

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 408 119

RC 020 976

AUTHOR Cahalane, Benita H.  
TITLE The Disproportionate Representation of Minorities in Rural Special Education Programs and What Can Be Done about It.  
PUB DATE Mar 96  
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the American Council on Rural Special Education (ACRES) (Baltimore, MD, March 1996).  
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)  
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.  
DESCRIPTORS Black Students; \*Disability Identification; Educational Discrimination; Equal Education; \*Grouping (Instructional Purposes); Learning Disabilities; \*Mild Mental Retardation; Minority Groups; Rural Schools; School Districts; School Surveys; \*Special Education; \*Student Placement; White Students  
IDENTIFIERS \*African Americans; \*Disproportionate Representation (Spec Educ); United States (Southeast)

ABSTRACT

Overrepresentation of minorities in special education has been a problem for 25 years and was targeted by the Office of Civil Rights as an initiative in 1993. One rural southeastern state examined its special education process from referral to placement to determine if procedures significantly overidentified or underidentified a particular racial group. Ten percent of the students from each of 25 school districts' special education tracking lists were selected to create a pool of 750 potential subjects. From this group, the 341 students that were assessed and referred for special education services for learning problems became the sample for the study. Results indicated that African Americans were overrepresented in programs for mild mentally retarded students, underrepresented in programs for specific learning disabled students, and overrepresented in the initial referral stage. The disproportionate representations of African Americans are findings consistent with results elsewhere in the literature, and indicate that variables such as attitude or expectations toward various races might be explored in future research. Strategies to determine the real causes of overrepresentation of minorities in special education are recommended for state, district, and higher education levels. Contains 16 references. (TD)

\*\*\*\*\*  
\* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made \*  
\* from the original document. \*  
\*\*\*\*\*

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Benita H  
Cahalane

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Benita H. Cahalane  
Mississippi State University  
Mississippi State, MS 39762

ED 408 119

## THE DISPROPORTIONATE REPRESENTATION OF MINORITIES IN RURAL SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS AND WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT IT

Overrepresentation of minorities in special education has long been a problem. One of the first discussions documenting the issue of disproportionate representation of African-Americans, American Indians, Mexican-Americans, and Puerto Ricans in classes for students with mental retardation was presented by Lloyd Dunn (1968). Court cases such as *Diana v. State Board of Education* (1970) and *Guadalupe v. Tempe Elementary School* (1972) were forerunners that addressed this issue by mandating the types of tests given to students (non-verbal) as well as the manner that tests were administered (primary language) (Reschly, Kicklighter & McKee, 1988). These proceedings began litigation concerning the overrepresentation of minorities in special education that continues to the present (Heller, Holtman & Messick, 1982; National Council on Disability, 1992; United States Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights (OCR), 1990). Reschly (1988) in his research on overrepresentative numbers of minorities in special education, contends this problem is one of the most controversial legal issues in special education and related services (p. 316). The impact of disproportionate numbers of minority students on special education programs has influenced both federal legislation (MacMillan, Hendrick & Watkins, 1988; Reschly, Kicklighter & McKee, 1988) and Department of Education policies (Winget, 1991; NASDE, 1991; Reschly, 1979, 1981, 1984, 1991).

Historically, the overrepresentation of minorities in programs for students with disabilities has been debated for 25 years, yet many of the problems cited by Dunn still plague the field of special education today. Since the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) targeted this issue as one of their initiatives beginning in 1993, many state departments of education and school districts have begun to examine special education program enrollments in an attempt to be proactive regarding the overidentification of minorities in programs for students with disabilities.

One southeastern state examined its special education process from referral to placement in an attempt to determine any procedures which significantly overidentified or underidentified any racial group. This paper will discuss this southeastern state's analysis of the data and give suggestions that other states and districts can use to develop their own comprehensive plan for addressing this complexed problem.

### Procedures

Twenty-five school systems in a rural southern state were randomly selected to obtain a representative sample of special education referrals. School systems with 95%

020976



or greater of any racial population were not included in the sample. Review of State Department of Education data indicated that in special education programs there was overrepresentation of African-Americans in programs for students identified as mild mentally retarded while programs for students classified as specific learning disabled were overrepresented with Caucasian. Each of the selected 25 districts were requested to submit a copy of the tracking list of all students referred and assessed for special education programming, whether determined eligible or ineligible for services during the 1992 school year. Ten percent of the students from each of the 25 school's special education tracking list were selected to create a pool of 750 potential subjects. The school systems were requested to provide specific data from the tracking forms for the selected students. From this group of 750, those students assessed and referred for special education services for learning problems (341) were identified as the sample for this study.

### Data Collection

Two documents from each student's record were requested to be copied for data collections purposes: the Student Referral Form, and the Multidisciplinary Eligibility Determination Committee Report. The state department of education mandated the use of these forms for the purpose of documenting the referral/eligibility process; therefore, all 25 districts reported consistent information on students referred for special education. Documents sent to the researchers were reviewed to determine whether the student was referred for a mild learning problem. Only the records that indicated learning problems were used as data sources.

A Student Profile Form (SPF) was designed as a guide to assist in gathering specific data related to student information, assessment, evaluation, and eligibility determination of the special education categories of MMR and SLD. The type information selected was chosen as areas suspected of leading to disproportionate representation of minorities in special education programs (Reschley & Ward, 1991; Chinn & Hughes, 1987; McLeskey, Waldron, Wornhoff, 1990; Ortiz & Yatesm 1983). The SPF was used to document general student information, such as age, grade, gender, race, and whether the student received free/reduced lunch and was enrolled in a Title 1 program. Student free/reduced lunch status had to be gathered from individual parents since that information is considered confidential. Student free/reduced lunch eligibility was one indicator of socio-economic status, whereas Title 1 gave information about the school system's attempt to serve the student in general education prior to special education referral.

### Results

The findings of this study indicated that there was a disproportionate overrepresentation of African-American students identified as mild mentally retarded and an underrepresentation of students identified as specific learning disabled in special education programs. Eligibility criteria or student characteristics were found to

significantly impact the eligibility/non-eligibility identification of students as MMR or SLD. Several general conclusions are warranted:

1. The disproportionate overrepresentation of African-Americans in MMR placements and underrepresentation of SLD placements are findings consistent with results presented elsewhere in the literature and may have implications that go beyond the examination of criteria, by race and by placement category. Variability such as attitude or expectations toward various races are hard to measure, but might be explored in future research.
2. The statistical significance of Adaptive Behavior Scale data for the students identified as MMR in comparison to the ineligible group revealed that African-American students were just as likely to be given the test and determined MMR or ineligible; however, Caucasian students were more likely to be given the assessment and determined MMR or not given the assessment and determined ineligible. The lack of documentation on the actual adaptive behavior test results made it difficult to substantiate previous research findings that found disparity between races regarding adaptive behavior deficits.
3. The absence of significance regarding the presence of a severe discrepancy by race and placement was surprising considering state and national statistics on the prevalence of severe discrepancies in SLD eligibility.
4. The findings of this study indicated that the sample population was higher in African-American (39.54) students and lower in Caucasian (60.41) students when compared to the total special education or total state public school population. This showed that there was an overrepresentation of African-Americans in the initial referral stage.

### Recommendations

Educators are naive to believe that a problem which has continued to manifest itself in various ways for 25 years will be remedied overnight. There are aspects of this situation which have been thoroughly researched, yet research needs to be conducted in other areas to gain clarity about specific aspects of the problem of overrepresentation of minorities in special education programs. Rather than being paralyzed by the magnitude of the situation and those factors which tend to diversify the solution, strategies can be attempted which would be in the circle of influence for districts, states or colleges and universities.

#### State Level-

1. Conduct a statewide analysis of child count data to examine trends by demographic areas, placement, gender and ethnicity.
2. Once data are collected, decide how involved the state will become in mandating

certain remedies (i.e. asking districts to submit a proposal to address aspects of the overrepresentation problem or changing eligibility criteria which tend to overidentify certain ethnic groups) to districts with problems.

3. Examine data based on the observed population in special education programs verses the expected enrollment based on national averages to decide whether the data are truly a portrayal of significant disproportionality or a statistical problem based on enrollment.

#### District Level-

1. Conduct a system-wide analysis of student identification process from referral to placement on a district level and on a building level.
2. Identify what area in the process seems to promote an over or underidentification of any ethnic group within the special education program.
3. Propose a plan to systematically work toward relieving the problem. Include a goal oriented approach with time lines which target dates.
4. Consider appointing a committee for eligibility which reflects the population of the school and the ethnicity of the individual being considered for special education services.
5. Promote quality evaluation at every point, especially in the area of I.Q. and adaptive behavior scales for students suspected as mentally retarded.
6. Enlist the community as much as possible as part of the solution to this problem.
7. Promote a unified system of education for all students.

#### Higher Education Level-

1. Continue to place emphasis on the recruitment of diverse populations of students within preservice and higher level education programs.
2. Infuse effective multicultural teaching practices into teacher education programs so that future teachers are knowledgeable about culturally sensitive or culturally responsive teaching practices with diverse learners (Ewing, 1995).

Finally, it would be difficult to express the impact of this issue more eloquently than William Raspberry when he said that we need to keep in mind that "problems persist after enemies are vanquished and diverting energy into battles with real or imagined enemies often prevents or delays solutions" (cited in Kauffman, 1993, p.6). What are the real enemies in this battle and what are the imagined? When and if we can discern between the two, the greatest gain of all toward remedy will be achieved for the students who are the ones often forgotten in the shuffle of bureaucracy.

## REFERENCES

- Chinn, P. C., & Hughes, S. (1987). Representation of minority students in special education classes. Remedial and Special Education, 8(4), 41-46.
- Diana v. State Board of Education, CA No. C-70-37. (N.D. Cal., July 1970) (consents decree).
- Dunn, L. (1968). Special education for the mildly retarded: Is much of it justifiable? Exceptional Children, 7, 5-24.
- Ewing, N. J. (1995). Restructured teacher education for inclusiveness: A dream deferred for African-American children. In Ford, Obiakor, and Patton (Eds.), *Effective education of African-American exceptional learners*. Texas: Pro-Ed.
- Guadalupe Organization v. Tempe Elementary School. District No. 3, No. 71-435 (D. Ariz., January 24, 1972) (consent decree).
- Heller, K., Holtzman, W., & Messick, S. (Eds.) (1982). *Placing children in special education: A strategy for equity*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- MacMillan, D. L., Hendrick, I. G., & Watkins, A. V. (1988). Impact of Diana, Larry pl, and P. L. 94-142 on minority students. Exceptional Children, 54(5), 86-432.
- McLeskey, J., Waldron, N., & Wornhoff, S. (1990). Factors influencing the identification of black and Caucasian students with learning disabilities. Journal of Learning Disabilities, 23(6), 362-366.
- National Association of State Directors of Special Education, Inc. (1991). (Research Rep. Date: April 26, 1991). Alexandria, VA: Author.
- Ortiz, A., & Yates, J. R. (1983). Incidence of exceptionality among Hispanics: Implications for manpower planning. National Association of bilingual Education, 7, 41-53.
- Reschly, D. (1979). Non-biased assessment. In D. Reschly (Eds.), *School psychology: Perspectives and issues* (pp. 215-253). New York: Academic Press.
- Reschly, D. (1981). Psychological testing in education and placement. American Psychologist, 36, 1094-1102.
- Reschly, D. J. (1984). Beyond I.Q. test bias: The national academy panel's analysis of minority EMR overrepresentation. Educational Researcher, 13(3), 15-19.

Reschly, D., Kicklighter, R., & McKee, P. (1988). Recent placement litigation part II, minority EMR overrepresentation: Comparison of Larry P. (1979, 1984, 1986) with Marshall (1984, 1985) and S-I (1986). School Psychology Review, 17(1), 22-28.

Reschly, D., & Ward, S. (1991). Use of adaptive behavior measures and overrepresentation of black students in programs for students with mild mental retardation. American Journal on Mental Retardation, 21(3), 480-493.

Winget, P. (1991). Court injunction on I.Q. Testing in Crawford v. Honig. Special Edge, 6(1), 1-3.



U.S. Department of Education  
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)  
Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)



# REPRODUCTION RELEASE

(Specific Document)

## I. DOCUMENT IDENTIFICATION:

Title: REVISED - THE DISPROPORTIONATE REPRESENTATION OF MINORITIES IN RURAL SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS AND WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT IN IT	
Author(s): Benita H. Cahalane Ed.D.	
Corporate Source: Mississippi State University	Publication Date:

## II. REPRODUCTION RELEASE:

In order to disseminate as widely as possible timely and significant materials of interest to the educational community, documents announced in the monthly abstract journal of the ERIC system, *Resources in Education* (RIE), are usually made available to users in microfiche, reproduced paper copy, and electronic/optical media, and sold through the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS) or other ERIC vendors. Credit is given to the source of each document, and, if reproduction release is granted, one of the following notices is affixed to the document.

If permission is granted to reproduce and disseminate the identified document, please CHECK ONE of the following two options and sign at the bottom of the page.



Check here

### For Level 1 Release:

Permitting reproduction in microfiche (4" x 6" film) or other ERIC archival media (e.g., electronic or optical) and paper copy.

The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 1 documents

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Sample

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Level 1

The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 2 documents

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN OTHER THAN PAPER COPY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Sample

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Level 2



Check here

### For Level 2 Release:

Permitting reproduction in microfiche (4" x 6" film) or other ERIC archival media (e.g., electronic or optical), but not in paper copy.

Documents will be processed as indicated provided reproduction quality permits. If permission to reproduce is granted, but neither box is checked, documents will be processed at Level 1.

"I hereby grant to the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) nonexclusive permission to reproduce and disseminate this document as indicated above. Reproduction from the ERIC microfiche or electronic/optical media by persons other than ERIC employees and its system contractors requires permission from the copyright holder. Exception is made for non-profit reproduction by libraries and other service agencies to satisfy information needs of educators in response to discrete inquiries."

Sign here please →

Signature: 	Printed Name/Position/Title: Dr. Benita H. Cahalane	
Organization/Address: Mississippi State University Department of Curriculum & Instruction Box 9205 MSU, MS 39762	Telephone: (601) 325-8894	FAX: (601) 325-7857
	E-Mail Address: bhc@ra.msstate.edu	Date: 4/15/97





### III. DOCUMENT AVAILABILITY INFORMATION (FROM NON-ERIC SOURCE):

If permission to reproduce is not granted to ERIC, or, if you wish ERIC to cite the availability of the document from another source, please provide the following information regarding the availability of the document. (ERIC will not announce a document unless it is publicly available, and a dependable source can be specified. Contributors should also be aware that ERIC selection criteria are significantly more stringent for documents that cannot be made available through EDRS.)

Publisher/Distributor:
Address:
Price:

### IV. REFERRAL OF ERIC TO COPYRIGHT/REPRODUCTION RIGHTS HOLDER:

If the right to grant reproduction release is held by someone other than the addressee, please provide the appropriate name and address:

Name:
Address:

### V. WHERE TO SEND THIS FORM:

Send this form to the following ERIC Clearinghouse: <p style="text-align: center;">ERIC/CRESS AT AEL 1031 QUARRIER STREET - 8TH FLOOR P O BOX 1348 CHARLESTON WV 25325  phone: 800/624-9120</p>
--

However, if solicited by the ERIC Facility, or if making an unsolicited contribution to ERIC, return this form (and the document being contributed) to:

**ERIC Processing and Reference Facility**  
1100 West Street, 2d Floor  
Laurel, Maryland 20707-3598

Telephone: 301-497-4080  
Toll Free: 800-799-3742  
FAX: 301-953-0263

e-mail: [ericfac@inet.ed.gov](mailto:ericfac@inet.ed.gov)  
WWW: <http://ericfac.piccard.csc.com>