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Disabilities Action

Edited by Tina Taylor-Ritzler

Dear Colleagues,

I am delighted to be the new editor of the Disabilities Column. My goal is to make this column as diverse as possible, in terms of content, contributors and format. I encourage you to contact me at tritzler@uic.edu if you would like your work to be featured or have ideas to further enrich this forum.

Special education research is an area of scholarship that can be greatly enriched by the work of community psychologists. In this issue our column features a thoughtful examination of special education research for immigrant and racial/ethnic minority students by Traci Weinstein, a student in the doctoral program in Community and Prevention Research at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Enjoy!

Educating Immigrant and Racial/Ethnic Minority Youth in Special Education Programs

Written by

Traci Weinstein, M.A., University of Illinois at Chicago

In the United States, our current system of public education is characterized by academic achievement as a function of race, ethnicity, primary language use, and socioeconomic status (Hilliard, 1992). Moreover, in our public school system, 1 in 3 of all students is of an immigrant or racial/ethnic minority background (Agbenyega & Jiggetts, 1999). These students are frequently overrepresented in substantially separate educational settings, especially in special education programs (e.g., Hoover & Patton, 2005). In fact, it has been estimated that up to 40% of all special education students are of a minority background (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). The Office of Civil Rights has found that African American students are overrepresented in services for emotional disturbances, American Indian and immigrant students are overrepresented in services for learning disabilities, and African American, American Indian, and Latino and other immigrant students are all underrepresented in programs for gifted and talented students (Hosp & Reschly, 2004). In addition, students from Spanish-speaking, English Language Learner (ELL) backgrounds tend to be overly referred to specialized programs for students with speech and language learning disabilities (Brantlinger, 2006). The educational discrepancies presented here involving students of immigrant and racial/ethnic minority backgrounds have been of ongoing concern for the past four decades in the U.S.

The education of immigrant and racial/ethnic minority students in special education programs, in particular, has received little attention in research. Therefore, the main purpose of this article is to examine how the education of immigrant and racial/

ethnic minority students in special education has been addressed by researchers and to examine how the underlying assumptions of such research have thwarted our research progress.

Special Education Services: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

There is a beneficial purpose of specialized educational services. Those who refer students to such services typically do so in order to allow students access to the advantages of individualized instruction and attention (DeSouza & Sivewright, 1993). Special education services originated from the efforts of parents of children with disabilities to ensure equitable education for all students (Brantlinger, 2006). Thus, these services were designed and intended to have positive effects on children's academic achievement and to enhance their educational experiences. Typically, special education services provide remedial and/or developmental instruction, while also balancing grade level preparation across multiple curriculum areas. The scope of these services frequently includes vocational coaching, college preparation, and life skills and social development. Allowing students access to general education curricula in substantially separate settings is intended to give students who have been labeled as difficult in some way a "safe haven" in which to learn. In fact, some research has shown that special education programs have benefits for some students, with particular advantages for students with emotional and learning disabilities (DeSouza & Sivewright, 1993). Specifically, students in these settings tend to spend more time on academics than they did while in a mainstream setting; exhibit higher achievement, particularly in mathematics, than their disabled counterparts in mainstream classes; and are less likely to fail classes and drop out of school than they would if they had remained in the mainstream academic environment.

Despite such advantages, however, specialized educational settings also hold negative consequences for children who are labeled as "different" and isolated from their mainstream peers. This disadvantage is of particular concern for students from immigrant and racial/ethnic minority backgrounds, who may already be experiencing the negative effects of such a label due to their minority status. Furthermore, these smaller specialized settings tend to be even more isolating than is generally acknowledged. For example, one study found that students in special education programs for behaviorally disturbed adolescents spent most of their class time on passive educational activities and independent seatwork, rather than engaging in interactive classroom activities (DeSouza & Sivewright, 1993). In general, students in substantially separate educational programs also tend to socially associate more regularly with other disabled peers from these settings than students from the mainstream setting. Additionally, the dropout rate of students in special education programs overall has been found to be quite high (30%) and fewer special education students continue on to college in comparison to students from the mainstream environment (Wagner & Blackorby, 1996). Thus, the paradox between the advantages and disadvantages provided by special education services is one that continues to require more focused attention and research.

An Examination of Special Education across Ecological Levels

By investigating the reasons why students are referred to special education, one study found that only 55% of students were referred for academic-related issues, whereas 33% were referred for primary reasons unrelated to academics (Hosp & Reschly, 2004). Further investigation revealed that teacher referrals to special education are also based on individual teacher's beliefs about their inability to deliver adequate education to specific students, in addition to various reasons related to student behavior (Gersten & Woodward, 1994). Moreover, over-referrals of linguistically diverse students to special education services appears to be an overall national trend. Given these reasons why students are being referred to and placed in special education services, the examination of special education practices needs to occur at multiple ecological levels (see Trickett, Leone, Fink, & Bratton, 1993), yet this type of ecological assessment is generally disregarded when investigating the education of immigrant and racial/ethnic minority children in specialized educational services (Agbenyega & Jiggitts, 1999).

Simple adjustments to mainstream educational practices that may enhance the learning needs of students from diverse backgrounds are often overlooked prior to referring them to special education services. For example, increased variety in curriculum topics, multisensory classroom activities, and social-emotional supports provided to all students in the mainstream setting are all ways that could engage students who are exhibiting difficult behaviors in mainstream settings. This notion of diversifying curriculum topics in order to make learning more meaningful to students is not a new one, yet it remains underutilized in our public schools:

Our incredibly polyglot and multiracial society is sorely in need of teachers who know how to honor the stories of their students and to join them to wider narratives and larger meanings. We need to learn better how to build on those stories, and, when they clash with mainstream stories, how to explore the discrepancies, rather than to assume pathology. (Featherstone, 1989, as cited in Brantlinger, 2006, p. 148)

When referrals to and placement in special education services typically focus on individual-level student factors, we fail our children by not taking into account important societal, community, and administrative level factors that are also impacting the academic achievement of diverse students.

As another example of a level of need that requires more focused attention in research, consider the issue of teacher training. Approximately 15% of all public school special education students are diagnosed with mild to severe behavior problems (DeSouza & Sivewright, 1993) and 50% are diagnosed with learning disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). However, despite the reasons for special education referral, students in special education programs are more often exposed to behavioral interventions, rather than academic ones (Del'Homme, Kasari, Forness, & Bagley, 1996). This overemphasis on behavioral interventions, and consequential underemphasis on academic programming, appears to evolve from inadequate teacher training. One of the most frequently cited ideas

for reforming our current educational practices of working with immigrant and minority students is teacher training (Hoover & Patton, 2005). In fact, college preparatory programs for mainstream academic teachers rarely require diversity training related to how to work with students of minority and diverse disability backgrounds. Thus, it is common for mainstream teachers to seek out the help and advice of special education and ELL teachers when they are having difficulties with immigrant and minority students, which may be one cause for so many overreferrals of these students to specialized educational programs.

Furthermore, rather than primarily focusing attention on the topic of diversity as it relates to teacher competence, there is a critical need to examine the policies and procedures that dictate which settings are most appropriate to service diverse students. More specifically, there is a dearth of literature that examines the mechanisms currently in place that result in the disproportionate placement of minority students in substantially separate programs.

Is Separate But Equal Even Possible?

With specific regard to the isolation of special education, an issue of new and increasing concern involves a pervasive pressure that is currently on public school staff to quickly refer students with significant academic difficulties to substantially separate educational programs, often without an ecological examination of the causes of such difficulties, as discussed above. This drive has been depicted as emanating from school administrators, who are under constant and renewed pressure to increase their students' test scores for budgetary compensation (Blanchett, Brantlinger, & Shealey, 2005). For example, by removing students with academic difficulties from mainstream settings, school administrators are able to show statistical improvements in measures of student academic achievement. Such practices point to the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) policies as the source of this problem (e.g., Cochran-Smith, 2005). NCLB policies, and the tactics that schools are forced to undertake in order to be in compliance with such policies, affect teachers and administrators equally, in addition to having significant implications for immigrant and minority children. One consequence of NCLB policies that is frequently cited in the literature is the perpetuation of racial and ethnic educational disparities in our public school system (Blanchett, Brantlinger, & Shealey, 2005). More specifically, the NCLB policies are blamed for emphasizing explicit educational outcomes without directing reform at equalizing the foundations that created the problems the policies are designed to address in the first place. As an example, consider urban schools that have inadequate funding to deal with poverty-related issues arising in the community. Because incidences of poverty-related medical, psychological, and social dysfunction are higher in these schools, which results in more academic difficulties for the students attending these schools, there is a consequential increase in student enrollment in special education services (Agbenyega & Jiggitts, 1999). As an additional consequence, the overrepresentation of immigrant and minority students in poorer urban schools reinforces the overrepresentation of these students in special education programs as well. Thus, in many cases, the disproportionate placement of immigrant

and minority students in specialized educational services originates from the NCLB policies that were developed at the governmental level to address such educational inequalities.

Contextual student factors, apart from academic factors, have a significant impact on issues of academic achievement, with particular implications for student placement in special education programs (Brantlinger, 2006). The importance of contextual factors has been documented throughout the history of special education as well. For example, in the early 20th century, public schools dealt with the socially-derived difficulties of recent immigrant students from Italy and Ireland by placing these students in substantially separate special education programs, for reasons that included physical, intellectual, or “moral” disabilities. Consider the following comments, made in 1926, to explain the contextual factors that were believed to be responsible for the overrepresentation of Italian children in special education services:

It is unquestionably true that the home surroundings of certain racial groups, notably the Italians and the Negroes, are, as a rule, far less favorable than those of the average American children...It seems probable, upon the whole that the inferior environment is an effect at least as much as it is a cause of inferior ability, as the latter is indicated by intelligence tests. (Goodenough, 1926, as cited in Brantlinger, 2006, p. 82)

A more recent examination of economic, academic, and demographic factors demonstrates how important these factors are to the referral of racial/ethnic minority students to special education services (Hosp & Reschly, 2004). Hosp and Reschly’s study revealed that demographic variables (e.g., race and English proficiency) served as the strongest predictors of student referrals to specialized services for emotionally disabilities (ED), with economic factors also serving as strong predictors for ED for African American students. In contrast, for referrals to specialized services for learning disabilities (LD), academic variables (e.g., mastery in reading and math) served as the strongest predictors, with demographic factors also of strong significance for LD students of American Indian, Latino, and Asian backgrounds. A final, yet important, finding in this study was that academic factors served as the weakest overall predictors for referral to special education services across all racial/ethnic categories and disability groupings. Given the implications of such findings, with contextual factors serving as significant predictors for special education referrals for minority students, is it possible to conclude that specialized educational programs are really separate but equal? Clearly, academic interventions for students of immigrant and minority backgrounds really need to begin to focus on contextual factors at the community, state, and national levels.

The Final Analysis

So where do we go from here? The multiple topics that have been examined in the existing literature and reviewed in this article all address some aspect of the problem of overrepresentation of immigrant and minority students in special education programs. For example, at the individual level, they typically examined factors

of psychopathology as they relate to student disabilities and fit. The topics that are addressed at the group level relate to cultural incongruence, teacher training in diversity instruction and curriculum development, and the collaboration between mainstream and special education settings. Across the community and societal levels, several factors compete, such as the need to reform special education practices, special education referral procedures, and NCLB policies. In addition, intervention is required at these higher levels to address the economic, academic, demographic inequalities that are impacting the factors reviewed in this article.

However, for every topic that has been examined, there are a number of issues contributing to the problem that remain overlooked. For example, the failure of schools to collect and analyze data on the educational outcomes of their own students, with particular attention to special education practices, is a major issue that requires further exploration in the assessment literature (see Salend, Garrick-Duhaney, & Montgomery, 2002). In addition, an area that has not been addressed in the current literature is how schools are meeting the needs of refugee students, particularly those from war-torn countries. Such students are typically exposed to traumatic events that have the potential to lead to emotional disabilities. In addition, these students are often subject to long stays in refugee camps without regular academic instruction, which has serious and long-term implications for student learning.

In conclusion, there are no easy answers when it comes to addressing the education of immigrant and minority students in special education programs. Furthermore, until we are able to desegregate our public schools entirely, we will not be able to fully desegregate specialized educational programs. Yet there is hope. Immigrant and minority students in special education programs do typically feel that they are supported and cared for in these smaller specialized learning environments. The benefits of special education services that have been reviewed in this article should not be cast aside lightly, because any positive academic outcome for these students is a success. 🌐

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