

African American Resilience: The Need for Policy in Escaping the Trap of Special Education

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African American male students are disproportionately displaced in the special educational systems throughout inner-city public schools in America. Throughout the nation, public schools are showing a consistent trend regarding the student population in special education. Three common demographic variables remain salient: race, social class, and gender (Ford, 2011; Kea & Utley, 1998). In looking at the students who are most likely to be positioned in special education, research reveals the students are Black, male, and poverty-stricken (Harry, Klingler, Sturges & Moore, 2002; Holzman, 2006; Noguera, 2003). Through critical analysis of this problem, data indicate a need for additional research on the interconnection of race-conscious educational policy, cultural pedagogy, and special education.

Keywords: African American males, special education, resilience

Horace Mann (1848), an American educational reformer, is often acknowledged for arguing education to be the great equalizer as it pertains to the successful conditions of men (para. 9). Throughout history, educational policies have supported this notion. In 1965, the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA) was signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson who contended that our goal as a nation must be to ensure that everyone is provided with an educational opportunity (U.S Department of Education, 2015). This resulted in the school districts, serving low-income students, receiving more federal funding to enhance the quality of education. A decade later, President Gerald Ford signed into law the *Education for All Handicapped Children Act* (Public Law 94-142), now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1975. This assured a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment for students that were identified as having a disability. In 2002, the reauthorizing of ESEA (1965) by congress was signed in to law by President George W. Bush as *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) after receiving bipartisan support. The overall objective of the NCLB act is to ensure that all students are academically achieving at grade level and not being left academically behind by their peer group. Title I of NCLB focuses on improving the academic achievement of the disadvantaged students to ensure all students have access to high quality education (NCLB, 2002). In spite of the numerous (re)authorizations and implementations of policy designed to improve education for disadvantaged students, African American males are often receiving an inferior education when compared to their female and White counterparts (Ford, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Lewis, Simon, Uzzell, Horwitz, & Casserly, 2010). This is due in part to their placement in less academically rigorous classrooms for students with disabilities (O'Connor & Fernandez, 2006).

Research indicates that African American males are unjustly overrepresented in special education due in large part to cultural bias, resulting in their receiving an inferior education (Holzman, 2006; Noguera, 2003; Ysseldyke & Algozzine, 1983). The impact of unjustly diagnosing African American males for special education is dire consequence on the trajectory of their futures. Students placed in special education who do not belong will over time conform to the behaviors of the students in the class with disabilities and will likely never return to mainstream classrooms (Fine, 2001; Kunjufu, 1995; Serwatka, Dove & Hodge, 1986). A study conducted by The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University (2001) revealed African American students were nearly three times more likely than White students to be diagnosed as mentally

retarded and two times more likely to be diagnosed with an emotional disorder. Kunjufu (2009) asserts that only 27 percent of African American males placed in special education complete high school. To this end, when considering the Black-White achievement gap (Ferguson, 2003; Randle, 2012) and the goal of NCLB (2002) in closing it, attention must be focused on policy addressing African American students being (mis)placed in special education.

The purpose of this article was to analyze the scholarly literature revealing the extent to which African American males are disproportionately appointed for and misplaced into special education programs. The investigation suggests the current methods of sentencing African American students to special education are flawed (O'Connor & Fernandez, 2006). Scholars contend the methods being used for referring students of color are resulting in the unjust and disproportionate placement of African American males into special education programs (Ford, 2011; Smith, 2001). These methods need to be revamped and new policies must be implemented regarding the referral and placement process.

Theoretical Framework

This article uses the ecological theory of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005) as the primary theoretical framework to provide a relevant context for understanding the intersectionality of how race, social class, and gender oppressions contribute to young Black males' school experiences (Holzman, 2006). More specifically, viewing this educational dilemma through an ecological lens assists in understanding the cultural disconnect that exacerbates school segregation when African American males are being isolated from mainstream classrooms disproportionately (Powell, 2005).

The author discusses how the public school's Eurocentric curriculum that is taught by majority White, middle-class women, is often culturally biased towards Black students, specifically males, of lower socioeconomic status and how this results in their overrepresentation in special education (Kunjufu, 2005; Porter, 1997). To this end, the author argues how special education has been used as a divisive weapon leveraged against Black children to perpetuate a permanent underclass.

The ecological model of human development focuses on five systems influencing a student's educational experience (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 2005). The five systems and their contextual impacts at each level are noted as the: 1) microsystem- friends, family, peers, school, afterschool programs; 2) mesosystem- home, school, community centers, neighborhood; 3) exosystem- extended family, parental workplace, health and social service agencies; 4) macrosystem- dominant beliefs, cultural values, attitudes, ideologies; and 5) chronosystem – the influence of time both in the individual's life trajectory (developmental phases) and historical context. The five systems, which result in the ecological model of human development, are not insulated systems, but are interrelated (Ungar, Ghazinour, & Richter, 2012). While visually, the ecological model appears to have each layer isolated by systems, the layers can and do overlap. In his earlier work, Bronfenbrenner (1975) stated,

In attempting to define the "ecology" of human development, the term's history and connotations are discussed. The ecological approach requires that the person, the environment, and the relations between them be conceptualized in terms of systems, and subsystems within systems. The experimental situation is not limited to being unidirectional and dyadic, allowing only first-order effects. Two or more environmental settings can and should be included, and these environments should be studied and described along with the subject. (p.1)

When using the ecological approach, as described above, one must consider the various systems individually and in tandem with others systems in the human development model –as it relates to people and their environments. In examining Black males being placed in special education, it is vital to have awareness of their socio-economic status, culture, school district's history with Black males, and the intellectual climate of the home. To this end, Ungar (2013) argues that a child's academic growth and educational resilience must be measured in relation to the challenges faced and the environment in which they are presented. Low-income African American males are being challenged by an educational system that often hinders their academic development. Yet, too often, low-income African American families are oblivious to how the educational system functions (Diamond & Gomez, 2004).

Literature Review

Since the conception of education in the U.S., schools have been the battlegrounds for equal opportunities among African American students. While African Americans were not originally allowed to attend the same schools with Whites, over time the passage of laws and judicial decisions such as *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) provided an avenue through which African American students could attend integrated public schools. Reactions to the decision were varied and touched a range of emotions among nearly all citizens of the United States. For some, *Brown* was heralded as the triumph over legal barriers to better educational opportunities for racial/ethnic and minority students. Although 'separate but equal' ideologies were overturned by *Brown*, more than 70 percent of Black students attend majority non-White schools (Clotfelter, 2004). Potentially related to the racial segregation of students is the achievement gap between Black and White students. The Black-White gap in the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) reading scores for 13-year olds in 1971 was 39 points; it declined to an 18-point difference in 1988 and then rose to a 22-point difference in 2004 (Perie, Moran & Lutkus, 2005).

Brief Historical Background of Special Education

The intended purpose of special education was for students with disabilities to be able to participate fully in society when they are adults (Smith, 2001). Beginning in 1975, Congress chose to address issues of education for children with disabilities (IDEA, 1975). Due to injustices of education for children with disabilities, a change was needed to provide a more equal educational opportunity for those students identified as having a disability. In 1948, only 12 percent of children with disabilities were able to receive special education (Ballard, Ramirez, & Weintraub, 1982). Students who had such disabilities were not able to attend school. In 1962, only 16 states had laws that allowed for children identified as mildly mentally retarded (MMR) to attend school with the understanding that everyone should be entitled to an education, regardless of any handicap or disability (Ballard et al., 1982). The federal government took an interest in assisting state local school programs to meet educational needs under the equal protection of the law (IDEA, 2004)

Children are enrolled into special education due to having some sort of a disability. The Individual with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 (IDEA, 1997) determined the categories of disabilities and whether or not a child needs special services (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). There are 13 different categories of disabilities as defined by the reauthorization of IDEA (1997), commonly referred to as Public Law 105-17 (see Figure 1). The government suggests that if a child in a school is recognized as having one of the disorders mentioned (or a condition that falls under one of the categories), they are acknowledged as a student with a disability (Smith, 2001).

Autism	Deaf-blindness
Deafness	Emotional disturbance
Hearing impairment	Mental retardation
Multiple disabilities	Orthopedica impairment
Other health impairment	Specific learning disability
Speech or language impairment	Traumatic brain injury
Visual impairment	

Figure 1. Categories of Disabilities

Being considered disabled should not hinder people from receiving an education. Certainly, to do so would be considered discrimination. In an effort to reduce discrimination against groups of people, schools are responsible for allocating additional resources for students who need them. If a student in a mainstream classroom is having complications based on a learning condition, that student should be compensated with additional resources in the interest of equity. Allowing all people to receive an education affords them the opportunity to be gainfully employed later in life. For this reason, on July 26, 1990, President Bush signed the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) that prevents discrimination in employment, transportation, public accommodations, and telecommunications of individuals with disabilities. Then Iowa Senator, Tom Harkins, considered the act to be the “emancipation proclamation” for disabled people (West, 1994). Special education can also be defined by eight fundamental provisions outlined in IDEA '97. Smith (2001) lists the eight provisions listed in the IDEA that need to be acknowledged (p.26). (See Table 2)

Table 2.
List of Provisions

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1. Free appropriate public education (FAPE)
 2. Parental rights to notification of evaluation and placement decisions, including the rights to due process hearing in the case of disagreements
 3. Individualized education and services to all children with disabilities
 4. Provision of necessary related services
 5. Individualized assessments
 6. Individualized education program (IEP) plans
 7. Education provided to the fullest extent possible in the least restrictive environment (LRE)
 8. Federal assistance to state and school districts to ease the burden of the excess costs for special education
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Malfunctions with Special Education

Many scholars and educators argue that special education is discriminatory in nature and places too many children of color therein (Artiles et al., 1998; Artiles & Trent, 1994; Artiles & Zamora-Duran, 1997; Ford, 2011; Harry, 1994; Kunjufu, 2009; Oswald, Coutinho, Best, & Singh, 1999). There is an overrepresentation of Blacks, specifically Black males, in special education. There are several reasons understood why Black males are placed into special education at such alarming rates. Some of the reasons considered range from poor academic achievement and disorderly behavior on the part of these students, to expected outcomes of poverty and limited access to health care, and institutional racism (MacMillan & Reschly, 1998; Patton, 1998; Reschly, 1997). For some educators, special education is a method of ejecting disruptive students from the mainstream classroom. Some educators see special education as a way to sentence minority students to low achievement and a less rigorous curriculum to ensure poor lifetime opportunities (Smith, 2001). Overall, there are too many ways that special education can be used as a weapon against children when used inappropriately.

Cultural misunderstandings of marginalized groups often result in distorted perceptions and projections of the group. Unfortunately, such is the case with some educators regarding students who do not come from middle-class backgrounds (Banks, 1994). Once a teacher is under the impression that a low-income Black student (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) is unable to display high levels of achievement, their expectation decreases and their confidence in that student is diminished (Baca & Cervantes, 1998; Gollnick & Chinn, 1998). Likewise, the academic confidence of the student decreases upon discovering the teacher has low expectations of him or her. This can result in the referral of a child to special education prematurely. Once a child is in special education who should not be, their confidence for learning can be negatively impacted. The results of teachers displaying a negative attitude towards a child's ability to achieve academically at high levels cause a child to internalize the negativity, resulting in reduced motivation. In many cases, this has been noted as the cause of students dropping out of school (Winzer & Mazurek, 1998).

Some researchers have taken issue with the unilateral approaches to making decisions on children being sentenced to special education with barely any input from the parents (Harry & Klinger, 2007). During a case study of minority students placed in special education, the researchers noted a school psychologist stating, "We [the psychologist and placement specialist] discuss it prior to the meeting just to make sure we are providing the best for the child. And once we have a unified front for the parents, we can bring them in just so they know what is going on" (Harry et al., 2007, p. 7). This approach is a major problem due to IDEA (1975) requirements that parents and members of the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) team should be actively involved in the placement of the child. Meeting with the parents after a decision has been made by professionals, who might be using legal and professional educational jargon, can be intimidating to the parents; this can cause the parents to just capitulate to the decision of the educational experts despite the decision not being in the best interest of the child. The parents can be oblivious to the impact that special education can have on their child and might not understand their rights to object to such a decision.

Discussion

The objective of this study was to investigate why Black children are disproportionately sentenced to special education programs, and educators' perception of this problem. Surely, this has been a long-standing problem in the field of education (Dunn, 1968). The research has displayed that Black children, compared to their white counterparts, are being pressured into special education programs at disturbing rates. Nevertheless, some educators appear to be

oblivious as to why Black children are overrepresented in special education classes for students with disabilities. Educators who are aware provide rationales as to why Blacks are diagnosed and sentenced to special education. Some reasoning provided includes low socioeconomic status of students, teacher bias, testing bias, cultural bias, inadequate access to research-validated instruction, and institutional racism (Ferri & Connor, 2005; Hosp & Reschly, 2004; Losen & Orfield, 2002). Many of the reasons are centered on ecological factors (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 2005) and the cultural bias of such factors (Ladson-Billings, 1997).

Lee (2003) explicates how Whites provide the standard for which other children are evaluated in America and public schools privilege the culture of the White middle-class and not the culture of African American of lower socioeconomic status (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). To this end, O'Conner and Fernandez (2006) suggest that students who perform noticeably differently from the referent will be considered impaired and in need of special services (p. 8). Such educational practices indicate the immediate need for cultural competence and pedagogy training. In addition, more educators need to undergo professional development as it relates to understanding and executing policy. Better understanding of culture assists in eradicating the ideology that different is synonymous with deficit. Research conducted in the field of education has indicated that children learn best when their culture and language are reflected in the school's curriculum (Franklin, et al., 2001; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1997; Tatum, 2003). Conversely, if teachers are oblivious to the culture of their students, then the children are not learning at their peak. Educators are responsible for ensuring students are receiving the highest quality of education.

A New York University study conducted by the Metropolitan Center for Urban Education (2008) revealed that, "In today's schools, student of color are taught a test-driven, Eurocentric curriculum that does not connect with their historical and sociocultural experiences" (p. 3). African American male students are too often not being effectively educated because they are not fully engaged with the curriculum. Kunjufu (2004) has argued that, "within the school curriculums in schools, African American children are not taught a thorough history of themselves and therefore usually don't see a lot of good or heroes in their history as a people" (p. 17). Black students' disengagement towards learning then ignites the process of being referred to special education. Implementing a race-conscious educational policy can serve as a change agent in preventing African American males from dropping out of school and being placed in special education at high rates (Moses, 2002; Porter, 1997).

Implications

In order to have an educational system achieve its promise of providing equal opportunity to all students, as previous policy has attempted to accomplish, there needs to be educational policies that focus on fostering an environment of social justice (Moses, 2002). It is critical for schools to allow for a learning environment in classrooms that is conducive to encouraging the autonomy of all students from different cultures. A school that discourages the autonomy of some students grounded in the belief that they have an academic inferiority due to their race, social-economic status, or race, should be viewed as educational malpractice.

One policy literature supports that should be implemented inside of public schools is *multicultural education educational policies*. The history of American public schools has revealed that an obvious cultural disconnect exists between students of color and White educators. This cultural disconnect often results in unfavorable treatment of students of color. Black students, especially males, are being overrepresented in special education based on cultural misunderstandings. Race-conscious education policies are indeed essential due to the impact they will likely have on fostering the idea of self-determination (Kymlicka, 1991; Moses,

2002). Some critics argue that race-conscious educational policies are often discriminatory to Whites, by allocating monies to be spent on things such as bilingual programs or the recruitment of students of color. But, is it really discrimination, or does it bring about equality? If race-conscious educational policies don't exist to help empower those of underrepresented cultures, are they being discriminated against in the absence of race-conscious educational policies? Underrepresented groups need to feel secure in their identity while learning in school to maximize their academic achievement. During a time where there are multiple policies aimed at improving academic achievement for lower performers, a race-conscious education policy could help to ameliorate the problem of underperformance and achievement gaps. On the basis of evidence currently available, there is a need for additional research on the interconnection of race-conscious educational policy, cultural pedagogy, and special education.

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