Teacher and Student Demographic Variables Which Predict Teacher Referrals of

African American Males for Special Education Evaluation

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Abstract

Disproportionality is defined as a situation whereby a group of individuals is represented in an environment at a percentage that is higher or lower than its representation within a total population (Alexander, 2010). The issue of disproportionality of African American males in special education and the cause of the overrepresentation continue to be a problem and source of debate in academia. Research indicates the most prevalent factors that contribute to overrepresentation include poverty, testing bias, perceptions of teachers, lack of cultural awareness and poor professional development that address working with linguistically and culturally diverse learners. (Kreskow, 2013). This research study proposal will address the question of whether student and teacher demographic variables predict how likely a teacher would be to refer African American male students for special education evaluation and whether there are significant differences in teacher ratings of severity of behavior based on race/ethnicity of African American male students. The conceptual framework that will guide this research is derived from principles of cultural theory and social exclusion theory. Results from similar research revealed that multiple linear regression showed that years of teaching experience, race of teacher, race of student, and teacher attitude toward inclusion were statistically significant predictors of teacher referral to special education. Results from this study could be used to advocate for education and professional development programs which promote educator awareness of how teacher and student demographics may influence teachers' perceptions and decision to issue referrals to special education. The professional development could also guide teachers in developing culturally responsive pedagogy and promote social change by reducing the number of referrals for special education evaluation among African American/Black male students.

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More than 2 million children of color are receiving special education services in schools across the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). According to the Institute for Educational Sciences, minority students make up greater than 52% of those served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). More than 17% American Indian/Alaska Native, 16% Black, 14% White, 12% Hispanic, and 7% Asian students make up the ethnic composition of students served. (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019, Paolino, 2003). Disproportionality is defined as a situation whereby a group of individuals is represented in an environment at a percentage that is higher or lower than its representation within a total population (Alexander, 2010). Many students in the United States are labeled and subsequently socially excluded from the mainstream learning process because of subjective behavioral assessments from their teachers.   Ünal and Ünal (2009) contend that teachers customarily refer students for special education evaluation as a method of handling behavior they consider disruptive to the learning process. The problem of overrepresentation is evident when Black students make up 15% of the public school population, and make up 16% of students served by IDEA. African American students are almost three times as likely as White students to be labeled intellectually disabled, two times as likely to be labeled emotionally and behaviorally disabled, and 1.3 times as likely to be labeled as having a learning disability (Council for Exceptional Children, 2002). According to the National Institute for Urban School Improvement (2001), African Americans are significantly overrepresented in high-incidence disabilities and emotional and behavioral disorders (Oswald et al., 1999).

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Literature Review

Current research on why African American students are labeled as disabled in disproportionate numbers speaks to both the cultural uniqueness of African American students, and to educator and systemic ignorance regarding their uniqueness. A literature review uncovered nine reasons for overidentification of African American students. They include (1) difficulty in constructing instructional programs that address the unique learning strengths and needs of students (Council for Exceptional Children, 2002); (2) procedures and processes used to refer and classify students for special education that have proved ineffective (Council for Exceptional Children, 2002); (3) lack of knowledge that a problem exists and, lack of know-how to resolve it (Council for Exceptional Children, 2002); (4) inaccurate assumptions, beliefs, epistemologies, and worldviews employed by the major "script writers" in the field (Patton, 1998); (5) educators' skewed perceptions and attitudes towards students with special needs (Utley & Mortweet, 1999); (6) the opportunities or lack thereof students have to learn (National Institute for Urban School Improvement, 2001); (7) lack of culturally responsive education in schools that connect race, culture, and class of teachers and that of their students; (8) high reliance on high-stakes assessment (Grossman; Harry; Townsend, 2002); and (9) disparity between a cultural/familial interpretation and acceptance of a child's behavior and the school's interpretation and lack of acceptance of that behavior. As a composite, these are systemic and structural failures that need to be addressed.

Past research has documented bivariate relationships between student variables such as race and gender with teacher referrals to special education evaluation. Eiland (2009) reported that male students were referred for special education evaluation at a slightly higher rate than females students and that African American/Black males were referred at higher rates than students of other

races. Codrington and Fairchild (2012) noted that African American/Black students were misdiagnosed and referred to special education because of general classroom behaviors that teachers considered disruptive. While other researchers have noted that African American/Black students were at greater odds for teacher office disciplinary referrals than students of other racial groups, which frequently lead to special education evaluations (Bradshaw, Mitchell, O'Brennan, & Leaf, 2010; Zhang et al., 2014). Codrington and Fairchild (2012) further posit that African American/Black students were frequently referred to special education because general education teachers were inexperienced in working with African American/Black children. Because some preservice teachers were less motivated to work with students whom they perceived to have disabilities or behavior problems, teacher attitudes toward inclusion has been linked to teacher referrals to special education evaluation.

Past literature has examined the bivariate relationships between variables related to the disproportionate relationships between variables related to the disproportionate referral of students belonging to minority groups, particularly African American/Black males for special education evaluation (Ellmer, 2010). However, there has been limited research examining how student and teacher demographic variables combine to predict teachers' decision to refer students for special education. No studies have examined differences in teacher ratings regarding the severity of classroom behaviors based on race/ethnicity. Thus, the purpose of this study is to investigate the predictive relationships between the independent variables (race/ethnicity of the student, teacher gender, teacher race/ethnicity, and teacher attitudes toward inclusion) and how likely a teacher would refer an African American/Black male student for special education evaluation.

Several teacher-related variables such as gender, race, teaching experience, and attitudes toward inclusion have been linked to teacher referrals to special education. Findings from several research studies have linked referrals to special education with gender of teacher (Bradshaw et al., 2010).

Conceptual Framework

How people form perceptions of risk is known as cultural theory. Current conceptualizations of cultural theory state that individuals form perceptions of the world experiences that are consistent with the broad systems of attitudes and beliefs that reflect their cultural way of life. This is important because the worldviews held by members of various groups frequently lead to cultural biases, which cause the group members to judge others based on their adopted cultural biases. Cultural theory is relevant for explaining how ones cultural beliefs influence teacher perceptions of student behavior in the classroom, which ultimately affects teachers' decisions to refer children for evaluation for special education.

The other premise that forms the conceptual framework is social exclusion. It is linked to male children being referred for special education evaluation and placement. Social exclusion explains the challenges that occur when people are subjected to artificially imposed and enforced barriers. Kearney (2011) state that children who are placed in special education settings often do not complete high school, do not pursue postsecondary level education, and tend to have higher rates of incarceration. Teachers are linked to social exclusion because they are primarily the ones who make the initial referral for special education evaluation. This theory is relevant because it addresses outcomes for students who are inappropriately referred for special education evaluation and placement.

Method

This proposed research study is a quantitative, correlational survey research design. A quantitative research design was used for this study because it is objective and reliable. The research design will determine whether relationships exist between variables. Surveys are an effective method of data collection that can be used to generalize the results to a larger population.

Participants

This study will be conducted in the Middle-Atlantic region of the United Stated, in Maryland. Participants will be recruited from two large suburban school districts, Prince George's County Public Schools (PGCPS) and Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS).

PGCPS operates 208 schools and special centers which include: 123 elementary schools, 24 middle schools, 23 high schools, and 12 academies (PreK-8). The student population for PGCPS is 36.46% Hispanic, .29% American Indian/Alaska Native, 2.76% Asian, 55.32% African American/Black, 0.20% Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, 3.67% White, 1.30% 2 or more races, 66.46% Free and Reduced Meals, 15,433 students receiving Special Education services. The staff population for PGCPS is 9,310 teachers. The demographic composite is unavailable.

MCPS operates 206 schools, comprising 134 elementary schools, 40 middle schools, 25 high schools, 5 special schools, 1 career and technology center, and 1 alternative education program. The student population for MCPS is 23.4% African American/Black, 0.3% American Indian, Asian American 15.7%, 23.4% Hispanic, 37.2% White, 33.2% students receive free and reduced-price meals (FARMS), Students receiving free & reduced-price meals (FARMS): 33.2%, 13.3% English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), 11.7% of the students receiving special education services: 11.7%. The staff population for MCPS is 13,698 teachers. The demographic

composite is 72.76% White, 12.35% African American/Black, 7.08% Hispanic, 6.02% Asian and less than 2 percent are American Indian, Pacific Islander or 2 or more races.

Participants will be recruited through a convenience sampling. This method is selected because this research study requires participants who are easy to access with desired characteristics. The desired characteristics were novice or veteran teachers employed by PGCPS or MCPS with full traditional or alternative certification. Using appropriate parameters, the minimum sample size for achieving adequate power to detect any statistically significant difference for this study was *n=65*. The sample for this research study will be *n=1000*.

Procedures

Prior to beginning this research proposal, approval to conduct this study will be granted by George Mason University as part of a doctoral dissertation (IRB Approval #99-99-9999999) Permission to conduct the study was also obtained from the Division of Accountability department of PGCPS and the Office of Shared Accountability for MCPS. Additional approval was also granted from all school Administrators who have given permission to announce the study during the last 20 minutes of a scheduled in-service professional development. During the agreed upon time, one researcher will attend the training to announce the study and to distribute the survey packets.

The survey packet includes the informed consent, *Teacher Rating Form* (TRF) survey, and the demographic questionnaire. The researcher will also describe the purpose of the study and explain the documents in the survey packets. After describing the study and reviewing the informed consent document, the research will ask participants if there are any questions. Participants will then be instructed to read and sign the consent form, complete the surveys (10-15 minutes) and return the completed forms sealed in the same envelope in which they received them.

Participants will be asked to drop off the completed packets in the locked drop box located in the main office. Participants will be provided contact information if they have any questions after their participation. All participants who complete the survey will be given a $30.00 Amazon Gift Card.

Instrumentation

Data will be collected using the TRF. The TRF was devised based on the *Achenbach System of Empirically Based Assessments*, an evidence-based method of evaluating the abilities, strength, adaptive functioning, behavioral, emotional and social challenges of individuals age 1.5 – 18 years of age (Achenbach, 2013). The TRF contains behavioral descriptions for three African American/Black students, three Hispanic students and three White/Caucasian students. Teachers will complete the TRF by reading the vignettes and rating how likely they would refer each student for special education evaluation. Teacher will also be asked to rate the severity of the behavior for each scenario. (Appendix 1)

Validity

Face and content validity will be used to establish validity of the TRF. After much consultation, this TRF instrument evaluates what it is intended and designed to evaluate, thus establishing face validity. In the development stage of the TRF, licensed school psychologists were given the scenarios to read and after completing their reviews, the psychologists indicated the TRF had acceptable face and content validity. No suggestions to reword or rework the scenario were received.

Reliability of the TRF will be assessed by using interrater reliability, which will be an estimate obtained from scores on similar items from different raters. The interrater reliability index was computed using the following formula: number of times observers agreed in their rating for each scenario / the total number of scenarios x 100. Again, experts were asked to read each

behavioral scenario and indicate whether they would refer each student by indicating yes or no.

The interrater reliability index showed that the two experts agreed on 8 of 9 scenarios. Using the

formula 8 / 9 x 100 yields an interrater reliability of *r=.89*. The experts were also asked to rate the

level of severity for disruptive classroom behavior as either mild, moderate or severe. Again, the

experts agreed on 8 of 9 scenarios for the severity of behaviors which yielded an interrater

reliability of *r=.89*. The interrater reliability index was developed for the likelihood of referral for

the behavioral scenarios and severity of behavior. The TRF is a valid and reliable instrument.

      Table 1 will show the variables included in this proposed study along with the levels of

measurement for each variable. Race/ethnicity and gender were measured as categorical variable.

Teacher attitude toward inclusion was measured by asking participants a question on their opinion

regarding the inclusion of students with students with special needs in the fully inclusive learning

environment. Participants will respond to the question using *1= Strongly Disagree, 2 = Somewhat*

Disagree, 3 = Uncertain, 4= Somewhat Agree, or 5=Strongly Agree. Severity of classroom

behavior is also an interval level variable that was measured using *1=Mild, 2=Moderate and*

3=Severe. The covariates for teaching experience will be measured on a ratio level. Participants

will also indicate the number of years of experience by writing a number in on the blank line in the

demographic questionnaire.

Table 1
Research Variables and Associated Levels of Measurement

Variable	Levels of Measurement
Independent	
Race/Ethnicity of Student	Categorical
Race/Ethnicity of Teacher	Categorical
Gender of the Teacher	Categorical
Teacher Attitude Toward Inclusion	Categorical
Teacher Attitude Toward Inclusion	Interval
Dependent	
Likelihood of Referral	Interval
Severity of Behavior	Interval
Covariates	
Years Teaching Special Education	Ratio
Years Teaching General Education	Ratio

Discussion

It's my belief that the findings from this research study proposal will support other studies that showed that student race is a factor which affected teacher referrals to special education evaluation (Bradshaw et al., 2010, Codrington & Fairchild, 2012; Zhang et al, 2014) and will negate the findings of the Green (2012) study which showed that the race of student was not related to teacher referral.

Ethical Considerations/Limitations

This study proposal has a few limitations. First, it is possible the results from the sample may not represent the total population of teacher ins the school districts across the United States. If the study were replicated on a larger scale, the results may be different. Secondly, teachers may have stereotypes toward a race/ethnicity that are not reflected in their responses and therefore their responses are not honest responses. Thirdly, the wording that was used in the vignettes on the TRF

may have enabled teacher to give what they perceived to be socially desirable ratings. Fourthly, the racial description on the TRF may have enabled teacher to mask their biases and prejudices toward minorities. Lastly, the sample are teachers form elementary and the results may not be generalizable across middle school, high school or private school teachers.

Recommendations

Several recommendations for this proposal are 1) a more broad sample of teachers may be required to see how various student and teacher variables are related to teachers' decisions to refer students for special education evaluation. 2) Remove the race from the vignettes as this might encourage teachers to not engage in social desirability 3) Add a qualitative element to query teachers to discover the underlying reasons for referring students to special education.

Ethical Considerations

Findings from this research proposal may be used to 1) raise awareness of the connections between teacher characteristics, student characteristics, and teacher referral of African American males for special education evaluation, 2) advocate for cultural sensitivity awareness and training seminars that inform educators of how variables are related, 3)Teacher may be motivated to develop more culturally relative and sensitive classroom management procedures.

Conclusion

Teachers must be aware of how exclusionary practices of special education placement affects the educational outcomes for students educated in those exclusionary settings and how their implicit assumptions and biases affect their response to behavior of students from those groups. The disproportionate representation of African American/Black makes referred to Special Education is a social problem that must be addressed. Through courageous conversations, teachers

can be made aware that special education evaluation referrals should not be the anecdote used to

address disruptive classroom behaviors.

Appendix

Teacher Rating Form Sample Items

Read the behavioral descriptions for each of the nine students. **All students are in the 9th grade, all are male, and all are doing quite poorly academically.** Read the scenario for each student, and then decide how likely you would refer that student to the school's multi-disciplinary team to determine whether the student qualifies for ED (emotionally disturbed) placement. Circle the number which reflects the how likely you would refer the student by circling the appropriate number. Also, mark the response that best represents your opinion regarding the severity of the behaviors for each student.

Use the scale below to rate how likely you would refer each student for special education evaluation based on the description that has been given		Indicate the level of severity of each behavior described in each scenario by circling the appropriate number.
1 = Very unlikely to refer		1 = mild
2 = Somewhat unlikely to refer		2 = moderate
3 = Uncertain		3 = severe
4 = Somewhat likely to refer		
5 = Very likely to refer		

Student	Behavioral Description	How likely to refer						Severity of behavior		
A	The student bullies his classmates frequently. The bullying is sometimes verbal, but often it is physical. In addition, this student, who is Hispanic, often curses out or uses vile language at his teachers.	1	2	3	4	5		1	2	3
B	The student sometimes hums loudly, and at other times makes odd noises. He does not seem to be aware he is doing this. At other times, this student, who is White, uses profanity, but this is directed only at other students. He has also been known to lie to his teachers without hesitation.	1	2	3	4	5		1	2	3
C	The student very often is seen or heard threatening other students with violence if they don't give in to his demands. He is often spotted carrying large sums of money. When this African-American youth is sometimes confronted by adults about his threats, he not only does not deny it, but he shows no guilt or remorse about his conduct.	1	2	3	4	5		1	2	3

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