

Brief discussions
of critical issues in
Urban Education

On Point...

**On the Nexus of Race,
Disability, and
Overrepresentation:
What Do We Know?
Where Do We Go?**



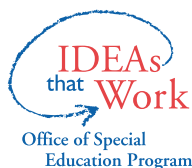
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The Nexus of Race, Disability, and Overrepresentation

What do we know? Where do we go?

The ethnic overrepresentation of students in special education programs in this country has been a recognized problem for more than 30 years. *Simply defined, overrepresentation, or the disproportionate placement of students of a given ethnic group in special education programs, means that the percentage of students from that group in such programs is disproportionately greater than their percentage in the school population as a whole.*¹ Currently, African Americans tend to be significantly overrepresented in the two special education categories of mild mental disabilities and emotional/behavioral disabilities (Oswald, Coutinho, Best, and Singh, 1999). At the same time, African American learners are also underrepresented in gifted education programs nationally (Patton, 1998). Although the latest national data indicate that Latinos/Hispanics and American Indians are not overrepresented in special education programs, these two groups are

¹ *Race is generally defined as a grouping of people based on essentially biological differences and is marked by the hereditary transmission of physical characteristics. An ethnic group generally refers to a group of people sharing a common and distinctive racial, national, religious, linguistic, or cultural heritage. For the purposes of this article, we sometimes will alternate between the use of these two terms.*

overrepresented in certain regions of the country and experience many of the same conditions and outcomes as African Americans.

Since 1968, when Lloyd Dunn first described the disproportionate numbers of “minority” students placed in self-contained classrooms for students with educable mental retardation, educators, advocacy groups, parents, academics, and policymakers have offered varying and often conflicting evidence and conceptual perspectives on the nature and extent of this imbalance. Over the years, a scarcity of relevant research has created barriers to a genuine understanding of the problem. Sensitivity and emotionality often associated with race and culturally laden issues have added a further layer of complexity to challenge those seeking answers and solutions. While current research is beginning to shed light on the tangled web of symptoms and underlying issues, many empirically supported studies, guided by important research questions and technically adequate methodologies, still await completion.

To agree that students of certain racial and ethnic minorities are overrepresented in special education is not to deny that some of them do have disabilities or learning difficulties. Indeed, special education may help many of these students access appropriate supports and instruction. However, the disproportionately large numbers of minority students placed in special education suggests that too many of the learning difficulties experienced by these children may be explained as “something wrong with the child” that special education can “fix.”

Researchers are increasingly focusing their attention on the issues of overrepresentation, and a growing body of literature is beginning to challenge these explanations (Patton, 1998). This scholarship and research illuminate a host of factors “outside the learner” that may contribute significantly to the perpetuation of disproportionality and, at the same time, reveal a number of increasingly common themes about probable causes and possible creative solutions.

What do we know?

One fact is abundantly clear—African American, poor, and, in certain circumstances, Latino and American Indian students are represented in special education in numbers greater than their percentages in the general school population. Currently in this country, students of color represent the youngest and fastest growing segment of the population (Hodgkinson, 1991/1994; Hopkins, 1997). Today, nearly one of every three Americans is African American, Hispanic/

Latino, Asian American, or American Indian and the percentage is growing.² According to Hodgkinson (1994), “by 2010 Whites will account for only about 9 percent of the world’s population; compared to 17 percent in 1997, making them the world’s smallest ethnic minority” (p.5). While children of color constitute an increasingly large percentage of public school students, especially in cities and large urban areas, they also constitute a disproportionately large number of the students in special education programs.

Recent data show that:

- African American students tend to be overrepresented in classrooms for students with mild disabilities and emotional and behavioral disabilities (Oswald, Coutinho, Best, and Singh, 1999).
- Almost 75 percent of diagnoses of mild mental retardation are linked to various socioeconomic-related environmental contingencies. Poor children are more likely than wealthier children to receive special education (U.S. Department of Education, 1998).
- Although African Americans represent 16 percent of elementary and secondary enrollments, they constitute 21 percent of total enrollments in special education (U.S. Department of Education, 1998).
- Poor African American children are 2.3 times more likely to be identified by their teacher as having mental retardation than their White counterparts (Oswald, Coutinho, Best, and Singh, 1999).
- The population of Native American children who receive special education services is one-and-one-half times greater at 16.8 percent versus 11 percent for the general population (Allison and Vining, 1999).
- African Americans, especially males, who engage in certain behaviors that represent artifacts of their culture—such as language (ebonics), movement patterns (verve), and a certain “ethnic” appearance—have been found to be overreferred for special education placement (Neal, McCray, and Webb-Johnson, 2001).
- Although Latino students are often not overrepresented in state and national data, they are likely to be overrepresented in special education when their proportion of a district’s diverse student body increases (Paper presented at Harvard University Civil Rights Project Conference on Minority Issues in Special Education, 2000, www.law.harvard.edu/civilrights).

² For the purposes of this article, we use the terms *Hispanic/Latino* and *Native American/American Indian* interchangeably.

- Children from culturally diverse backgrounds needing special education support often receive low-quality services and watered-down curricula (Paper presented at Harvard University Civil Rights Project Conference on Minority Issues in Special Education, 2000, www.law.harvard.edu/civilrights).
- Poverty and other socioeconomic factors affect the incidence of disability among all ethnic groups and across all disabilities. Even with socioeconomic factors considered, race and ethnicity remain significant factors in placing children in special education (Paper presented at Harvard University Civil Rights Project Conference on Minority Issues in Special Education, 2000, www.law.harvard.edu/civilrights).
- Large urban programs are far more likely to have higher percentages of minority and poor children in special education than rural programs (Patton, 1998).
- The larger the educational program, the larger the disproportion of minority students in special education (Heller, Holtzman, and Messick, 1982).
- The larger the number of minority students in a school district, the greater the representation of minority students in special education (Harry, 1992).
- Asian Pacific students are generally underrepresented in disability categories and overrepresented in gifted and talented programs (Harry, 1992).
- White students are consistently overrepresented in gifted and talented programs and specific learning disability categories (Finn, 1982; Harry, 1992a).

These statistics provide clear evidence that, where these children are concerned, something is amiss in our schools. Following, we provide a summary of some of the findings from the research on disproportionate representation and its probable causes, and then we make a few suggestions about future directions for research and practice.

What do we understand about overrepresentation?

Students from racial and ethnic minorities, in the main, arrive at schoolhouse doors with a great deal of cultural “capital,” or “funds” of knowledge, that not only are rarely recognized, built upon, or accommodated by educators and schools (Hale, 2001), but that may in fact be misconstrued in ways that lead to misdiagnoses of disability and inappropriate placement in special education programs.

Discussions about overrepresentation and its symptoms most often focus on the gathering and analysis of *numbers* and *proportions of students* by ethnicity in a

certain disabling condition compared to their proportions in the general population. While the numbers may vary from place to place, the patterns tend to be the same. But the data itself is one of the problematic features of disproportionality. Many have questioned the ethics and accuracy of the methods commonly used for collection, analysis, and interpretation of the numerical data. In spite of efforts to gather and analyze data in ways that increase the likelihood of its accuracy and consistency, understanding is often confounded when figures for certain minority groups vary depending on the author or agency reporting or interpreting the data (MacMillan and Reschly, 1998).³ Even with accurate data, the numbers and percentages do little to increase our *conceptual* and *theoretical* clarity about the issues.

Some roots of disproportionality

Among the conceptual factors that can influence disproportionate representation are issues around race (Hilliard, 2001) and its definition and significance; issues around culture, class and gender oppressions; and issues around the definition of disability and the nature of difference (Artiles and Trent, 1994). At the same time, other conceptual and sociocultural factors, like the individual and collective use of stereotypes and assumptions about marginalized groups, also contribute to the intractability of overrepresentation (Steele, 1997).

In schools, systemic factors related to teacher effectiveness, biased perceptions about students, and even the opportunities students have, or have not had, to learn may influence ethnic overrepresentation in special education (Gadsen, 2001; Hale, 2001; Watkins, Lewis, and Chou, 2001). Additionally, the region of the country, the size of the school program, the services available, whether the school is in an urban, suburban, or rural setting and the specific disability in question all have a bearing on educational practices, the gathering and interpreting of data, and the crafting of solutions.

Inadequate and inappropriate referral, assessment, and evaluation procedures used either to refer students for possible inclusion in special education, or to determine their placement in special education, contribute greatly to the large numbers of minority students in these programs (Artiles and Trent, 1994; Patton, 1998). Biased tests which discriminate against children of color and other evaluative data gathered and interpreted by educational professionals who may have ill-

³ For further reading and insight relative to the influence and impact of collective stereotypes, the formation of intellectual identities, and performance of African Americans, the reader is referred to Steele & Claude, M. (1997) "A Threat in the Air: How stereotypes shape intellectual identity and performance." *American Psychologist*, 25; Steele, Claude, M. & Aronson, J. (1995) "Stereotype threat and the intellectual test performance of African Americans." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 69; Osborne, J. W. (1999) "Unraveling Underachievement Among African American Boys from an Identification with Academics Perspective." *Journal of Negro Education*, 68.

conceived and stereotypical attitudes about culturally diverse learners are factors that some have offered as contributing to the lack of culturally and politically appropriate instruction and positive outcomes for these students (Beuboeuf-Lafontant, 1999; Hilliard, 2000; Samuda, 1998).

Two elements have emerged as keys to understanding the nexus of race, disability, and overrepresentation. There is a disconnect between the race, culture, and class of teachers in most schools on the one hand, and the culture, race, and socioeconomic status of learners they serve on the other. This disconnect is associated with *underachievement* which contributes significantly to the disproportionate representation of these learners in special education (Ford and Harris, 1992; Irvine, 1990). Increasing numbers of traditionally trained teachers from the dominant American culture are teaching students who are often nontraditional learners, resulting in cultural, race, and class chasms in our classrooms and schools. Further, too few teachers have been educated to recognize and deal with the cultural, class, and gender “knapsacks” of these learners, or of their own, and many have low expectations shaped by inaccurate assumptions about the innate ability of racial minorities and poor children (Delpit, 1995; Irvine, 1990).

Other school related factors which limit students’ success are unsupportive school cultures; policies, structures, and school routines that do not reflect an understanding of cultural competency; and curriculum and pedagogy used in classrooms that are poor in quality, a poor fit for the students, and that are not culturally responsive (Watkins, Lewis, and Chou, 2001).

Some scholars suggest that the absence of meaningful, respectful, and culturally reciprocal family/school partnerships, and a lack of resources in poor schools all help to seal the fate of these learners while reducing their competitiveness for the scarce resources of society (Delpit, 1995; Ford and Harris, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Taylor, Casten, Flickinger, Roberts, and Fulmore, 1994).

To illustrate this point, studies show that African American, Latino/Hispanic, and Native American or First Nation children, along with poor children are far more likely than children in more affluent school districts to:

- Be taught by teachers who are not qualified to teach the core subjects
- Have teachers who completed an alternative certification program
- Have more substitute teachers
- Attend schools that are in substandard condition, lack state-of-the-art

technology, and do not offer a rigorous and culturally responsive curriculum

- Have teachers who do not have access to sustained professional development opportunities
- Have teachers, administrators, and related service professionals who are not culturally competent
- Have inferior instructional materials (Haycock, 2001).

Further, these students are less likely to receive program planning and counseling than their White counterparts or other students who are more advantaged.

In spite of systemic school reforms like Goals 2000 (1995) that suggest that curricula and instructional approaches be designed to ensure that all students, including those who have been disadvantaged socially, educationally, or economically, have equal opportunities to meet higher academic standards, many schools are ill prepared to serve students in ways that help to ensure their success. Attendance at schools that are not culturally competent or accommodating of the needs of these learners often represents the “last nail in the coffin” for students who may already be experiencing difficulties.

Underachievement and Disidentification with Academics—Being Motivated

Relatedly, the second author of this article has suggested that a new category of disability should be created that more appropriately describes one of the major factors contributing to the perpetuation of disproportionality. Since a host of researchers, among them Irvine (1990), Delpit (1995), Ladson-Billings (2001), and Ford and Harris (1992), has documented that many learners find their way into special education by the mere fact of *not having been taught*, he is suggesting a new category of disability called “ABT,” which translates into “ain’t been taught” (Patton, 2001).

The more recent research on opportunities to learn underscores the fact that as a result of ineffective teaching often disconnected from culture, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, many of these learners have had limited opportunities to learn (Tate, 1995). In fact, some interesting empirical data substantiates the claim that many of these learners who “ain’t been taught” appropriately and who have had reduced opportunities to learn, have also had limited opportunities to develop their

intellectual identities and identification with academics (Ogbu, 1977; Osborne, 1999; Spencer, 2001).

At the same time, many schools unwittingly foster and perpetuate the underachievement of children of color (Hanley, 1999). Osborne (1999), citing self-esteem literature on identification with academics (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934), reminds us that “people receive feedback from their environment and that this feedback, if attended to, is perceived” (Osborne, 1999). Further, if an individual values a certain domain of learning and/or experience, he/she will not only be motivated to identify with that domain but will also utilize efforts and energies that allow him/her to succeed and thrive in that particular domain. This notion of identification with academics or developing an intellectual identity has been recognized as an essential and necessary condition to learning (Finn, 1989). Thus, those students who have histories of not identifying with academics experience few contingencies between academic outcomes and self-esteem (Osborne, 1999). As a result, performance at academic tasks is not sufficiently intrinsically rewarding for these learners, and poor performance is not intrinsically punishing (Osborne, 1999).

Simply put, as a result of a number of factors such as stereotype threats, (Steele, 1997), cultural-ecological factors associated with involuntary minority status (Ogbu, 1997), and oppositional and “cool-pose” ways of behaving (Majors and Billson, 1992), too many African American, Hispanic/Latino, and Native American learners have not been appropriately motivated to “identify” with academics and, accordingly, see little return on their efforts and investments in academic endeavors.⁴ Students who do not identify with academics will not manifest positive academic outcomes like good grades, being placed on the honor roll and graduating from high school. They are more likely to have poor grades and high rates of suspension and expulsions, factors which increase the likelihood of being inappropriately placed in special education. In reality, their underachievement and other problems are often a result of “disidentification” and the lack of effort and motivation rather than disability.

Additionally, students may be misidentified as emotionally disturbed or learning disabled when the problems really have more to do with cultural differences and discontinuities, economic disadvantage or not being taught English (Garcia and Ortiz, 1988). Further, a student’s poor performance could be attributed to reasons other than cognitive and linguistic deficits. According to Mattes and Omark (1984), these reasons could include a use of inappropriate instruments, inappropriate adaptations, poor testing conditions, lack of test taking skills and lack of rapport and differences

⁴ Stereotype threat is defined as: a frequent sense of being threatened by negative images about one’s group, of being judged by them, of being treated in terms of them, of being at risk of fulfilling them (Steele, 1997).

in cultural roles and interactions. Thus, the combination of circumstances which leads to the “creation of the underachiever” also frequently provides low-performing students with an often inappropriate referral to special education.

The intractable problem of disproportionality

Disproportionality is not just a problem of numbers. It is rather more about the fact that students are being *misdiagnosed as disabled and being placed in special education programs they do not need*. Ideally, special education should constitute an appropriate *array of services* designed to meet the needs of learners and to support learning in inclusive settings for those who legitimately need these services. Too often, however, special education becomes a *place* students are sent when they don't perform. Further, the problem is also about the quality and academic relevance of the special education programs blocking students' educational progress and decreasing the likelihood of their return to the general education classroom. This, in turn, limits their ability to compete for the scarce resources of society. Additionally, a greater availability of special education programs encourages increased placement of students of color (Harry, 1992a). Thus, a large number of students of color cross the border from normalcy to disability, not because they are disabled, but because schools are not able to support them in ways that allow them to succeed. Henry Trueba (1989) offered one view of this phenomenon:

These disabilities are an attribute of school. Children's seeming “unpreparedness” for mainstream schooling is only a measure of the rigidity and ignorance of our school system, which creates a handicap out of social and cultural differences (p. 70).

To echo Trueba's indictment, Harry reports, in a 1992 ethnographic study of 12 low-income Puerto Rican parents whose children were classified as learning disabled or mildly mentally retarded, that most of the parents in the study said that their children were fine until they started school.

The problem of overrepresentation also contributes to the referral of minority special education students to more restrictive environments (U. S. Department of Education, 1997). Indeed, one state survey reported that the majority of African American, Hispanic/Latino, and American Indian/Alaskan Native students

with disabilities were reported to be in special classes or separated sites for most of the school day, while most White students with disabilities were in general education classes 40 percent or more of the school day (New York State Education Department, 1999).

As noted by Patton (1998), “while these students are spending time in special education programs, they miss essential general education academic and social curricula.” This limited exposure to the core academic curriculum and more challenging content continues the spiral of what Markowitz, Garcia, and Eichelberger (1997) describe as “lower levels of achievement, decreased likelihood of post secondary education, and more limited employment.” Additionally, the consequences of misplacement can be long lasting and detrimental. Students rarely shake off the special education designation, let alone raise their academic skills to grade level. Most of all, misdiagnosis and misplacement more often than not minimize opportunities for students to be as successful as they might be in their academic lives and in their lives outside of and beyond school.

The Equity 2000 program demonstrated that when provided with strong counseling, motivation, and support, poor and minority children can demonstrate mastery of rigorous standards. But, until we make significant changes in what we are doing, and how we are doing it, many students will not have the educational foundation and opportunities to meet the new, more rigorous standards, nor will they enjoy the success and achievement that is possible with the appropriate education and supports.

Disability, Culture, and the Nature of Difference

What constitutes “appropriate education and supports,” particularly for students who have learning difficulties? And by what processes are students identified as disabled and referred to special education? In spite of federal legislation and guidelines like the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (P.L.105-17), different interpretations by educators, administrators, policy makers, and parents lead to significant differences in definitions and practice. In this country, educational practices and policy related to students with learning difficulties vary significantly from state to state, school district to school district, and even from one school to the next.

Part of the reason for this discrepancy and variability in interpretation and practice is that there is no commonly held *definition* of disability, either in our schools or in society. Although many think of disability as a personal characteristic, others see it as a socially constructed phenomenon related to ideas of difference or

deviance from a norm. In schools, “the arbitrariness of the designation ‘disability’ for many students with mild learning disorders illustrates that the concept is more a reflection of social values than of objective reality” (Harry, 1992b). We often describe children who, for one reason or another are not learning like the rest, as having a learning “disability.” In this case, disability is most likely associated with “difference” or “deviance” from the norm of progress or achievement associated with learning at a particular level.

Likewise, cultural diversity is often viewed as a “difference” or “deviance” from the norm associated with ethnicity, race, gender, language, and social class. But different from what? In most cases the “what” would refer to the dominant White, middle class culture. In fact, in the past some researchers and educators have used the terms “culturally and socially disadvantaged” to refer to African Americans, Hispanic/Latinos, Asian Americans, and Native Americans. After recognizing the oxymoron implied in the statement “culturally disadvantaged”—unless one is using a dominant White, middle class norm for comparative purposes—a “better” form of language that encouraged reference to these groups as “culturally different” became vogue.

Today, many people, educators included, often try to simplify what they do not understand by calling the multiple and complex variables associated with culture “cultural difference.” Their interpretations and simplifications often lead to the perpetuation of myths and false assumptions about ethnic minority and poor students’ culture and behavior. This linkage may lead to the misperception of ethnic minority students as being inherently inferior when they are not successful in school.

Additionally, over time, the terms “difference,” “culture,” and “disability” have become linked so that children’s cultural “differences” may, as a result of this association, contribute to a diagnosis of “disability.” Stereotypes about the abilities of children of color are probably maintained by this correlation, and to some extent, perpetuate the placement of disproportionate numbers of ethnic minority students in special education classes. Unfortunately, for some, their poor educational outcomes become “proof” of their inferiority.

Relatedly, some professionals may also assume that the differences between the school culture and the culture in the home, particularly when families are not proficient in English, are too wide to bridge. Indeed, many school practitioners may even be oblivious to these differences and not know that it is important to differentiate between learning problems that are truly evidence of a disability, and those that are the result of a student not being able to speak English.

Needless to say, the experiences, worldviews and creativity of the groups who are

overrepresented in special education do not typically inform the cultures, practices, and routines of very many educators or schools. What we know about how issues of race, class, ethnicity, culture, and socioeconomic status influence the achievement and behavior of these groups or our attitudes and expectations for them is seldom incorporated in our teaching. Upon this shaky ground educators often unwittingly formulate procedures and policies in schools that contribute to the misdiagnosis of disability when students are not academically successful.

What Can We Do? Conclusions and Future Directions

America's schools are more culturally diverse and complex than at any time in our nation's history. We will continue to have problems with overrepresentation as long as we develop educational structures, systems, routines, and pedagogies without understanding more about how the belief systems, biases, prejudices, and socioeconomic inequities that have existed for centuries in the American society are played out and perpetuated in our nation's schools. We must change the way we think about ability, competence, and success and encourage schools to redefine support so that the need to "sort" children is reduced. We must not require students to *adapt* to the prevalent teaching practices, instructional materials, and assessment instruments that are used in schools and which often lead to the determination that they are deficient in their ability to learn.

School professionals, families, students, policy makers, community members, researchers, and teacher trainers must join together in a mutual enterprise as allies and as coparticipants for the development of a new, inclusive, and ever changing culture that incorporates fully the cultures of their students. School success and failure should become the shared responsibility of all. We need schools and educational systems in which teachers and other professionals understand and respect their many different students and the capacity of these students to build a more inclusive society. We need families and communities that support the work of schools and their children. We need researchers and policy makers who will further our knowledge and support change through legislation when necessary.

Reducing ethnic overrepresentation is a matter of creating a successful school environment for all students and accurately distinguishing disabilities from so-called cultural differences, political influences, and socioeconomic factors. We must realize that the causes of low academic performance and challenging behavior do not reside solely within the child or family.


We need a different vision of society—one which is truly inclusive of all diversity including race, ethnicity, gender, regionalism, religion, socioeconomic status, class, culture, and exceptionalities/disabilities. We need to think of cultural diversity as the confluence of the languages, beliefs, values, traditions, creativities, and behaviors of ALL of us that define who we are as individuals and who we are as a nation.

Finally, we must use our visions as models for schools. To accomplish this vision we would like to offer six suggestions that we believe would make a big difference:

- Situate the issue of overrepresentation within the context of the interrelated and sometimes conflicting variables of race, culture, class, and gender issues.
- Engage educators in forms of cultural self-assessment, whereby one's own attitudes, values, and beliefs are examined constantly and routinely in order to determine which ones need to be addressed and/or changed.
- Refine the assessment and evaluation procedures used in general and special education so that practices are designed and implemented with an understanding of the differences between disability and culture.
- Design teacher education, administrator, and related services professionals' preparation programs and professional development programs to include the critical cultural knowledge, skills, and experiences for the inclusion and instruction of culturally diverse students and students with disabilities. This knowledge should be acquired through study and experiences with different ethnic and cultural groups, in order for teachers to become "cultural brokers" (Gay, 1993).
- Expand the race, disability, and overrepresentation conversation/dialogue to include families, communities, faith-based organizations, social and political change agencies, and the like.
- Conduct research that is empirically grounded quantitatively and/or qualitatively to provide us with a better conceptual understanding of the variables that influence ethnic overrepresentation. Coutinho and Oswald (1998) have offered a few examples of such needed research:

Research that determines whether ethnic groups are "susceptible" to a particular disability.

Longitudinal analyses to discern "changes in disproportionate representation within districts over time" (p. 69).



Research to determine if the presence or absence of observer bias, or the extent to which “so-called meaning or value assigned to particular behaviors, attitudes, or cognitions varies by type of observer...(p. 69).”

- Analyze the “decision making process that guides the identification of students as having a disability at the community level” (p. 69).

This research should explore the extent to which team membership, attitudes, and other characteristics influence who is identified (Clarizio and Phillips, 1986).

In addition to these suggestions, the reader is advised to engage in additional study and reading of the articles contained in the reference section and the “for further reading” section at the end of this paper.

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