

Chapter 1

Disproportionate Representation in Special Education and the Intersectionality of Race, Ethnicity, and Socioeconomic Status

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ABSTRACT

Over 50 years ago, Dunn expressed concern that many children placed in special education classes were more likely children with mild learning problems from socially culturally diverse backgrounds rather than intellectually disabled. Further, Dunn described the then practices and policies as “morally and educationally wrong.” From this viewpoint, the chapter will use a multifactorial perspective to examine issues regarding disproportionate representation in special education, including communication sciences. Further, the chapter will discuss how these factors intersect with demographic variables such as the race, ethnicity, class, and home language of children with disabilities.

INTRODUCTION

The passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (Education for All Handicapped Children Act, 1975) was meant to assure that children with disabilities have access to a “free and appropriate public education,” to provide due process for children and families, and to evaluate the effectiveness of the special education and related services for these children. Similarly, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (“Education for All Handicapped Children Act,” 1975), in conjunction with the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was designed to provide individuals with disabilities access to an

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appropriate education. Together, this legislation should provide all children with access to equitable and effective special education services. However, since its earliest inception, special education has been the subject of legal challenges regarding racial, ethnic, and language minority disproportionality (Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders, 2013).

This chapter will review the literature on disproportionality and special education from federal legislation, particularly IDEA. The chapter will then examine the research that has explored relationships between race, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, home language, and special education identification, and access to services. While studies have consistently found that disproportionate representation in special education for children with disabilities, there is conflicting research on what type of disparity exists for children with disabilities from racial or ethnic minorities. Finally, the chapter will examine the literature regarding the disparities that have been reported in the identification of communication disorders and access to services in speech-language pathology

BACKGROUND

Disproportionality can be defined as the underrepresentation or overrepresentation of a specific group within a setting relative to that group's proportion in the total population (Dever et al., 2016). Questions regarding the disproportionate representation of students from diverse backgrounds in special education classrooms were raised over fifty years ago. In 1968, Dunn expressed concern regarding the number of children in special education classrooms from racial, ethnic, language minority, or low-resourced homes. Dunn posed that it was more likely that these children had mild learning problems instead of having an intellectual disability. Further, Dunn (1968) described special education practices and policies as “morally and educationally wrong” (pg.5). This seminal article recognized and highlighted disparities amongst racial and ethnic minorities in the special education system and facilitated an ongoing evaluation and discussion on inequities in special education and related services.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1400, 2004) has been amended to address concerns regarding the disproportionate representation of children with disabilities based on race, home language, and ethnicity. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) theoretically ensures the right of all children with disabilities to have access to special education and related services, which includes services for speech, language, and hearing impairments. Thus, speech-language pathologists play an essential role not only as direct service providers but also have the opportunity to develop practices that address social justice for children with disabilities. Accurate and early identification of disabilities plays a critical role in successful academic and communication outcomes. Alternatively, delays in identification or misidentification, whether over- or under-identification, can have a negative impact on academic and communication outcomes.

MAIN FOCUS OF THE CHAPTER

Issues, Controversies, Problems

Amendments to the IDEA Act (2004) require states to determine if there is significant disproportionality, that is, an overrepresentation based on race or ethnicity, in the identification of children with disabilities,

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