator is different than that of the student, language instead can hinder the growth of the relationship. Consequently, African American students are often expected to learn the language of power; Standard English.

According to Au (2009) "...most teachers of those African American children who have been well-served by educational systems believe that their students' life chances will be further hampered if they do not learn Standard English" (p. 122).

Considering how language is derived from culture, many African American children struggle with both their culture and language not being understood or accepted. As posed by Artiles (2006):

The notion of history is also used to describe cultural history, which is simply put; this notion refers to the inherited values, traditions, and ways of thinking of cultural groups and societies. In the case of the United States, race, social class, language and gender have been central categories of identity. (p.228)

As alluded by Artiles (2006) and Au (2009) to deny someone's language is to deny their identity, and when African American children do not feel accepted, they tend to disconnect from the teacher, and the lesson being taught. Once disconnected, there is a lack of participation, interest

and classroom discourse. In addition, an academic disconnect will cause behavioral issues that may not have occurred if culture is a valued characteristic of a child. Researchers McDermott and Varenne (1995), as delivered through the culture as disability theoretical lens, write the following:

In explanations of school failure, this account maintains that children of minority cultural background mixed with teachers from a more dominant cultural background suffer enough miscommunication and alienation to give up on school, this despite the fact that they are at least, fully capable. (p.335)

Therefore, according to McDermott and Varenne (1995), the connection between student and teacher is imperative for the development of the learning relationship. The language-cultural gap becomes the stimulus for referrals for evaluation and most times placement in special education services.

Similarly to McDermott and Varenne (1995), Compton-Lilly (2009) write about culture.

The researchers state:

Understanding the role of culture in learning requires understanding what is actually cultural about students learning. From a cultural historical perspective, human beings interact with their words primarily through mediational means, such as cultural artifacts, tools, signs, and symbols including language. Culture is defined as our social inheritance. (p. 61)

According to Compton-Lilly (2009), a student's culture is interconnected to how he acquires knowledge from instruction. Compton-Lilly (2009) continue to write about culture and learning by writing that "....the unfortunate reality is that more often than not, despite some grass-roots efforts across local and professional communities, learning is often socially and culturally

organized to ignore the kinds of literacies students acquire and develop throughout their everyday lives” (p.65).

Teachers must be mindful of the diversity that comes with children in more ways than race. Culture and language must be a valid function of the unit and lesson planning process. Literacy is a major issue in special education and seldom are texts relatable to children of color. African American students are not engaging with the literature being taught (McDermott & Varenne, 1995). Therefore, based on McDermott and Varenne (1995), culture is what makes us who we are, and when the connections cannot be formed there is a gap in interest. This lack of engagement dilutes the critical thinking skills necessary to fully participate, thus creating the perception that they are unable to learn. Once that perception is made, the referral process begins that consequently leads to a special education label.

Socioeconomic Status: The Label That Leads to the Label

Money, power and privilege are all variables for American success. However, when it comes to education, those variables should not determine the value of who receives a quality education and who does not. There is the assumption amongst educators, counselors and administrators that children from low socioeconomic backgrounds are predestined to be deficient in academic development (O’Connor & Fernandez, 2006). Some researchers do not agree with that way of thinking and reasoning. O’Connor and Fernandez (2006) introduce the “Theory of Compromised Human Development (TCHD)” which consists of the following:

[It] offers an oversimplified conceptualization of development and consequently misspecifies that which places minority students at heightened risk for special education placement...minority students are more likely to be poor and that being poor heightens

exposure to social risks that compromise early development and increase the need for special services. High risk environments, such as living in poverty, shift the entire curve of achievement to the left, so that there is an increase in the number of children with special needs at the lower end. (p.6)

Unlike O'Connor and Fernandez (2006), Ceja and Yosso (2007) explain that through the application of the Critical Race Theory, society has placed the stereotypical restraints and limitations due to where a child may live and how much money their household acquires. The relation between critical race theory and special education, according to Ceja and Yosso (2007), is that students, who are classified with disabilities, remain in special education despite changes in their family's socioeconomic status. However, O'Connor and Fernandez (2006) articulate that "students with disabilities may be declassified when there are changes in the family's financial position. Without examining what poor children are, we lose sight of how schools systematically marginalize the developmental expressions and competencies of these children" (pp. 7-8). Where African American children live and how much money their households acquire mark them for special services that they may not need. According to the theory posed by O'Connor and Fernandez (2006), the development can be hindered by the label of "special ed" as well as the label of being poor. Both labels diminish power and place students of color at the bottom of the social and educational ladder.

Possible Reasons of Overrepresentation of Minority Students

Shippen, Curtis, and Miller (2009), as well as Zhang and Katsiyannis (2002) write about possible reasons why minority students are overrepresented in special education. Shippen et al. (2009) organized focus groups in order to illicit feedback from both general education and special education teachers, as well as counselors. The researchers found that "...general

education teachers...voiced an unawareness of the problem and a great deal of misunderstanding” (Shippen et al., 2009, p. 230). However, the researchers explain that “factors such as socioeconomic status, lack of resources, lack of parental improvement, and the changing nature of raised expectations for schools based on new legislation (NCLB) were cited [by general education teachers]” (Shippen et al., 2009, p. 231) as reasons for overrepresentation. When discussing overrepresentation with special educators, Shippen et al. (2009) found that the teachers were cognizant of this disproportionality and were concerned “...that in their system, African American children are overidentified [sic] with a label of MR [Mental Retardation]” (p. 232).

The findings of Shippen et al. (2009) correlate to those of O’Connor and Fernandez (2006) who also cite that socioeconomic factors impact overrepresentation of African American Students in special education. These researchers explain that lower socioeconomic standing causes African American students to be classified as students with disabilities (O’Connor & Fernandez, 2006; Shippen et al. 2009).

Addressing Overrepresentation of African American Students in Special Education

Zhang and Katsiyannis (2002) studied the number of students who were placed in special education throughout the United States, including the District of Columbia. The researchers found that African American students as well as American Indians and Alaskan Natives were overrepresented as being classified with Emotional Behavior Disabilities, Learning Disabilities, and Mental Retardation (Zhang & Katsyiannis, 2002). The researchers articulate that the following can be implemented so that overrepresentation is addressed:

educational agencies must engage in school wide, validated instructional and behavioral interventions that address the needs of all students, including those from culturally diverse backgrounds...moreover, educational agencies must be vigilant in ensuring a nonbiased identification and placement process through the expanded use of prereferral teams, the improvement of prereferral, multidisciplinary and placement team training. (Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002, p. 186)

Salend and Garrick-Dulhaney (2005) like Zhang and Katsiyannis (2002) also describe strategies that can be used so that African American students are not overrepresented in special education. The researchers write that “educators can help minimize the disproportionate representation of students of color in special education by delivering a wider range of effective, culturally sensitive educational services within the general education program that support student learning and family involvement” (Salend & Garrick-Dulhaney, 2005, p. 215). Salend and Garrick-Dulhaney (2005) have developed strategies to address overrepresentation. One of the strategies directly relates to the findings of Artilles and Harry (2006), Gold and Richards (2012) and Shippen, Curtis, and Miller (2009) who write about test bias. Salend and Garrick-Dulhaney (2005) recommend that to lessen test bias so that African American Students are not overrepresented is to “use classroom –based assessment alternatives to standardized testing” (p. 215). Different assessment tools, other than standardized tests, “assist educators in linking assessment and instruction and provide a more comprehensive understanding of students’ learning abilities and needs and the impact of the classroom environment on their learning” (Salend & Garrick-Dulhaney, 2005, p. 215).

Conclusion

The disproportionality of African American children in special education is a topic that seems to produce more and more attention and research, but not so many solutions. The variables of language, culture and money are considered the main catalyst for the pedagogical practices being used in classrooms today. According to Ford (2012), “it is not only crucial to know that Black students are overrepresented in special education; it is more important to know the specific categories, gender differences and income differences” (p.400). Arnold and Lassman(2004) assert that the diagnosis hold greater significance than income or gender, “the diagnosis of disability is always a complex issue. In settings other than the public school determination is multidisciplinary process in which teams of professionals work together to determine the appropriate label for the individual who is labeled” (p.4).

Method

Context

The purpose of this study is to determine the reasons for overrepresentation of African American students in special education. This study is being conducted in an urban school district in upstate New York. This particular school district was chosen because I am currently employed in the district and have observed overrepresentation of African American students in special education.

Participants

To gather data regarding the reasons for the overrepresentation of African American students in special education, I interviewed six parents/guardians, three teachers, and two administrators.

One of the students is an African American male who is in third grade. Jack is classified with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) with extreme behavioral issues and learning disabilities. He has been classified with both disabilities since kindergarten. Jack reads at a kindergarten level; however, he is very fluent in math. He is in an all-male, self-contained 8:1:2 class. He is pulled out for speech, literacy, and Resource /counseling. Jack's mom is Gwen. She is a single mother of three children. Jack is the middle child. She is very concerned about his future, due to his lack of interest in school and his explosive behavior. Gwen is active in his education, but she fears that he will never get out of special education classes.

Gary is a fifth grade African American male classified with Autism and Other Health Impairment (OHI) since pre- kindergarten. He is progressing well academically, but he does not interact well with others. Gary is very defiant at times and will go into a screaming rage if he gets too frustrated. He carries a twisted pipe cleaner for comfort. He is pulled out for Speech, Occupational Therapy and Resource. Gary's parents, Sharon and Ron, are very active in the educational process for their only son. They are aware and enforce all academic strategies for learning. On the other hand, Sharon and Ron do not encourage him to interact with others due to him becoming easily frustrated.

Jonathon is a seventh grader African American boy. He is classified with Intellectual Disability (ID). He is in an 8:1:2 self-contained special education class. Jonathon's mom, Anna,

was a teenage mom. She had Jonathon when she was fourteen years old. She has five children, and Jonathon is the oldest of five. Anna tries to participate in Jonathon's schooling, but is unable to, due to her parental obligations (she has a newborn) and to transportation concerns. Anna does not have a vehicle.

Lisa is fourth grade African American girl. She has Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) and Learning Disability (LD). Lisa is in a mainstreamed fourth grade class, and she receives pull-out services, such as speech, counseling, and occupational therapy. Lisa moved to New York from Maryland over the summer. She lives with her grandmother, Pam, step grandfather, and her aunt. Lisa is Pam's third oldest granddaughter. Pam is involved in Lisa's education. She is concerned that Lisa will not be college bound.

Derek is a fifth grade African American boy. He has Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Learning Disability (LD), and depression. Derek is in a mainstreamed class. He enjoys playing basketball, and Derek enjoys being a member on the team. Derek lives with his grandmother, Debbie, and with his mom, Sandy. Sandy was recently released from prison. Derek's dad is in prison. Debbie is a school bus driver, and she is involved in his education. Debbie attends Derek's CSE meetings, and she is concerned that Derek is not being challenged academically.

Paul is a sixth grade African American male. He was recently mainstreamed in January. Prior to January, he was in a self-contained 6:1:2 special education setting. Paul was born prematurely and had medical concerns. He attended school when he was seven years old. Prior to attending school, Paul did not receive early intervention services. He has bipolar disorder and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Paul is struggling academically. He lives with his mom, Jackie, his six siblings, and his aunt. Jackie takes care of Paul's aunt, who has a

medical condition. Jackie dropped out of high school in ninth grade, and she is not confident in her literacy abilities and feels embarrassed in the school setting. Jackie tried advocating for Paul to be mainstreamed.

Three teachers are also participating in this study. The first teacher is a secondary special education teacher who has been employed in the urban district for over 20 years. Her name is Ms. Lee. She currently co-teaches with a general education teacher. She also pushes in for literacy instruction. The second and third teachers co-teach together. Their names are Ms. Connors and Ms. Garrett. Ms. Connors is the special education teacher and Ms. Garrett is the general education teacher. Ms. Connors has been teaching in the urban school district for twelve years. Prior to coming to the urban school district, she worked in a suburban school in upstate New York. Ms. Garrett has been teaching for nine years in the urban school district. Ms. Connors and Ms. Garrett have been co-teaching for four years.

A special education coordinator and a principal are the two administrators who will be participating in this study. The special education coordinator, Ms. Miller, was a former special education teacher in an urban district in upstate New York. She is currently responsible for overseeing the progress of all special education students in the school in which she has been assigned. Ms. Miller represents the school at Committee on Special Education (CSE) meetings, and makes sure teachers are prepared for the meetings when they are required to attend. Ms. Miller has been employed in the urban school district for seventeen years, and she has worked in five different schools in the district. The principal, Ms. Taylor, was a former teacher at the school in which she now is an administrator. She has been serving in her current position for four years. She was also a former vice principal at a charter school in upstate New York.

Researcher Stance

Considering that my current position at this school is building substitute, I was an observer first. I would use spare time and lunch periods to observe classrooms and take field notes. My notes were broad at first, mostly writing about the schedule and structure of lessons. I also wrote about the classroom discourse and how effective or ineffective it was to the dynamics of the class. After a few visits, I focused on one student and would write notes about just that student. Once I gathered notes on that student, I became an interviewer. I interviewed parents, teachers, and administrators about the special education process, teaching strategies, assessments and the common core. Through these interviews, I gathered data on why African American students are overrepresented in special education. Please refer to the appendix A for the parent interview questions, to appendix B for the teacher interview questions, and to appendix C for the administrator interview questions.

Currently, I am a building substitute in an urban school in upstate New York. I am certified in Adolescent Education and English Literature. I am currently pursuing my Master's degree in Secondary Special Education.

Method

The purpose of this study is to find the reasons why there are so many African American students in special education. My research questions are: Are the students being properly classified? Are school districts using a universal method of assessment to identify classifications? Are students in special education placed there because of socioeconomic

reasons? Can children who are classified be mainstreamed with successful results? Is the special education process fair? Why are African American students overrepresented in special education?

In order to gather data for my study, I observed classrooms and interviewed parents, teachers, and administrators. By observing classes, I noticed that there are more African American students classified as students with disabilities than Latino and Caucasian students. Through interviewing my participants, I learned about the special education process and possible reasons for the overrepresentation of African American students in special education.

Informed Consent and Protecting the Rights of the Participants

The parents, teachers, and administrators were informed that their participation in this study is voluntary. I sent consent forms to the parents asking permission to interview them and to also tape record the interview. I obtained permission forms from the administrators and teachers to record and transcribe their interview responses. In addition, I used pseudonyms for all participants and district and school names were not disclosed in this study. This protects the confidentiality of the participants.

Data Collection

I collected data through the use of field notes and interviews. I took field notes during classroom observations. I interviewed parents, teachers, and administrators. While interviewing them, I recorded and transcribed the participants' responses. By doing so, I was able to listen to the interviews several times when coding my data.

Data Analysis

Upon collecting the data, I reviewed my field notes and interviews. I transcribed the interviews that I recorded, and I carefully re-listened to the interviews and re-read the

transcriptions. Then, I categorized themes that I found that were prevalent among the parent interviews and the school officials' interviews. After organizing my data into themes, I created a chart in which I recorded information from each interview that fit the corresponding themes.

Findings and Discussion

Introduction

After tape recording the interviews that I had with parents/guardians, teachers, and administrators, I carefully re-listened to the tapes and analyzed my data. Upon examining the interview responses, I found that there are several reasons why parents/guardians feel that African American students are overrepresented in special education. These reasons differ from those of teachers and administrators. Through this study, it was evident that parents/guardians have different views from teachers and administrators regarding why African American students are overrepresented. Parents and guardians believe that the reasons for overrepresentation include the initial special education assessment process, the impact of labels, lack of communication from school, reliance on medication, and difficulty with mainstreaming students. Teachers and administrators believe that African American students are overrepresented because of their socioeconomic background and lack of parent involvement.

Initial Special Education Classification Process and Assessments

Parents and guardians felt that African American students are overrepresented in special education due to the classification process and types of assessments administered. Debbie, one of the participants in the study, stated “ When I asked the teachers at the meeting to show me the tests they gave him [Debbie's grandson], they just said all the kids take the test for they level and

Derek scored low”(Debbie, personal interview, March 13, 2013). Debbie’s interview reflects that there is uncertainty regarding the types of assessments administered when students are being evaluated for special education services as well as what the scores mean. It also shows that there is a lack of thorough communication between school and home. In Debbie’s case, the teachers did not explain the scores that her grandson, Derek, received. Debbie was frustrated because she was unaware of what the assessments measured, the types of questions that were asked, and the score ranges that her grandson earned.

It has been documented that in the field of special education, school faculty and staff need to identify test bias and determine ways to assess students that truly demonstrate students’ knowledge skills and ability levels (Artiles & Harry, 2006; Gold & Richards, 2012; Shippen, Curtis, & Miller, 2009). Salend and Garrick-Dulhaney (2005) suggest that teachers use an array of assessment tools in order to prevent test bias.

When interviewing the parents and guardians of my subjects I found it disturbing that they were not aware of what assessments were administered and how the assessments determined the label. Furthermore, services were already being implemented before the parents were formally notified. Parents are the first teachers children have and know them better than anyone, therefore they should know the content of the tests their children are taking and how those tests affect their children’s’ academic process.

Labels

Parents and guardians expressed concerns about why their children and/or grandchildren were labeled (i.e. emotional disturbance, learning disability, other health impairment) and the negative connotation of these labels. Pamela (personal interview, March 7, 2013), Lisa’s grandmother, stated the following:

I hate that they labeled my baby. Girls have enough to deal with, than to have to deal with this. It seems that now that she go to counseling at the school, she act out more since she know that she supposed to. Lisa aint no dumb child and to me it seem like the label made her feel like she aint smart.

As evident in the above quote, Pamela feels that her granddaughter does not require a label and that this label has adversely impacted Lisa's self-esteem and overall progress. The same concern regarding the negative aspect of having a label was also voiced by Jackie, Paul's mother. Jackie (personal interview, February 21, 2013) explained:

I don't like the label of ADHD for Paul, but at least it's better than me not knowing that he needed help from the school. Plus Paul get a check from SSI, and that's the label they used on his paperwork. I see his report card don't have the label, so when I show it to people they don't know that Paul has a label. I just don't want him feeling stupid or nothing like that. I think they do some kids like that because I don't have a good job and we live in the hood.

According to Jackie, labels can be stigmatizing because children always carry this label with them. This causes low self-esteem, embarrassment, and a sense of not being able to achieve. Pamela and Jackie feel that by labeling children, this causes an overrepresentation of African American students in special education because the students stay in the special education system, they do not rise above the label, and their siblings may also be classified. Jackie expressed concern that since Paul is labeled, her other children will also receive a special education label. Due to this concern, Paul is starting to feel more sensitive about his label, what it means, and how it will affect his siblings. Jackie is also worried that Paul will be given more labels and that this will further affect his education and future employment.

The power of labels and their possible negative impacts have been expressed by Gold and Richards (2012) who articulated that labels can cause students who are classified with disabilities to become isolated from society and students will take on the role of that label.

If children are constantly told that they are exhibiting certain behaviors, the attention they receive from said behaviors will warrant them to continue. Unfortunately, the negative response from society lasts a lifetime. Many children carry the label throughout life and adulthood becomes a continuous struggle for success. There is a greater chance that they will be unemployed, incarcerated and in some extreme cases, homeless.

Lack of Communication from School

Parents and guardians were frustrated due to the lack of communication from teachers. Sharon (personal interview, March 14, 2013), Gary's mom, explained that teachers did not communicate with her about the needs of her child. Sharon stated:

When he was first classified, we had the initial meeting with the school and the special education people at the district offices. Shortly after, I requested a conference, and it took them over a month to get back to me and set up a conference because he was not doing well at all. I would dread the CSE meetings because there was never good news, always stuff about his behavior. And we were told to call if we had questions or just needed support. We only hear from the school when he gets out of hand.

Sharon's experiences illustrate that it is necessary for the school to regularly communicate with parents and guardians, to foster a strong school and home environment, establish a positive rapport with parents, and continue to work with parents throughout the school year so that parents and teachers can be a team. Lack of communication between home and school leads to overrepresentation of African American students in special education because teachers are not

providing parents with strategies that they can use at home to help their children make academic gains. Without support from the school, parents do not receive the tools needed to help their children with homework and test preparation.

Pamela, Lisa's grandmother, also voiced concerns regarding school and home communication. During the interview (Pam, Personal Interview, March 7, 2013) she expressed:

When he was first classified, we had the initial meeting with the school and the special education people at the district offices. Shortly after, I requested a conference, and it took them over a month to get back to me and set up a conference because he was not doing well at all. I would dread the CSE meetings because there was never good news, always stuff about his behavior. And we were told to call if we had questions or just needed support. We only hear from the school when he gets out of hand.

The above quotation is another example of teachers not providing the support that is necessary to the parents. It is essential that the school is understanding of the guardians' requests and works with the parents/guardians to best support children. For example, perhaps if Pamela was receiving reports, as she requested, Lisa would be making greater progress in school. Hence, lack of communication between school and home can result in African American students being overrepresented in special education because parents are not provided with support to further help their children in the home setting and thus achieve in school.

Reliance on Medication

Another reason why parents and guardians believe that African American students are overrepresented in special education is because schools are relying on medication as a way to help students make academic gains than actually investing time in properly instructing students in the areas in which they have needs. Both Anna, Jonathon's mom, as well as Sharon, Gary's

mom, voiced concerns about the reliance on medication. Anna (Personal Interview, March 18, 2013) explained:

Them people at that school rely too much on the meds for Jonathan. I told them that he don't need it all the time and they had the nerve to tell me not to send him to school unless he has it. When he acting up in school or not doing his work they always blame the meds not being in him. He don't like being called out like that and then he gets even worse. They never seem to blame how they teach or deal with the kids can make them act up too.

The above statement illustrates the mother's frustration with the school system and demonstrates a need for the educational institution to examine the academic and social needs of each student, the appropriate support that the student may need, and how to help each student succeed, along with collaborating with the parents. In Anna's case, Anna does not feel comfortable with the medication that Jonathon is prescribed; therefore, it would be necessary for the school, Anna, and Jonathon's doctors, to discuss Jonathon's medical needs, as well his instructional supports, to help Jonathon succeed.

Sharon, Gary's mother, feels anxious regarding her son's medication needs. During the personal interview on March 5, 2013, Sharon explained:

We are aware that Gary needs meds, but if we are down to (1) dose we are harassed for the refill. It's almost like they don't want to teach him unless he is medicated. He is a little boy. I don't think they even know him off the meds. I wonder if they fear him or something?

In Sharon's case, the school needs to work with the parents to ensure that both the child and the parent have the needed support. For example, if Sharon did not get the medication filled on time,

perhaps the school nurse and social worker may be able to help her. It is essential that the school and the parents schedule time to meet, discuss their concerns, and create plans that will aid the student. Also, the school needs to hear the parent's frustrations and build a positive rapport with the family. For instance, if the school knew how Sharon felt about the medication, faculty and staff would be able to understand her perspective and problem solve with her.

Difficulty Mainstreaming Students

Parents and guardians also felt that African American students are overrepresented in special education because they did not have opportunities to be mainstreamed and thus not receive grade level instruction with their general education peers. Due to lack of mainstreaming, parents and guardians believe that their children do not have the chance to make appropriate grade level gains and will be continually placed in self-contained classes, without the hope of being mainstreamed or declassified. One of these parents who advocated placing her child in a mainstreamed class was Jackie. During a personal interview on February 21, 2013, Jackie articulated:

Do you know how many meetins I had to go to to get Paul in regular class? I went to 8 meetings in one school year. Ms Miller [special education coordinator] tried to put me down by asking me write a letter asking for Paul to be in regular classes cause she knew I wasn't good at writing. I told her to send it in the mail and I would sign it. That day I cried so hard because I knew I had blew it. Paul is at the age where they started to pick at him and I don't want that cause I went through that. Paul is smart, I just don't think they trying hard enough to teach him. He been in a few fights and when I go to the school for the meeting about it, they always say that it was too soon for him to be in regular class.

But to me, I think they be picking on him, and the teachers let him so he be defending his self.

The above statement reflects Jackie's disconnection from the special education process because she was not being heard by the school, and she was not being respected. She had to have several meetings with the school officials and provide additional paperwork. Jackie felt that she was being intimidated because administrators were aware that she did not have a strong educational background and asked her to write a letter. Jackie felt that her voice and the knowledge that she possesses about her own child was not valued by the school system. She was advocating for her son, but she was unable to successfully have him placed in a mainstreamed class, not even on a trial basis. Perhaps if Paul had had the opportunity to be mainstreamed, he would have made academic and social progress by working with his peers and being challenged with grade level curriculum. Since Paul did not have this chance, he was left behind by his own school.

Debbie, Derek's grandmother, also had difficulties trying to place her grandson in a mainstreamed class. Debbie (personal interview, March 13, 2013) stated her experience:

I knew I didn't want Derek in no self-contained class because his parents were already contained and I felt that I didn't want him to be used to that. It took lots of talks with the principal and the district office people to help me. I had to do what they told me and I worked with them to get him in a regular class. It took an entire school year and I don't think it should have taken so long, but I'm glad he in a regular class.

Due to the long process of having her grandson mainstreamed, Derek's education was placed on hold. He could have been in a mainstreamed class sooner and this would have allowed him to be with his general education peers and have access to grade level material.

Socioeconomic Background

O'Connor and Fernandez (2006) argue that school districts place African American students in special education based upon the family's socioeconomic status (financial needs, housing abilities, etc.). In my research, it was determined that unlike parents and guardians, teachers and administrators felt that one reason for the overrepresentation of African American students was due to their socioeconomic background.

Ms. Lee, a special education and literacy teacher at the school, discussed her views on socioeconomic status and the classification of students. Ms. Lee (Personal Interview, March 12, 2013) stated:

So when children come to school, hungry or sick it is expected that they may require some attention other than teaching. What I find is that because these children are suffering from the factors of their environment, they may have a tendency to not be normal. For them to act according to how they feel, can result in them being labeled and placed in special ed class. In a nut shell, poor kids are expected to fail. Im not sure why, but there are poor children everywhere, yet they are not labeled. If these kids were somewhere else, there shortcomings wouldn't be considered in their educational success.

Ms. Lee articulates that because students come from families who are struggling economically, they are assumed that they are considered for special education services. She argues that schools are biased in perceiving that students from lower socioeconomic classes have needs that cannot be met in general education classes, without special education services. Ms. Lee is also advocating that schools carefully consider each student's situation and delineate what truly is a special education need rather than a need that comes from a socioeconomic concern. For example, if a student is falling asleep in class and is not progressing academically, the student

may not need special education services. Instead, administrators, teachers, and school psychologists need to determine if the student is truly feeling frustrated in class and is therefore sleeping or if the student is unable to sleep at night because he is worried about his parents' health.

Ms. Miller, the special education coordinator, stated what the overall mentality of the school system is in placing students in special education. The following is not what she believes in, but is her perception of the urban district's philosophy:

There are so many of our special education because they are from the hood and hood kids don't value much and don't have a whole lot to value. I mean just think about what they have to face every day just walking to school. Most of times they come to school angry and that anger is layered with other factors can cause a hindrance in them learning. One report later, and they are labeled and placed in a class with other classified students.

(Personal Interview, March 4, 2013).

It is significant that school systems begin to dissociate from the long lasting belief that students from the inner city need special education services. Instead, schools should view each student's case individually and provide supports to the students, such as Response to Intervention supports, before classifying students. Also, as articulated by Ms. Miller, students may need psychological services in order to help them work through difficulties so that they can make academic gains. If a student is feeling depressed, he may not be completing homework, preparing for tests and therefore, be struggling academically. Hence, this student may need support from a school psychologist, guidance counselor, or social worker rather than support from a special education teacher. In this case, it may not be appropriate to classify a student when he does not require special education services to make academic and social gains.

Ms. Taylor, the principal of the school, expressed why she feels that African American students are overrepresented in special education. During the March 14, 2013 interview, Ms. Taylor stated, "I have seen brilliant students reduced to a Sped label simply because he wouldn't be still and would blurt out the answers." According to Ms. Taylor, educators need to create a classroom environment where they try an array of strategies to support and help students succeed rather than assuming that the student is not performing well due to special education needs.

Lack of Parent Involvement

Shippen, Curtis, and Miller (2009) write about possible reasons why African American students are overrepresented in special education. Shippen et al. (2009), in their research, stated that lack of parent involvement could play a role in classifying African American students. Lack of parent involvement was also discussed during my interviews with two co-teachers. On February 27, I interviewed Ms. Connors and Ms. Garrett. Ms. Connors stated, "I think that if they had more parents advocate and participate in the learning process, then there will be more solutions and less of a problem." However, as evidenced during the parent interviews, when parents/guardians have tried to advocate for their child to be mainstreamed, such as Debbie and Jackie, they were met with opposition. Therefore, it is interesting to discern the different perspectives regarding parent involvement as parents and teachers tend to have differing views.

It is also essential to note that there are teachers who are eagerly trying to work with parents. For example, Ms. Garrett has been working diligently to involve parents. She articulated:

I have done everything short of begging to get parents to get involved in their children's education. We have had pizza parties, family night with music and games, I have sent out surveys and questionnaires and got 4 out of 33 back. This year I have had to reschedule

half of my CSE meetings because parents don't show up or have to reschedule. I truly believe in a coherent partnership in any relationship especially education. Once the parents sign their names on the paper that solidifies their children's educational fate, then they have to be prepared for what to come.

It is evident that Ms. Garrett believes in collaboration and is trying to create rapport with her students' parents. Based upon the interviews that I have had with parents and teachers, it seems as though both teachers and parents/guardians want communication between home and school, as indicated by Sharon and Pamela. However, it may be necessary to hold a forum that addresses what parents/guardians expect from faculty and staff regarding communication and how the school can reasonably provide this support. For example, some parents may feel that Ms. Garrett's family night is an effective event; however, other parents may want to attend but may not have transportation or may be working late hours. Therefore, it is essential to address the concerns and needs that stem from both faculty and staff as well as from parents and guardians to better create strong communication systems that are welcomed by both institutions (home and school).

Conclusion

Based upon the interviews from parents and guardians as well as those from faculty (administration and teachers), it is evident that both groups view that African American students are overrepresented in special education. However, parents and guardians provide different reasons why this is the case. They feel that students are overrepresented due to the initial special education classification and assessment process, the emphasis of labels and classification, lack of communication from school, school reliance on medication, and lack of mainstreaming

opportunities. Teachers and administration feel that African American students are overrepresented due to their socioeconomic background and lack of parental involvement.

Implications and Conclusion

While working in both an urban and a suburban school district, I noticed a disproportionate number of African American students in the special education self-contained classrooms, and I was immediately intrigued by how this disproportionality came about. The purpose of the study was to research how the special education process worked and why so many of the recipients of special education services are African American children. The essential research question that guided my study was: Why are African American students overrepresented in special education? This question enabled me to determine some of the reasons for overrepresentation by gathering and analyzing data from parents/guardians, teachers, and administrators.

I sent letters to parents/guardians requesting an interview about their experiences with the special education process. Once signed permission slips were obtained, I scheduled interviews with parents/guardians. In addition to gaining parental feedback, I also interviewed teachers and administrative staff at the same urban school in upstate New York. I recorded the interviews and analyzed the data by listening to the tape recordings and creating a chart by grouping responses from parents/guardians and those from teachers and administrators.

The data reveals that parents/guardians are not made fully aware of how their children were labeled or how the labels were determined. Some parents feel that their children are stigmatized by the labels they are given, and are destined to be in special education throughout their educational careers. Parents/guardians feel that schools are not communicating with them effectively and this makes advocating for inclusion more difficult. For example, due to lack of

school and home communication, parents/guardians feel that school faculty is not providing their child with the opportunity to be mainstreamed, even when parents advocate for such a placement. On the other hand, teachers and administrators feel that the overrepresentation comes from the lack of parent involvement along with the socioeconomic background these children come from. Teachers are frustrated with the lack of concern from parents and feel that if parents were willing to be more involved there would be less African American students in special education. Administrators feel that children from poor families have so many obstacles that keep them from learning, and consequently behavior becomes the catapult for special education referrals, labels and services.

This study demonstrates that greater educational opportunities need to be available to parents/guardians regarding the special education process. Therefore, the findings of this study have implications for school administrators as well as teaching faculty. School districts need to provide more information to parents to help them understand how the determination to classify students is made from beginning to end. Teachers and administrators need to look at each student's case individually, rule out factors for what may be causing academic concerns, refer to the Response to Intervention process, conference with parents/guardians, try methods in the classroom (such as teaching using Gardener's multiple intelligences), before considering classification.

A limitation of this study was time. Due to time concerns, I was unable to have more participants in the study and interview students to determine if they knew if they were classified and how this made them feel. In the future, I would create a weekly focus group with students to discuss their experience in special education in order to gather their feelings about their labels and services.

This study also brings forth questions regarding the overrepresentation of African American students in special education. Firstly, it is important to determine what schools are doing to prevent overrepresentation. This raises the following question: Do all schools in the district have a protocol to ensure that overrepresentation is not occurring? If so, what is the protocol and how recently has it been updated? Secondly, although the administrators and teachers in this study are aware of concerns regarding overrepresentation, do all faculty and staff recognize that this is taking place and does there need to be professional development on this topic? Perhaps, if professional development was offered, school faculty may be more prone to incorporating a variety of instructional strategies prior to referring the student for special education.

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Appendix A – Questions for Parents/Guardians

1. When and how were you notified about your child's label?
2. Do you agree/ disagree with the label? Why or why not?
3. Were you involved in decision for services?
4. Are the services helping? How are you informed of progress?
5. Why do you feel your child was chosen for special education?
6. Share your experience in a Committee on Special Education (CSE) meeting

Appendix B- Questions for Teachers

1. 1. How do you provide services to kids?
2. Do you adapt the curriculum or is it adapted for you?
3. How do you contact/interact with parents and how effective is it?
4. Do you specialize in one area or another? Describe.
5. What does your district provide for continuing education/teacher development?
6. Why do you feel there are more African American children in special education than white children?

Appendix C- Questions for Administrators

1. What is your role in the special education process?
2. Do you attend CSE meetings? Why or why not?
3. Are you accountable to the district for the success of special education students?
4. Are there transition programs within the district for special education students?
5. Why do you feel there are more African American children in special education than white children?

