

Commentary

Where Are All the Black Male Special Education Teachers?

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Experts in the field of special education are familiar with shortages. Special education teachers are at the top of the critical shortage list in educational systems in nearly every state in the United States, especially in urban areas (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). A shortage of special education teachers when a disproportionate number of Black male children receive special education services (Irving & Hudley, 2008; Mickelson & Greene, 2006; Sample, 2010) means that Black male children receiving special education have limited engagement with Black male teachers. In light of this disparity, Black male children must navigate learning, behavioral, and social issues without culturally experienced minority role models.

The under-representation of Black male teachers in special education has significant consequences. Historically, Black males account for the disproportionately high number of children served in K-12 special education programs (Talbert-Johnson, 2001). Often, the children are evaluated using racially biased assessments (Cartledge & Duke, 2008). Further, the children are often assessed and serviced by educators who reflect neither the diversity of the student environment and classroom (Tyler, Yzquierdo, Lopez-Reyna, & Flippen, 2002) nor are the educators prepared to meet the cultural needs of students from diverse backgrounds (Cramer, 2015; Ford, 2012). In urban public school areas, larger concentrations of minorities often exist (Ford, 2012) and Black males with special education needs will spend a majority of their public education in a classroom with a nonminority female teacher (Bryan & Ford, 2014). Researchers have suggested that for minority children, particularly in urban schools, the notion of being taught by White American females with limited exposure to the experiences and culture of minority children is distressing (Cramer, 2015; Talbert-Johnson, 2001). For example, Talbert-Johnson (2001) found that many White American female special education teachers felt poorly prepared to work with Black children. Black male children who matriculate through K-12 public schools without engaging with a Black male teacher means the students are denied perspectives, guidance, and an understanding that may only come from a Black male teacher.

Often, Black male children in special education programs can face challenges within their schools and communities that can lead to exceedingly high dropout

rates and low achievement levels compared to their peers enrolled in general education programs (Blanchett, 2006; Frazier, 2009). Additionally, Black male children face poor academic and social outcomes, and have more restrictions regarding access to education environments that same-aged and non-minority peers have been known to thrive within (Cramer, 2015). The realities have not changed much for Black male children, and with limited numbers of successful role models in public school classrooms, the cycle of poor outcomes in special education may continue if no immediate changes occur.

Issues facing Black male children in special education must be addressed. Education reform with the goal of drastically improving adult outcomes for Black male children has been one of the biggest failures in schools nationwide. Although several matters need to be urgently addressed, one of the more burdensome complaints has been finding effective and culturally competent teachers to serve as role models, advocates, and leaders for Black male children (Wilson, 2015). Therefore, the question becomes, “How are recruitment and retention opportunities created for Black males to teach in special education?”

Based on the need to diversify the United States teaching force, the alarming fact is that less than 2% of the nation’s public school teachers are Black men (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Thus, the current pool of Black male teachers is small, and disconcerting realities indicate that only a fraction of the available Black male teachers choose special education teaching careers. Lower percentages of Black male teachers in special education programs would in part indicate that school district officials have a limited pool of applicants when hiring special education instructors. Based on the short supply of Black male special education teachers and increasing diversity of public school populations (Tyler et al., 2002), the intent to recruit, train, and retain Black male teachers in special education programs should be clear. So, what are the steps that need to occur to bring more Black male teachers into special education programs?

Funding Priorities for Special Education Teacher Preparation

The priority level for funding programs to recruit and retain Black male teachers in special education programs must be given greater urgency. More federal and state resources are needed in order to recruit, train, and support good teachers (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Administrators and leaders at colleges and universities must demand resources for teacher preparation programs in order to target the recruitment of Black male teachers for special education programs. Special education teacher preparation programs are often smaller at colleges or universities; therefore, competitive funding should be available for the special education program leaders who are making efforts to increase and diversify the applicant pool. Funding for teacher preparation programs used to target Black male special education teachers from federal and statewide agencies should be allocated directly to colleges and universities for administrators to recruit and retain Black male teachers if the initiative is to be taken seriously. Considering the need, leaders of the teacher preparation programs should be provided with grant funding to reduce the cost of tuition, provide stipends to fully fund tuition, provide funding for field training in appropriate settings, including diverse education settings, induction support,

and other support used to increase the pool of effective and prepared Black male special education teachers.

Priority Compensation and Higher Pay

Nationally, popular consensus exists that teachers are underpaid (OECD, 2015). Overall, teachers need to earn higher wages; however, for leaders to get serious about recruiting and retaining special education teachers, higher wages, bonuses, and other incentives must be given increased thoughtful attention. Higher wages are necessary for most teachers, but for special education teachers who are faced with increased demands (e.g., case management duties, high job stress, high-risk working conditions) (Brunsting, Sreckovic, & Lane, 2014), higher wages, bonuses, and other incentives are extremely important for recruitment and retention. Generally, individuals who want to enter the teaching workforce will find school divisions where higher pay is offered more appealing (Guarino, Santibañez, & Daley, 2006). The opportunity to earn top salaries, compared to other notable careers, such as engineering and technology, will certainly attract attention, including the interest and attention Black males seeking teaching careers.

Invest Early in Teaching Careers

Recruiting Black males to work with Black male children who have disabilities could start with emphasizing the need within the profession. Officials of colleges and universities offering teaching programs in special education can collaborate with officials in local high schools and colleges to find diverse pools of candidates. Officials in colleges and universities with special education teacher preparation programs can recruit aggressively within local and state organizations (e.g., National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) and visit classes at local historically Black colleges and universities, and public K-12 schools, to share success stories about Black male teachers. Individuals who oversee special education programs at higher education institutions should make certain that recruitment literature, websites, and social media include reports of successful Black male special education teachers to increase inspiration for other Black males to choose the special education field. Success stories may include a range of positive stories about Black male special educators in leadership roles within K-12 special education classrooms and K-12 administration programs. To help resolve the issues within the special education field, it is vital that administrators hire more Black male special education faculty members who can serve as role models, increase program statuses, and represent how the teaching field should be diversified at all levels.

Innovative and Alternative Programs

Special education programs overall continue to have a critical shortage of personnel who are qualified to teach children with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2015); therefore, leaders within teacher preparation programs must use innovative ways to recruit and prepare teachers. Technology is one method leaders can use as a means to reach a wider audience to recruit and retain individuals interested in teaching in the special education field. The recent

advancements in technology and its use by instructors within higher education programs to prepare special education teachers has garnered attention from researchers (Bullock, Gable, & Mohr, 2008; Sebastian, Egan, & Mayhew, 2009). In effect, the technology used in distance learning educational programs within the special education field has been used as a way to certify special educators (McDonnell et al., 2011). Distance learning educational opportunities have been used to recruit more diverse candidates, including Black males. For example, I have experienced the increased enrollment of minorities, including Black males, in a distance learning special education program at one local college. Often, learners experience conflicts with childcare and not having enough time based on work and other adult responsibilities that have kept them from enrolling in college programs (Bay, 1999). Use of distance education to address identified conflicts could increase the number of adults seeking access to a college education, thereby increasing and providing access for minorities, particularly Black males, to college programs.

Alternative licensure programs, often defined as an alternate to a 4- or 5-year degree program, are quite popular in the United States. Reports showed that as many as 35 states have an alternative certification program in special education (Rosenberg, Boyer, Sindelar, & Misra, 2007). Research studies have shown that because the programs may be shorter in duration and may involve earlier teaching experiences for candidates (Sindelar, McCray, Brownell, & Kraft, 2014), the use of alternative licensure programs has increased recruitment of minorities and men compared to established and traditional teacher preparation programs (Blazer, 2012). Additionally, it has been reported that teachers in shortage fields, such as special education programs, have been attracted to alternative licensure programs (Blazer, 2012). The main attraction to the programs includes having more flexible schedules and a fast track for completing degrees and certifications (Blazer, 2012). In their study comparing a large traditional and alternative special education program in Memphis, Tennessee, Robertson and Singleton (2010) presented the total number of male and female graduates in the alternative and traditional programs. Robertson and Singleton (2010) found that higher numbers of males graduated from the alternative programs (20%) compared to 7% within the traditional program, and a higher number of Blacks graduated from the alternative program (39%) compared to 22% within the traditional program. Robertson and Singleton suggested that the larger number of graduates from alternative licensure programs might be associated with efforts to recruit individuals to teach in inner city schools. Black graduates of the Memphis alternative special education program were more likely to be employed and maintain employed in area schools (Robertson & Singleton, 2010). The findings can be seen as an example of an alternative licensure program as a pathway to recruit and retain Black male special education teachers. The findings by Robertson and Singleton (2010) may be useful for teacher preparation programs that move toward a more targeted effort to recruit Black men for special education teaching positions, particularly in urban environments.

Conclusion

This commentary brings to attention the need to increase the number of Black male special education teachers within special education programs in the

United States. The goal was to present ideas to recruit and retain Black male special education teachers. The steps outlined to bring more Black male teachers into special education programs are not exhaustive. My hope is that the presented considerations will be strongly deliberated by stakeholders within the education system who are interested in doing more to increase the number of Black male teachers in the special education field. The implications are great for Black male children in special education if the status quo of predominantly White teachers continues, despite a growing diversity within the student population in public schools. In other words, Black male children in special education programs will face issues that will only become more pervasive and lead to the same poor outcomes if the methods to recruit and retain increased numbers of qualified Black male special education teachers are not addressed.

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