

Improving Educational Outcomes for Minority Males in Our Schools

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This article examines the academic underachievement and disproportionate special education placement of minority males. Causes and consequences for poor academic performance by minority males are reviewed. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and No Child Left Behind Act are discussed in relation to minority male academic achievement. Finally, strategies are presented for improving outcomes for minority males.

Keywords: Minority males, academic achievement, cultural bias, IDEA, NCLB

Sixty years after the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka, KS* (1954), disparities in education outcomes for minority and majority students remain a persistent problem (Gardner & Miranda, 2001; Skiba et al., 2011), and African American, Latino, and Native American students consistently underperform on academic measures (DeValenzuela, Copeland, Qi, & Park, 2006; Paul, 2004). Academic disparities are even greater when outcomes of only minority males are considered (Artiles, & Trent, 1994; Greene, & Forster, 2003). For example, disaggregated data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2010) revealed that 51.3% of 12th grade African American males possess below basic reading skills when compared to 36.1% of African American females, 24.3% of White males, and 13.1% of White females.

Poor academic performance by students can result in consequences such as dropping out of school, special education placement, limited postsecondary opportunities, and low paying jobs (Bridgeland, DiIulio & Morison, 2006; McCardle & Chhabra, 2004; McLoyd & Purtell, 2008). The impact of poor academic skills is not limited to underachieving students. Its impact is felt within their communities and across the nation. America must develop and maintain a well-educated and diverse workforce to compete in a world economy increasingly driven by communication and technology (Hernandez, 2009; U. S. Department of Education, 2012). However, individuals with poor academic skills are ill prepared to compete in a technology driven job market. President Obama recognized the need for a well-educated and diverse workforce and has since established two critical initiatives—a goal of 60% of Americans obtaining a college degree by 2020 (U. S. Department of Education, 2012), and the establishment of the “My Brother’s Keeper” program (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/my-brothers-keeper>)—to improve outcomes for Latino and African American males.

In order for minority males (i.e., African American, Latino, and Native Americans) to achieve the goal of improved outcomes, they must have access to quality education throughout their schooling. Access to quality education is the foundation for developing knowledgeable and

productive citizens (Kauffman, Conroy, Gardner, & Oswald, 2008). This article examines the current state of academic outcomes for minority males, identifies possible causes for poor academic achievement, discusses what is being done to improve the academic outcomes of minority males, and provides recommendations for the future.

Academic Achievement Of Minority Males

The disparity of the academic achievement between minority and majority students has been a concern for decades (U. S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2009). At the time of the Brown (1954) decision the reason for poor academic performance by minority students seemed clear with the culprit being institutional racism enforced through separate and unequal school systems. Schools for minority children (e.g., African American) were grossly underfunded and poorly resourced when compared to schools for children from the dominant culture. At that time, the solution for eliminating academic racial disparities was the integration of schools as a means to allow all children equal access to educational experiences.

However, fourteen years after the Brown desegregation decision, Dunn (1968) raised the issue of minority children, especially males, being disproportionately placed in special education classes. Research conducted by Dunn found that African Americans, particularly males, were being referred to special education (i.e., mild mental retardation category) at a rate that exceeded their percentage of school enrollment. Later, researchers identified disproportionate special education placements for Native American and Latino males (Artiles, & Trent, 1994; Ford, 2012; Harry & Kingner, 2006).

In the decades since the Brown decision and research findings by Dunn, initiatives to remedy the disproportionate placement of minority students in special education and close the achievement gap between minority and majority students have been put forward. Some of these initiatives were included in federal legislation—the *Individuals With Disabilities Act (IDEA) 2004* and *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB)*—with the goal of improving the quality of education for all children, including children with disabilities.

IDEA and Minority Males

The disproportional placement of minority males in special education is a challenging issue that involves how minority male students are identified and the education services they receive. IDEA (2004 [P.L. 108-446]) mandates that educators identify all children who have disabilities and provide them with a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment. In an effort to be inclusive, definitions within the special education categories, particularly learning disabilities, behavior disorders, and mild intellectual disabilities (referred to as mild disabilities) are purposely vague (Anastasiou, Gardner, & Michail, 2011). An unintended consequence of definitional vagueness may be the inclusion of individuals, particularly minorities, in special education who do not have disabilities (Anastasiou et al.). Native American and African American students are at higher risk for special education placement than any other ethnic group (KewelRamani, Gilbertson, Fox, & Provasnik, 2007; Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Gallini, Simmons, & Feggins-Azziz, 2006; U. S. Department of Education, 2009). Native American and Latinos males are at a higher risk for being placed in the special education category of learning

disability (Anastasiou et al., 2011), while African American males are typically disproportionately placed in the special education categories of mild intellectual disability and behavior disorders (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). The rate of placement for Latino students is close to expectations, based on the national Latino population. However, when data is analyzed at the state and district levels, pockets of disproportionality are found (Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, & Higareda, 2002; Kauffman, Mock, & Simpson, 2007). There is also evidence that Latinos with disabilities are more likely than Whites to receive instruction in a restrictive environment (e.g., self-contained classroom) (Perez, Skiba, & Chung, 2008).

Concerns about disproportionality prompted the Office for Civil Rights to commission the National Academy of Sciences to conduct a study to identify the causes for the disproportionate placement of minority males (i.e., African Americans) into the category of mild intellectual disability. Results of the study, *Placing Children in Special Education: A Strategy for Equity* (National Research Council, 1982) revealed that teachers referred minority students for special education testing, but did not refer White students that exhibited similar characteristics. They also found that evaluators used different types of tests, more tests, or a different interpretation of test results to determine that minority students needed special education services. Additionally, data indicated that Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) was not followed in many cases where minority students with special need were placed in self-contained classrooms, while similarly situated White students are placed in regular classrooms. Moreover, a delay in the evaluation and placement of students was found to affect children of all races and national origins (U. S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2009).

Data from the aforementioned report served as a catalyst for the development of multi-factored assessments to determine if a disability label was warranted for a child. In fact, many of the recommendations from the report are embedded in the language of the IDEA reauthorization of 2004 such as gathering information from parents; examining authentic education products as well as standardized tests; reemphasizing the importance of parents as partners in the education of their children with disabilities; and placing a strong emphasis on improving the quality of instruction for students.

Further, IDEA (2004) directly addresses the issue of racial disproportionality at both the national and state levels. Racial disproportionality was designated as one of three areas for monitoring and enforcement. IDEA requires states and local educational agencies (LEAs) to actively engage in steps to address the disproportionate representation of minorities in special education. Part B regulations include key guidelines of how states are to monitor LEAs to determine if disproportionate representations of minorities are receiving special education and related services in their states due to inappropriate identification. States are further required to collect and examine data to determine if significant disproportionality in special education (e.g., behavior disorders, intellectual disabilities, and specific learning disabilities) based on race and ethnicity exists on the state and LEA levels. States must also monitor the educational settings in which children receive services (e.g., general education classroom, resource room, self-contained classroom) and the types of disciplinary actions used to discipline children (including suspensions and expulsions). The provision also require LEAs use evidence-based assessments (e.g., response to intervention [RtI]) to assess culturally and linguistically diverse (CDL)

students, such as English Language Learners (ELLs), prior to referring these learners for possible special education placement (Brown & Doolittle, 2008; Orosco & Klingner, 2010).

The collection of data on ethnicity provides the opportunity for educators to determine if patterns of disproportionality exist within their districts and/or schools, such as a higher number of minority students being placed in special education categories. Educators should use this data to analyze the impact of their policies on subgroups within the school district. The higher rates of special education placements for minority males are important indicators that cultural biases may be impacting the placement process (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Countinho & Oswald, 2000; Kauffman & Landrum, 2009; Losen & Orfield, 2002). In other words, disproportional representation of minority males in special education categories could be due to factors other than disabilities, meaning that educators may misinterpret culturally based behavior differences, causing some culturally different students to wrongly receive disability labels. Also, some teachers may have deficit thinking reflected in low expectations/biases toward minority males, which can lead to the misinterpretation of behaviors (Ford, Harris, Tyson, & Frazier Trotman, 2002).

No Child Left Behind and Minority Males

Similar to IDEA's promise of an appropriate education for all children with disabilities, a central purpose of the No Child Left Behind Act was to ensure that all children are provided access to a quality education (National Center on Educational Outcomes [NCEO], 2003). NCLB promises that all children, particularly those in high poverty schools (which tend to have predominately minority student populations) would receive a quality education designed to promote academic success. Schools are judged by the ability of their students to meet the federal academic guidelines on standardized assessments required to demonstrate adequate yearly progress (AYP) (Yell, 2012). NCLB also mandates that education data be disaggregated so that the academic progress of ethnic subgroups and economically disadvantaged students can be monitored. This was a central component to the law for the purpose of providing educators with the information required to assure appropriate academic progress for all students (Yell, 2012). In other words, the goal was to provide a quality (i.e., equal) education for all learners and subsequently decrease the academic achievement gap between minority and majority students.

The implementation of empirically validated instruction is essential to the efforts for decreasing the achievement gap between minority and majority children, as well as children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Stearns, 2002). Schools with students who continued to perform poorly academically, across multiple years, would be in jeopardy of faculty being replaced and the school curriculum revamped. NCLB pushed states to examine curricula and how effectively children in their schools were instructed. In response, state departments of education attempted to improve outcomes for children through the development of academic standards for students, especially in reading and math in their respective states (Carmichael, Martino, Porter-Magee, & Wilson, 2010).

These aforementioned efforts evolved into a national movement to create a common course of academic standards across states (i.e., Common Core <http://www.corestandards.org>) -- the

common core. Common Core has two foci, college and career readiness standards and the K-12 standards.

The college and career readiness standards were designed to assess what students should know when graduating from high school (i.e., postsecondary readiness). K-12 standards were designed to address academic standards in elementary through high school. However, despite the intentions of these education initiatives to date, the achievement gap between minorities and majority students remain relatively constant (Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, 2011).

Neither IDEA, NCLB, or Common Core is a perfect education initiative; yet, each seeks to promote quality education for all children. This is a critical and necessary step in improving outcomes for minority male students. However, the authors believe that in order to make substantive changes in closing the achievement gap and decreasing disproportionality, educators and policymakers must do more than develop guidelines and collect data on the disparities. That is, there must be a more systematic and effective implementation of effective instruction for all students throughout their education experiences. While IDEA and NCLB have flaws, both also contain positive features. For example, IDEA and NCLB require teachers to utilize empirically validated instructional strategies and assessments that are intended to promote effective classroom instruction. The premise is that if all students receive quality instruction, more children will experience academic success thereby reducing the number of students (including minority males) who underachieve and/or are referred for special education placement.

However, despite the intent of these laws, a significant improvement in the outcomes of minority students, especially males (Vanneman, Hamilton, Baldwin-Anderson, & Rahman, 2009) has not been realized. In 2009, the graduation rate for White males was 76% compared to graduation rates for Native American, African American, and Latino males—i.e., 58%, 52%, and 50%, respectively (Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, 2012; Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2012). This does not mean that the education laws are incorrect in calling for empirically validated instruction for all students. The fact is, numerous studies have demonstrated that when students from diverse cultural backgrounds are instructed using empirically validated strategies they can be academically successful (Cartledge, Yurick, Singh, Keyes & Kourea, 2011; Gardner, Cihon, Morrison, & Paul, 2013; Gardner, Heward, & Grossi, 1994/2001; Kauffman et al., 2008; Moats & Foorman, 2008; Therrien, Gormley, & Kubina, 2006). Unfortunately, the implementation of effective instruction has been poorly and inconsistently executed, particularly in schools in high poverty neighborhoods that often have a majority minority student population (McLoyd & Purtell, 2008), thus placing minority students at an increased risk for underachievement and special education placement.

Cultural Bias and Poverty

One reason for concern about disproportionality and poor academic performances by minority males is that they may be indicators that historical inequities and racial biases influence how minority males are treated (Patton, 1998). Educators have often chosen to acknowledge the existence of disparities between ethnic groups but avoid the difficult conversations involving the pervasive issue of cultural bias and its influence in American schools (Singleton & Linton,

2006). The results have often been efforts to address symptoms of cultural bias and not the systemic root of cultural bias. In other words, strategies were recommended and implemented that were designed to reduce the achievement gap but the attitudes of educators who were to implement the strategies remained unchanged (Singleton & Linton). Though academic content is impartial and unbiased, individuals can be biased toward others and in some cases develop or maintain policies that inherently favor one ethnic group over another (James, 2012), i.e., a policy for the selection of gifted and talented students that emphasizes performance on IQ tests and other academic measures, while deemphasizing other creative forms of giftedness. Another potential area of bias is discipline. Educators may apply harsher consequences to minority males than majority males for similar behaviors (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002; Townsend, 2000). Often these consequences include removal from the classroom (e.g., suspension or expulsion) thereby decreasing students' opportunities to learn and increasing their risk for academic underachievement.

Additionally, educators must have skills in discerning culturally based behavior from disability related behaviors. Children engaging in actions that are appropriate within their culture may have their behaviors misinterpreted. Minority males may appear to be nonchalant about school and their education, however this nonchalant attitude may not reflect their real feelings toward school but is an important part of their street persona (Allen & Boykin, 1992).

Finally, culturally based behaviors should not be used to place children in special education (Ford, 2012). For example, the use of nonstandard English by students both in speech and writing may cause some teachers to view them as possibly having a disability in written or oral communication, when in reality, the students are following the language conventions for their culture. Therefore, they are not demonstrating a disability but reflecting a learned language. These students may need additional instruction to become proficient in Standard English but language differences are not necessarily indicative of a disability (Cartledge, Gardner, & Ford, 2009).¹

A critical step in addressing the disproportionate placement of minority males in special education, and the achievement gap, is to prepare teachers who are culturally sensitive with the knowledge of how bias can manifest in education decisions to prevent the unnecessary placement of minority males in special education. Further, teachers need to be trained in effective pedagogy and how to modify their instructional delivery so that it is culturally sensitive (Cartledge et al., 2009). The development of culturally sensitive teachers will require that colleges of education emphasize the role culture plays in education in terms of potentially negative and positive consequences.

Poverty and Minority Males

Another factor that can impact education outcomes for students is poverty. Ethnic disparities in poverty are well documented in the United States (Hosp & Reschly, 2004). According to research, one quarter of African American and Native American children and 22% of Hispanic

¹ See Tyrone C. Howard (2010) for a full discussion of the influence of race and culture in American schools.

children live in poverty, compared with 11% of Asians and 8% of Whites (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Lee, 2006).

Children from poor families often begin school with fewer important school-related skills than their more affluent peers (Hart, & Risley, 1995) and these children may behave differently due to environmental circumstances associated with poverty. When behavior differences are paired with low teacher expectations (e.g., bias) children may be mistakenly viewed as having a disability. The disaggregation of special education data mandated by IDEA has consistently yielded a pattern of African American, Latino, and Native American males being at increased risk for special education placement and more restrictive learning environments than their White counterparts (Artiles, Trent, & Palmer, 2004). The combination of ethnicity and poverty risk factors only increase the need for culturally sensitive teachers.

Also, because poverty is sometimes used as the primary reason for the poor performance of minority males in the schools (Anastasiou et al., 2011; Donovan & Cross, 2002), educators need to have an understanding of how it influences behaviors. Research has shown that there is a correlational relationship between family wealth and academic achievement (Neuman, 2008). As such, minority families, due to America's history of discrimination, have not always had the same opportunities as other families to amass wealth (Gardner & Mayes, 2013). It seems disingenuous to have historically restricted the economic opportunities for minority groups then use low SES as a rationale to explain why they are unsuccessful. Regardless of the cause of poverty, minority children are more likely to live in poor communities and experience the toxic effects of poverty, increasing their risk for special education placement and poor academic achievement (Oswald, Coutinho, & Best, 2002). However, poverty as a risk factor does not explain why minority males have a higher risk than minority females for special education placement and poor academic achievement. Therefore, it is difficult to eliminate bias particularly toward minority males as an influencing factor for disproportionality and poor academic achievement (Qswald et al., 2002). Nevertheless, educators need to understand how certain patterns of behaviors develop and flourish in impoverished communities. Given these circumstances educators need to acquire the knowledge and skills on how to promote academic achievement among impoverished children.

One proffered solution to the poor academic performance of disadvantaged children is to have them attend more effective schools (e.g., suburban schools). If the quality of instruction in schools in low-income neighborhoods is less effective, then access to quality instruction within more affluent schools may serve as a solution. However, as attractive as this solution may be, simply placing minority and disadvantaged males into more affluent schools does not always yield the desired results of education equity (Ahram, Fergus, & Noguera, 2011).

Transferring minority males from a poor performing school to a more academically rigorous school may require additional support to enable them to experience success. However, if educators at the new school are predisposed to believe that minority children and/or poor children are academically less capable (i.e., deficit thinking), it may cause them to maintain lower expectations for minority children (Ahram et al., 2011). Rather than providing the academic support for a successful transition into a new school, these minority males may be at a higher risk for special education placement (Gardner & Miranda, 2001). If minority males are

not referred for special education, teachers' low expectations for these youngsters may result in their placement in less academically rigorous general education courses offered by the school (McPherson, 2010). Consequently, minority males are at greater risk for lower academic achievement and poorer educational outcomes compared to majority students, even in more academically rigorous schools.

Improving Outcomes for Minority Males

How can educators reverse the negative trends that impact minority males? A critical factor for academic achievement is high quality instruction. Teachers' knowledge of effective instructional strategies is foundational to improving outcomes for minority males (Kauffman et al., 2008). Both IDEA and NCLB mandate the implementation of effective pedagogy. The implementation of empirically validated instruction as intended by these laws will improve access to a quality education for all children, including minority males.

Teachers should also have skills in making data-based instructional decisions. The ability to use empirically validated instructional strategies and make data-based decisions will allow teachers to appropriately implement a three-tier RtI model that insures that all children receive empirically validated instruction; and those that need additional help will receive small group or one on one instruction (Fuchs & Deshler, 2007). RtI allows for the more judicious use of education resources (Barnett, Daly, Jones, & Lentz, 2004), which is important in urban schools where resources are often limited. Additionally, teachers need to possess skills in working with diverse student populations.

Culturally sensitive pedagogy. Developing culturally sensitive teachers is vital to improving outcomes for minority males. Culturally sensitive teachers have expertise in empirically validated instructional strategies and they have the ability to effectively incorporate students' culture into the curriculum in meaningful ways. Culturally sensitive teachers are also better able to determine whether a child is demonstrating traits that are associated with a disability or simply a cultural difference (Cartledge et al., 2009; Equity Assistance Centers, 2008).

Cultural sensitivity is essential knowledge for determining the appropriate educational placement for minority males (i.e., special education, general education, gifted education, etc.); and making the correct educational placement decision is vital to improving the academic achievement of minority males. If students are not appropriately placed in the right educational environment based on their instructional needs, it is virtually impossible for these students to receive a quality education. The benefit of an appropriate and effective education throughout their academic career provides minority males with the best opportunity to achieve academically and to become positive contributors to society after high school graduation.

A related consideration for improving outcomes for minority males is the identification of the most rigorous academic curriculum in which the students can be successful. The authors believe when students are not placed in rigorous curricula designed to maximize their academic potential, students are not receiving an appropriate education. Students wrongly placed in an instructional environment may be less prepared for postsecondary opportunities, and their lack of preparedness may have lifelong consequences (i.e., limiting career opportunities).

Achieving the goal of an appropriate education for all students requires commitment by educators, parents, and colleges of education. Colleges of education and school districts must train and insist that teachers use empirically validated pedagogy in all classrooms as well as regularly assess the effectiveness of their instruction, based on student achievement. Additionally, teachers should enhance the curricula to include positive examples of minority males. The authors believe that inclusion of positive minority males in the curricula can increase the minority males' interest in academics and serve as a positive model of the benefits of academic achievement.

If effective culturally sensitive instruction were systematically implemented across all schools as recommended by NCLB, children will benefit academically. Students who struggle in classrooms where empirically validated instruction is implemented can be selected for additional and more intense instruction using a RtI model. Children who continue to struggle despite the implementation of empirically validated pedagogy and additional instructional opportunities can then be evaluated for special education services.

In addition to the implementation of empirically validated instruction, there should be a special education evaluation process that minimizes the risk of bias due to ethnicity or SES, as intended when IDEA was enacted. That is, the implementation of a nondiscriminatory multi-factored special education assessment process for identifying students with disabilities that is sensitive to cultural differences. This process should include parents/guardians as fully valued members of the IEP team, recognizing the fact that parents are the resident experts about their children. The assessments also should include culturally sensitive tools including authentic products, observation, and multiple tests. Additionally, educators should be aware that minority males may have different behavior patterns than White students and these differences should be viewed within their cultural context.

Lastly, the identification of an appropriate educational setting is not a one-time decision. The education process is dynamic. It requires regular and careful analysis of the students' performances to determine if students are appropriately placed and making progress commensurate to their abilities. As such, educators need to regularly evaluate students' academic progress, including educational placements. However, the periodic evaluation of the appropriateness of a child educational placement should not be restricted only to those in special education. It should also include those in general and gifted education.

Conclusion

Minority males continue to lag behind their peers academically despite the implementation of IDEA and NCLB. However, educators can use the important concepts in these laws such as the use of empirically validated pedagogy to improve the quality of instruction for minority males. Providing an appropriate education for all students is the most important charge of each LEA. Our society's well being depends on schools playing an active role in the development and education of children, and helping them to become productive members of society. Given the achievement gap between minority and majority males, it is critical that educators employ culturally sensitive and empirically validated pedagogy to maximize instructional gains for minority males. Minority parents also have an indispensable role to play in the education

experiences by collaborating with educators. Parents and teachers working together can increase the likelihood of minority males receiving a quality education.

AUTHOR NOTES

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