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UNDERREPRESENTATION OF MINORITY STUDENTS IN
SPECIAL EDUCATION

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF
BETHEL UNIVERSITY

BY
MARVIN DALE PETERSON III

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE MASTER OF ARTS

NOVEMBER 2020

BETHEL UNIVERSITY

UNDERREPRESENTATION OF MINORITY STUDENTS IN
SPECIAL EDUCATION

BY

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ABSTRACT

Disproportionality in special education representation has been a commonly used focus of study for many years. The most frequently researched topic is the overrepresentation of black and brown, usually male, students in Emotional, Behavioral, and Social special education designations. Based on the experiences of this researcher, a void existed in the research showing the reasons why some minority groups were underrepresented in specific special education categories. This research sought out to explore what the research demonstrates are factors in the underrepresentation of minority students in specific special education designations. Data nation-wide shows that roughly seventeen percent of students in public education receive special education services. It is pertinent to the field, as well as this researcher's professional development, to understand the reasons that students can be under-, over-, and mis-represented. The research focuses on three factors that were established during the review of literature: student and parent perceptions, teacher perceptions, testing, as well as other causes linked to underrepresentation that were found in the review of literature.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Research has shown that overrepresentation of students, specifically based on ethnicity, race, socioeconomic status, gender, and home language is a prevalent issue in special education (Adkison-Bradley, Johnson, Rawls, & Plunkett, 2006; Ferri & Connor, 2005; McKenna, 2013; Sanatullova-Allison & Robison-Young, 2016). However, specific groups of students have been determined to have been underidentified and underrepresented in some special education categories (Cooc, 2017; Guiberson, 2009; McKenna, 2013). The significance of both over-, and under-, representation in special education of groups of students based on race, socio-economic status, ethnicity, and home language creates an inequitable learning and educational experience for students on both ends of this spectrum.

The availability of appropriate special education services is critical to a student's success not only in the classroom but in the entirety of their educational journey including their access and preparation for appropriate post-secondary opportunities. According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (reauthorized in 2004), "The stated purpose of the IDEA is: to ensure that all children with disabilities have available to them a free appropriate public education that emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living...". The special education and related services cannot be meeting the unique needs of students when students are overrepresented, underrepresented, or misrepresented.

As a high-school teacher, working primarily with students receiving special education services, seeing the overrepresentation of black and brown students in specific categorical designations, while remaining absent from other categorical designations, makes this a strong

area of personal/professional interest and concern. It is also clear that based on the school, district, and state-wide data, that there are entire populations of students based on race and ethnicity that are not receiving special education services equivalent to their percentage of the overall student population. This in conjunction with informal conversations with parents of students in both general education and special education demonstrates the inequity, and nuance, of this issue.

Multiple examples of interactions with families illustrate my concern. Jacob¹ was a 9th grade student in high school who had been receiving special education services since the 3rd grade. He was due for his tri-annual reevaluation. He requalified based on a continuing need for special education services after completing a comprehensive evaluation. At the results meeting, his mother noted that she did not want him to be labeled as Emotional or Behavioral Disorder (EBD). Jacob had been receiving services under this “label” or categorical designation for the entirety of his special education participation. After explaining to his mother that while the team understood her concerns, and the overrepresentation of black male students labeled EBD, she had to be informed that the data did support the criteria for EBD and there was a lack of evidence to support an alternate designation. The team ultimately accepted the designation, with his mother’s support, as long as her concerns were noted in the evaluation.

Jordan, a 10th grader, had been identified by the student support team as struggling academically, socially, and with age-appropriate behaviors. He wasn’t currently receiving special education services, but happens to be in a collaborative special education class (these classes are

¹ Pseudonyms used for student anonymity and privacy

collaboratively taught by a special education teacher and a content teacher). After several attempts to contact his grandmother, the vice principal and the coordinator of special education in the school connected with her explained their concerns. The grandmother told them that she was opposed to any sort of special education or 504 accommodations. The academic record of the student showed that this student had already been evaluated for special education services multiple times, qualified, and services had been rejected.

A third experience with Jonathan, a 9th grade student who was not receiving special education services but was in a collaboratively taught classroom by chance, where he too was identified as needing support. Jonathan was reading at the equivalent of a 2nd grade level, struggling to comprehend any of the content being taught, and was significantly behind his grade-level peers. A call home and review of records indicated that Jonathan had been receiving special education services since the 1st grade. His parents had declined to continue services at the end of Jonathan's 8th grade year. After several conversations it came to light that the parents believed, based on what they had heard, that being in special education meant that Jonathan could contract a disability and believed it to be contagious. Through an interpreter, we were able to help them understand that not only was this not the case, but that it would be detrimental for Jonathan to be suddenly expected to perform equivalent to his grade-level peers independently after receiving support for the bulk of his educational journey.

These anecdotes illustrate how each of the students described above was not receiving an adequate, equitable, or appropriate educational experience. While special education categorical designations serve a purpose, and have individual criteria, the identification process, student and parent perceptions, testing, and other factors create disproportionate representation of students in

each. Without evaluating, understanding, and reflecting on this information educators and staff, as well as families and students will not be receiving the educational support that they need.

Purpose and Focus of this Study

This topic was chosen to study underrepresentation of minority students in special education categories as the topic of my thesis research based on my experiences in the Urban Teacher Program (UTP) at Metropolitan State University, the work by this researcher during student teaching in the suburbs of Minneapolis, and the experience working as a substitute and classroom teacher in Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS). The educational perspective derives from being a native of Minnesota (this researcher was born and grew up in the suburbs of the Twin Cities), and most recently, the writer lives and works in Minneapolis. Witnessing students being taught who were not being supported or served through special education, the seemingly absent students of certain races and ethnicities, and the perceptions of students, parents, and guardians became a great concern. It created a dilemma of wanting to ensure that more students who needed services were receiving them, while also understanding the preexisting overrepresentation of students of color. Creating an equitable environment has been a focus and passion of mine, while seeking to understand the reasoning behind the statistical discrepancies that were apparent.

The student and parent perceptions of special education services and labels, teacher perceptions of students who do and do not receive special education services, the assessment and identification for special education services, as well as other causes of underrepresentation are critical to equity in education as well as to ensure the success of every student. Without equity

and accuracy in identification, provision of services, and team agreement students will be deprived of a system of support they are legally entitled to.

Thesis Question

Thus, the purpose of this thesis is to review the existing literature and attempt to respond to the following question:

What does the research demonstrate as factors that cause minority students to be underrepresented in specific special education designation categories?

Definitions of Terms Used in this Study

The following literature review will utilize the terms “categorical designations” to include all 13 categories:

Specific Learning Disability (SLD),

Other Health Impairment (OHI),

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD),

Emotional Disturbance (ED or EBD),

Speech Language Impairment (SLI),

Visual Impairment (VI),

Deafness, Hearing Impairment (HI),

Deaf-Blindness,

Intellectual Disability (ID), and

Multiple Disabilities as defined by IDEA (2004).

The terms “testing” and “assessment” will be directly related to evaluation for, qualification for, or reevaluation of a student as it relates to receiving special education services and for the purposes of this study will not include summative or formative in-class assessments or testing.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Based on the question, *What does the research demonstrate are factors that cause minority students to be underrepresented in specific special education designation categories?*, the literature reviewed examined the following parameters: student and parent perceptions as they relate to special education designations; teacher perceptions relating to special education designations; testing and the relationship to special education designations; other causes linked to underrepresentation or misrepresentation in specific special education categories. The literature collected and reviewed represented qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods of research that included a wide range research perspectives, observations, surveys, teacher and student interviews, and data on special education criteria, identification, and representation.

To ensure a thorough and inclusive investigation of the available research, a search was conducted on the “Underrepresentation in Special Education” and “Overrepresentation in Special Education.” Including research on overrepresentation allows the research both context and research which found conclusions related to underrepresentation and misrepresentation. The search included terms such as special education labels, special education perceptions, testing and special education, representation and special education, equity and special education, and variations used based on prior results. Research on special education and labeling is bountiful and therefore these terms were often used with synonymous verbiage to find relevant research.

A wide-reaching search of peer-reviewed journal articles, news articles, press releases, government statistics, and census information was completed using previously identified keywords and phrases. Several databases were utilized throughout this process including EBSCOhost, ERIC, CLICSearch through Bethel University’s online library, SAGE, and Google

Scholar. In addition to direct research, this review includes material found using ancestral searches of other works' bibliographical references. More than 74 articles were reviewed relating to the search terms used in the methods described, of which 32 are referenced in this literature review. Excess research was not employed in this study when it did not align with the intended purpose of this body of research. Some reasons for studies not to be utilized included perceptions relating to special education that were unrelated to representation, testing that was not relevant to special education categories or designations, and work that had not been peer-reviewed.

Overrepresentation as Context

Overrepresentation of students of color in special education has been explored extensively in the past 15 years (Adkison-Bradley, Johnson, Rawls, & Plunkett, 2006; Ferri & Connor, 2005; Guiberson, 2009; Hibel, Farkas, & Morgan, 2010; LeBeauf, 2008; McKenna, 2013; Morgan et al., 2017). This topic is commonplace in university classrooms across teacher preparation programs as well as in professional development settings. Looking at overrepresentation allows educational professionals to increase their awareness of these practices and perspectives to allow for further growth and minimization of these practices (Adkison-Bradley, Johnson, Rawls, & Plunkett, 2006). Ferri and Connor's work explored the effects of race, dominance, and superiority on special education placement of non-white students (2005). Hispanic overrepresentation exists in speech and language and learning disabled while the same is not true in other designations (Guiberson, 2009). Research consistently revealed that boys are more likely than their female counterparts to be identified as special education (Hibel, Farkas, & Morgan, 2010). The educational deficiencies based on socioeconomic status have also

been linked to the overrepresentation of students of color (LeBeauf, 2008). Overrepresentation has been shown to be specific to disability categories and is not consistent among other categories (McKenna, 2013). The myriad of reasons for why students are overrepresented is explored in depth by a number of scholars (Morgan et al., 2017).

Student and Parental Perceptions

Perceptions have a significant influence on how individuals make decisions. This includes what they choose to do, where they choose to go, who they choose to be affiliated with, how they choose to be represented, and so on. Special education labels prove not to be an exception to this rule. Research has conclusively shown that adolescents are hyper-aware of how they are perceived by others. Mayes and Moore (2016) sought to explore exactly how the perception of special education identification and labeling affected students. In the entirety of the study, including eight student participants interviewed, “each student participant talked about the initial identification of their special needs as being isolating” (Mayes & Moore, 2016, p. 77). One student explicitly shared that she felt “isolated by her educational label and placement in special education classes ... ‘I felt low and stupid’” even going so far as to “purposely [skip] or [be] late to class so that others would not know she had special needs” (Mayes & Moore, 2016, p. 77).

The use of labels or being designated as a student receiving special educational services has the power to create social and emotional changes. One student interviewed by Mayes and Moore (2016) stated that “before being identified as having a disability, she was much more social, but has since then disengaged with her friends and teachers because she wants to be by

herself” (p. 77). Many students find themselves isolated or pushed out of social groups when identified as special education students (Mayes & Moore, 2016). In a critical time such as adolescence, any barriers created to social normalcy will prove detrimental to students.

Perception of labels and special education are frequently associated with a negative stigma (Ferri & Connor, 2005). However, the research found some positive perceptions of disability from a student's perspective as well. According to Mayes and Moore (2016), one student expressed that having a diagnosis of ADHD by stating that, “It really didn’t make me feel different, ’cause almost everybody has ADHD” (p. 81).

Parents’ perceptions of disabilities and special education are varied, including differences in acceptance, understanding, knowledge of, belief in the relevance to their student, and awareness (Mayes & Moore, 2016). The work of Broomhead (2013) focused “...on the experiences of parents with children with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESD)” (p. 14). Parents were found to believe that their children’s disability was caused or due to ineffective or poor parenting (Broomhead, 2013). While some parents identified a feeling or perceived this of educators, others had direct evidence that this was the case. One parent shared insight into what they believed the feeling of educators was by explaining that the staff think “[the student has] his problems but really if somebody was just firmer with him he'd be fine” (Broomhead, 2013, p. 16). Less subtle comments recalled by a parent that were made directly to them included suggesting that the parent take a class on parenting (Broomhead, 2013). According to Broomhead (2013), many educators and paraprofessionals directly stated that the parenting styles and home environments were directly related to student behaviors of those identified as BESD (Broomhead, 2013). It is important to note that “Seventy-three percent of

parents [interviewed] in the remaining three sub-groups [non-BESD disabilities] perceived their children's special educational needs to be biological, uncontrollable conditions” (Broomhead, 2013, p. 17).

The work of Broomead (2013) explored guilt specifically identifying that there is significant guilt placed on parents, even without the influence of educators and staff. One parent explains by stating:

Of course I'm to blame they're my genes, doesn't matter if it's nature or nurture, both things are my doing ... I did it, I made it, pre-womb, inside womb, after womb, and so all blame lands on me ... I have guilt over should I even be using Mr Muscle sprays around the house, should I be dressing them in natural cotton and should we be doing yoga, you know have I made the right intervention (Broomhead, 2013, p. 17).

It is important to note that the same experience was not true of other diagnoses and disability categories in the study which parents again did not feel responsible for their children's diagnosis or disability designation (Broomhead, 2013). Broomhead's research showed that the guilt and blame towards parents, perceived or direct, was consistently directed only at specific disability categories.

Adding to the potential factors of over-, under-, and mis-representation in special education categories is the primary or home language of parents and students. One such factor is the relationship between parents/guardians and school staff. According to Guiberson (2009), Hispanic “mothers who reported negative interactions or experiences of bias and discrimination early on became defensive, distrusting, and suspicious of school staff in subsequent interactions” (p. 169). Due to the lifelong, and school significance, of having a student with a disability is

having faith and trust in both the system and those who are entrusted to care for your children. When that trust is lost, the systems of support, as well as the relationships themselves, deteriorate. No study reviewed by Guiberson (2009) directly related perception or disapproval of services of hispanic and latino students to underrepresentation. However, according to Guiberson (2009), “more than half of Hispanic parents believed that they should not interfere with teachers’ decisions and maintain a respectful distance” meaning that while the research is not conclusive, it has also not covered every aspect of racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse identification processes (p. 169).

The research showed that another factor in parents electing for or against placement in special education programming was the implications they believed it had for their students. Hibel, Farkas, and Morgan (2010) explained that “if Asian parents view special education placement as possibly impeding their children’s academic advancement, they may be less willing to allow their children to be so placed” (p. 328). Similarly, Williams (2007) established that historical failures in special education have left lasting impressions as one parent expressed that she “thought a lot of kids placed in special education are absolutely destroyed” in her experience with a broken system (p. 257). Parents identify, even though these are not best-practices and many schools refrain from these practices, that isolation, self-contained rooms, separation, and lack of cultural awareness and curriculum are cause for concern when considering special education services (Williams, 2007).

Another factor involved in the decisions of families to engage with or request support for their student related to special education is what they believe are the intentions or the knowledge base of the staff involved. While the majority of parents genuinely have their children’s best

interest at heart, it would be easy for them to justify receiving support from someone they believe disregards, or does not understand, their culture, language and or community is a valid concern. In a study that involved interviewing parents, one parent made this point specifically:

My observation has been that many of these students are in special education because of a lack of understanding of their culture. When a kid comes in acting very energetic and seems to be out of control, you throw them in special ed just to get rid of them. That is basically what was happening in this system. When the Office of Civil Rights came down several years ago, there was some admission by the school system that the schools hadn't been doing some things right. The school system said it was going to do more. There may be some minimal improvement, but special education still isn't where it needs to be (Williams, 2007, p. 255)

In similar fashion, “many African-American families view this specialized educational service as an opportunity to be further disenfranchised from the school community due to the negative stigma a special education label brings” (Gold & Richards, 2012, p. 152). Gold and Richards research went on to explain that “the brand of “Special Education” can ostracize children in a most pernicious way, leaving them feeling like outcasts” (p. 152).

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a specific disability category that finds minority students underrepresented (Zelege, Hughes, & Drozda, 2019). The research showed that not only are students underrepresented but articulated two possible reasons as to why.

After interviewing 24 African American family members, researchers identified a pattern in their approach to care where adults believed that the best way to protect children with ASD was to promote their independence, treat them “as normal,” and keep them away

from the potential prejudice and bias of white doctors. (Zelege, Hughes, & Drozda, 2019, p. 4322)

Zelege, Hughes, and Drozda (2019) explored the medical testing related to Autism Spectrum Disorder and their findings establish that cultural and societal norms and expectations play a vital role in the effectiveness and validity of testing relating to the disability. Shaia et al. (2020) explained in their research that the stigma of ASD caused parents to refuse or reduce the likelihood that they would support an ASD diagnosis of their child. “One participant discussed the general societal stigma about ASD and misperceptions about children with the diagnosis, as a barrier” while others spoke broadly about their culture and community not supporting or understanding such a diagnosis (p. 1844).

Teacher Perceptions

It is important to note that while the focus of this study is on underrepresentation of minority students in specific special education designations, research was found making known a similar issue for female students (Hibel, Farkas, & Morgan, 2010; Manwaring, 2008).

Manwaring (2008) explained the gender roles assumed and projected for females by adults creates and perpetuates the identification numbers seen in special education. Furthermore, the research indicated that statistically boys are significantly more likely to be identified as special education due to behavior and emotional concerns by teachers (Hibel, Farkas, & Morgan, 2010). The relevance of this underrepresentation of female students in special education, relating to teacher and staff perceptions, furthers the significance of the research of any group who is not represented, underrepresented, or misrepresented in specific special education categories.

Teachers' perceptions of students, of disabilities, and of what a student who needs support looks like are directly related to what students are identified for testing, the subjectivity of the testing itself, and the communication between the staff person and the respective family member who pertinent information is being shared with. Many disability categories' criteria for qualification directly require testing that can be subjective even when best practices and precautionary measures are in effect. "Disproportionate representation may be especially likely to occur for those types of disabilities that rely more on a teacher's judgment and contextual factors (e.g., LD, EBD) than those types that rely on relatively more objective criteria" (Hibel, Farkas, & Morgan, 2010, p. 314). The entire process, while intended to be comprehensive, has a flaw because ultimately perceptions, beliefs, and preconceived notions play a role in the process.

The research reviewed showed that some of the underrepresentation of minority students in specific special education categories that exists is actually related to changes that have taken effect in the recent past. Hibel, Farkas, and Morgan (2010) revealed that one "explanation of minority underplacement could be that teachers have become more attentive to the issue of minority overrepresentation in special education" (p. 327). Due to the awareness of overrepresentation of minority students, as discussed previously, closer attention and effort is being focused on this issue. "Teachers (particularly those in high-minority schools) may have reduced their special education referral rates for members of racial/ethnic minority groups as they became more sensitive to the possibility of such racial inequality" (Hibel, Farkas, & Morgan, 2010, p. 327). Within the same body of research Asian American students were underrepresented, in the only data found in this research that actually showed less likely or equally likely referral rates for minority students as their white peers, in special education

identification (Hibel, Farkas, & Morgan, 2010, p. 327). It is critical to note that while research by Hibel et al. established the importance of perceptions, this is also relevant to the process of student evaluation and identification.

Testing

In order for students to qualify for special education services, several steps must be followed. Most frequently a student is identified as being behind their grade level peers in social, academic, or emotional skills. At this point, based on the significance of the discrepancy to their grade-level peers, the student is often given interventions and support to attempt to remedy the issue at hand. Based on the success or failure of these interventions and supports, the student would be referred for evaluation through a 504 or special education support staff, or a team who has been assembled with this specific function. Comprehensive evaluations include, but are not limited to: parent, teacher, and student interviews, progress monitoring data, norm- and creation-referenced testing, assessments relevant to the students age and or grade level, teacher input and feedback, questionnaires to be completed by multiple parties, and student and or teacher observations.

In the process described it is critical to note that referral to a special education department or support team places the process in motion. This step has been noted to include potential bias of teachers and evaluators (Cooc, 2017; Ferri & Connor, 2005; Hibel et al., 2010; Woodson & Harris, 2018). According to Woodsen and Harris (2018), “race of student, race of teacher, years of teaching experience, and teacher attitude toward inclusion significantly predicted teacher referral for special education evaluation” (p. 36). Hibel et al. (2010) argues similarly that

“Teachers (particularly those in high-minority schools) may have reduced their special education referral rates for members of racial/ethnic minority groups as they became more sensitive to the possibility of such racial inequality (p. 327). Research has established that in addition to identification and interventions, standardized or norm-referenced testing can be problematic for representing populations of minority students appropriately (McKenna, 2013).

Other Causes Linked to Underrepresentation of Minority Students

Research conducted by Sullivan, Kulkarni, and Chhuon (2020), on the potential underrepresentation of Asian American and Pacific Islander concluded that “AAPI disproportionality in special education is not as straightforward as simple underrepresentation” due to the complexities and nuance of a geographic and ethnic group that is broad and includes large groups with differing experiences (p. 463). According to Sullivan, Kulkarni, and Chhuon (2020), the research concluded that while underrepresentation of Asian American and Pacific Islanders in special education is challenging to understand as these groups are commonly aggregated in data that was obtained making it difficult to ascertain which subgroups are truly represented accurately. Data conclusively showed that underrepresentation of Asian American and Pacific Islander groups were significantly underrepresented in special education categories, that Pacific Islander data was overshadowed by aggregate data, and that that no clear cause was identified in the research (Sullivan, Kulkarni, & Chhuon, 2020).

Another finding of this review of literature identified that pressure from administrators, districts, and state mandates caused declines in special education identification and lowered special education percentages within school and district population sets (DeMatthews & Knight,

2019). The use of policy change and directives from leadership, albeit at a school, district, or state level can have a direct effect on representation across disability categories. Multiple teachers identified that they felt pressure to reduce special education identification, maintain general education settings, and allow 504 accommodations to suffice for struggling students (DeMatthews & Knight, 2019).

CHAPTER III: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Summary of Literature

Overrepresentation of students of color, while not the focus of this study, has been explored frequently, has very minimal research that contradicts itself, and continues to be a relevant topic of research to this day. While this research is important, very little research has been done on the placement of students who do qualify for special education services, specifically what disability categories statistically do not represent equally with a given student group's percentage of the school population. The research is clear that black and brown male students are frequently overrepresented in Emotional Behavioral Disorder categories. What the research does not show is that the numbers of students in alternate groups, such as Autism Spectrum Disorder, do not represent the same overrepresentation and in fact show significantly lower percentages of students of color. The research reviewed demonstrated that there are several factors that must be taken into account to understand over-, under-, and mis-representation.

The effect that labeling, or placing a designation, on students and their families was clear in the research. This review of literature found that several studies have concluded that disability categories carry stigma, perception of what it means to carry a given label, and what this implies about a student currently as well as their post-secondary aspirations. Even broadly, being designated as special education caused frequent isolation and the feeling of being othered.

Parental perceptions of special education, specifically as it related to Emotional Behavioral Disorder or Behavioral Emotional Social Disorder, caused parents to find blame and guilt either directed towards them or self-inflicted. Due to the complex nature of human

interaction, and judgement, this can directly result in the breakdown of relationships and communication between those at home responsible for children and the teachers and school staff. The same guilt and blame was not associated with other disability categories which may partially explain the stigma and hesitancy of parents to be supportive of an EBD or BESD designation.

Another area where under-, over-, and mis-representation was possible related to those families and students whose home language was different than that of the school staff, predominantly Spanish speaking homes in the research. When families and staff are not able to communicate effectively and efficiently there is often a lack of trust, empathy, and understanding that can allow for a relationship that does not support agreement for a student to receive, or even be evaluated, for special education services. Similarly, when parents were found to fail to understand and appreciate what special education meant, they were less likely to be supportive towards the process. In order for the process to work as designed, the entire team needs to be in favor of the process and understand what it means. A breakdown in either of these can quickly create a dilemma for all parties involved.

Teacher and staff perceptions closely impact the referral process as well as the end result of special education placement, as shown in the research. Teachers perceptions have demonstrated in the reviewed literature that female students as well as non-hispanic white students were less likely to be identified as needing referral to, or qualifying for special education services. Teachers were more likely to incorrectly represent students in the subjective areas of learning disability and social or emotional disorders due to their subjective assessments. While the research did not show that underrepresentation was caused by one of these factors, it did establish that perception plays a role in the interpretation and identification of students.

The research on testing as it relates to special education placement was minimal and not specific enough to draw a conclusion based on the question posed by this review. However, there is clear evidence in this review to show that subjectivity in the referral process, as well as with the inequity that exists in norm- and criterion-referenced testing, is of significant importance.

Limitations of Research

The limitations found in this review were not intended to negate the overrepresentation of minority students in special education broadly or in specific disability categories, however the abundance of research on this topic was evident. As previously stated, the overrepresentation of minority students, specifically black male students, is clear. Underrepresentation has not been studied, by any research found in this review, specifically to racial, ethnic, or minority categories and disaggregated by special education designation unless it was specific to a single minority group. Due to the void in research on underrepresentation based on demographics, it is challenging to draw any definitive conclusions about the underrepresentation of any specific minority group in a given special education designation. It was clear that while very little research answered the question as a whole, research did allow for the question to remain plausible as an assertion.

The fundamental limitation found in this review was the quantity of research specifically related to the question: What does the research demonstrate are factors that cause minority students to be underrepresented in specific special education designation categories? This review could have been more comprehensive if the quantity of empirical studies had been greater in subjects of student and parental perceptions, teacher perceptions, testing, and other causes linked

to underrepresentation of students in special education designations. An additional limitation of the review was absence of any empirical, peer reviewed, research demonstrating the relationship between those who are referred to special education and those who qualify which included demographic information disaggregated. Multiple studies were specific to changes made after research identified overrepresentation and the effect this has had on teacher perception and the referral process. Reflecting on how to use the information gleaned from this review in my own classroom, with data that was limited to a single minority demographic or broadly to include all groups, made it challenging to establish how to use this information in my own professional practice. There was very minimal specific research that could be found identifying that race or ethnicity was an isolated factor in identification or provision of services in special education designations.

Implementation of Future Research

Further research should be conducted to evaluate the underrepresentation of students in specific special education designation categories. Specifically, research needs to assess student populations by race, ethnicity, and home language in every disability category as they compare with the general population of a school-, district- or state-wide population. With special education populations equating to seventeen percent of the population of students, this area of research demands attention.

Further information on what demographics are unequally represented in special education could inform educators, administrators, and school staff on how to best rectify, or develop training, as it pertains to these issues. A quantitative or qualitative study of students in an urban

school or district could capture precise data on the specific population and correlate it with the same data in its special education program broken out by disability category. This research could validate the literature established in this review and create additional future research.

Professional Application

Due to the nature of this research closely aligning with work that I am currently engaged in, there are clear implications that I will take into my future practice. First, the perception that parents and students have as it pertains to labels remains a critical element of communication with students and their families. We must maintain clear lines of communication and involvement from all participants in the team so that we may work together and understand each participant's intentions, concerns, and hesitations. Second, due to the research establishing that overrepresentation is still an ongoing issue, we must engage actively in the disruption of this systematic and inequitable practice. Third, understanding that teacher race and student race, as well as years of experience for educators, are factors in the process of who is referred for special education we must keep this in mind as we attempt to deconstruct the inequity that exists in unequal representation in special education as a whole as well as specific to individual designations. I will share this information with my colleagues to allow further growth, and at least on a school-wide level we can address this head on. Fourth, seeing that testing remains an issue for identification, I will continue to complete comprehensive evaluations so that the student, and their families, are given the opportunity to create a well-rounded set of data to be reviewed by the team to make the best decisions. Fifth, I will continue to complete research and

participate in professional development to best mitigate the issues as they relate to under-, mis-, and over- representation.

Conclusion

One broad conclusion of this review of literature was that there are several factors that lead to the under-, over-, and mis-representation of minority students in specific special education designations. The review was designed to look into three causes: student and parent perceptions, teacher perceptions, and testing. A fourth, other linked factors, was added in the process of this review as other causes were represented in the literature reviewed. Research specifically determining underrepresentation specific to minority students and a given disability category proved to be minimal. The dearth of preexisting research allowed this review to seek to find connections from existing literature to the question at hand.

In attempting to answer “what does the research demonstrate are factors that cause minority students to be underrepresented in specific special education designation categories?”, there was no single empirical study that showed that a factor directly correlated with underrepresentation. Several bodies of research that were reviewed gave possible explanations for underrepresentation including: parental disconnect with school staff, testing that was incorrectly identifying students’ disability categories, and teacher implicit or explicit perspectives as it relates to special education and the referral process. In lieu of research explicitly identifying causes for underrepresentation, this research allows another potential area for study as it appears that overrepresentation in specific special education categories, a plentiful

research subject, might be part of the explanation for absence or lower percentages in the alternate designations.

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APPENDIX

Table 1. Literature Reviewed

Author(s) (Year)	Title of Article	Overrepresentation	Underrepresentation	Perception (Student, Parent, or school staff)	Testing
Adkison-Bradley, C., Johnson, P. D., Rawls, G., & Plunkett, D. (2006)	Overrepresentation of African American Males in Special Education Programs: Implications and Advocacy Strategies for School Counselors	X			
Allen, J. K. (2017)	Exploring the role teacher perceptions play in the underrepresentation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in gifted programming		X		
Broomhead, K. (2013)	Blame, guilt and the need for "labels"; insights from parents of children with special educational needs and educational practitioners British Journal of Special Education			X	
Cooc, N. (2017)	Examining racial disparities in teacher perceptions of student disabilities			X	
DeMatthews, D. E., & Knight, D. S. (2019).	The Texas special education cap: Exploration into the statewide delay and denial of support to students with disabilities.			X	X
Ferri, B. A., & Connor, D. J. (2005)	In the Shadow of "Brown": Special Education and Overrepresentation of Students of Color	X			
Gold, M. E., & Richards, H. (2012).	To label or not to label: The special education question for african americans.	X	X	X	
Guiberson, M. (2009)	Hispanic representation in special education: Patterns and implications Preventing School Failure	X	X	X	
Hibel, J., Farkas, G., &	Who is placed into special	X	X	X	X

Morgan, P. L. (2010).	education?				
Holmes, C. D. (2017)	Disproportionate placement of african american students in special education: Teacher perceptions of the referral process	X			
	Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1400 (2004)				
LeBeauf, I. (2008)	Racial disparities in new millennium schools: Implications for school counselors.	X	X		
Manwaring, J. S. (2008).	Wendy or Tinkerbell? How the Underrepresentation of Girls Impacts Gender Roles in Preschool Special Education.		X		
Mayes, R. D., & Moore, J. L., I.I.I. (2016)	Adversity and pitfalls of twice-exceptional urban learners			X	
McKenna, J. (2013)	The Disproportionate Representation of African Americans in Programs for Students With Emotional and Behavioral Disorders	X		X	X
Milner, H. R., & Ford, D. Y. (2007)	Cultural considerations in the underrepresentation of culturally diverse elementary students in gifted education.		X		
Morgan, P. L., Farkas, G., Cook, M., Strassfeld, N. M., Hillemeier, M. M., Pun, W. H., & Schussler, D. L. (2017)	Are black children disproportionately overrepresented in special education?	X	X		X
Park, K. H. (2010)	Teacher perceptions of disproportionality of minorities in special education			X	
Robson, K., Anisef, P., & George, R. C. (2018a)	Under-represented students and the transition to post-secondary education: Comparing two toronto cohorts Canadian Journal of Higher Education		X		
Sanatullova-Allison, E., & Robison-Young, V. A. (2016)	Overrepresentation: An Overview of the Issues Surrounding the	X			

	Identification of English Language Learners with Learning Disabilities				
Shaia, W. E., Nichols, H. M., Dababnah, S., Campion, K., & Garbarino, N. (2020).	Brief Report: Participation of Black and African-American Families in Autism Research..	X	X		
Sheffield, E. L., & Morgan, G. (2017).	The perceptions and experiences of young people with a BESD/SEMH classification.			X	
Sullivan, A. L., Kulkarni, T., & Chhuon, V. (2020).	Making visible the invisible: Multistudy investigation of disproportionate special education identification of U.S. asian american and pacific islander students.				X
Williams, E. R. (2007)	Unnecessary and unjustified: African-american parental perceptions of special education			X	
Woodson, L., & Harris, S. M. (2018).	Teacher and student demographic variables which predict teacher referrals of males for special education evaluation.	X		X	X
Wright, B. L., Ford, D. Y., & Young, J. L. (2017)	Ignorance or indifference? seeking excellence and equity for under-represented students of color in gifted education		X		
Zeleke, W. A., Hughes, T. L., & Drozda, N. (2019).	Disparities in Diagnosis and Service Access for Minority Children with ASD in the United States.			X	