

## **The Over-Representation and Under-Representation of Minority Students in Special Education and Gifted and Talented Programs**

The disproportional representation of culturally, linguistically, and ethnically diverse and low-income students in special education and gifted and talented programs has been a persistent issue for many decades. It has been a long standing trend that the percentage of minority students constituting special education programs exceeds their percentage make up of the total enrollment. Similarly, for gifted and talented programs, the percentage of minority students constituting gifted and talented programs is below their percentage make up of total enrollment. In fact, data on the racial composition of gifted students in elementary school shows that while minority students comprise approximately 36% of the U.S. school population, they comprise less than 20% (19.7%) of students in gifted and talented programs (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2002). In contrast, White students, at 59% of the student population, make up 72% of students in gifted and talented programs (Ford, et al., 2008). Disproportionality is an issue with English language learners (ELL) as well. According to a 2000 survey conducted by the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) of the U.S. Department of Education, 6.4% of all students are enrolled in gifted and talented programs, whereas only 1.4% of all ELL students are enrolled in these same programs (Hopstock & Stephenson, 2003).

Over the next decade, the majority of schools will become multi-racial as the school age population continues to diversify, underscoring the importance of appropriate identification and placement of minority students. Demographic data on public school enrollment changes indicate that nationwide the proportion of White students in the nation's public school population is declining while non-white enrollment is increasing. In 1960, the percentage of students enrolled in elementary and secondary schools that were White was 86.6%. By the 2005-06 school year, it was 57.1% (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2006). This trend is projected to continue, with Latinos—already the largest minority group in public schools—increasing at a greater rate than other racial/ethnic groups (Orfield & Lee, 2007). Latinos, the fastest growing segment of the school age population, are projected to outnumber white students by 2050. Given the status quo in which minority groups are inadequately identified for special education and gifted programs, an increasingly diversifying student population will likely lead to greater challenges for school districts.

Rather than attributing disproportional minority placement in special education and gifted programs to a single variable, scholarship in the field of education has uncovered a wide variety of factors that are thought to be at the root of disproportional placement. Indeed, a report completed by the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) stated,

“For students having difficulty in school who do not have a medically diagnosed disability, key aspects of the context of schooling itself, including administrative, curricular/instructional, and interpersonal factors, may contribute to their identification as having a disability and may contribute

to the disproportionately high or low placements of minorities. The complexity of issues of culture and context in schools makes it nearly impossible to tease out the precise variables that affect patterns of special education placement. (Donovan & Cross, 2002)

Among the many factors contributing to the misidentification of minority students for special education, students labeled with disabilities often 1) have inadequate classroom instruction prior to referral to special education; 2) are subject to inconsistent or arbitrary placement policies and processes; and 3) if living in low income communities, are placed in special education simply due to the lack of effective schooling options (Harry & Klingner, 2007, 2006). Furthermore, the over-identification of low-income and minority students for remedial and special education classes and the underrepresentation of diverse students in gifted and talented programs is reinforced by cross-cultural misunderstanding, assessment bias, and teacher referral processes (Harry & Klingner, 2007, 2006; Ford, et al., 2004; Skiba, et al., 2008).

In order to address these issues, educators and policymakers need to consider how to change the identification and placement procedures for special education and gifted programs, and how to improve services that address the academic needs and achievement of these historically neglected populations. A growing body of research has identified approaches to assessment, cross-cultural curriculum and program implementation, as well as interventions and structural changes to schooling that can improve proportionality when implemented in a culturally responsive manner (Briggs, et al., 2008; Joseph & Ford, 2006). To obviate the need for special education placement, schools need to identify children in need of additional help earlier and improve general education services, in conjunction with measures that improve teacher preparation and address the multiplicity of biological and social factors contributing to disproportionality (Donovan & Cross, 2002).

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