

National Implications: Overrepresentation of African Americans in Special Education Programs in East Texas Elementary Schools: A Multi-Case Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

Despite a wealth of literature examining overrepresentation of African American students in special education programs, little research has focused on overrepresentation at the local and regional level. Using case study qualitative method, the experiences of special education administrators, principals and teachers were collected and analyzed to ascertain the strategies, policies and procedures being implemented to alleviate the overrepresentation of students of African American descent in special education programs in three East Texas elementary schools. Factors contributing to overrepresentation and common practices to alleviate African American overrepresentation emerged from the narratives of the participants.

Scenario

What can be done to help Mikhal? He is a 9 year old African American child born to a single, teenaged mother and father who both dropped out of high school. His teacher, Ms. Lambright, is frustrated because Mikhal is unable to complete his third grade level classwork. When queried about interventions provided to Mikhal, his teacher notes that she has provided extra time. No other interventions have been tried and his teacher notes that Mikhal is unable to read grade level work, complete simple math calculations and is writing in incomplete sentences. With an air of exasperation, Ms. Lambright laments that she cannot reach Mikhal's mother because she works several jobs and Mikhal often stays with extended family members. The teacher laconically states that Mikhal will most likely be held back and will be a dropout. What can be done to assist

Mikhal? Will he be a casualty of the American public education system which labels many African American youth based on their impoverished backgrounds and inability to “fit” in the Eurocentric system?

Introduction

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act ([IDEA], 2004) is designed to ensure that students with disabilities receive a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). To accomplish this goal, schools must have in place appropriate procedures to determine if a child who is referred to special education is a child with a disability who requires special education and related services to achieve progress appropriately in the school curriculum (Willie, Garibaldi, & Reed, 1991). In many cases, however, children are inappropriately referred and erroneously determined to require special education and related services, when, in fact, they do not. When this occurs repeatedly and primarily to one group of students in a school district, as is the case for students from African American families in many districts across the country, it results in a disproportionate percentage of group membership in special education (Willie, et. al., 1991). Disproportionate overrepresentation of African American students in special education is a well documented problem and troubling phenomenon (Agbenyega & Jiggets, 1999; MacMillian & Reschly, 1998; Oswald, Best & Countinho, 1999; Patton, 1998; U.S. Department of Education, 2002; Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002) and is a problem worthy of systemic study (Dunn, 1968; Harry & Anderson, 1994). Clearly, overrepresentation of students of African American decent in special education is a national problem; however, few studies examine the problem of overrepresentation at the local and community level.

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine the strategies, policies and procedures being implemented to alleviate the problem of overrepresentation of African Americans in special education programs within three East Texas elementary schools which were identified as having a high risk level of overrepresentation by the Texas Education Agency (TEA).

Literature Review

Overrepresentation of minority students in special education has been a concern for more than forty years (Agbenyega & Jiggetts, 1999; MacMillan & Reschly, 1998; Oswald, Best, & Countinho, 1999; Patton, 1998; Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002). A classic article by Dunn (1968) argued that the identification and placement in special education of socioculturally deprived children, often from minority backgrounds, with mild learning problems was of concern because of the placement of these children into segregated settings, the questionable benefits of these placements, and the detrimental effects of labeling. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, as reauthorized in 2004 by

Public Law 108-446, and many associated judicial decisions (*Diana v. State Board of Education*, 1970; *Hobson v. Hansen*, 1967; *Larry P. v. Riles*, 1979; *Marshall v. Georgia*, 1984) required school districts to implement nondiscriminatory procedures to ensure that children with disabilities, rather than ethnic or cultural differences are appropriately identified (Oswald, et. al., 1999). Despite the mandate of IDEA, more minority children continue to be served in special education than would be expected from the percentage of minority students in the general school population (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). In an effort to curb the mislabeling of minority children into special education, Public Law 105-17, amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997, required expanded state-level reporting and corrective provisions intended to resolve the problems in identification and placement of children representing diverse social, racial, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds in special education (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

In spite of the presence of convincing data on the overrepresentation issue and the extant literature challenging special education processes that lead to identification and placement, the problem of overrepresentation of African American students in special education continues to persist (Patton, 1998). The literature is replete with causal factors leading to placement in special education including the failure of the general education system (Artiles & Trent, 1994), inequities in the referral, assessment and placement procedures (Agbenyega & Jiggetts, 1999), poverty, high fertility rates among African American women (Agbenyega & Jiggetts, 1999; Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002), social class (Williams & Collins, 2001) and the lack of consistency in the method of measuring disproportional representation used in various studies (Public Policy Research Institute, 2003).

Methodology

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are educator perceptions regarding factors impacting overrepresentation of students of African American decent in special education?
2. What policy-based practices currently are extant that address the overrepresentation in special education?
3. To what extent are current policies to alleviate overrepresentation being implemented?

Setting and Participants

Purposeful sampling (Creswell, 1998) was used to select participants for this qualitative study. Participants in this multi-case study included a total of three elementary principals, three special education administrators and eighteen elementary school teachers selected from an urban district (more than 5,000 students), a suburban district (a total of 3,000 to 4,000 students) and a rural district in Northeast Texas with a total of less than 3,000 students. Participants had to have worked in the school district a minimum of three years. The names of each participant and research sites have been changed to protect their identities.

For this research study, a list of school districts with an overrepresentation of students of African American decent in special education was requested from the Texas Education Agency (TEA). From this list, schools in the Northeast area of East Texas were used to generate a set of schools which had been assigned a risk level of four on the Data Analysis System (DAS) due to an overrepresentation of African Americans in the special education program. The DAS is the process used by the TEA to analyze data elements in each district's special education program. DAS is composed of ten data elements which include (1) district level percentage of special education students relative to the state median, (2) district-level analysis of potential ethnic disproportion of student populations served in special education, (3) district-level analysis of potential disproportion of students identified as limited English proficient served in special education, (4) district-level analysis of potential disproportion of students identified as economically disadvantaged served in special education, (5) district-level analysis of TAKS passing rates of students served in special education, (6) percentage of special education students exempted for the statewide assessment, (7) district-level analysis of potential disproportionate discretionary referrals of special education students to alternative education programs for disciplinary reasons, (8) district-level analysis of potential disproportion of official dropouts that were served in special education, (9) district level analysis of potential disproportion of African American students served in special education identified as having mental retardation ,and (10) district-level analysis of potential disproportion of limited English proficient students served in special education identified as having a speech or language impairment.

Based on DAS data, the Texas Education Agency assigns risk levels for each district based on each of the ten data elements. The degree of risk is assigned to a data element based on district performance when compared to a statewide standard. The lowest risk level is zero and the highest risk level is four. For this study, schools with a risk level of four on data element two were selected as participants. From this list, three school districts were selected to participate.

Schools with similar demographics were used for the study. Individual semi-structured interviews (Merriam, 1998) were conducted with an elementary principal and special education director at each location. Six teachers at each location were invited to participate in focus group interviews, which encouraged interaction among participants (Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996) while providing the researcher with the ability to gather large amounts of information in a limited amount of time (Madriz, 2000). Three

focus groups of teachers with six participants each were utilized. Each of the interviews conducted were tape recorded and transcribed.

Research Sites

Hollytree Elementary, the suburban research site under study, is located in the small town of Hollytree located approximately 125 southwest of Shreveport, Louisiana and 125 miles southeast of Dallas, Texas. Hollytree boasts an economy that exceeds other cities its size with numerous manufacturers and bedding plant industries. Hollytree Elementary, which houses prekindergarten through the fourth grade had a student enrollment of 480 students. The ethnic distribution was 24.4 percent African American, 44.6 Hispanic, 30.8 percent White, 0.2 percent Asian/Pacific Islander and 0.0 percent Native American. The student percentage for economically disadvantaged was 80.8 percent.

Leesville Independent School District (LISD) is located in Leesville, Texas, the geographical and county seat of Houser County. Leesville is in the heart of the beautiful East Texas piney woods, fifteen miles west of the Louisiana border. Leesville, a rural area with a population of 5,600 people, is the home to a historic courthouse built in 1885 on the Town Square. Industries located here include timber, poultry and cattle. Leesville Elementary, which houses grades one through three, had a student enrollment of 377 students. The ethnic distribution was 27.3 percent African American, 24.1 percent Hispanic, 48.0 percent White, 0.5 percent Asian/Pacific Islander and 0.0 percent Native American. The student percentage for economically disadvantaged students was 68.7 percent.

Willow Springs Independent School District (WSISD) is the largest urban school district in Northeast Texas and encompasses 193 square miles. The city offers a variety of educational opportunities. Willow Springs is the home of a junior college as well as two four-year institutions of higher learning. WSISD maintains a total of 35 campuses and auxiliary facilities and serves approximately 17,500 students. Willow Springs Elementary School, which encompasses grades prekindergarten through fifth grade, had an enrollment of 435 students. The ethnic distribution was 39.5 percent African American, 23.0 percent Hispanic, 37.0 White, 0.0 percent Asian/Pacific Islander, and 0.5 percent Native American. The number of students listed as economically disadvantaged was 51.7 percent.

Data Collection and Analysis

Because the researcher is attempting to build a comprehensive picture of the case under study, this study involved three forms of data collection: interviews, observation

and informational retrieval from documents (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 1998). As previously noted, semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to gather the experiences and perceptions of the participants (Merriam, 1998). Observation techniques in this study were used as a research tool to gather first-hand information in the natural setting. The researcher kept field notes in a journal to document the specifics of the observation including descriptions, direct quotations and observer comments. Merriam (1998) writes that documents are a ready-made source of data for the researcher that is not dependent on human beings for cooperation. Documents analyzed in this study included the school district data reported to the Texas Education Agency, Data Analysis System (DAS), campus improvement plans, pre-referral team logs, student handbooks, special education referral forms, staff development training calendars, and benchmark assessment data.

In qualitative research, data collection and data analysis are a simultaneous activity and not a linear process (Merriam, 1998). Data analysis methods involved transcribing, coding and categorizing field notes and interviews (Sells & Smith, 1997). Miles and Huberman's (1994) data reduction techniques were used to analyze data. The data reduction techniques consisted of the following: (a) categorizing and pattern matching, (b) data displayed through matrices, and (c) conclusion drawing and verifying. A coding scheme involving key words, abbreviations, and numbers to mark passages in the data were used (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). Codes with similar content and relationships were combined into larger categories. Once the coding was applied to the data and themes and concepts began to emerge, the next step required analysis of how each of these categories was linked to each other in a theoretical framework. For this multiple-case study, within-case analysis and cross-case analysis were conducted (Merriam, 1998) to ascertain common themes from all cases. For the within-case analysis, each case was treated as a comprehensive case in and of itself. Data were coded and themes identified for the specific case. Once the analysis of each case was completed, a cross-case analysis was conducted to identify common themes from all cases.

Since the researcher was the primary instrument of data collection and data were filtered through my theoretical perspective and biases, a method for supporting trustworthiness was established (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Five methods to enhance trustworthiness used in this study included triangulation (Gay & Airasian, 2000), member checks (Creswell, 1998), explaining researcher bias (Creswell, 1998), using thick-rich descriptions (Marshall & Rossman, 1999) and employing an audit trail (Merriam, 1998).

Findings

Throughout the individual interviews and focus groups, as well as during the review of documents and observation, several prominent themes emerged. The themes that emerged relative to factors contributing to overrepresentation included: (a) poverty, (b) financial incentives, (c) lack of parental involvement, (d) bias in assessment, and (e) lack of diversity training. Relative to policies and procedures being implemented, the

following themes emerged: (a) prereferral intervention, (b) operating guidelines, (c) staff development, (d) extended day programs, and (e) early intervention programs. The findings are reported by a discussion of the themes which emerged relative to the guiding research questions.

Research Question One: What are educator perceptions regarding factors impacting overrepresentation of students from African American backgrounds?

Five predominant themes emerged from the cross case analysis of each research site studied.

Poverty

The Public Policy Institute (2003) indicated that without adequate intervention resources, public schools will be overwhelmed with children from poor socioeconomic environments. All of the participants in each of the three research sites indicated that poverty has a large impact on special education referrals, thus leading to overrepresentation. Participants opined that students come to school with a lack of foundational academic skills causing them to fall behind their peers. One administrator explained, "I think poverty is a major reason for special education referrals in our district and for minorities, succinctly. In our county, the median household income is \$12, 000 yearly. Poverty is rampant." Additionally, the study participants linked the poor performance of the students to lack of educational skills of their parents who often drop out of school. One participant noted, "A lot of our students are from lower income homes with parents working multiple jobs to survive." The effects of poverty in the research sites supports the findings of Abgenyega and Jiggetts (1999) that poverty effects have intensified overenrollment and placement, into special education, for families living below poverty levels, from homes of teenage mothers, without or without husbands, from divorced parents, from parents who are minimally educated, and from homes where they are latchkey children.

Financial Incentive

Because of the unfortunate poverty experienced by many families of African American decent, parents may have a financial incentive to refer their children for special education testing (Herrera, 1998). Findings from this study parallel Herrera's findings and indicated that schools in East Texas have received parental requests for testing in order to secure Social Security benefits. Participants in each research site indicated knowledge of parents referring children for financial gain, and noting that parents often

requested retesting if their child did not meet eligibility for special education services. One special education director noted, "I think that somehow many parents have figured out that there are benefits that come with eligibility. A teacher in the suburban school district explicated, "Some parents see the road to a SSI check without a doubt. I have sat in on IEP meetings where the parent will say the child is mentally retarded and compare the child to a sibling. They want the check."

High Stakes Testing

The desire for accountability measures for public education has led to implementation of high stakes testing which is used to evaluate districts and individual campuses. In their study, Agbenyega and Jiggets (1999) maintained that schools railroad children from African American backgrounds into special education to maintain a school's meritorious test scores. When questioned if high stakes testing had impacted referrals of African American students, one principal said, "Well, I can honestly say that we have not referred many kids to special education because we want to have higher scores." While the principals interviewed for this study denied students being referred to elevate a district's state assessment scores, special education administrators and teachers noted the pressure to complete instruction in specified subject areas based on the state assessment's content has led to special education referrals. One fourth grade teacher explained, "Ah, well, state assessment has greatly increased them [referrals] because you don't want the kids that can't pass to take the test." The findings of this study parallel the findings of a study by Losen (2002) indicating that students are referred in order to exclude them from high stakes testing.

Bias in Assessment

Bias in assessment practices is perhaps the most widely publicized aspect of minority overrepresentation in special education (Agbenyega & Jiggets, 1999; Arnold & Lassman, 2003; Patton, 1998). Special education administrators interviewed for this study explicated they had worked with their staff members to use culturally sensitive assessment instruments in evaluating students with minority backgrounds. While the administrators felt students were assessed appropriately, several did admit that older students rarely are dismissed from special education and that assessment personnel will often give additional tests if the student who is being reassessed does not qualify. Moreover, the administrators explained that campus personnel are leery of dismissing students from special education for fear the student will struggle in the general education classroom or drop out of school. One administrator stated, "We are not going to dismiss them at seventh grade because they have been in special education forever. We also are

not going to reassess a student moving in from another district.” As noted by Losen (2002) evaluation decisions are often subjective involving school politics, teacher perspectives and cultural bias.

Lack of Teacher Training

Often children of minority backgrounds are referred to special education when they fail to achieve in general education. As noted by Kea and Utley (1998), teachers cannot teach multicultural children until they know them. Each of the participants in the research sites studied indicated little or no diversity training. If training was provided, it was through the use of a guest speaker with no follow-up sessions. One administrator noted, “I feel it [diversity training] has been negligible. You are not going to change mindsets. You know, the majority of teachers from this area were trained in this area and have stayed in this area.” Whenever the topic of diversity training was discussed, the participants most often responded that they had received poverty training through Ruby Paine, a nationally known consultant focusing on poverty and its effects on academic achievement. Ruby Payne training is specifically designed as a strategy for working with children in poverty and is widely known not to address the cultural and linguistic diverse needs of minority students.

In addition, of the three sites studied, there was an imbalance between the racial/ethnic composition of the student population and the racial/ethnic makeup of the teaching force which supports the contention of Key and Utley (1998) that there continues to be a lack of personnel which “creates conditions that detract from building a successful multicultural society and excellence for all students” (p.45).

Lack of Parental Involvement

A common theme emerging in this study was the lack of parental involvement as a contributing factor to overrepresentation of students of African American decent in special education. Teachers, principals, and special education administrators discussed the lack of parental involvement in education. Several individuals indicated that parents do not help children with homework, including reading to their children. A teacher from the rural research site noted, “If we are doing a special program and their child is performing they will come. If you are just talking about parents being involved through parent conferences, phone calls, or helping with homework, I don’t see that very much.”

Cultural Factor

Talbert-Johnson (1997) noted that general education systems still operate from a Eurocentric perspective and that educators are not often equipped to deal with different cultures, lifestyles, and values in their classrooms. During the interviews, several participants likened overrepresentation to a cultural factor and noted that school personnel might refer a student to special education because of a lack of professional understanding. A special education director stated, "I see black parents highly involved in it [referrals]. But, there is almost an entitlement. They see it as a means to graduation and a way to get through school."

An additional cultural factor arising during the cross case analysis was the specific targeting of African American boys based on their behavioral issues at school. Knotek (2003) found that referrals to special education for boys of African American decent were most often related to behavioral issues in the school setting. Participants expressed concerns with the prevalence of behavioral issues and questioned if the behavioral issues were due to a lack of appropriate male role models in the home. One teacher stated, "I didn't have a lot of support from the families of African American students'. I think that has a lot to do with it." A physical education teacher noted, "From the ethic point of view, I think it might come back to the lack of a male image in the home and school setting."

The discussions of cultural factors lead to a discussion focused on racism. Grossman (1998) concluded that prejudice and discrimination against non-European American and poor students is rampant and that much of the prejudice is unconscious. Additionally, Artiles (1998) remarked, "ethnic minority groups have been traditionally seen as 'problem people' and that discrimination, prejudice and racism are subtly and openly enacted every day in our country." During the study, only one participant remarked that the overrepresentation in her school district could be caused by racism. The teacher stated, "I believe prejudice is big here. I believe it is a regional issue." After the teacher's statement, no other participants in the focus group made comment on the on the issue of racism.

Research Question Two: What policy-based practices currently are extant in the school system that addresses the overrepresentation of African Americans in special education?

Common practices to alleviate the overrepresentation of African Americans emerged from the narratives of the research participants. These practices comprised (a) operating guidelines, (b) prereferral teams, (c) staff development, (d) appropriate assessment instruments, (e) extended day program, and (f) early intervention.

Operating Guidelines

In order to address special education processes, each of the school districts in the study had instituted special education operating guidelines which were published in manuals. The manuals addressed areas including child find identification, referral processes, parental involvement, campus intervention teams, and the individual education plan meeting. The manuals were practical and usable documents which were updated frequently to reflect changes in the delivery of educational services to students with disabilities.

Prereferral Intervention

Research studies (Arnold & Lassman, 2003; Artiles, 1998; Harry & Anderson, 1994) have indicated that effective prereferral teams establish collaborative school and community relationships and involve parents in school and classroom activities. Additionally, Knotek (2003) notes the usefulness of prereferral teams in offering protection in evaluation procedures for students experiencing difficulty in school by stating, “ problem solving could be more fair and equitable with prereferral teams because many heads are better than one” (p. 16).

Each of the schools in the research site had fully functional prereferral teams comprised of a school administrator, general education teacher, special education teacher, counselor and, when possible, the parent. Teams met on a weekly basis to discuss student difficulties and to assign interventions to be tried. Each intervention was specific in its scope and timeframe. Participants in the study found the team process to be effective in reducing referrals to special education and in providing an additional level of support for students and teachers. This was evidenced in a statement from a principal who stated, “We try to intervene quickly if a student has a problem. We use small group instruction, hands-on manipulatives, cooperative grouping and peer tutoring.”

Staff Development

Reducing overrepresentation of children of African American descent in special education is a matter of a successful school environment and the ability to distinguish disabilities from so-called cultural differences (Meyer & Patton, 1991). Each of the sites participating in the study identified a need for more diversity training. Two of the sites participating in the study indicated limited diversity training and one site noted that no diversity training had been received. A principal noted that he must be honest and noted, “We haven’t had a lot of training. We have had some training on brain research and how it impacts learning. I really can’t give you any specifics in diversity training.” Teachers in

all three schools related they had not received training specifically designed to meet the unique learning styles of individual students such as a diversified curriculum, understanding cultural similarities and differences or analyzing cultural viewpoints.

Appropriate Assessment Instruments

Another policy-based theme that emerged from the interviews involved the appropriate selection of assessment instruments. Losen (2002) found that evaluation instruments are filled with subjectivity. Special education administrators interviewed indicated that they had worked with staff in addressing any discrepancies in the evaluation instruments and had provided training to their staffs in selecting appropriate instruments which are not culturally biased. Each of the administrators interviewed posited that they felt their assessment staff members utilized instruments which do not discriminate against students of different ethnic groups. One director explained, “We have done a good job at looking at what assessments we utilize and making sure it does not cause overrepresentation. In addition, we have done more training with the Woodcock-Johnson looking at the discrepancies within the different parts of the test and doing a greater analysis.”

Extended Day Programs

In an effort to meet the needs of students with academic difficulties, all of the research sites studied had instituted extended day tutorial programs as a means to provide extensive tutorials to students who are not progressing academically. Teachers, along with support personnel such as the counselor and librarian, were assigned to teach in the extended day program. Performance of all students to pass the statewide assessment and to progress academically was a schoolwide effort. The use of extended day programs was one intervention used by schools to meet the students of students prior to a special education referral.

Early Intervention Programs

Without adequate resources as compensatory mechanisms, students from homes with lack of enrichment often are referred for special education (Oswald, et. al., 1999). Each of the schools participating in this study utilized various early intervention programs to meet the needs of learners who demonstrate a lack of basic academic skills.

Often using data disaggregated from reading inventories, teachers identified areas lacking mastery such as phonemic awareness, fluency, and comprehension. Based on this information, campuses selected students for additional assistance through small group or computerized instruction. The assistance provided was supplemental to regular classroom instruction.

Research Question Three: To what extent are current policies to alleviate overrepresentation being implemented?

Based on observations and interviews conducted by the researcher, there is a discrepancy in the implementation of policies in each of the three East Texas school districts studied. While there is sufficient evidence to indicate that prereferral teams, early intervention programs and extended day programs are consistently implemented, there is ambiguity in the use of staff development. The focus group of teachers in two of the research sites indicated they had not received training in the unique learning needs of children from African American families. This is in contrast to the interviews conducted with the principals in which they noted staff had received training. While the campuses have implemented policies and procedures to reduce overrepresentation of students from African American descent, special education administrators in each district indicated that their respective districts were still overrepresented based on the last report from the Texas Education Agency. Only one school demonstrated evidence in the reduction of students of color in the campus special education program.

Conclusion and Implications

The findings of this study are consistent with the literature regarding overrepresentation of African Americans in special education and the measures to alleviate the disproportionality. This study provided a multi-case examination of overrepresentation at a regional and local level, rather than a state and national level. Few studies have been conducted which highlight a regional focal point. The overall purpose of the study was to identify programs, policies and procedures implemented to alleviate the overrepresentation of African Americans in special education.

Although only one participant perceived that overrepresentation was related to racism, one must read between the lines to reveal the implicit racism which exists. While blatant racism is not present, it percolates beneath the surface as evidenced by many of the comments from the study participants. It exists in the statements relating African American parents seeking social security benefits through the guise of special education referrals, in the remarks relating to the foundational skills that students display upon entering school, and in the discussion of single parent families and teen pregnancies in the African American community. Furthermore, several participants commented on the lack of parental involvement of African American parents, which also may signal implicit racism since no other parent groups were mentioned by the interviewees. Although

racism was not overt, this research study found that current educational systems in three East Texas communities were not free of prejudice and discrimination.

Furthermore, the findings of this study explicate a need for higher education to provide training to preservice teachers in culturally responsive pedagogy designed to address the needs of students from varying backgrounds. With the changing demographic landscape, teachers will need on-going, site-based professional development tools to meet the changing needs of students in this global economy. This study indicated that teachers, across urban and rural settings, were not trained in cultural diversity which is a significant factor in overrepresentation.

The standard response to alleviate overrepresentation of African Americans in special education has been to call for school and educational reforms. But reform may not be sufficient to meet the macro and micro level issues affecting East Texas schools. This requires members of the community to take steps to academically and personally ameliorate the situation. Only through these steps can schools begin to alleviate the overrepresentation. This finding is significant for legislators who call for educational reform to reduce overrepresentation but do not consider the cultural and economic factors which play a major role in African American overrepresentation in special education. In essence, there appears to be an ideological train wreck occurring. While the states and national government are putting measures in place to address overrepresentation, there is no discussion regarding the racism, cultural, and economic issues which impact special education referrals of children from African American families. In a very real sense, the everyday choices that teachers and administrators make will either contribute to continued inequality or help promote long overdue social transformation.

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