

## *Factors Involved in the Overrepresentation of Minority Students in Special Education Programs Through the Lens of Previous Literature*

**Dr. Faisal Alashal F. Alhusayni**

*Assistance Professor of Learning Disabilities*

*Department of Special Education King Abdulaziz University*

### **Abstract:**

**D**isproportionate representation of minority students in special education programs is one of the historical issues facing the educational system in the USA and elsewhere, as mentioned by many previous studies. Thus, a large number of published studies had been trying to determine the factors contributed to this issue alongside its negative impact. After reviewing the published literature, this study found that this issue were mostly underlying by researches, whereas, many other researchers argued that the overrepresentation of minority students in special education seemed to be a global intractable issue, and could be found in some countries such as Canada, Germany, and New Zealand. This study Demonstrated the factors that mainly contributed to this issue, which related to students, teachers, and practices or processes, and negatively impacted students and their parents, as well as the field of education. Additionally, in this study, Response to Intervention (RTI), and culturally relevant teaching practices were introduced as approaches to resolve the issue of overrepresentation and reduce the high-percentage of minority students in special education programs. Some suggestions for futures studies and implications were also provided.

**Keywords:** *Special Education; Minority Students; Overrepresentation; Parents; Emotional-Behavioral Disorder; Specific Learning Disabilities; Response to Intervention.*

### **Introduction:**

Since the 1970s, the issue of overrepresentation of minority students in specific categories of disability has been being reported by the United States Office of Civil Rights (OCR) (Ferri, Connor, 2005). The overrepresentation happens if a membership of certain group in

special education is bigger than their percentage in the general education population (Green, 2005; Mills, 2003). mentioned that. Unfortunately, throughout the history of special education, most of researches were underlying the issue of overrepresentation rather than suggesting or indicating some effective remediation, therefore, treated this issue as an outcome rather than as a sign of underlying issue (Rueda, Windmueller, 2006). By comparing Canada, Germany, New Zealand, and the USA Gabel, Curcic, Powell, Khader, & Albee (2009), stated that the issue of overrepresentation of minority students in special education seemed to be a global intractable issue.

The typical main categories of disability involved in this issue include mild mental retardation (MMR), emotional-behavioral disorder (EBD), and specific learning disabilities (SLD). Also, generally, students from African American, Latino, and Indian American, are considered to be the most common groups involved in the issue of overrepresentation (Rueda, Windmueller, 2006; O'Connor, Fernandez, 2006). Due to the fact that SLD is considered the largest category of disability in the nation, Waitoller, Artiles, & Cheney (2010), mentioned that more than half of the articles written about overrepresentation in the literature of special education were published from 2000 to 2006. The increase of this publication might be attributed to the fact that the reauthorization of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) 1997 and 2004 include superior importance on the identification process of SLD students as one of the largest category that included most of students who are overrepresented as having SLD. Consequently, most of research on the issue of

overrepresentation has included the SLD students as a category and African American as a group involved in this intractable issue (Waitoller, Artiles, & Cheney, 2010; Bush-Daniels, 2008).

Although, researchers have been trying to determine the factors contributing to this issue and its negative impact, they have come out with different results to explain it. Meanwhile, based on different results, the debate about the main factors and the negative impact of the issue of overrepresentation seems to be continuing and the problem of overrepresentation as well (Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, & Ortiz, 2010; Rueda, Windmueller, 2006). However, there is potential agreement in the literature of special education about the factors involved in this issue, such as the factors related to students or parents (e.g., race, culture or background, and socioeconomic status, and gender) (Williams, 2007). Factors related to the teachers (e.g., low qualification, and bias), and factors related to practices or processes (e.g., identification process, and prereferral intervention) (Perez, Skiba, & Chung, 2008; Williams, 2007).

This paper will discuss the factors contributing in the issue of overrepresentation related to students or parents, teachers, and practices or processes, then, the negative impact of this intractable issue on students, parents, and the field of special education. Furthermore, an indication of the approaches that can reduce overrepresentation of minority groups in special education will be made, such as Response to Intervention (RTI), and culturally relevant teaching

practices. This paper will conclude by addressing the conflict between studies involved in the issue of overrepresentation, and the need for more studies about how to effectively resolve this intractable issue.

### **Potential Factors Involved in Overrepresentation**

In this section the paper will discuss different potential factors involved in the issue of overrepresentation of minority students in the SES. To illustrate, there are three main factors; factors related to students (e.g., race, gender, and low socioeconomic status), factors related to teachers (e.g., low guilty of teachers, bias), and factors related to practices or processes (e.g., the bias of educational system, the absence of prereferral intervention). It is to be noted that dividing the factors involved in overrepresentation to three main categories, in this paper, does not neglect the interactions between them.

### **Factors Related to Students**

The factors related to students include race and gender of the students who were overrepresented. Mandell, Davis, Bevans, & Guevara (2008), mentioned that in some cases, even if students have similar diagnostic or clinical profiles, they do have different labeling as having special needs based on their ethnic differences. For example, even if White students were the largest groups who received SES, African American students were more likely to be identified as having Emotional Disturbance (ED) than White or even Latino students, whereas Latino students were more likely to be identify as having Learning Disabilities (LD). However, based on students' gender,

there are some differences within the same race. To illustrate, due to the fact that the behaviors of African American boys' were more likely to be considered as disruptive, boys were more likely to identified as having special needs and receive SES more than African American girls (Mandell, Davis, Bevans, & Guevara, 2008; Watkins, Kurtz, 2001).

Interestingly, Coutinho, & Oswald (2005), stated that most of studies, addressing the gender disproportionality in SES, focused on overrepresentation of boys, whereas, the focus of studies should also address the underrepresentation of girls in SES compared with boys. For instance, boys were 1.33 times as likely as girls to be identified as having mental retardation, and twice likely to be identified with LD than girls (Coutinho, & Oswald, 2005). On the other hand, Guiberson (2009), indicated that Latino students were less likely to be overrepresented in SES, because general education teachers referred large number of Latino students to the English Language learning (ELL) rather than SES. Hence, the number of Latino students in SES seemed to be less than other minority students. In this case, regardless of the educational needs the percentage of minority students, particularly African American boys inadequately overrepresented in SES than White students.

According to Mandell, et al (2008), African American parents were less likely to effectively advocate for their children's educational needs than White parents. As a result, White children who were identified as having Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) were more likely to receive different type of medication than

African American students identified as having the same disorder. On the other hand, some African American parents claimed that one of the most important reasons that led general education teachers to refer their children to SES is their low socioeconomic status. To illustrate, teachers were more likely to refer children who from low-income families to SES than other children (Williams, 2007). Shealey, & Lue (2006), stated that the large number of students referred by general education teachers to special education programs and placed in SES as having disabilities were from low socioeconomic background.

In short, the factors that are involved in the issue of overrepresentation related to students can include race, gender, low socioeconomic status, and the advocacy of parents for their children's rights.

### **Factors Related to Teachers**

Most of the studies that indicated the factors related to teachers mentioned that the potential cultural disparity between teachers and their students can contribute to the overrepresentation of minority students in SES. According to Monroe (2005), the preparation programs of teachers often do not encourage them to expand their knowledge to cover not only the academic material, but also to include cultural responsive pedagogy, classroom management, and students' discipline. Therefore, some education teachers were affected by some kind of stereotypes about their minority students. For example, some teachers believe that African American boys require more control than other students; as a result, teachers believe that those students are more likely to respond to punitive measures instead of nonpunitive (Monroe, 2005).

In fact, some of district schools have reported shortage of highly qualified special education teachers for years (Leko, & Smith, 2010), and most of the teachers who worked with students with special needs were unprepared to work as special education teachers. A study by Shealey, & Lue (2006), found that none of the teachers who taught students with disabilities were licensed to teach those students. Consequently, minority students who were referred to those teachers were more likely to be placed in SES programs as having disabilities than other students. Therefore, the lack of highly qualified general and special education teachers not only badly affects the quality of services provided to all students in general education, but also the identification of students as having special needs and the right place for them.

Although some studies attributed the issue of overrepresentation to the bias of general education teachers against minority students, the study of Bradshaw, Mitchell, O'Brennan, & Leaf (2010), found that African American teachers were more likely to refer African American students to the Office Disciplinary referrals (ODRs) than White teachers. As a result, African American students were more likely to receive four out of six of ODRs than White students. In fact, the studies indicated different results about the bias of general education teachers against their minority students.

### **Factors Related to Practices or Processes**

The most important factor related to practices or processes is the lack of effective processes used with students, such as referral and identification processes.

According to Monroe (2005), most of expectations, practices, and policies in the educational system reflect the values of the people who created them, so the judgment of minority students by using the norms of majority students would be unfair for them. To illustrate, most of educational procedures are imbued with cultural standards, hence based on these norms the performance of minority students seemed to be lower than other students, due to the imbued with cultural norms rather than their low abilities (Monroe, 2005). Therefore, by comparing the performance of all students with what their teachers expect from them, minority students are more likely to be referred to SES than other students.

Unfortunately, the problem of ineffective procedures does not only affect the referral process but also the assessment and evaluation process as well. Although, the IQ test is considered the most common means that are used to assess the cognitive abilities of students, there are several criticisms about the use of such means; it includes cultural and linguistic biases against both minority and low socioeconomic background students (Ferri, & Connor, 2005). Consequently, by using the IQ tests White and middle class students are less likely to be identified as having disabilities than minority students.

### **The Negative Impacts of Overrepresentation**

In this section the paper will address different negative impacts of the issue of overrepresentation. To illustrate, there are three different main aspects that negatively result from overrepresentation of minority students in SES such as the negative impacts on students (e.g., academically and



psychologically impacts), negative impacts on parents (e.g., affect the relationship between parents and schools), and negative impacts on the field of education (e.g., increasing the funding of SES, decreasing the quality of SES). In fact, dividing the negative impacts of the overrepresentation to three main impacts in this paper does not neglect the interactions between them.

### **Negative Impacts on Students**

Students of minority groups who are inadequately identified as having disabilities, negatively affected by this misidentification, whether academically or psychologically. According to Duren Green, McIntosh, Cook-Morales, & Robinson-Zaartu, (2005), African American students, who were served in SES, spend most of the school day outside the classroom of general education whether in separate class or separate school. To illustrate, the school system seems to force those students to spend more than 60% of the school day and exclude them from accessing the mainstream curriculum. Unfortunately, excluding minority students from being in the general education classrooms with their peers and placing them in the SES did not help them to improve their academic abilities (Duren Green, McIntosh, Cook-Morales, & Robinson-Zaartu, 2005).

In fact, both of general and special education teachers were more likely to have low expectation about the students who were identified as having disabilities, so definitely the performance of those students will negatively be affected by the low expectation of teachers (Bradshaw, Mitchell, O'Brennan, & Leaf, 2010; Williams, 2007). In

this case, based on the low expectations of teachers those students were more likely to perform less than what they could, so their academic achievement did not improve the way it was supposed to. Mandell, et al. (2008) stated that the label given to students can play a very important role in the outcomes of their education or even in their lives. Moreover, Williams (2007), stated that students who were inadequately labeled as having special needs were more likely to lose their self-esteem, hence those students were psychologically negatively affected by being placed inadequately in the wrong place.

Furthermore, the minority students who were placed in the SES were more likely to become dependent on others, increasing the likelihood of losing the confidence and motivation among those students (Williams, 2007). As a result, labeling minority students as having disabilities, and placing them in the SES often lead to limiting their educational opportunities, which often limit their economic opportunities in the future (Shealey, & Lue, 2006). Therefore, not only the academic achievement of minority students will be negatively affected by the issue of overrepresentation, but also the psychological aspects will be affected as well.

### **Negative Impacts on Parents**

The parents of minority students were also negatively affected by inadequately placing their children in the special education programs. According to Williams, (2007), some African American parents have reported negative impressions not only about the SES where their children received their education services, but even about

the whole educational system. In fact, even if the relationship between schools and minority families seems to be less than other families, placing minority students in SES can lead parents to refuse the labeling that is given to their children. Most of the researchers mentioned that one of the most important factors that can lead students to be successful in schools is the good relationship between schools and homes (Duren Green, McIntosh, Cook-Morales, & Robinson-Zaartu, 2005).

Unfortunately, the overrepresentation of minority students in SES can be the result of ineffective relationship between schools and families. However, it can lead parents of those students to feel that schools do not care about the education of their children in general education classrooms for illogical reasons. To illustrate, in the study of Williams (2007), some of African American parents claimed that their children were excluded from being in general education classrooms just because of their race. Other parents argued that due to their low socioeconomic status, teachers referred their children to SES.

Although, the reason of placing some of African American students in SES is to help them to improve their abilities, parents of those students did not believe that SES would benefit their children because they believe that SES was not the right place to adequately educate their children (Williams, 2007). In this case, parents of minority students seemed to lose their faith not only in special education services but even in the educational services at all. In short, the issue of overrepresentation has great impacts not only

on student who are overrepresented in SES, but also on the parents of those students as well.

### **Negative Impacts on the Field of Education**

The negative impacts of the issue of overrepresentation continue to affect beyond the students and parents. It even negatively affects the educational services. According to Shealey, & Lue (2006), only 20 percent of the teachers in the United States of America got training in teacher education programs on how to culturally and linguistically educate students of different cultural backgrounds, who represented 43 percent of total student population. Unfortunately, it is clear that the gap between the percentages of teachers who were able to serve minority students was inadequately less than the percentage of those students in the schools of United States. Therefore, minority students are really at risk of being overrepresented in SES as having special needs than other students.

According to Mandell, Davis, Bevans, & Guevara (2008), the issue of overrepresentation inadequately increased the number of minority students who received special education services. As a result, the presence of students who were inadequately identified as having disabilities can increase the burdens on special education programs, which will add more burdens on special education teachers as well. However, Greene, Forster (2002), stated that the funding incentives encourage schools in states that used “bounty” system to identify more students with special needs in order to get more funding provided by the federal government for each child.

Consequently, increasing the number of students in SES will increase the funding of educational services which must provide each student identified as having disabilities (Greene, Forster, 2002). As a result, the quality of SES available to students who are really in need will negatively be affected by the increase in the number of students who did not need to be in, especially, when suffering from shortage of qualified special education teachers reported by district schools for years (Leko, & Smith, 2010). Therefore, the issue of overrepresentation has negative impacts not only on the special education programs, but also on all educational services as well.

### **Approaches to Reduce the Overrepresentation**

In this section the paper will introduce the two most important approaches recommended by researchers in order to resolve the issue of overrepresentation of minority students in the SES, and reduce the funding provided to SES as well. To illustrate, these approaches will include first, the multi-tiers intervention approach RTI, and the culturally relevant teaching practices approach.

### **Response to Intervention (RTI)**

The first main approach that is recommended to reduce the overrepresentation of minority students in the SES is the Response to Intervention (RTI) approach. According to Brown-Chidsey, & Steege (2005), the idea of this multi-tier approach is to providing all students who are whether have some learning problems or at risk of being identified with disabilities three different Tiers of intervention and

monitoring their progress. The concept of Tier1 is to provide students with different types of instructions in the general education classrooms and document their improvement. The idea of Tier2 is to provide some students, who may have learning difficulties and did not respond to the Tier1 intervention, with extra focusing and different types of instruction. Some students may still be unresponsive to Tier1 and 2. In this case, Tier3 will provide those students with more intensive instructions (Brown-Chidsey, & Steege, 2005; Duren Green, McIntosh, Cook-Morales, & Robinson-Zaartu, 2005). Therefore, students who have some learning problems will have the opportunity to receive additional educational support in the general education classrooms, instead of just being referred to special education programs. In this case, minority students who are often used to referral to SES without prereferral intervention will stay in general education classrooms with their peers and receive educational intervention that can adequately meet the needs of those students.

One of the benefits of RTI approach is building a good relationship between schools and parents of minority students because RTI requires involving parents in the education of their children. According to Duren Green, et al. (2005), the traditional role that parents can play in the education of their children was to be sources of background information; however, in the RTI approach the parents are included as the most important collaborators. In this case, the RTI approach can encourage both the schools

and parents to work effectively together in order to provide students with greater opportunities to adequately improve and become successful.

Another benefit of RTI is to provide all students with a perreferral intervention in general education classrooms, which can help them to receive different type of instructions based on their needs. According to Williams (2007), some of African American parents claimed that general education teachers did not try to help their children in the general classrooms before referring them to the SES. Therefore, this situation led parents of African American students to feel that general education teachers did not want to accept those children in their classes, so the only way to get rid of them was to refer them to the SES. In this case, by applying RTI approach minority students can receive three different Tiers of adequately intervention in general education classrooms before they referred to the special education programs.

The RTI approach can also resolve the problem of cultural mismatches between teachers and their minority students. According to Monroe (2005), based on cultural differences African American students were more likely to be referred to the SES as having behavioral problems and being identified as with ED than other students. In this case, due to the misunderstanding of some cultural differences, some of the general education teachers tended to consider some of African American students' behaviors as unacceptable, whereas these behaviors are considered as normal in the culture of those students (Williams, 2007).

By implementing the RTI approach, general education teachers must wait and collect more information about any signs that can lead to the right judgment. Also, the focus of teachers will be on how to effectively educate all students in the general education classrooms rather than finding students who need to be excluded to be in the SES (McKinney, Bartholomew, & Gray, 2010). As a result, supporters of RTI approach argued that this multi-tier intervention can reduce the number of all students referred and identified with special needs, and resolve the issue of overrepresentation of minority students in the SES (McKinney, Bartholomew, & Gray, 2010). On the other hand, the RTI approach is considered to be one of the most important approaches not only to reduce the high percentage of minority students in the SES, but also to reduce the high percentage of some special education categories such as the category of Learning Disabilities (LD) (Fuchs, Deshler, 2007).

### **Culturally Relevant Teaching Practices**

One of the most critical causes of overrepresentation of minority students in the special education programs is the cultural differences between those students and their general education teachers (Shealey, Lue, 2006). Whereas, the IDEA continues to emphasize that the determining of a student learning difficulties are not the result of lack of whether English language or appropriate instruction (Guiberson, 2009). Therefore, bridging the cultural gap between teachers and their students can be one of the most effective solutions to the issue of overrepresentation. According to Shealey, & Lue (2006), the program of



teachers' preparation should include the cultural differences of minority students in order to adequately educate and place them in the right place, instead of using their differences against them. When teachers increase their awareness of different cultures, they become more able to provide students with different teaching strategies and involve the cultural differenced in their teaching practices (Guiberson, 2009). Therefore, the multicultural teaching strategies can benefit not only minority students who speak English as a first language, but also the second language learners.

Unfortunately, involving the culturally relevant teaching practices in the teachers' preparation programs does not directly benefit in-service teachers. Therefore, in-service teachers should attend professional development workshops where they can develop their teaching strategies to cover cultural or linguistic differences of students (Guiberson, 2009). In fact, the percentage of minority students in schools is approximately twice greater than the percentage of teachers who are trained to effectively work with those students. Therefore, closing this gap can resolve the issue of overrepresentation of minority students in SES, and decrease the funding provided to the special education programs as a result.

In conclusion, the overrepresentation of minority students in SES is affected by different variables and has different negative impacts on several aspects. Unfortunately, this issue seems to be intractable and still facing the field of special education for several years.

Although, there is disagreement between researchers about the main potential factors involved in overrepresentation, they all agree that it has grave negative impacts not only on students who are overrepresented, but even on the parents of those students. Also, both of the fields of special and general education are negatively affected by this issue as well.

Unfortunately, both of the approaches that were recommended to resolve this issue require more effort and seem to be hard to be appropriately implemented. For instance, in order to adequately implement RTI approach both the content of RTI approach and the educational system need to be ready for that. In fact, there is disagreement between researchers about the RTI itself, rather than its effectiveness. According to Fuchs, Deshler (2007), most of studies involving the RTI approach as an alternative solution for reducing the number of students who referred to SES were not implemented with students in the higher grades, and were focusing on early reading problems. Therefore, most of the studies indicated that there are needs for more studies about how to appropriately implement RTI with both students in higher grades and other academic content, such as writing and math (Fuchs, Deshler, 2007).

On the other hand, involving the culturally relevant teaching practices that were recommended to resolve the issue of overrepresentation are also challenging the field of education and seem to be hard to implement. According to Shealey, & Lue (2006), the gap between the percentage of

minority students and the teachers who are trained to appropriately work with them seem to increase. Also, some researchers raised some questions about how to provide in-service teachers with the opportunity to develop their teaching strategies to cover the cultural differences of their students (Guiberson, 2009). Finally, due to the fact that not only the USA is facing this intractable issue, but even Canada, Germany, and New Zealand, and the USA (Curcic, Powell, Khader, & Albee, 2009), there are needs for not only national researches, but also global researches in order to effectively resolve this intractable issue.

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