
Is There a Disproportionate Representation of African American Males in Special Education? A Causal-Comparative Investigation


Kiena S. Hughley

Youngstown State University, kshughley@ysu.edu

Karen H. Larwin

Youngstown State University, khlarwin@ysu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.gardner-webb.edu/joel>

 Part of the [Disability and Equity in Education Commons](#), [Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons](#), and the [Special Education and Teaching Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hughley, Kiena S. and Larwin, Karen H. () "Is There a Disproportionate Representation of African American Males in Special Education? A Causal-Comparative Investigation," *Journal of Organizational & Educational Leadership*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.gardner-webb.edu/joel/vol7/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Education at Digital Commons @ Gardner-Webb University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Organizational & Educational Leadership by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Gardner-Webb University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@gardner-webb.edu.

Introduction

History tells us that as a society, we have contributed to the stigmatization and prejudicial treatment of individuals with disabilities. Society has isolated, segregated, medicated, and institutionalized them. According Antonak and Livneh (2000), society's negative attitudes toward individuals with disabilities have caused obstacles in fulfilling a role and attaining their goals. It is important for counselors and therapists to understand the nature of disabilities to care for them properly and ethically. In short, the Fourteenth Amendment states that "no state can make or enforce any law" that reduces the privileges and freedoms of an individual (Interactive Constitution, 2020). Although most forced sterilizations took place in institutions, individuals with disabilities who lived with their families were sterilized without consent. The first sterilization was in Indiana in 1907 (Kappel, 2009). This came in part from the Eugenics Movement, a scientific way of "improving" the human race by preventing the procreation of "confirmed criminals" "idiots," "imbeciles," and "rapists" (Kappel, 2009, p. 17).

A hallmark case that marked the beginning of citizens challenging the legislation that allowed sterilization was known as the "three is enough" case (Buck v. Bell, 274 U.S. 200 1927). Dr. John H. Bell, a superintendent of an institution, recommended that Carrie Buck, a woman who was raped and became pregnant, be sterilized without the perpetrator being liable (Kappel, 2009). Carrie Buck's mother also lived in the institution. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes rejected the equal protection under the law argument and ruled in favor of Bell. This case has never been overturned.

The pressure to change the laws came about in 1960. History proved that time, money, and energy were used to control individuals with developmental and intellectual disabilities. However, by the 1970s a decline was seen to prevent individuals with disabilities from having

children. The 1980s marked a change in legislation for parents, guardians, or an adult with enough intelligence to make sound decisions regarding lifesaving treatments, and, in 2001, the state of Virginia apologized for its role in eugenics (Kappel, 2009). The purpose of this historical viewpoint is to show the progress made with treatment of people with disabilities, and to serve as a reminder that there is still work to be done.

Students who have been evaluated for having a suspected disability may qualify for special education services in one of the 13 disabilities, as outlined in IDEA (2004), and having a significant discrepancy between performance and ability, limited progress or deficiency in a cognitive area, evidence of emotional or behavioral disturbances, or problems with fine or gross motor skills. Students are given a multi-factored evaluation in which a battery of tests, interviews, and statements from parents and teachers are given. Cultural biases exist in testing: data show that racial groups were over-identified. African Americans are almost three-times as likely as Whites to be identified as “mentally retarded” and almost twice as likely to be identified as having an “emotional disturbance” (Oswald, Coutinho, Best, & Singh, 1999).

Several court cases involved children whose civil and educational rights had been violated opened the door for the policies and laws in special education that we have today. Parents sought to integrate John Phillip Sousa Junior High School in the District of Columbia (DC) and were denied solely based on race. In May of 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court held that the DC racially segregated, public school system violated the due process clause of the Fifth Amendment (*Bolling v. Sharpe*, 347 U.S. 497 1954). Again, in DC, a lawsuit was brought forth based on ability grouping using a single standardized measure which resulted in discriminatory practices. A civil rights activist, Julius Hobson, filed a lawsuit against the DC’s board of education (*Hobson v. Hansen* (269 F. Supp. 401 D.D.C. 1967). The U.S. Supreme Court held

that it was unconstitutional to deprive student's equal education (poor Blacks/affluent Whites). It was court ordered that the district not track students, integrate teachers, and provide bussing. In 1968, Lloyd Dunn, a past president of the Council for Exceptional Children, was a pioneer in the development of tests that allowed parents and teachers alike to understand, teach, and assist children with disabilities (Moran, 2018). He was also the first to bring disproportionality of African American students to the forefront. Finally, *Larry P. v. Riles* (495 F. Supp. 926 N.D. Cal. 1979) remediated the reliance on ability testing of African American students and placing them in "mentally retarded" classes in California. The court ordered the district to develop plans to eliminate disproportionality of African American students in "mentally retarded" [*sic*] classes. Use of the ability testing (IQ) violated the Education of Handicapped Children (EHC) & Rehabilitation Act (RHA) of 1973. These hallmark cases expounded upon and laid the foundation for the following laws and were influenced by interest groups. The change efforts were associated with the Civil Rights and Disability Rights movements. The objectives of IDEA (2004) were to guarantee that students with disabilities received FAPE. This included the protection of their rights as well as their parents' rights to receive assistance from federal, state, and Local Education Agencies (LEA). IDEA (2004) ensured the implementation and coordination of special education programs for all students with disabilities. Finally, both educators and parents had the tools necessary to improve results and attest to the effectiveness of the education being received (IDEA, 2018). In terms of the disproportionality section of IDEA (2018), it is a necessary regulation that states and LEAs report the number of minority groups in special education classes and that early intervention programs for underrepresented children are coordinated and comprehensive (IDEA, 2018).

Currently, African American students are identified as having a SLD, ED, or ID at a disproportionate rate in comparison to their White peers. This over-representation is occurring among minority students, specifically African American males, and is quickly becoming one of the hot topics of education. Disproportionality is defined as the high representation of minority students identified with a learning disability or other type of disability under IDEA (IDEA 2004). Laws are in place that, in theory, acknowledge and prevent the problem of disproportionality. However, the National Education Association (NEA): Truth in Labeling (2007) reported that, “Black males who are viewed as having ‘challenging’ behaviors are referred more often for special education programs serving children with emotional disabilities (p. 8).”

This study will discuss the referral policies associated with special education, its major players, implementation, and evaluation of those policies. The implication for isolation and improper education are of great consequence, for example, racial achievement gaps, disproportionate numbers in discipline, and educational equity. When a specific group of individuals is overrepresented in special education, it shows “difficulties in effectively teaching struggling minority students” (Rebora, 2011, p. 36). One theory regarding the overrepresentation of minorities in special education is the lack of interventions or understanding of assessment results. Another reason for overrepresentation is the relationship, or lack thereof, between the student and teacher. H. Richard Milner IV, in an Education Week article stated, “There are kids placed in these programs because educators do not want to deal with them, do not know how, or do not know how to respond to them” (Rebora, 2011, p. 36).

LaNear and Frattura (2007) used the Critical Race Theory as their framework to discuss the history of special education law. The authors’ viewpoint was that “special education legislation and judicial decisions are based solely on traditional perspectives” which may lead to

“intentional and/or unintentional discrimination against children with disabilities, especially those from culturally diverse backgrounds” (p. 87). Most research cites cases that according to LaNear and Frattura (2007), used “traditional narratives” that mask injustices. Such cases are *State ex Rel. Beattie v. Board of Edn. City of Antigo*, (169 Wis. 231 Wis. 1919) that excluded Merritt Beattie from public school due to his disabilities. The Board of Education attempted to argue that because of his multiple disabilities, a “depressing” and “nauseating” effect (Yell, 2019, p. 37) would come upon students and teachers. *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (347 U.S. 483 1952, 1954) is cited in many research articles regarding educational history. Its hallmark decision set the foundation for the civil and disability rights movements (Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005).

Ferri and Connor (2005a) explored the notion of (re)segregation brought upon by special education. Historically, civil rights cases’ Supreme Court rulings emphasized an equitable education for all students. However, between the ground breaking *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, (347 U.S. 483 1952, 1954) and the present, the progress has begun to stagnate. African American and Latino students are over represented in special education programs (Ferri & Connor, 2005a).

Ferri and Connor (2005a) also suggested that some special education program practices are covert forms of facial segregation. Although special education identification is seen as acceptable, race and disability have become symptoms of exclusion and leads to a bigger issue, disproportionality. According to Ferri and Connor (2005a), “rigid norms have affected implementation of special education policies which have contributed to the persistant over representation of Black and Latino students” (p. 457).

Congress set federal requirements to provide resources to children with disabilities in the early 1970s. By 1973, Congress enacted P.L. 93-112, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974. Special education began with the passage of the Federal Special Education Law in 1975 (P.L. 94-142), the Education of all Handicapped Children. Today, it is known as IDEA (2004).

Implementation of IDEA (2004) was not an easy task, with its multiple layers. Congress began to delegate to other agencies how to make each section specific and meaningful. They had to consider every entity that was affected, such as federal, state, and local agencies, schools, school boards, parents, and students. They made sure that one mandate did not affect another. The legislature held these agencies accountable by way of committee hearings and investigations. These hearings included different sections of the Act such as eligibility assessment and unbiased evaluation, appropriate education, least restrictive environment, parent participation, due process, etc. (National Council on Disability, 2018). As a part of implementation, Congress built upon the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) and the Education of the Handicapped Act (IDEA, 2004). Court cases such as *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Citizens (PARC) v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania*, (334 F. Supp. 1257 1972) and *Mills v. Board of Education of District of Columbia*, (348 F. Supp. 866 1972) helped to solidify the principles of the draft.

Over the course of history, Congress attempted to look at this issue from the outside; meaning, they began with training for personnel on how to “deal” with people with disabilities. As a result, the Training of Professional Personnel Act of 1959 was enacted, which trained leaders how to educate children with mental retardation (Education, 2007). Following this Act, Congress began to look at how schools were being funded to educate students. The ESEA

(1965) and State Schools Act of 1965 provided states with direct grant assistance to educate students with disabilities. In 1973, a shift began in how children with disabilities were viewed. Two things happened before the enactment of Section 504-Rehabilitation Act of 1973. First, federal funding was at the forefront, and second, excluding and segregating people with disabilities were viewed as discrimination (Mayerson, 2018). The Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 led the way for IDEA (1990), a law that made FAPE accessible to students with disabilities, ensured special and related services, governed how state and local agencies over-saw those services, and authorized formula and discretionary grants.

IDEA (2004) applied to parents of children with disabilities, students, school districts, and LEAs. Questions regarding its legitimacy, criteria, and standards can be found in summaries of the legislation and *Whose Idea is It?* - a guide for parents, students, and advocates outlining rights and responsibilities. Sabatier and Mazmanian (1980) outlined the variables associated with the implementation process. IDEA's (2004) history stemmed from other laws that Congress had difficulty implementing some aspects of the law in terms of evaluation and there was a need to amend portions of it as well. Congress amended and reauthorized the law many times to improve the intended outcomes for students with disabilities. The target groups in this case were the states and schools. Behaviors needed to be changed as to how and with what criteria students were being identified as having a disability or adverse behavior issues. By overrepresenting a specific group (i.e., African American males), there was an inadvertent connection to society and the impact on the community was often a negative one. Research has shown that there is a disproportionate number of African American male students who are disciplined and referred for special education at a higher rate than other racial and ethnic groups.

In the Shadow of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*

In theory, anniversaries mark a time of progress and celebrations. The 50th anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, (347 U.S. 483 1952, 1954) and the 30th anniversary of IDEA (2004) according to Ferri and Connor (2005b) marked a time to re-examine the efforts of equitable education. The authors focused on the disproportionate placement of excluded groups of students. They discussed the strategies that the southern states used to (re)segregate following the years after *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, (347 U.S. 483 1952, 1954) (p. 96). Some states used pupil placement and ability tracking as a method to (re)segregate students, stating that criteria were psychological, moral, or health related. The authors cited articles from the Southern Education Review Service (1955, 1956, December), which reported an all-White school gained 500 Black students, Prince Edward County schools closed which left African American students without formal education, while White students received state funded tuition grants to go to private school (Ferri & Connor, 2005b, p. 96). Teachers reported that Black students were often absent or late to school and were “slow learners” or needed “special attention” (p. 98).

Teacher – Student Relationships

Dweck (2007) argued that one’s ability can be measured on a continuum of fixed to growth mindset. Those with a fixed mindset are less likely to recover from a setback or take risks. Conversely, someone with a growth mindset is likely to take risks, accept challenges, learn from mistakes, and show grit. Gutshall (2013) examined teachers’ mindsets towards students with and without disabilities. The researcher found that given student scenarios, “teachers shared the same characteristics as the general population and their mindsets were strongly correlated with student ratings for the student scenarios” (Gutshall, 2013, p. 1080).

Limitations and future research included “how teachers mindsets might impact student mindsets” (Gutshall, 2013, p. 1081).

Previous research suggests the exploration of strategies to decrease the barriers to inequality. Ladson-Billings, in her book, *The Dream Keepers*, stated, “it has been suggested that teachers unconsciously favor those students perceived to be most like them in race, class, and values” (1994, p. 66). A culturally relevant teacher is one who connects with students inside and outside of the classroom. He or she encourages the student and empowers the student to use their culture as a focal point (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Student behavior serves as an indicator of teacher-student relationships and the teacher’s perception of good or bad relationships. Wilkins (2014) attempted to account for the lack of validity of the instrument by using a qualitative and quantitative design since the instrument used to measure teacher perception was not viable. This research raised many questions regarding instrumentation and sampling. Only 18% of the projected participants responded (Wilkins, 2014). A comparison of the teacher’s perception of a good or bad relationship to that of the students would be beneficial determining academic achievement and may confirm some biases. Student-teacher relationships have been studied to explain academic achievement. The current research can serve as a catalyst to assist in developing a logical argument. The author observed that there was a possibility that teachers had poor relationships with students who did not participate. A feature of this research that needs to be re-worked is changing the methods to obtain a larger sample size. The author mentioned a limitation was using teachers from only large districts. This statement is agreeable; however, a mixed sample of large and small districts would possibly garner favorable results. Using small districts only will bring its own set of biases.

Theorizing Racial Inequity in Special Education

Sullivan and Artiles (2011) sought to understand the racial inequality among racial groups and disability categories using the structural approach, an approach that “allows for institutional racism associated with policies and practices” (Sullivan & Artiles, 2011, p. 1530), using data from the Arizona Department of Education for the 2004-2005 school years. Looking at general and special education student enrollment, the authors considered five racial categories and the high-incidence disability categories. They analyzed the data which consisted of 76 students in Grades K through 12 (unified districts), 92 elementary districts K-6 or 8, and 15 high school districts of Grades 8 through 12 for a total of 216 LEAs (p. 1537). Questions posed by the authors were “To what extent are racial minority students disproportionately represented in special education across analytical scales and disability categories?” and “To what extent is disproportionality for the different race-disability groupings predicted by the structural factors of LEAs?” (p. 1533). To fill in the gaps in literature on this topic, Sullivan and Artiles (2011) used the structural theory to understand racial inequality. It looks at the root of the societal problems, such as institutional racism. One of the key ideas is the competition for resources inasmuch as the more African American students identified, the more funding and resources schools receive from which all other students reap the benefits.

Results indicated that 11.5% of students were identified for special education, whereas the risk was greatest for African American students (13.95%) and Native American students (14.43%) (Sullivan & Artiles, 2011). Overrepresentation was most common among Native Americans, followed by African Americans (p. 1539); the results of the last question indicated that racial minorities associated with an LEA demonstrated the most relative risk.

Examining Racial Disparities in Teacher Perceptions

North Cooc (2017) examined the perception of teachers from survey results to determine if teachers disproportionately perceived minority students as having a disability. The researcher found that White teachers were more likely to perceive minority (Black & Hispanic) students as having a disability “1.42 to 1.56 times than Whites” (Cooc, 2017, p. 14). Similarly, Thomas, Caldwell, Faison, and Jackson (2009) observed the perceptions of teacher discrimination and academic achievement among African American and Caribbean Black adolescents. The researchers found that perceived discrimination was negatively related to academic achievement (Thomas et al.) Previous research conducted by Mickelson (2003) and Farkas (2003) showed that less overt forms of discrimination contributed to inequalities in discipline, test scores, and special education placement.

Lloyd Dunn (1968) emphasized the notion that students of color as well as students with low SES were overrepresented in special education. One common theme that emerged from previous research is the disproportionality among minorities in special education. Ahram, Fergus, and Noguera (2011) reported Native and African American students have a higher risk of being identified as having a disability. In fact, they stated, “African American students are more than twice as likely to be identified as ED and 2 1/3 times to be identified as MR” (Ahram et al., pp. 2236-2237). One of the main elements of their findings was a deficit in cultural thinking on the part of the educator. Furthermore, the researchers suggested that the implementation of a “culturally responsive framework produces a ‘shift’ in special education placement process which leads to a reduction in disproportionality rates” (Ahram et al., p. 2234).

Effects of Belonging and Racial Identity

Boston and Warren (2017) developed a logical argument as to why a sense of belonging influences urban African American high school students' achievement. The focus of the study was to also show how a student's racial identity, specifically African American, is a factor of academic achievement. As with previous studies, authors measured students' connectedness. To further this research, it may be of benefit to examine these same effects on other minority populations. The current study is relevant because it adds to the body of work for this topic. More research of this nature should use middle grade samples to ascertain if the findings would be a predictor of high school achievement. There was limited research related to the topic of sense of belonging and racial identity beliefs. The literature review suggests that lack of a sense of belonging is associated with negative feelings, depression, anxiety, alienation, and loneliness (Boston & Warren, 2017, p. 27).

Referral Process

Previous research indicates that there is bias in the referral process which significantly effects the identification of special education for African American students. For example, Kearns, Ford, and Linney (2005) cited pedagogy, bias, lack of cultural exposure, and apathy as factors related to African American representation in special education. The purpose of their study was to gain insight to the perspective of school psychologists regarding the overrepresentation of African American students in special education. Based on the surveys from the school psychologists, "the most influential variable on the placement of African American students into special education was cultural disadvantage" (Kearns et al., p. 301). Harry and Anderson (1994) focused on the process of referring African American males to special education programs. They argued that the process is biased against African American

males. According to the article, the decision to refer is based on teacher perceptions (Harry & Anderson, 1994).

Frattura and Capper (2006) assessed the differences between a whole-school approach to service delivery versus segregated programming. The researchers found that the students did well in a segregated program, however, they missed instructional time in the whole group setting. Frattura (2013) made the following recommendation in her summary analysis of special education services' report that all "students should receive instruction based on universal design for learning principles within the common core" (p. 3). Dr. Frattura (2013) also recommended using RTI, Wilson Reading, and Read 180.

Response to Intervention (RTI)

Anderson-Irish (2013) examined the RTI model as a possible solution to the over-identification of minority males in special education. Anderson-Irish reviewed literature to determine if RTI is a contributing factor in decreased referrals. Other contributing factors mentioned in research discuss teacher perception and its subjectivity towards minority students. It is argued whether RTI has a significant effect on over identification in special education. Research in this area is new, however, there are some findings that report strong indicators of RTI having an impact; for example, Cawelti (2004) reported that schools are reporting declines in the number of referrals. O'Shaughnessy, Lane, Gresham, and Bebe-Frankenberger, 2003 stated that RTI is one of the most effective methods to alleviate the over-identification of minorities in special education. Conversely, Fuch, Mock, Morgan, and Young (2003) stated RTI was found not to be effective. Researchers Proctor, Graves, Jr., and Esch (2012) had experienced success with RTI and cited implementation, time and effort as the keys.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy- Response to Intervention

Harris-Murri, King, and Rostenberg (2006) argued the need for a culturally responsive perspective to RTI. The focus of the paper was to “effectively address and remediate students who display social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties” (Harris-Murri et al., p.782). The authors wanted to infuse the culturally responsive pedagogy into the research-based RTI as a means of addressing the behaviors of students who display socio-emotional difficulties as well as those who are “linguistically diverse” (Harris-Murri et al., p. 782). They saw this combined approach to remedy the deficits shown by these students. The significance of this opinion piece to the current research is the notion that culture is relevant to academic achievement. The authors attempted to persuade the readers that by combining culturally responsive pedagogy to RTI, “deficits can be effectively addressed” (Harris-Murri et al., p. 782).

Culturally Responsive Teaching

Shevalier and McKenzie (2012) wanted to focus on the “cultural gap” between students and teachers by using the Noddings Care Theory as their theoretical framework, citing that using CRT reaches urban youth. They argued that urban teachers in preparation programs are exposed to CRT in terms of the “how” and “what” of CRT (Shevalier & McKenzie, 2012). The authors expressed the need to fill the gap, which is discussing the “why” or theoretical aspect. When teachers “care about” a thing, it did not benefit the teacher or students. Caring for is built on face-to-face relationships. Shevalier and McKenzie (2012) argued that when teachers respond to students by engaging in meaningful dialogue, they establish positive relationships. The significance of this discussion as it relates to the current study is the impact that “being cared for” and relationships have an impact on social and emotional growth as well as academic achievement (Shevalier & McKenzie, 2012, p.1091).

Gay (2002) highlighted culturally responsive teaching for both general education students as well as special education students. Gay (2002) stated that some obstacles to implementing CRT are “negative teacher attitudes and expectations for students of color and confusing disability with diversity” (p. 614). Gay (2002) cited studies that discuss planning for students who “do not fit the mold” to “teachers blaming students for their own sense of incompetence” (p. 615). The author cited comfortability with ethnicity and diversity determine their confidence with teaching culturally responsive. The significance of this opinion paper to the current research is equity in delivering instruction for all students and it speaks to addressing different learning styles.

The review of the literature offered five themes. The historical perspective offered an account of civil rights cases which changed the trajectory of how education is provided to all students, including those with disabilities. The second is student teacher relationships, the themes among the research were growth vs. fixed mindsets of the teacher, student behavior as possible factor, students’ perceptions regarding teachers caring for them, sense of belonging, and trust. The research collectively stated that teachers who care for and have a growth mindset are likely to have success with students, when students like and trust them.

The third theme is racial inequity, this research implicit bias resulting in inequalities in discipline, test scores, and special education placement. When students are not connected or have a sense of belonging, negative feelings are associated with the disconnect. The fourth theme, referral process research, is biased and based on perceptions of the teachers and the students’ behavior. The fifth theme, response to intervention, is seen as a possible solution to the overidentification of minority males, and culturally relevant pedagogy as the theoretical framework for examining the issue of disproportionality.

Methods

The current investigation sought to examine whether there is a disproportionate representation of African American males in special education. This research used a mixed method design to study the disproportionality in special education among African American males in relation to their White counterparts. State and district data were used to gather information regarding student and teacher demographics, as well as data from Indicators 9 and 10. The pre-existing multi-year data were analyzed to identify if and why the disproportionality in the suburban school district exists. SES of students, race, gender of teachers, and disability categories were the variables observed.

Specifically, this investigation utilized pre-existing data from a suburban school district to answer the following research questions:

Research Questions

1. Is there a disproportionate representation of African American male students identified as Emotionally Disturbed (ED), Specific Learning Disabled (SLD), and other low incidence disabilities (OTH), which includes Speech & Language Instruction, Other Health Impaired, Autism, and Traumatic Brain Injury, in Northeast Ohio's suburban school district for the 2019-2020 school year?
2. Is there a relationship between socioeconomic status (SES) and the percentage of African American males identified in special education programs in Northeast Ohio's Suburban School district?

Research Design

A quasi-experimental, causal-comparative research design was used to analyze 2019-2020 of data from the suburban schools' six clusters. This research design was employed

because use of multiple years of data, without any manipulation, would provide the best estimate of what was happening in these schools. While this design is not truly experimental, the findings of the proposed study were based on the full population of data, rather than a sample. This approach eliminated the error that might occur when making statistical inferences.

Setting and Sample

The study sample was drawn from six clusters in the suburban school district. There are six schools, Pre-K through 12. Each district receives an overall letter grade based on six components, achievement, progress, gap closing, improving at-risk K-3 readers, graduation rate, and preparation for success. Each component is weighted differently. The suburban school district's report card is a 'D' (ODE, 2019). The district includes one high school- School A, one middle school-School B, one upper elementary school-School C, and three elementary schools (School D, School E, and School F). As of December 20, 2019, there were 3,111 students enrolled in the district (ODE, 2019). Seventy-two percent of those students are Black, 15.9% of the students are White, 3.4% are Hispanic, and 6.6% are two or more races. There are 243 teachers in the suburban school district. Eighty-five percent of the teachers are White, 14.9% are Black, and 0.004% are multiracial. Sixty-eight percent of the teachers are female and 32% are male. The average salary for teachers is \$78,856. In the school years 1994-1998, the suburban school district's average salary for teachers was \$43,671. During that time, the district had an average of 18.83% minority students and 6.53% minority teachers (ODE, 2019).

Procedures and Data Collection

Each school district is required to utilize a data collection tool. The district from which this data was taken used Data and Storage Library (DASL), while the ODE produced a district report card for each school district and school. The data were current and relevant to the study.

Students' SES, race, ethnicity, gender, and disability categories were the variables observed, as well as the gender, race, and ethnicity of the teachers.

Data Analysis

Data were collected for test variables and the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to enter and perform statistical analyses. Data analysis included basic descriptive analyses and zero-order correlational analyses. To answer the research questions, all relevant tests of statistical assumptions were conducted. An independent samples *t*-test was used to determine the differences between disproportionality and the SES and Demographics variables. A Pearson's Chi-Square analysis was deemed the most appropriate analysis to address this research question since disability status and ethnicity/race are both nominal categorical variables.

Results

This quasi-experimental, causal-comparative study determined whether there was a significant difference among the number of African American males in special education programs in a Northeast Ohio suburban school district during the 2019-2020 school year. Specifically, the research questions for the current investigation included.

Descriptive Statistics

Initially, the distribution by Gender was analyzed with the data provided by the district. These results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Gender of Students

Gender	<i>f</i>	%
Male	481	68.2
Female	224	31.8

As indicated in Table 1, there are two-times more males than females in the sample of data.

Males make up 53.5% of the students in the suburban school district; of that, 81% of Black male students are identified for special education program placement, whereas only .087% White males are identified. Table 2 provides a breakdown of the students by grade.

Table 2

Students by Grade

Grade	<i>f</i>	%
3	82	11.6
4	72	10.2
5	79	11.2
6	50	7.1
7	7	10.9
8	106	15
9	80	11.3
10	135	19.1
11	21	3
12	3	0.4

As indicated in Table 2, most students enrolled in the suburban school district are in K-8 buildings. The data provided were limited to students taking the state tests. Table 3 provides the breakdown of students by ethnicity/race.

Table 3

Students with Disabilities by Ethnicity/Race

Ethnicity	f	%
Asian	3	0.4
Black	568	80.6
Hispanic	18	2.6
Multi	38	5.5
Pacific	2	0.3
White	75	10.6

As indicated in Table 3, based on the data provided, most students identified with disabilities enrolled in the suburban school district are Black.

Table 4 provides a breakdown of students by ED, SLD, and OTH.

Table 4

Disability Categories

Disability	f	%
ED	95	13.5
SLD	329	46.7
OTH	278	39.4

As indicated in Table 4, students identified as SLD make up the largest percentage of the sample data, while OTH represents the second highest percentage.

Research Question 1 asked, *Is there a disproportionate representation of African American male students identified as Emotionally Disturbed (ED), Specific Learning Disabled (SLD), and other low incidence disabilities (OTH), which includes Speech & Language Instruction, Other Health Impaired, Autism, and Traumatic Brain Injury, in Northeast Ohio's suburban school district for the 2019-2020 school year?* A Pearson's Chi-Square analysis was deemed the most appropriate analysis to address this research question since disability status and ethnicity/race are both nominal categorical variables. Results of the chi-square analysis indicate $\chi^2_8=38.68, p=.001$. This indicates there are significantly more Black male students with disabilities relative to all other groups. Data was also analyzed for female students. Black female students are identified half as often as Black male students with a disability in this sample. Results of the chi-square analysis indicate $\chi^2_8=19.20, p=.014$.

Research Question 2 asked, *Is there a relationship between socioeconomic status (SES) and the percentage of African American males enrolled in ED, SLD, and OTH in Northeast Ohio's suburban school district?* A Chi Square analysis was conducted on available data for $n=116$ students. Results indicate that there are significantly more identified Black male students who are receiving free and reduced lunches relative to non-Black male and female students, $\chi^2=23.95, p<.0001$. Figure 4 presents a graphical representation of this distribution.

Discussion

This study examined the disproportionate representation of African American males in special education programs. The intent of the study was to determine whether African American

males were overrepresented in the school district and if race and socioeconomic status were factors in the relationship. CRP and CRT were used as frameworks as a basis to establish the approach that acknowledges the culture of the students. CRT/CRP focuses on the academics and personal successes of students individually and collectively while empowering them. Findings were assessed by applying the CRP pillars and CRT practice areas for the purposes of evaluating why disproportionate representation exists and how it can be addressed. CRP serves as the theoretical framework to help examine and challenge the issues of race and gender which impacts educational practices, specifically: special education.

Academic Achievement/Information Processing

Previous research on racial inequality in education indicate implicit bias resulting in inequalities in discipline, test scores, and special education placement. Shevalier & McKenzie (2021) cited using CRT reaches urban youth. Teachers who cultivate the minds of students by showing that they care, while giving the extra push, can reduce social emotional stress from stereotyping threat and micro aggressions. Gay (2002, p. 614) stated that some obstacles to implementing CRT are “negative teacher attitudes and expectations for students of color and confusing disability with diversity.”

The current study found that there was a relationship between the overrepresentation of Black male students identified and placed in special education programs and the predictor variables of race, gender, and SES. Black male students make up most of all disability categories in the Northeast Ohio suburban school district in this study. Likewise, Black female students were identified half as often as Black male students. The data also revealed the racial composition of instructional staff predicted this relationship. Although the suburban school

district has hired more African American educators, the percentage of Black teachers to White teachers is still relatively low.

Economic factors play a role in the identification of students with disabilities inasmuch as funding supports education programs and instructional materials. The more students identified as having one of the 13 disabilities, the more funds are allocated. All students disabled and non-disabled benefit from these resources. This study found that more identified Black male students are receiving free and reduced lunches relative to non-Black male and female students.

Cultural Competence/Awareness/Learning Partnerships

Previous research on teacher efficacy and socioeconomic status asserts that teachers' bias towards students based on SES may be one explanation for inappropriate referrals (Podell & Soodok, 1993). They found that teachers with lower personal efficacy perceived the special education setting to be appropriate (1993). Teachers who are culturally competent understand culture and its role in education. They are aware of their own biases and help students create a positive mindset and sense of self-efficacy (Hammonds, 2015).

Implications

Teacher preparation programs prepare teachers to be experts in their content, however, 15 years of experience as a cooperating teacher, Resident Educator, Special Education department chair, and administrator confirm that some new teachers lack the knowledge of how to teach students who learn differently or who come from diverse backgrounds economically and/or socially. Disproportionality and overrepresentation of students in special education carries with it many implications for educators. When students struggle in and are misplaced in classes, they often need consistent support and appropriate curriculum in core courses. Administrators and educational leaders may attempt to overcompensate by having too many interventions for

struggling students (Fergus, 2010). Typically, the behavior of students is the lead contributor of teachers recommending students for special education. It is often seen as fixing struggling students. Using data incorrectly or applying pressure for a student to be labeled do more harm than good. Often it prevents students from reaching their academic potential due to setting low expectations. There are negative stereotypes associated with students, especially those in the minority. This over-representation may result in racial bias or profiling throughout the students' school year or career.

Dweck (2007) argued that one's ability can be measured on a continuum of fixed to growth mindset. Those with a fixed mindset are less likely to recover from a setback or take risks. Previous research would suggest, teachers who believed students are bad kids or slow learners typically had low expectations of them. Thomas et al. (2009) found that African American and Caribbean Black students perceived teacher discrimination had a negative effect on academic achievement. They also cited similar research findings suggesting that students perceived teacher discrimination manifested as "low teacher expectations and stereotyping as bad kids" (Thomas et al., p. 426).

According to research, RTI has shown to be a positive factor in decreasing the number of African American male student referrals to special education programs (NEA, 2007). The focus of RTI is to provide a multi-tiered approach to students who are struggling and have skill deficits. Frattura (2013) stated that there are academic and representation discrepancies for African American students. They are "over-identified in special education." Teachers will use RTI as a bridge to refer students for special education programs. In a memo from the director of Office of Special Education Programs (2011), although the Department of Education "does not subscribe to a particular RTI framework" (p. 2), local education agencies were successful with

implementing RTI strategies. Those students who were not successful were referred for evaluation. Many factors shaped the issue of disproportionate representation of Black males in special education programs such as the motivation to refer Black male students more than any other racial group. Other implications for the disproportionate representation of African American students are the lack of special education training for general education teachers, thus impacting their ability to properly instruct students with disabilities. Training teachers on the process of using RTI with fidelity before referring students for special education programs have shown to be successful in previous research. The suburban school district in the current study is comprised of two cities, one of which has a higher median income. There could be an implied discrepancy among buildings with a higher number of students with a low SES when compared to those with lower numbers.

Limitations

The current study used a limited sample size (only using student testing data) from a small suburban school district. Due to COVID-19, the research was limited based on data acquired prior to the statewide shutdown; no additional data were available once schools were not in session. Another limitation to this study was not examining the racial divide between African American male students referred to special education programs compared to those referred to gifted programs.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The implications associated with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004), specifically, section 300.346 Part B; Subpart E, members of Congress and other interest groups such as the U.S. Commission for Civil Rights (OCR), Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), NEA, the Schott Foundation, etc., are that the racial

bias associated with the disproportionate and overrepresentation of minorities, specifically African American males, exasperates African American males and other minorities, and could be a conduit to societal issues.

Research tells us that when these students are identified as having SLDs or EDs “they are more likely to have less access to same aged peers, rigorous curriculum, post-secondary outcomes, and held to lower expectations” (NEA: Truth in Labeling, 2007, p. 2). Members of local government, school officials, LEAs, and the federal government must do their due diligence to create equitable policies for all. Local government and school officials can begin by understanding the link between the effects of disproportionate labeling of African American males and societal issues. When students are misplaced in classes or do not receive the appropriate curriculum, it contributes to how society will view them once they leave the four walls of their school. In short, students are ill-prepared.

Podell and Soodak (1993) investigated teachers sense of efficacy and biases. They found that teachers who perceived themselves as ineffective also believed that students who were low achievers and from a low SES household were inappropriately placed in regular education classrooms. Conversely, effective teachers did not differentiate students based on their SES. Researchers further noted teachers referred more students without cause and made decisions unrelated to academics (Podell & Soodak, 1993, p. 251). The current study shows, over two decades later, the problem of referring students, specifically African American male students with low SES still exists. Traditionally, teachers’ focus was to educate students; overtime, it has been replaced with the need to prepare students for testing. For some teachers, preparing students who have the ability or a likelihood of passing the state test have become paramount.

New teachers are entering the field of education ill-equipped to educate students in urban settings where low SES, trauma, and low achievement are the norms. Perhaps it is time to re-examine teacher education programs including course work, field experience, and student teaching practices.

Recommendations for this study include but are not limited to teacher-training programs. Teacher-training programs should include special education courses as well as field hours with an Intervention Specialist. Most teacher preparation programs focus on the content and pedagogy; however, they do not include strategies to educate students with disabilities, how to write IEPs, or how to implement them. Stricter reporting criteria is needed to decrease the risk of districts overrepresenting minority students. The second recommendation is to require specific criteria and documentation for teachers who consistently recommend students for special education (i.e., intervention documentation, parent meetings, etc.).

References

- Ahram, R., Fergus, E., & Noguera, P. (2011). Addressing racial/ethnic disproportionality in special education: Case studies of suburban school districts. *Teachers College Record, 113*(10), 2233-2266.
- Anderson-Irish, N. (2013). The over identification of minority males in middle school special education programs: Examining the RTI model. *Journal of the American Academy of Special Education Professionals, 63-72*.
- Antonak, R. F., & Livneh, H. (2000). Measurement of attitudes towards persons with disabilities. *Disability and Rehabilitation, 211-224*.
- Billings, G. L. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal, 32*(3), 465-491.
- Blanchett, W. J., Mumford, V., & Beachum, F. (2005). Urban school failure and disproportionality in a post-Brown era: Benign neglect of the constitutional rights of students of color. *Remedial and Special Education, 26*(2), 70-81.
- Boston, C., & Warren, S. (2017). The effects of belonging and racial identity on urban African American high school students' achievement. *JULTR, 26-33*.
- Brown v. Board of Education, 347 U.S. 483 U.S. (1954).
- Buck v. Bell, 274 U.S. 200 1927.
- Cooc, N. (2017). Examining racial disparities in teacher perceptions of student disabilities. *Teachers College Round, 1-40*.
- Dunn, L. M. (1968). Special education for the mildly retarded: Is much of it justifiable? *Exceptional Children, 35*(1), 5–22.
- Dweck, C. (2007). Boosting achievement with messages that motivate. *Education Canada, 6-10*.

Family Education and Privacy Rights Act, 20 USC 1232g.

Ferri, B. A., & Connor, D. J. (2005a). Tools of exclusion: Race, disability, and (re)segregated education. *Teachers College Record, 107*(3), 453-474.

Ferri, B. A., & Connor, D. J. (2005b). In the shadow of Brown: Special education and overrepresentation of students of color. *Remedial and Special Education, 26*(2) 93-100.

Frattura, E. (2013). *Executive summary analysis of special education services report*. Retrieved from www.inclusionproject.org

Frattura, E., & Capper, C. A. (2006). Segregated programs versus integrated comprehensive service delivery for all learners: Assessing the differences. *Remedial and Special Education, 27*(6), 355-364.

Fuchs, D., Mock, D., Morgan, P., & Young, C. (2003). Responsiveness-to-intervention: Definitions, evidence, and implications for the learning disabilities construct. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice, 18*(3), 157-171.

Gay, G. (2002). Culturally responsive teaching in special education for ethnically diverse students: Setting the stage. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 15*(6), 613-629.

Gutshall, C. (2013). Teachers' mindset for students with and without disabilities. *Psychology in the Schools, 50*(10), 1073-1083.

Harris-Murri, N., King, K., & Rostenberg, D. (2006). Reducing disproportionate minority representation in special education programs for students with emotional disturbances:

Toward a culturally responsive response to intervention model. *Education and Treatment of Children, 29*(4), 779-799.

Hobson v. Hansen, 269 F. Supp. 401 D.D.C.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. (1975). Retrieved from

<https://sites.ed.gov/idea/about-idea/#IDEA-Purpose>

Kearns, T., Ford, L., & Linney, J. A. (2005). African American student representation in special education programs. *Journal of Negro Education, 74*(4), 297–310.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The dream keepers: Successful teachers of African American children*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Ladson-Billings, G. (2006). *Yes, but how do we do it? Practicing cultural relevant pedagogy*. ESED 5234 – Master List. 37. Retrieved from

<https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/esed5234-master/37>

LaNear, J., & Frattura, E. (2007). Getting the stories straight: Allowing different voices to tell an 'effective history' of special education law in the United States. *Education and the Law, 19*(2), 87-109.

Larry P. v. Riles, 495 F. Supp. 926 (N.D. Cal. 1979).

Mayerson, A. (1992). *The history of the American with Disabilities Act: A movement*

perspective. Retrieved from Disability rights education & Defense fund: dredf.org/about-us/publications/the-history-of-the-ada/

Mills v. Board of Education, 348 F. Supp. 866 (D.D.C. 1972).

Moran, M. (2018, July 28). *Vanderbilt news*. Retrieved from

<https://news.vanderbilt.edu/2006/04/11/developmental-disability-education-pioneer-lloyd-dunn-dies-59030/>

National Council on Disability. (2018). *Improving the implementation of the individuals with disabilities act: Making schools work for all of America's children*. Retrieved from <https://ncd.gov/publications/1995/09051995>

National Education Association. (2007). *Truth in labeling. Disproportionality in special education*. Retrieved from <http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/HE/EW-TruthInLabeling.pdf>

O'Shaughnessy, T. E., Lane, K. L., Gresham, F. M., & Beebe-Frankenberger, M. E. (2003). Children placed at risk for learning and behavioral difficulties: Implementing a school-wide system of early identification and intervention. *Remedial and Special Education, 24*(1), 27–35.

Oswald, D. P., Coutinho, M. J., Best, A. M., & Singh, N. N. (1999). Ethnic representation in special education: The influence of school-related economic and demographic variables. *The Journal of Special Education, 32*(4), 194-206.

Proctor, S. L., Graves, Jr., S. L., & Esch, R. C. (2012). Assessing African American students for specific learning disabilities: The promises and perils of response to intervention. *The Journal of Negro Education, 81*(3), 268-282.

Rebora, A. (2011). *Keeping special ed in proportion*. Retrieved from www.edweek.org/tsb/articles/2011/10/13/01disproportion

Sabatier, P., & Mazmanian, D. (1980). The implementation of public policy: A framework of analysis. *Policy Studies Journal, 8*(14), 538-560.

Section 504, Rehabilitation Act of 1973, 29 U.S.C. § 701 (1973).

Shevalier, R., & McKenzie, B. A. (2012). Culturally responsive teaching as an ethics-and care-based approach to urban education. *Urban Education, 47*(6), 1086-1105.

Southern Education Review Service. (1955, June). Parochial school report given.

School Southern News, p. 14.

Southern Education Review Service. (1956). East Tennessee views on school. *Southern School*

News, 3(1), p.7.

Southern Education Review Service. (1956, December). Negroes make up 68 percent of

district enrollment (1956, December). *Southern School*

News, p. 16.

State ex Rel. Beattie v. Board of Edn. City of Antigo, (169 Wis. 231 Wis. 1919).

Sullivan, A. L., & Artiles, A. J. (2011). Theorizing racial inequity in special education: Applying

structural inequity theory to disproportionality. *Urban Education*, 46(6), 1526-1552.

The Education for all Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA), Pub. L. No. 04-142, 89 Stat. 773-

796 (1975).

Thomas, O. N., Caldwell, H. C., Faison, N., & Jackson, J. S. (2009). Promoting academic

achievement: The role of racial identity in buffering perceptions of teacher discrimination

on academic achievement among African American and Caribbean black [sic]

adolescents. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 101(2), 420-431.

Wilkins, J. (2014). Good teacher-student relationships: Perspectives of teachers in urban high

schools. *American Secondary Education*, 52-68.

Yell, M. L. (2019). *The history of the laws and children with disabilities. The law and*

special education (5th ed.). New York, NY: Pearson Education.