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AUTHOR Singhal, Rebecca
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ABSTRACT

Some of the reasons for the overrepresentation of minority students in special education programs are reviewed from historical and contemporary perspectives, and the effects of this overrepresentation and some of the proposals to eliminate, or at least remedy, this situation are examined. In the 1960s, many people rejected the genetic explanations of the low rates of success among minority students and replaced these explanations with a theory of cultural deprivation/inferiority. Programs such as Head Start and Chapter 1 were implemented under these assumptions. Anecdotal evidence from recent years suggests that most educators would now say that they do not believe minority group students are genetically or culturally inferior, but research suggests that many teachers act as if they are. Teacher bias and test bias contribute to the overrepresentation of minority group students in special education. A contemporary approach to this problem recognizes that students' culture and language have great impact on their cognitive styles. A culturally sensitive approach must become part of the pre-referral, referral, assessment, and programming process if the problem of overrepresentation of minority students in special education is to be rectified. (Contains 28 references.) (SLD)

Revisiting Segregation: The Overrepresentation of Minority Students in Special Education

Rebecca Singhal
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University of Calgary
Department of Educational Psychology

The overrepresentation of minority students in special education programs, including those designed for students with learning disabilities and the educable mentally retarded, has been plaguing school officials for the past three decades (Majhanovich & Majhanovich, 1993; Williams-Dixon, 1991). The factors responsible for such disparity remain the source of much controversy; unfortunately scholarly debate seems to have brought about little hope for a solution (Williams-Dixon, 1991). For instance, recent numbers indicate that more minority children are served in special education programs for the handicapped than would be expected based solely on the proportion of minority students in the general school population (Maheady, Towne, Algozzine, Mercer, and Ysseldyke, 1990). In addition, decreases in the prevalence of overrepresentation in one area of special education has resulted in increasing rates in another (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Williams-Dixon, 1991). This paper will examine some of the major reasons suggested for this overrepresentation from both a historical and a comptemporary perspective, the effects of such displacement, and intervention and remediation from a sociocultural perspective that has been proposed to eliminate, or at the very least, mediate this systemic problem.

A 1984 report indicates that 3.10 percent of black students and 1.40 percent of Native students were in classes for the educable mentally retarded as compared with 1 percent of non-Hispanic whites (Williams-Dixon, 1991). Similarly, disproportionate numbers of minority students are placed into classes for the learning disabled or emotionally disturbed. This disproportion is especially true for black students that have consistently been overrepresented in classes for the educable mentally retarded (EMR) (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Williams-Dixon, 1991). For instance, black participation in classes for the EMR was almost 3.4 times greater than that of whites in the seventies (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Maheady et al., 1990). Williams-Dixon (1991) points out that the status quo

is maintained by the very definition and criterion of the category 'learning disabled', which is considered to be the 'middle-class' diagnosis. For instance, IQ specifications and achievement test scores for the learning disabled work to exclude minority students since such tests have been shown to underestimate black and minority children's abilities. Therefore, a difference of only 15 points can place a borderline child in a class for the educable mentally retarded skipping the learning disabled classification altogether (Williams-Dixon, 1991).

Although a sharp change in diagnosis began to occur in the 1980's, the disproportion of minority students in special education programs was perpetuated once again as was noted by Tucker (1980, cited in Maheady et al., 1990):

> when it was no longer socially desirable to place black students in EMR classes, it became convenient to place them in the newly provided LD category. It took a year to make the changeover, but the resultant proportional differences were maintained (p. 104)

Therefore, during the 1980's, this pattern repeated itself with the overrepresentation of both black and Hispanic students in programs for individuals with mental retardation, speech and language impairments, and learning disabilities in about one-fourth of the special education programs (Artiles & Trent, 1994).

An examination of this trend into the 1990's clearly demonstrates that this situation has, in fact, worsened. More recent literature has suggested that minority students that would have been placed in classes for the learning disabled or educable mentally retarded in the seventies and eighties, are now being inappropriately rendered to English as second language programs (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Gersten & Woodward, 1994; Majhanovich & Majhanovich, 1993). In addition, recent numbers from a widely cited report from The Department of Education in 1992, concludes that the proportion of

minority youth in special education programs has continued to be larger than their representation in the general school population (US Department of Education, cited in Artiles & Trent, 1994).

The report indicates that while the student population in general education was 70 percent white, 12 percent black, and 13 percent Hispanic, the population of exceptional individuals served during the 1987 school year was 65 percent white, 24 percent black, and 8 percent Hispanic (US Department of Education, 1992, cited in Artiles & Trent, 1994). Surprisingly, however, the report concluded that the exceptionally high disproportion of black students in special education programs was attributable to the fact that black students were more likely than their white counterparts to have experienced poor prenatal, perinatal, or postnatal health care and early childhood nutrition which may have resulted in actual disabilities (US Department of Education, 1992, cited in Artiles & Trent, 1994). Unfortunately, such overgeneralizations continue to mask the real issues that are at the core of this debate.

A recent empirical study confirmed that inappropriate placements continue to occur in our public school systems despite laws and provisions, such as Public Law 94-142 in the United States, that mandate that the eligibility for special education services must not be contingent upon economic disadvantage or cultural differences (Barona, Santos de Barona, & Faykus, 1993). In the present study, 300 students referred for consideration of special education placement were examined to determine the differential contribution of four sociocultural variables on special education eligibility decisions. The four variables were ethnicity, socioeconomic status, family size, and father absence. One hundred students each were assigned to the three categories of mentally retarded (37% white, 34% black, 29% Hispanic), learning disabled (53% white, 34% black, 29% Hispanic), and assessed and not found eligible for special education services (30% white,

40% black, 30% Hispanic). The Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-Revised (WISC-R) was administered to each of the students to determine special education eligibility. Information regarding the four sociocultural variables was collected by the authors through parent interviews and school records.

The data was analyzed in order to determine the amount of variance accounted for by the sociocultural variable when the WISC-R factor was adjusted for. This procedure was repeated for each variable, elibibility group, and WISC-R factor independently and in combination. F-tests were then conducted to determine whether the amount of variance accounted for was significant. The results indicate that no sociocultural variables contributed significantly to predicting learning disabled eligibility; however, ethnicity made a significant contribution to the prediction of the non-eligible group with the other three variables proving insignificant. In addition, ethnicity was found significant in predicting mentally retarded placements as was socioeconomic status. Again, this study confirms that minority students are more likely than white students to be placed in programs for the educable mentally retarded not because of their IQ, but because of their race (Barona, Santos de Barona, & Faykus, 1993).

According to Williams-Dixon (1991), such placements may constitute a new version of segregation and discrimination by sentencing minority students to special classes with low or non-existent educational expectations. While many educational policy makers are willing to make the claim that justified and complete explanations for these disparities are still lacking, a number of concerned educators and parents worry that minority students are being placed into special education classes mainly to alleviate teachers' problems in dealing with culturally different children and youth (Williams-Dixon, 1991).

Historical Perspectives

Prejudice

Although the focus of this paper is on present day accounts of the overrepresentation of minority learners in special education programs, a discussion of historical explanations is necessary for a complete understanding of more modern day proposals. In the past, it was both acceptable and commonplace to justify racial segregation, immigration restrictions, and educational inequity based on the belief of genetic differences (Grossman, 1991). Today, these conditions are no longer acceptable in our society and theoretically, in our educational system; however, some individuals continue to believe that different ethnic groups inherit different intellectual potentials that cause, or at least contribute to, ethnic differences in school outcomes (Grossman, 1991; Reschly, 1991).

Those who believe that there are inherited ethnic and class differences in intelligence find it understandable that some minority groups are disproportionately placed in classes for the educable mentally retarded and that white, non-Hispanic middle-class students are more likely to be assigned to courses of study for "high potential" students in which teachers stress independent study and higher level cognitive skills. At the same time, Hispanic, Native, and black students are overrepresented in tracks for "low-potential" students in which teachers stress instructional techniques that involve concrete, repetitive drill and practice (Grossman, 1991). It is for this very reason that minority students are consistently underrepresented in programs for the gifted and talented (Grossman, 1991; Smith, LeRose, & Clasen, 1991; Williams-Dixon, 1991).

Similarly, Thomas (1986) traced the historical mechanisms used by the public school system for placing Italian, Polish, and southern black immigrant children into special classes for "social adjustment" in the 1920's. It is suggested that the testing and

tracking used in these special education classes likely discriminated against the unassimilated newcomers because teachers and administrators feared these students were destined for a life of crime. Placement into such programs was used as a control mechanism based on stereotypes, prejudiced beliefs, and fear (Thomas, 1986).

Cultural Deprivation

In the 1960's many people rejected the genetic explanations of the low rates of success among minority and working class students as being racist and replaced it with a theory of cultural deprivation/inferiority (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Grossman, 1991). According to these theorists, members of certain minority groups are not born inferior, but rather they are brought up in cultural environments that deprive them of the advantages necessary to succeed educationally in the superior, dominant 'EuroAmerican/Canadian' culture (Grossman, 1991). Dunn, a leading expert in the area of special education in the 1960's, also proposed that "socioculturally deprived" students were at risk for being placed in classes for exceptional learners and maintained that throughout time, socioculturally deprived children were identified as those that came "from poverty, broken and inadequate homes, and low status ethnic groups" (cited in Artiles & Trent, 1994).

Unfortunately, however, as a remedy Dunn concluded that minority and poor children achieved at higher levels when they attended schools with children from "white middle- class homes". This analysis is extremely problematic in that ethnic students' increase in academic improvement was attributed to their association with white students when, in fact, minority students' improved performance in integrated settings was more likely due to increased access to improved facilities and enhanced learning opportunities (Artiles & Trent, 1994). Again, Dunn's proposal failed to address the real issues concerning the overrepresentation of minority students in special education programs.

In order to combat the characteristics that these theorists attributed to culturally deprived students - low levels of educational aspiration; poor verbal skills; pessimism; conformity; dependency; inability to delay gratification; and concrete and convergent thinking, programs such as Head Start and Chapter 1 were implemented to compensate for students' cultural deprivation in order to expose them to the influence of the more positive, advantaged culture of the majority of students (Grossman, 1991).

Contemporary Perspectives

Teacher Bias

Anecdotal evidence from the last decade suggests that most educators would claim that they do not believe that minority students are genetically or culturally inferior (Grossman, 1991). However, research suggests that many teachers act as if they are (Grossman, 1991). This finding is troublesome since national trends indicate that ethnic minorities will reach 44.6 percent in metro Toronto, 39.3 percent in Vancouver, 25 percent in both Edmonton and Calgary, 20.6 percent in Winnipeg, and 19.9 percent in Montreal by the year 2001, with the largest groups consisting of Chinese, South Asians, African, and West Asians/Arabs (Majhanovich & Majhanovich, 1993).

Although a few studies failed to find significant ethnic differences in educators' expectations for their students, most studies indicate that beginning in preschool and continuing through their college careers, teachers expect white middle-class students to perform better in school than minority students, even when achievement test scores, grades, and school histories would predict otherwise (Gottfredson, Marciniak, Birdseye, & Gottfredson, 1995; Grossman, 1991; Kolb & Jussim, 1994; Jussim, 1989; Madon, Jussim, & Eccles, 1997; Page & Rosenthal, 1990; Plewis, 1997; Ross & Jackson, 1991; Trujillo, 1986; Witty & DeBaryshe, 1994). This finding has been replicated in numerous studies, specifically when teachers are given the exact same information about students in

their own classes or in experiments, and consistently attribute higher academic and intellectual potential to EuroAmerican/Canadian students. These biased expectations lead to inaccurate performance evaluations by teachers and to self-fulfilling prophecies in students (Jussim, 1989). According to Witty and DeBaryshe (1994), self-fulfilling prophecies are created once students internalize their teachers' expectations, use them as the basis of their own self-evaluations, and subsequently alter their academic motivation and behaviour to reach these expectations. The end result, whether it is a positive or negative influence on learning and academic achievement, depends on the teacher's beliefs, perceptions, and expectations for the student.

A study concerned with the underrepresentation of minority students in programs for the gifted and talented used the theory of self-fulfilling prophecies to examine this disparity. The assumption underlying the study was that of proportionality: giftedness is randomly distributed across race, gender, and ethnic groups; therefore, an identification system which works properly must identify students representative of their subgroup in proportion to their numbers in the total population (Smith, LeRose, & Clasen, 1991). Since numbers indicate that minority students are underrepresented and white students overrepresented in gifted programs (Chinn & Hughes, 1987), the study proposed that conventional methods for identifying giftedness have failed (Eby & Smutny, 1990, cited in Smith, LeRose, & Clasen, 1991).

The identification of the students for The Lighthouse Project took place as the students entered kindergarten. The project believed that minority children should be represented proportionately in the gifted sample and in the gifted program. Thus, the top-scoring (specific test/criteria for identification was not provided) 9 percent of each major ethnic group (white, black, Hispanic, and "other") were identified as gifted and randomly assigned to either a gifted treatment or regular (no special treatment) track. Ninety-one

students were identified and placed in total. This longitudinal study followed students throughout their school career and results were recorded 12 years later in their senior year. The authors concluded that of the treated minority students, 63 percent graduated in higher education and no students dropped out of high school. In contrast, of the minority students assigned to the no treatment group, only 21 percent graduated in higher education and an alarming 45 percent dropped out of school prior to graduation. The decision of which students to exclude was made randomly and therefore equitably, however, the authors acknowledge the results were disastrously unfair. The research project did, however, prove extremely valuable to educators and researchers alike. The findings indicate that access to programs for minority students does make a difference and therefore raises the equity issue to the status of critical - access to equitable gifted programming for minorities student should not be considered a privilege but a right (Smith, LeRose, & Clasen, 1991).

According to Grossman (1991), educators also maintain prejudicial behavioural expectations for minority students, especially black students, whom they expect to be more disruptive and deviant than white exceptional learners. This in part would explain the overrepresentation of black students in special education programs for the severely emotionally disturbed (Artiles & Trent, 1994; MacMillan, Gresham, Lopez, & Bocian, 1996; Reilly, 1991). An empirical study conducted by Bahr, Fuchs, Stecker, and Fuchs (1991) sought to examine this issue. The study explored whether classroom teachers' perceptions of difficult-to-teach students are racially biased.

Participants in the study included 40 classroom teachers each of whom nominated a difficult-to-teach (DTT) pupil most likely to be referred for psychological evaluation and placement in special education. Half of the students were black and the other half were white. All of the grade 5 students selected were male with a mean age of 11 years and 5

months. The teachers of the students were 73 percent female; 70 percent and 30 percent were white and black, respectively.

Information regarding student behaviour was obtained from teacher interviews, teacher ratings, student performance on academic measures, and observations of pupils' classroom behaviour. The results of the study indicate that both black and white teachers rated black DTT pupils significantly more appropriate for referral than white students (Bahr et al., 1991). The authors suggest that this result is consonant with recent evidence indicating continued disproportionality in the placement of black students in special education. However, because the teachers descriptions and ratings of their DTT students' classroom behaviour as well as teacher responses on the severity-manageability-tolerability scales were similar for black and white students, the researchers concluded that the reason for the disproportionality was more likely due to the academic performance of the two groups (Bahr et al., 1991). For instance, the black students' scores on the Woodcock Reading Mastery Tests were significantly lower than the white students and 13 of the black DTT students had been retained in at least one grade compared to only 5 of the 20 white DTT students. However, once again this raises the issue of black underachievement and grade retention. Based on previous evidence, it can be speculated that self-fulfilling prophecies based on teacher expectations and perceptions of black students' academic and intellectual potential may have, to some extent, contributed to the black students' poorer performance.

A recent study was conducted in response to Bahr et al.'s (1991) earlier research. MacMillan et al. (1996) proposed that the systematic referral of children for academic and/or behavioural problems is not racially biased in any manner on the part of the referring teachers. In the present investigation, 150 children, 36.6 percent white, 28.6 percent black, and 34.6 percent Hispanic, in grades 2 through 4 who had been

recommended for prereferral interventions, were compared on a number of cognitive/achievement and behaviour scales. The instruments included the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-III (WISC-III), Wide Range Achievement Test-Revised (WRAT-R), School Archival Record Search (SARS), Social Skills Rating System-Teacher (SSRS-T), Conners Teacher Rating Scale-28 (CTRS-28), and Critical Events Index (CEI). The data was analyzed with five multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVA) and one analysis of variance (ANOVA). All analyses consisted of a 3 (ethnic group) x 2 (gender) design.

The results of the study revealed that white students scored significantly higher on WISC-III VIQ and WRAT-R reading than both the black and Hispanic students. As such, the authors suggested that contrary to the notion that minority group children are discriminated against by teachers in the referral process, their findings indicate that black and Hispanic students who are referred are significantly lower on VIQ and reading than their white counterparts (MacMillan et al., 1996). However, as Majhanovich and Majhanovich (1993) point out, further assessment of students' native or first language cognitive/academic abilities is necessary for a student who manifests a low VIQ. MacMillan et al. (1996) proposed that teachers may show greater reticence and reluctance in referring minority students based on sensitivity to multicultural issues and past litigation concerning inappropriate placement of minority students (Reschly, 1991).

Findings from the behavioural scales indicated that black and Hispanic students scored significantly higher on the SSRS-T scale than white students and black students scored significantly more hyper than both Hispanic and white students on the CTRS-28. Both of these behavioural scales are, however, teacher reports. Grossman (1991) provides a possible explanation for this suggesting that students whose ethnic or socioeconomic backgrounds are different from their teachers' may get into trouble if they behave in ways

that are acceptable in their homes and communities, but not in school. For instance, many black students are brought up to be more active, emotionally responsive, and assertive than white middle-class teachers are prepared to accept (Reilly, 1991). As a result, black students are often inappropriately referred to and accepted into special education programs for the behaviour disordered and emotionally disturbed based on teacher reports and scores from behavioural scales (Grossman, 1991; Reilly, 1991).

Based on these findings, the authors concluded that black and Hispanic students were not referred based on teacher bias, but rather because of their poorer scores on the intelligence tests and poorer conduct and behaviour. However, their conclusions suggest that tests that were normed on white middle-class individuals can and should be appropriated to students of different cultures. This leads to the issue of test bias in the referral process and its effect on the placement of minority students in special education.

Test Bias

Test bias has been proposed to be a major contributor to the overrepresentation problem (Maheady et al., 1990) and as Reilly (1991) proposes, "culturally and linguistically different students are most affected by the process of standardized testing". Of particular concern has been the process by which items are selected for inclusion in standardized tests, the standardization sample used in norming these measures, and the tests' validation process (Maheady et al., 1990). In general, it has been argued that traditional standardized tests (particularly IQ tests), rely heavily upon the values and experiences of white middle-class culture and therefore, discriminate against students from different cultures. In addition, critics have noted that normative samples, which traditionally include greater numbers of whites, weigh performance levels in favour of the white middle-class culture (Maheady et al., 1990).

Maheady et al. (1990) point out that in the face of these serious concerns, educators have spent considerable amount of time in search of the "fair test", including attempts to develop "new" testing procedures (culture-fair and culture-free) tests, using adaptive behaviour scales in conjunction with intelligence measures, using criterion-referenced measures, and interpreting results using local and /or special group norms. However, they conclude that for the most part, these procedures have not significantly reduced the overrepresentation of minority students in special education.

Remediation - A Sociocultural Perspective

As mentioned above, many researchers have criticized the way standard assessment instruments have resulted all too often in the placement of minority children in lower level streams or in special education classes. This debate has resurfaced as our demographics continue to change with ethnic minorities making up almost 40 percent of the population in major urban centres (Majhanovich & Majhanovich, 1993). As such, many of these new immigrant students are not native speakers of English and because of poor assessment practices, are being placed into classes for the learning disabled (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Gersten & Woodward, 1994; Majhanovich & Majhanovich, 1993).

Cummins (cited in Majhanovich & Majhanovich, 1993) suggests that many of these placements arise from a misunderstanding on the part of the teacher and assessor as to the real linguistic proficiency of minority children. By the second year in the host country, minority students may appear to have mastered the new language (English), as they are quite capable of carrying on casual conversations and following most instructions (cited in Majhanovich & Majhanovich, 1993). However, they may also be experiencing learning problems which will result in referral for assessment. The assessor, after speaking with the child and finding him or her sufficiently fluent, will probably assume that ability in the new language is not a real problem and will proceed to administer the verbal tests of

the WISC-R, intended for native English speakers (Majhanovich & Majhanovich, 1993). Then, when the student performs poorly on the VIQ, which is normally considered one of the best predictors for overall IQ, the assessor will naturally judge that the student is below average. As such, the student will be inappropriately labeled as "at risk" or placed in a classroom for the learning disabled (Gersten & Woodward, 1994). A case study by Troyna and Siraj-Blatchford (1993) concluded that ESL students inappropriately placed in learning disabled programs believed they were denied equality of educational opportunity.

New research in the area of ESL students and their placements into special education programs has brought about a new perspective in remediation. Earlier research focused on alternative teaching/instructional strategies such as DISTAR and precision teaching (Maheady et al., 1990) and multicultural education with a focus on teaching students to accept and appreciate diversity (Dean, Salend, & Taylor,1993). These educational strategies are extremely valuable and should be included as part of the solution to the overrepresentation problem; however, theory in ESL teaching has brought forth a sociocultural perspective to this debate.

Cummins (cited in Majhanovich & Majhanovich, 1993) suggests that many educators' belief that students' academic difficulties are caused because of interference of the home language with English is false. He argues that it is well known that one's sense of identity is closely linked to one's first language and if the first language is supressed, or seen as having less value than the second language, the students' sense of identity and self esteem may be damaged (cited in Majhanovich & Majhanovich, 1993). This point was perhaps best advanced by Soviet developmental psychologist L.S. Vygotsky. He believed that one's mental functioning could be understood only by examining the social and cultural processes from which it derived and that tools and signs, primarily language, mediated mental functioning (Wertsch & Tulviste, 1992). As such, an individual, or

student, can not be separated from his or her experiences, culture, and language. Although Vygotsky's writings were written over 50 years ago, his ideas are now being embraced by concerned educators to address the problem of minority overrepresentation.

A recent report by Wright (1995) addressed this issue stating that social, cultural, psychological, and behaviour factors all influence achievement among pupils. Moreover, minority students are subject to the unique cultural influences that are often at variance with the majority of the white population, influencing their achievement in a majority-dominated society. Therefore, in recent years, much has been written concerning the effect of culture and language on learning (Wright, 1995). Until now, the emerging issues of ethnicity, minority status, bilingual education, second language acquisition, and socioeconomic status have not been considered as relevant to the needs and concerns of special education (Wright, 1995). Research has shown that most of the instructional planning and activities conducted by special education teachers are still based on the traditional model of instruction, with little consideration being given to students' cultural and linguistic background. Artiles and Trent (1984) propose that an approach to this issue of disparity must emphasize the interplay between the ecological and cultural facets of children's development and learning processes. From this perspective, students' learning processes are seen as grounded in a constructivist perspective, as socially based, and as context specific (Artiles & Trent, 1994). This contemporary approach is parallel to Vygotsky's earlier writings. As Wright (1995) concludes, as educators we can no longer afford to ignore the impact that culture and language have on a learner's cognitive styles, and this approach must become part of the pre-referral, referral, assessment, and programming process if the problem of overrepresentation of minority students in special education is to be rectified.

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Organization/Address: University of Calgary Dept. of Educational Psychology	Telephone: 403-239-3849	Fax: 403-241-9460
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