

Disproportionate Representation in Special Education

The disproportionate representation of minority students has been a controversial issue in special education for decades. Historically, students from CLD backgrounds have been, and continue to be disproportionately represented in special education (e.g., Ford, 2012; Oswald, Coutinho, Best, & Singh, 1999; Skiba et al., 2008; Sullivan, 2011; Zhang, Katsiyannis, Ju, & Roberts, 2014). African American, Hispanic, American Indian, and Native Alaskan students are overrepresented in special education; however, Asian American students are underrepresented (Ford, 2012; Zhang et al., 2014). Specifically, African American students are overrepresented in the categories of intellectual disability, emotionally disturbed, specific learning disability, and developmentally delayed with the greatest overrepresentation in each category being African American males (Artiles, Bal, Trent, & Thorius, 2012; Ford, 2012). Hispanic student representation varies from state to state in the aforementioned categories. However, Hispanic students are typically overrepresented in the categories of intellectual disability and learning disability if they are English language learners.

When examining gifted and talented programs, African American, Hispanic, and Native American students are underrepresented. On the other hand, Asian students are underrepresented in the categories of intellectual disability, emotionally disturbed, specific learning disability, and developmentally delayed yet overrepresented in gifted and talented. Disproportionate representation of CLD students in special education is a multifaceted problem attributed to numerous factors (Ford, 2012; Skiba et al., 2008; Trent, Kea, & Oh, 2008; Zhang et al., 2014) including (a) test bias, (b) poverty, (c) special education processes, (d) inequity in general education, (e) issues of behavior management, and (f) cultural mismatch/cultural reproduction (Skiba et al., 2008).

According to the U. S. Department of Education, Census data show that within the public school population, “minority” students are numerically becoming the majority nationally (Aud et al., 2011). Conversely, the teaching population extensively remains Caucasian and female. Cultural differences amongst educators, students, and families have been presented as a key explanation for over-referrals, thus creating overrepresentation (Ford, 2012).

Critical Thinking:

How do you think we, in education, can best tackle this issue of disproportionate overrepresentation? How can you make a positive impact in your classroom?