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## Educator Preparation as a Factor in Disproportionality:

### Finding Equity for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Learners

#### Overview

Disproportionate representation in special education of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students has been a growing problem for decades. One of the most complex issues in the field of special education is disproportionality, which is the overrepresentation or under-representation of a particular demographic group in special education programs compared to the overall student population. CLD students are disproportionately represented in special education, indicating a need to educate and train current and pre-teachers as a remedy for this issue. Changing demographics in American schools necessitates that educators to prepare to work with students from racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds.

#### Vocabulary Terms

- AA- African American
- CD- Culturally Diverse
- CLD- Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
- EBD- Emotionally or Behaviorally Disturbed
- ELL- English Language Learner
- Disproportionality- the extent to which membership in a given group affects the probability of being placed in a specific disability category.
- IDEA- Individuals with Disabilities Act
- MID- Mildly Intellectually Disabled
- MOD- Moderately Intellectually Disabled
- OSEP- Office of Special Education Programs
- OCR- Office for Civil Rights

#### Descriptive Context

The United States is increasingly becoming a culturally diverse nation. By the year 2050, over half of the nation's population will be Hispanic, African American, Native American or Asian (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education & American Institute of Research, 2010). In contrast, less than 15 % of U.S. teachers are

African American or Latino (Duncan, 2009). Native American or Asian teachers represent 4 % of the U.S. teacher population. Changing demographics are of grave concern in the area of personnel preparation for teachers working with CLD students (Cartledge, 2004).

Culturally diverse students are historically and currently represented disproportionality in special education (Guiberson, 2009). In addition, CD students are represented disproportionately among students with disciplinary and/or behavioral problems (Cartledge, Gibson, Singh, 2007). Over- and underrepresentation of CD students in special education is often attributed to issues in assessment (Loe & Miranda, 2002). Disproportionate representation among students with disciplinary and/or behavioral problems is attributed to a lack of cultural congruence between educators and students.

Insight into teacher education and preparation of CD students with challenging behaviors may also stem from literature about effective instructional practices for CD students receiving special education services. Cartledge, Gardner, & Ford (2009) outline specific instructional practices for CD students receiving special education services are:

(a) student-centered instruction, (b) concrete and relevant examples of concepts, (d) explicit instruction in metacognitive strategies, (e) social skills training, and (g) modeling.

Reducing disproportionality requires adequate and comprehensive teacher training programs. Pre-service and in-service training for general education teachers needs to be designed to equip personnel with critical competencies in teaching reading and social skills (Cartledge & Dukes, 2008). The emphasis is on these abilities because teachers need to effectively deal with this group of minority students with special needs.

### Regulatory Perspectives

Multiple policies, procedures, and practices exist at the national, state, district, school, or classroom levels that can lead to overrepresentation or underrepresentation of CLD populations in special education programs.

#### **National Level**

The National Education Association (NEA) (2007) states that disproportionate representation of CLD students in special education programs has been a national concern for nearly four decades. Since the U.S. Office of Civil Rights first started to sample school districts in 1968, AA students have been overrepresented in special education programs, particularly under the categories of mental retardation and emotional disturbance (Artiles, Salazar & Higuera, 2002).

To ensure all children learn and succeed, educators need to know how they can help decrease inappropriate special education identification and improve opportunities for CLD students. A collaborative effort between the National Education Association (NEA) and the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) outlines the purpose of

teacher preparation and education as a guide to:

- provide educators with basic information about the nature and causes of disproportionality;
- discuss related policy, procedural, and practice issues;
- offer recommendations to educators about how to address disproportionality;
- outline implications of disproportionality and questions for local and state affiliates to consider.

The 22nd Annual Report to Congress on the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (1997) cited the disproportionate representation of racial and ethnic minorities as a major concern for both the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) and the Office for Civil Rights (OCR). OSEP and OCR identified the following major concerns about disproportionate representation:

- Students may be misclassified or inappropriately placed.
- Placement in special education classes may be a form of discrimination.
- Students may not be served or may receive services that do not meet their needs.

Table 1.

*Disproportionate Percentage by Ethnicity*

	Percent in General Population	Percent in Special Education Population
Asian/ Pacific Islander	3.8	1.7
African American	14.8	20.2
Hispanic	14.2	13.2
American Indian	1.0	1.3
Caucasian	6.62	6.36

Table 1 describes the representation of ethnic groups in general and special education by percentages of total populations. The table shows results over and under representation of African American and Hispanic students compared to other ethnicities.

**State and Local Level**

The states must create and support policies and procedures designed to prevent the inappropriate identification or disproportionate representation by race and ethnicity of children with disabilities, including children with a particular impairment. In addition, states require collection and examination of data regarding disproportionality. The State Educational Agency (SEA) must examine data, including data disaggregated by race and ethnicity, to determine if significant discrepancies are occurring in the rate of long-term suspensions and expulsions of children with disabilities among LEA's or compared to the rates for nondisabled children. Each state that receives assistance under Part B of the Act must provide for the collection and examination of data to determine if significant disproportionality based on race and ethnicity is occurring in the state and the LEA's educational agencies. Part B is outlined as:

Indicator 9 (p.66): Percent of districts with disproportionate representation of racial and ethnic groups in special education and related services that is the result of inappropriate identification. (20 U.S.C. 1416(a) (3) (C))

Indicator 10 (p.69): Percent of districts with disproportionate representation of racial and ethnic groups in specific disability categories that is the result of inappropriate identification. (20 U.S.C. 1416(a) (3) (C))

IDEA 2004 addresses disproportional representation as ongoing problem and made new statutory provisions:

- Local education agencies must develop policies and procedures to prevent the over-identification of students.
- School districts must gather and analyze data and identify disproportionality across disability categories.
- Students cannot be determined to have a disability if the students' primary deficit is due lack of appropriate instruction in reading or mathematics.
- LEAs with high rates of racial, cultural, ethnic and linguistic differences in special education are required to implement early identification services and to reserve a maximum of 15percent of federal funding for early interventions.
- That 15 percent of federal aid should be used for early intervention services for students with disabilities.
- Districts with an overrepresentation of minorities with disabilities are required to use 15percent of the federal aid for early intervention

In alignment with IDEA 2004, OSEP has identified five monitoring priorities within the State Performance Plan (SPP): (1) Free Appropriate Public Education in the Least Restrictive Environment; (2) Disproportionality; (3) Child Find; (4) Effective Transition; and (5) General Supervision. The SPP contains 20 indicators associated with these five monitoring priorities. The indicators support the increase of student achievement and reducing student failure through effective teaching training and education programs.

Student demographics are shifting at a rapid pace; however, public educators remain predominantly White (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education & American Institute of Research, 2010). Current research regarding demographics of students in teacher preparation programs offers conflicting results (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education & American Institute of Research, 2010). However, it appears as though preparation of minority pre-service teachers is on the rise; yet, not at the same rate as minority students in preschool through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Cultural differences challenge teachers educating students from cultures different than their own (Howard, 2006). Moreover, White teachers are often unaware, or unconscious, of the bias they exude in the classroom, curriculum, and instruction of CD students. According to Beverly (2010), awareness of cultural incongruence is the first step towards cultural competence.

Obiakor and associates (2002) described the significance of special educators developing a professional sense of cultural competency to employ in the field. The authors listed and described several actions to overcome obstacles that may inhibit cultural competency: (a) engaging families and communities to become partners with the school, (b) making significant changes in the assessment process to reflect a student-centered approach, and (c) ensuring development of a collaborative relationship between the school and all members of the community (e.g., local businesses, state and federal agencies).

#### Snapshot of Research

Existing research affirms a significant amount of overrepresentation of minority students labeled and served under the subjective categories in special education (Arnold & Lassmann, 2003). A subjective category is one in which the process of determining eligibility requires a certain amount of judgment or personal opinion on the part of the professional involved in labeling a student and on the part of those involved in the eligibility process (Parks, 2010). According to recent studies, 14 categories such as EBD and MR are the most common labels for students of minority races when placed in special education programs. In 2003, 40% of students currently labeled Mildly Intellectually Disabled (MID) or Moderately Intellectually Disabled (MOD) were of African American decent (Arnold & Lassman, 2003). Categories such as these require a more subjective, professional judgment for placement and are high-incidence due to the frequency of the use of the label (Conway, 2006).

Current literature discusses different types of training that would be relevant and possibly help regulate overrepresentation of minorities that need special services could be training in behavior management techniques, differentiated instruction, and cultural awareness (Parks, 2010). Adequate training in the area of behavior management might be useful to avoid unnecessary referrals in special education. Differentiated instruction may be helpful to students because it utilizes multiple methods with a hierarchy of levels of support that meet individualized needs based on student response. Cultural awareness may limit prejudice and misrepresentation of minorities in special education. Educators need to be aware of their own prejudices and be more accepting of differences among children, not just with race but with ability as well.

The National Research Council (2002) concluded that schooling independently contributes to disproportionality in special education by providing unequal educational opportunity in teacher training. Training may include a problem-solving process that includes, but is not limited to, analyzing the problem, identifying existing resources, allocating and using resources, and correcting current practices.

Literature addressing recruitment of minority educators is outdated by decades and focused on educators for CLD special populations, but not CLD students with challenging behaviors. Outcomes of applied recruitment strategies with specific student populations (i.e., CLD potential pre-service teachers) would significantly contribute to efforts to diversify special education teacher demographics.

## Related Issues

### **Instructional Practice**

Literature regarding specific, effective instructional practices for CD students with challenging behaviors is limited. An exhaustive review of effective instructional practices for this population resulted in only two publications offering practical solutions for educators. The first was by Campbell-Whatley & Gardner (2002). Effective instructional practices recommended were (a) delivering instruction at a brisk pace to increase student engagement and (b) designing instruction to promote high rates of student success. Specific instructional tactics that incorporate the practices recommended include (a) response cards, (b) peer tutoring, and (c) cooperative learning groups. Cartledge, Kea, & Simmons-Reed (2002) cited using response cards when working with CD students with challenging behaviors.

Insight into how to effectively instruct CLD students with challenging behaviors may also come from literature focusing on instructional practices for CLD students receiving special education services. The literature does not specify the issue of challenging behaviors; however, many of the other variables are potentially the same (i.e., misidentification of disability, learning problems, and cultural incongruence between teacher and student).

### **Field-based experiences**

Field-based experiences with CLD students identified with EBD, is another area of needed research because it would provide a sense of hope and direction. Unfortunately, there is a dearth of literature in existence regarding outcomes of pre-service teacher for CLD students with challenging behavior. Research in this area is necessary if teacher preparation programs are to be informed on how to prepare pre-service special educators for this population.

Pre-service teachers should be made aware of issues in assessment and identification of CLD students, especially students with challenging behaviors. In addition, pre-service educators must be challenged and assisted in developing cultural competency skills to be

implemented into practice once in the classroom. Research on the facilitation of the self-awareness process would assist to inform teacher educators

### Summary

Despite procedural safeguards, students from culturally and linguistically based minority groups continue to be over and underrepresented in special education. These patterns at a national, district, and local level may result in a disproportionate representation of minority students in special education. As the nation's schools become more diverse, educators and researchers must closely examine disproportionality to ensure all children are receiving an equal education in a positive learning environment. Administrators should examine school practices that may reduce disproportionality, including pre-referral interventions, instructional practices, professional development, and family involvement to maximize student success and to minimize disproportionality. Parents, teachers, and administrators must collaboratively work together to maximize every student's potential to learn in the classroom.

### Recommendations

Obiakor et al. (2004) recommends using a nondiscriminatory identification process when assessing CD students for special education services. Recommendations to reduce disproportionality in schools are outlined: (a) self-evaluation, (b) field-based experience, and (c) call for minority leaders.

*Self-evaluation.* Cartledge (2004) encourages educators to critically self-evaluate their own knowledge of a student's background when assessing and planning instruction for the CD student with EBD. Moreover, Cartledge explains behavior as something seen through a "culturally altered prism"; that is, a student's behavior is evaluated through the teacher's personal cultural lens. Consequently, Cartledge recommends educators become aware of the values and nuances of the student's culture when assessing behavior and planning interventions. Positive teacher attitudes and culturally responsive instruction are critical to positive outcomes for CD students with challenging behaviors (Campbell-Whatley & Gardner, 2002).

*Field-based experience.* Finally, some research suggests the effectiveness of extended field experiences for preservice teachers working with CD students (Culp, Chepyator-Thomson, & Hsu, 2009). A journaling experience with CLD students and the pre-service teachers' response to the cultural incongruence has shown to facilitate a commitment to (a) social justice, (b) cultural competence, and (c) equity in classroom practices (Whitehead, 2007).

*Call for minority educators.* Serwatka et al. (1995) reported a study on the effect of minority teachers on the rate of identification of CLD students with EBD. Findings suggest that as the percentage of African American teachers increases, the percentage of overrepresentation of AA students decreases. In another study, Skiba, 2003 interviewed

66 educators—teachers, principals, school psychologists, and special education directors—to understand their perspectives about the factors that may contribute to disproportionate representation for minority students. Results concluded that the educators found it difficult to confront racial disparity in education, and the disparity may contribute to the disproportionate percent of minority students in special education.

Additional research must be conducted to identify evidence-based programs preparing and training current and pre-service teachers working with CLD students with challenging behaviors. Preparation programs emphasizing culturally sensitive and responsive practices will promote positive outcomes for this population. Current and pre-service teachers must intentionally strive to remedy the disproportionate representation of students. Awareness and appropriate teacher training provides methods to effectively reduce disproportionate representation in special education programs. Preparation programs must emphasize the importance of special education's purposes and goals in an increasingly diverse society.

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