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Disproportionality In Special Education: The Factors of Overrepresentation, Lack of Inclusion and It's Impact on Student Success

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DISPROPORTIONALITY IN SPECIAL EDUCATION: THE FACTORS OF

OVERREPRESENTATION, LACK OF INCLUSION, AND ITS IMPACT ON STUDENT

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Abstract

The Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) is the guiding force behind placement for special education students. It provides students with disabilities access to the general education classroom and the ability to learn. The Individuals with Disabilities Act of 2004 (IDEA) sets forth regulations that require academic institutions to prioritize inclusive learning for all students regardless of the severity of needs. However, through various studies and findings, institutions have not followed mandates wholeheartedly. Due to this, students with disabilities, as well as minority students, are both consciously and subconsciously pushed away from the general education classroom, unfairly singled out through the referral process and treated differently based on race or their disability label. Assumptions and narrow points of view have contributed to unbalanced placement trends, practices, opportunities, and outcomes for students with disabilities. There is also an apparent lack of inclusion within special education. This can be seen in many program structures. Despite efforts, research has presented trends that indicate prolonged exclusion and unequal treatment for those with more severe needs. Multiple studies will reveal that there has been a lack of effort among institutions to address individual needs in the LRE (Least Restrictive Environment). This sends the message that the only place for high need students to learn is outside the mainstream classroom. Decisions regarding placement should always be made on a case-by-case basis and not be primarily influenced by situational, socio-economic, or other factors.

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Definition of Terms

SLD - Specific Learning Disabilities

EBD - Emotional, Behavioral Disabilities

OHD - Other Health Disabilities

ASD - Autism Spectrum Disorders

ODD- Oppositional Defiant Disorder

DCD/DD Developmental Cognitive Disabilities or Developmental Disabilities

HI - Hearing Impairment

S & L - Speech & Language

VI - Visual Impairment

MD- Muscular Dystrophy

TBI - Traumatic Brain Injury

ID - Intellectual Disability

CI- Cognitively Impaired

OI - Orthopedic Impairment

DB - Deaf/Blindness

ELL/EL- English Language Learner

LRE- Least Restrictive Environment

IDEA- Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

HSP - Home School Program

IEP - Individual Educational Plan/Program

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION AND PERSONAL CONNECTIONS

Most institutions hold the high standard that students with disabilities are able to learn in inclusive environments, however, there has been evidence that suggests that despite regulations that mandate inclusion such as the Individuals with Disabilities Act of 2004 (IDEA), institutions are not fully embracing mandates.

Evidence highlights there are issues when it comes to compliance with meeting IDEA requirements in addressing disproportionality through the referral process. Monitoring practices have come into question because even with regulation changes towards improved policies involving data collection and identification and placement trends, states continue to under-report evidence of disproportionality. There has been an over-identification of students based on Minority Disproportionality Reports (MDR) and minority student placement is commonly based on particular disability categories as well as certain settings (Strassfeld, 2019). Strassfeld was a researcher who had presented multiple findings relevant to educational policy and disproportionality. This research demonstrated how support programs that are seemingly created for minority students do not always cater to this student population. For example, a gifted program for minority students known as 'Spanish English Transition' (SET), was highlighted in a 2005 court case *McFadden v. Board of Education for Illinois School District* as evidence. This program was geared toward minority students even though a significantly small percentage of students enrolled were actually a minority. Educators made claims that minority students would be able to participate, however, it was discovered that students would only be able to do so through "English- Only classes." There is clearly racial bias through this procedure, as the program was intended for the majority and does not include efforts to support students who lack English language skills (Strassfeld, 2019). This clearly demonstrated a discrepancy in institutions

following through in serving all students. The program did not actually focus on what it intended to; this offering for non-English students does not improve issues with disproportionality. Neglecting to focus on this issue prolonged racial segregation and discrimination (2019). More importantly, it sent the message that there are not strong enough sanctions in place to hold the educational system accountable when this issue arose.

Additional evidence within the referral process is worth noting, as it points to one possible explanation for disproportionality overall. Specifically, the timeline for disability identification has not been sufficient enough for proper placement. Institutions have adopted a mentality of waiting until students fail or demonstrate significant learning challenges. At that time supports and interventions are provided once issues have become a problem and students are suggested for special education before it is too late (Yell, Shriner & Katsiyannis, 2006). Due to this, students oftentimes do not get the support they need to be eligible for special education earlier on in the process. As a result, needs go unaddressed longer, which makes for a stronger case for needing more severe special education services once needs are identified. More importantly, educators miss the opportunity for students to receive support while in the mainstream classroom. This means students can be incorrectly placed in both special education and mainstream environments. In order to avoid this, special education has made efforts to implement early intervention methods that many educators in special education are taught to do. The author has a strong desire to explore these issues and the evident disproportionality that is prevalent within the field of special education, as it is multifaceted. This research aims to bring forth evidence that provides possible explanations as well as solutions to move toward a more effective system of learning for students with disabilities.

Despite national mandates that require schools to make learning an equal playing field, there is clear evidence to suggest that educational environments have gone against regulations. This is reflected in the overrepresentation of minority students in special education programs. For example, from observations and discussions with various teachers, the author has discovered that this reality is rooted in teachers' false and negative assumptions about minority students' ability to succeed in the regular classroom. Too often, teachers can subconsciously blame the student and assume that their socioeconomic status or lack of access to resources causes students to be ill-equipped to handle the demands of learning (Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Simmons, Feggins-Azziz and Choong, 2005). Therefore, teachers take this and believe that they themselves cannot meet the demands of the student, and at times inadequately place them in special education programs (Hosterman, DuPaul & Jitendra, 2008). This is true for many minority groups, however, the research reveals that this regularly influences African American, Latino, Asian American, and ELL learners. This has caused the researcher to question whether educators are not doing all that they can to make learning possible for students. It is believed that more thoughtful consideration would actually lead to more appropriate educational placement. This is one of the core dilemmas this author aims to explore throughout the thesis.

Another subtopic that relates is the lack of inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream learning environments. Again, IDEA and the least restrictive environment are set in place to provide this to students, as they have every right to learn alongside their peers. Furthermore, it is believed that students with disabilities should be given as much support in the mainstream classroom as possible before exploring more restrictive options. However, stepping into schools, this researcher has seen more students receiving pull-out services and not being regularly included in their general classroom. Research conducted by Beacher & Bell seems to

support these observations as well. These researchers gathered together the statistics from ESL

service providers and it was discovered that the majority of their support (more than half) is

given away from the classroom (2017). This seems to demonstrate that teachers are quickly

moving to conclusions and assuming that the only way to serve students with disabilities is

through intense exclusion. This is clearly a false reality. This research aims to explore this issue

further as well as highlight the positives of inclusion while acknowledging any potential

hindrances, proper identification, and properly serving students with disabilities.

Thesis Questions

With these two areas of inquiry in mind, this author will explore the lack of inclusion and

unequal opportunity plaguing special education. Further, the researchers cited in this chapter

have raised significant questions to consider regarding special education identification.

Therefore, the thesis questions will help to clarify and bring insight as to disproportionality and

to search out answers to the questions that follow:

1) What accounts for the severe level of disproportionality prevalent in special education,

specifically overrepresentation and lack of inclusion prevalent in special education?

2) How does placement impact student outcomes?

3) And finally, how can institutions improve this unfortunate trend?

The following research in Chapter II provides a beginning view of the unfortunate reality

in many educational environments as well as evidence to show possible explanations for a lack

of effort in improving opportunities for students with disabilities. That said, the thesis will focus

on the research to help answer the questions posed.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview of the Research Process

The research was derived from the Bethel University library search engines such as ERIC, EBSCO, Academic Search Premier, and Google Scholar. Common publications referenced in this piece include the *Journal of Special Education, Journal of Exceptional Children, and Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities.* In addition, the articles were discovered using search terms such as "disproportionality and inclusion", "IDEA and least restrictive environment trends" as well as "minority students and placement."

Overview of IDEA: Educational Mandates Related to Inclusion and LRE

A child's learning environment is at the center of a students' educational experience. As early as 1970 with the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, regulations stated that students with disabilities have the right to learn alongside mainstream students. This guideline is also included in the most current mandate IDEA (2004).

Following the principles of IDEA (2004), students with disabilities receive education alongside their peers. There are various provisions within the IDEA that articulate requirements for individualization to ensure a personalized education for disabled students. By law, individuals and their families are entitled to receive individual services and resources (American Psychological Association, 2018). However, before making individualized changes, educators should attempt and keep instruction in the mainstream classroom as much as they are able and give students the least restrictive environment when learning. A student's support team determines the degree to which they are part of the regular classroom. This means that efforts are made to provide students with disabilities in an appropriate setting where a student is able to make academic gains. The Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) specifically highlights the

mainstream classroom as the least restrictive and most appropriate space for students unless it is not possible for individuals to make academic gains or meet needs with supports in the regular classroom (Williamson, Hoppey, McKleskey, Bergmann & Moore, 2020). LRE is specified in order to prioritize inclusion among all students regardless of the severity of needs or race. Again, the goal for special education students is for individuals to be integrated with the mainstream classroom as much as possible. This means that schools are inclusive towards all students, and ensure that students with disabilities receive access to all aspects of the general education classroom. Schools are required to include inclusive practices. This is specifically accomplished through an LRE, as it is a vehicle for schools providing equal access. It gives students the opportunity to learn along with general education students while receiving specialized support. This holds true when it comes to placement patterns with minority students, program structures for students with disabilities as well as overall referral and disability identification practices.

Despite inclusion and mandates, research suggests that many national educational standards do not embody the same level of equality. One of the most prevalent issues influencing the severe level of disproportionality is the reality of placement patterns evident in special education programs. Researchers Parekh & Brown investigated this issue by analyzing a program model currently being used with high- need 6th-grade students in Ontario, Canada. Here, students are being served in the 'home school program' (HSP) and are in special education classrooms half the school day the rest in their general education class. In addition, the HSP was the new model of intervention that allowed for intense support that helped students reintegrate into the mainstream classroom for a limited amount of time until they made enough academic gains to learn alongside regular performing students (2019). It specifically targets those with a Specific Learning Disability (SLD), Emotional/Behavioral Disorder (EBD), Autism Spectrum

Disorder (ASD), and Developmental Cognitive Delay (DCD) while participating in academics that prepare them for secondary learning. Students are temporarily placed in this format and gain access to higher learning when academic improvements are made (2019). Even though this model seemed to prioritize student advancement, results indicate otherwise.

Approximately, less than half of the students were taught in the mainstream classroom. In addition, even with the HSP placement, students' access did not increase even though these students did improve academically (2019). Most importantly, those placed in HSP are lowest on the socioeconomic spectrum and were overrepresented in HSP. Given that access did not improve signals an emphasis on shortcomings among educators for minority students. Separating students through this model influences students' academic options during secondary learning and at the high school level. An argument can be made that students are experiencing modern-day segregation given that students are being placed in different groups with lower expectations and treatment (2019). Efforts are made to seemingly follow IDEA guidelines when it comes to inclusion, however, the researchers highlight that policies tend to "exacerbate the disablement of students, particularly students who are male, racialized, and who experience an economic disadvantage" (Parekh & Brown, 2019, p. 114). With the current state of affairs, it seems as though minority students are more likely to be seen as 'the other.'

Programming Model Trends

Current data from the U.S Department of Education from 1990-2015 provides insightful contextual evidence for the previous research conducted on this topic. As mentioned previously, placement decisions are grounded in IDEA and LRE mandates, which highlight that the mainstream classroom is the least restrictive and most appropriate place for students unless it is not possible for students to make academic gains (Williamson, Hoppey, McCleskey, Bergmann

& Moore, 2020). Overall, placement in less restrictive settings went down and there was also a decrease in the number of students in pull-out settings significantly. In addition, mainstream placement increased for LD, EBD, and ASD students. However, identification and referral increased for elementary-aged students along with decreases in pull-outs for elementary and secondary students.

It is important to note that disparities with placement are more prevalent within institutions that have lax guidelines towards inclusion and placement. This is often the case for charter schools. Fierros and Blomberg, whose previous research has involved the issues of charter school placement and special education restriction presented interesting findings. Charter schools have the freedom to develop their own rules for determining student eligibility for special education programs. They are not required to include students with disabilities in the mainstream classroom, however, if students are enrolled, students' severity of needs tends to be lower so they can be in the regular classroom (2005).

State-wide data obtained from a charter school in California indicated that this structure yields increased numbers of African American, Black, Hispanic, and Pacific Islander students being placed in special education (Fierros & Blomberg, 2005). While minority students are overrepresented in special education programs within this type of school, enrollment is limited as a cost-cutting measure because it is expensive to enroll students.

While inclusion and the least restrictive environment is the most ideal space for students, this has not been reflected in student documentation. Student IEPs are where educators highlight justifications for individuals to learn outside of the mainstream classroom. Researchers Kurth, Morningstar & Kozleski, education department faculty at the University of Kansas have published multiple works regarding special education supports, inclusion, and multicultural

teaching. A collaborative study from 2004 analyzed the reality of placement seen in common LRE placements indicated on Individual Educational Plans (IEP's) for students that ranged from 16-21 years of age. Disability categories ASD, DB, DD, EBD, HI, ID, MD, OI, OHD, SLD, S&L, TBI, and VI" (Kurth, Morningstar, & Kozleski, 2014, p. 233). Researchers specifically looked at the degree of restrictive placement, improvement patterns, and what disability categories receive the most restrictive placement. Students had to be placed in three defined categories: A) "Inside the regular classroom 80% or more of the school day", B)"Inside the regular classroom less than 40% of the school day" C)"Outside the regular classroom entirely (receive schooling in a separate school, residential setting or homebound environment)" (Kurth, Morningstar, & Kozleski, 2014, p. 229).

Researchers found that approximately 31% of student participants were in restrictive settings. Many students are in category B or C placements, with C placement encompassing 98% of students, as those often involve high-need disabilities that require expertise staffing and a highly individualized curriculum. Furthermore, students who have "dual-sensory impairments, multiple disabilities, and Emotional Behavioral Disorders are among the most likely to be educated in separate schools. Students with developmental delays, specific learning disabilities, and speech-language disorders are among the least likely" (Kurth, Morningstar, & Kozleski, 2014, p. 232). Kurth, Ruppar, Tews, McCabe, McQueston & Johnston (2019) reported similar results which showed increased restrictive placement justifications were common among students with high cogntive needs.

Another area of focus within this study is the national level of anticipated improvement in moving towards more inclusive trends. When it came to state targets, evidence varied overall, and States proposed an increase of 10% of students being placed in less restrictive settings

(Category A) and a decrease of 4% (Category B). Almost all States accept Ohio anticipated a slight change in placement patterns. Ohio boldly made claims for a 6% decrease in Category C placements. Three States, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Texas did not change their anticipated placement trends. In terms of progress, there has only been a small decrease in restrictive placements.

The authors highlighted that there have not been significant positive changes toward including students with disabilities in the mainstream classroom and this is largely due to students not being able to move away from a restrictive environment. Schools have deemed this the most appropriate place for learning. This seems to be based on the level of support needed and the severity of student functioning. It is evident that change needs to take place and this change begins with policy adjustments, specifically ones that focus on providing individualized support in the mainstream classroom (Kurth, Morningstar, & Kozleski, 2014). Contrary to IDEA, the staff has continued to place students with severe disabilities in highly restrictive settings. This is in large part due to students not being provided the support that is conducive to learning in the mainstream classroom. Teachers have deemed individualized federal settings the most appropriate place for students to learn (Kurth, Morningstar, & Kozleski, 2014). There has not been a significant change in placement patterns since the passing of IDEA. These results signify that teachers are jumping to conclusions when placing students and are assuming that nothing can be done to accommodate those with severe learning disabilities. This is unfortunate because, in some instances, this could lead to unnecessary placement.

Unfortunately, restrictiveness is a far-reaching issue that significantly impacts minority students as well, especially those with learning disabilities. Hosp & Reschly, both professors of Education developed an interesting study aimed to explore how services within special education

differ for African American and Caucasian students. They also analyzed factors that contribute to restrictive placement for these minority groups. Reviewing demographics, it was discovered that males spend more time away from the mainstream classroom, students of younger age are being placed, students level of social skills and length of placement in special education influences time in and away from general education classrooms (Hosp & Reschly, 2002, p. 228) Race and classroom intervention was also a contributing factor. The majority of African American students do not receive interventions thus, they spend more time away from the main classroom than Caucasian students. When it comes to behavior management, there seem to be higher ratings of dependency and behavioral issues with African American students. This is true for students having an LD or Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) label, as these disabilities often involve increased levels of emotional instability or poor academic progress. These factors directly impact the amount of time these students are away from the mainstream classroom.

This research team also examined how academic achievement and socioeconomic status are connected among minority students. Proficiency data indicated that African American and Asian students had the lowest ratings and the majority of these students had an EBD, LD, or ID label. Overall, socioeconomic factors were the strongest influencer for the representation of minority groups because race is often a substitute for economic status (Hosp and & Reschly, 2004). Economic and racial factors were the strongest for ID and EBD disability labels. Hosp and Reschly's data showed that students with EBD were being referred because of behavioral issues and students with LD were referred based on low achievement (Hosp & Reschly, 2004).

It is apparent that environmental factors strongly influence minority students' academic experience. Family life is an important angle to consider when analyzing the placement of minority students. A child's socioeconomic background, family dynamic and connectedness with

the family has some influence on a child's developmental potential. It is important to acknowledge that ethnic groups possess their own culture and this naturally influences students' academic outcomes. Cultural backgrounds influence student levels of engagement and this is dependent upon the degree in which their family has access to resources, the level of parent involvement in their child's learning as well as exposure to academic content in various basic subjects. One of the key aspects of understanding disproportionality brought forth by Aritles, Munoz & Abedi, members of the Department of Education and Director of Evaluation studies, is understanding how a student's experience is different when you are a minority in special education (1998). Reviewing assessment data, it was revealed that African American students have lower performance in reading. Latino students demonstrated low performance in math and statistics for both racial groups were related to low family income, perception of self-achievement, and weak family dynamics. Anglo students seemed to exhibit higher assessment scores, positive feelings related to achievement, and stronger family structures.

Conducting additional studies on differences is recommended by researchers that may arise through generations to "understand the sociocultural meanings and functions of family structure to understand how parents develop structure and rules" (Artiles, Munoz & Abedi, 1998, p. 554). This would help educators understand the value parents place on education, their understanding of disabilities, and how they navigate learning for their child. It is imperative for educators to understand family life and their ability to utilize resources, as this directly impacts a child's progress and overall success in the classroom. Furthermore, teachers must help parents develop effective routines and academic patterns that will help foster academic growth and minimize low attendance rates among minority students. Most importantly, teachers must get to know students on a personal and cultural level. This will help teachers understand students'

school experience, reduce any biases or negative views towards minority student achievement as well as build student trust. All of these factors will positively influence learning outcomes.

<div align="center">**Disproportionate Trends in Minority Student Programming and Practices**</div>

Sadly, minority representation seems to be the most skewed in educational environments; this is the case for many African American, Hispanic and Indian students. One researcher that has brought forth numerous points related to this issue is Mark Guiberson. Guiberson is an assistant professor at the University of Colorado, who specializes in culturally diverse populations and interventions. This researcher's previous work surrounding minorities focuses on family structures and literacy instruction. Current research sheds light on the issue of misidentification, another issue that accounts for a significant amount of disproportionality among minority students.

It has been noted that "more Hispanic students are identified as learning disabled or speech-language impaired… the pattern may reflect that schools are struggling to identify Hispanic students with disabilities" (Guiberson, 2009, p. 168). There have been limited qualified professionals or bilingual support professionals available to properly address these issues. Therefore, there are often mistakes made in disability identification due to educators' lacking an understanding of different languages and cultures. Over referral takes place because teachers mistake a lack of language proficiency for more intense issues that warrant special education placement. For example, due to low SES and access to resources seen with minority students, African American students are increasingly identified as LD or cognitively impaired (CI) (Brosnan, 1983). Students are also overidentified as EBD and SLD in some charter schools (Fierros & Blomberg, 2005). Another researcher Sullivan from Arizona State University who's research comes from the Council for Exceptional Children, noted that minority students that

account for 39% of enrollment have been Latino and 16% of those students have been identified as ELL (2011).

There is evidence to suggest that assessment standards for minority students have influenced such skewed patterns. Sharpe, a research consultant for the Minnesota Department of Children, spearheaded a focus group that highlighted many minority education professionals' perspectives on disproportionality issues, one being assessment practices (1996). Participants included but were not limited to special education coordinators, learning disability teachers, and speech pathologists. Participants voiced concerns that assessments have not been culturally sensitive. Tests have been normed for students that know English. Additionally, assessments have included evaluators that do not speak the same language and have not accounted for those that are non-verbal (1996). Developing improvements that address these disparities would greatly reduce unequal representation.

Preparedness and Knowledge Related to Instructing Students with Disabilities

It was indicated during the referral process that disproportionality can stem from a lack of preparedness among teachers to identify disabilities and properly assess students. It seems the same can be said for teachers and their comfortability addressing more severe needs. This idea was analyzed by Cannon, Swoszowski, Gallagher & Easterbrooks, all of whom have previously published research that emphasized educational psychology and teacher preparation. This current study continued this examination and focused on the attitudes, practices, and skills teachers possess in order to reach students with disabilities in the mainstream classroom (2012).

Approximately 9 male and 16 female teachers were chosen to participate and were given a questionnaire to communicate their level of comfort working with students with special needs. In addition, individuals partook in seminars related to teaching to disabilities, instructional

strategies as well as accommodations and modifications to meet IEP specifications. The overall message of this presentation was equality. This is key for teachers, especially general educators who are working to balance their support between regular performing students and those with individual needs. With this background knowledge, pre-survey results signaled decreased confidence when it came to beliefs, practices, and skills. With the survey, teachers indicated skills in analyzing informational sources, planning short and long term, content, assessment, student pace, providing students feedback, differentiating instruction, and grading (Cannon, Swoszoski, Gallagher & Easterbrooks, 2012). There were no notable changes between ratings with results prior to and after the survey in terms of long-range planning, checks with students, individual instruction, and grading, indicating that these areas are prioritized among teachers (Cannon, Swoszowski, Gallagher & Easterbrooks, 2012). Furthermore, it is clear that with the right information and support, educators are comfortable taking measures to ensure a unique learning experience; one that takes individual needs into account.

An even stronger case can be made for minority students being marginalized within special education. This too is the result of teachers not understanding how to approach minority students academically and culturally. At times, teachers do not always take the time to understand students' perspectives and backgrounds. This can greatly influence their level of achievement. There is a "lack of capacity on behalf of regular education to meet the demands of minority youth… when we don't know what to do, we call them special education students" (Sharpe,1996, p. 16). Sharpe asserts that high standards can play into these findings. With such a strong emphasis on academic excellence, any student whose academic potential is misunderstood or undervalued is by default placed into special education. California State University and educational faculty members Echevarria, Powers & Elliot suggested utilizing small groups and

developing behavior management tactics in order to improve the processes (2004). Similar to all special education students, if teachers take the time to understand a student's situation and how background can impact learning, as well as take a proactive approach, it is likely that minority needs would be able to be addressed adequately in the classroom.

Assumptions and Attitudes Related to Disproportionality of Minority Students and Inclusion

Some of the earlier findings eluded some common assumptions and attitudes that negatively influence student placement. Many of these have come from those in the field who are general educators, special education teachers, and counselors. Researchers Shippen, Curtis & Miller published a study analyzing core perceptions of issues prevalent among African American students. Here, all participants voiced their understandings of factors contributing to overrepresentation, the referral process, assessment practices, and parent involvement, and overall understanding of disabilities.

Overrepresentation was commonly misunderstood among all groups, however, special education teachers seemed to have a stronger awareness but do consider it to be a prevalent issue. With assessment and referral, both are seen as strong contributors because the process is not always transparent and they always address needs properly or in a timely manner. In addition, placement is based on meeting eligibility criteria, which often overemphasizes student failure (2009). With such a strong emphasis on meeting benchmarks, there is an unfair deficit mentality among educators that feel minority students cannot meet expectations. Participants held the assumption that community or lack of resources contributes. While this can negatively influence learning outcomes, it does not mean that minority students are or will be inherently unsuccessful. Finally, there was a shared view among educators that parents' level of involvement greatly contributes. Cultural differences and socioeconomic status can naturally

decrease parent engagement depending on their situation. Along with this, there can be a lack of acceptance of a disability label among parents because of differences in cultural norms. This can lead to families being unsure how to best support their child, culminating in increased levels of African American students being placed in programs (2009).

Unfortunately, it is known that teachers can hold negative racially driven assumptions about minority students. This idea is brought forth by North Cooc, a University of Texas faculty member who has published multiple findings on racial disparities for the *Journal of Adolescence and Educational Researcher.* Teacher perceptions from 10th grade English and math teachers are the focus as well as how disability and background play into these perceptions. Cooc's core hypothesis was there is a clear link between disability labels and student backgrounds when it comes to teacher perception. Furthermore, it was assumed that minority students, especially African American, Hispanic, and Native American students would be perceived as having a disability. It is important to note that Cooc presented the idea of 'conditional race neutrality.' This means that perceptions are made solely based on students' performance on standardized assessments.

The main hypothesis remained true in this case, as low socioeconomic status (African American, Hispanic, and Native American) were more likely to be referred to special education programs. In addition, oftentimes when the majority of students are Caucasian, minority students are less likely to stand out and be seen as having a disability. School demographics played into this trend as well. Educators were more likely to perceive students having a disability if the school had high standards of achievement compared to low proficiency ratings (Cooc, 2017, p. 15). Interestingly, overall it was found that teachers are less likely to perceive students as having a disability in efforts to be racially neutral. In order to be in compliance with IDEA regulations,

teachers are more resistant to identify students as having a disability when their level of functioning seems to be in line with peers.

An interesting angle of inquiry is the analysis of teacher ratings of the disability label attributes seen in minority students. Researchers Hosterman, DuPaul & Jitendra have identified bias when it comes to identifying ADHD symptoms with minority individuals. A current study surrounded teacher ratings for African American students with ADHD in reading and math. These subject areas were identified as being areas of decreased engagement for students, in which teachers reported significant ratings of these students being engaged in 'off-task verbal' behavior. Any rating of off-task behavior was a direct reflection of cultural differences in teachers; they are less familiar with students' patterns of movement, speech, and social behaviors (2008). This means that educators are more likely to view common minority behaviors as atypical or hyperactive. Over identification, in this case, stems from the fact that Caucasian teachers are less likely to identify ADHD symptoms or problem behaviors of those in the same culture and more likely to see it in those of a different culture. This leads to increased referrals for minority students in special education programs (2008).

The factors mentioned above directly influence the overall attitudes educators have towards inclusive settings and integrating inclusive practices into the classroom. This, in turn, as the researcher will point out, directly influences the segregative nature of student placement. Stoler, a special education instructional service provider, highlighted perspectives from 9 high schools with a total of 182 participants through survey results. The survey specifically targeted findings related to student learning ability (disabilities that do not hinder academic progress), inclusion (placements in the regular classroom), traditional limiting disabilities (disabilities that are not apparent in the mainstream classroom) and classroom factors that influence disability

instruction for teachers such as structure and number of students (Stoler, 1992). Educators' level of experience with disability-focused teaching was also accounted for in this study because it can influence an educator's outlook towards inclusion.

Stoler found that the more education received, the more teachers seemed to accept and have positive feelings about inclusion as a practice. When it comes to meeting individual needs, general education teachers are concerned with the size of their classroom and the issue of balancing their time between groups of students. This is a valid concern, as time and attention are often taken away from the regular performing students in efforts to meet other student's needs (Stoler, 1992).

A general education teacher from Concord Elementary in Edina, Minnesota communicated this same concern during the author's practicum experience. It was noted in an interview by this general education teacher that general education teachers are juggling a lot with so many students and at times, it can seem as though special education staff does not always see how addressing particular needs could be overwhelming.

Further findings suggested that even with a small number of students in their classrooms, it has been challenging for teachers to get an adequate amount of guidance and support from special education staff. Educators also reported a loss of control when medical equipment and paraprofessionals enter their classrooms (Stoller, 1992). Some of these findings echo the issues of reachability and comfortability teachers have in addressing more severe needs as previously referenced by Cannon, Swoszowski, Gallagher & Easterbrooks (2012). Not surprisingly, these concerns have surfaced internationally as well. Questionnaires were presented to elementary and secondary teachers in Canada, Australia, Hong-Kong, the United Kingdom, Singapore, and India. Evidence of personal views towards inclusion was paramount. Teachers showed concern

in addressing modifications/adaptations, feelings of frustration, and discomfort meeting needs (Ewing, Monsen & Keilblock, 2018). It is clear that general education teachers are reticent to accept inclusion due to lack of support, the balance needed to address all types of learners, and additional support infiltrating the classroom.

In the eyes of general educators, these considerations can be a hindrance to mainstream learning, and having students included in their classrooms is far too overwhelming. These concerns result in students being placed in restrictive settings because, based on the findings, highly individualized settings with specialized staff are seen as the "easier" option. Teachers must be given outlets of support to be able to accommodate the factors that go into caring for a child with special needs both mentally and physically. Doing so would likely increase the prevalence of services offered in the regular classroom as well as improving trends in placement.

It is helpful to understand the general consensus and opinions of lead administrators as well. These individuals, through policies and practices, directly influence the culture of inclusion present in educational environments. Praisner, an educational consultant analyzed the opinions of approximately 400 elementary principals on their level of openness towards this practice. Background information on personal characteristics, training, educational experience, and perception of the LRE were also considered in this study. Personal views were gathered using the Principals Inclusion Survey (PIS). Out of all the participants, it was discovered that 21% of individuals accepted this practice and 76% were resistant to it (2003). The researcher noticed that pull away surfaced when the leaders felt a sense of pressure to implement inclusion in order to comply with regulations (2003). These participants would possibly feel differently when inclusion can be embraced voluntarily. Positive associations existed among those with those that had special education and individual teaching experience. This was the case for many of the

participants. These individuals communicated that partial inclusion in the mainstream classroom is the most fitting arrangement for students. In addition, "LRE placements were seen as most appropriate for speech/language, physical disability, other health disability, deaf/hard of hearing or SLD" (Praisner, 2003, p. 140). On the other hand, more restrictive settings were seen as most fitting for students with EBD and ASD.

Overall, this research revealed that it is common for administrators to hold the assumption that a more severe diagnosis means a more restrictive setting and those without social or behavioral issues could fit into a mainstream environment. This goes against the view guiding regulations of IDEA that all students, regardless of disability have the right to learn in the general environment. However, with positive experiences, training, and individual experience with disability, principals are able to see inclusion as something to consider. Negative experiences or more severe labels are seen as not conducive to mainstream learning (Praisner, 2003). Again, perspectives from lead administrators are paramount because they have such a strong influence over an entire district's value and belief system. Having an open-minded disposition sets the tone for every educator. Teachers are then naturally able to develop inclusive practices that embrace all learners regardless of IDEA mandates, even when students have severe needs that do not seem to be solvable.

The Impact of Placement in Non-Inclusive Settings on Student Learning Outcomes and Overall Experience

While restrictive settings can be the most appropriate place for students, this is not the case for *every* student. Through the research presented thus far, it is apparent that student placement is influenced by a multitude of factors. However, the most noticeable trends result in students being inadequately or unnecessarily placed based on a lack of effort from educators to

accommodate or modify the mainstream environment or assumptions that manifest into justifications based on the severity of needs. There is no question that these aspects and placements can dramatically influence students' academic growth as well as their social/emotional functioning. In order to understand the degree of impact, researchers Jones & Hensley published a study through the *Educational Researchers Quarterly* that analyzed the perspectives of middle and high school students with developmental disabilities in resource rooms and more restrictive settings.

Using the Arc's Self Determination Scale, (ASDS) the researchers were able to interview students regarding individual levels of autonomy, self-regulation, psychological empowerment, and self- realization. Students' perception of support was evaluated using the Student Support Scale for Children and Adolescence (SSSCA). The structure of the students learning environment was either a resource room (pull out) or a self-contained environment. The resource room involved integration and access to the mainstream classroom whereas self- contained settings were known to be physically closed off with limited peer interaction with intense support (2012). Students in resource rooms felt a greater sense of self-determination in all four defined areas than others in restrictive spaces. This is likely due to the fact that the ability to make choices exists and there is more opportunity in the resource room settings with job tasks.

Evidence also suggested some positives from self-contained classrooms; students felt as though they had more support than those in resource rooms. This is likely due to the structure of the restrictive settings in this district that have the same teachers and students. This creates consistent and familiar environments and thus, students feel like they have more personalized and trustworthy 1:1 interactions (2012). Teachers also noted that there was a greater sense of dependency among students in self-contained spaces. It is believed that teachers should increase

social interaction among students so that those with disabilities have natural interactions and have opportunities to build their social skills. Efforts to provide these experiences include proximity of mainstream and special groups and socialization during passing time, lunch, and recreational clubs/events (2012).

Additional limitations of non-inclusive environments are noted by Rea, McLaughlin & Walther-Thomas. These researchers analyzed push-in and pull-out programs being utilized at two middle schools in Washington. In this case, factors of performance, attendance were taken into consideration at Enterprise Middle School. This school operated using a teamwork model where students are separated into classes and rotate and teachers plan, teach and work harmoniously. Most importantly, special education instruction was inclusive. Contrastingly, at Voyager Middle School, there is less collaboration among teachers, and students are taught by one general education teacher, and special education services are not integrated. Students in inclusive arrangements were stronger academically in reading, math, and science (2012). Inclusive programming also led to higher rates of attendance than those in pull-out programs. Given that Enterprise made such strong efforts to collaborate, it makes sense that these students would make academic gains. In this type of environment, all service providers are connecting consistently, which ensures individual goals are obtained, especially for special education students. It is apparent that student goals would not be as easily obtained in Voyagers setup because individual progress is addressed away from the classroom. Collaboration is lacking without close proximity, and it is more likely that individual student concerns will fall through the cracks.

Researchers Rose, et al. (2009) examined negative feelings and unfair treatment among students in various settings. Students in restrictive and inclusive settings, specifically those with

ASD and ID research by Rose, et al. 2009 highlighted that students in restrictive settings are more likely to be bullied and victimized by their peers. However, students are just as likely to experience these same treatments in inclusive settings as well. Current research by these individuals revealed that students with ASD experienced the most victimization in inclusive environments and students with ID noted trauma in restrictive and inclusive settings. In addition, students with EBD experienced victimization in inclusive environments and tended to fight more while in restrictive settings (2015). This makes sense given the high levels of emotional instability along with various behaviors. It is important to note that researchers suggest inclusive environments for students with disabilities, as they provide more opportunities for social interaction and naturally allow students to increase their social skills (alt. Hong & Espelage, 2012). Prioritizing inclusion for those with EBD and other disabilities will allow students to gain the skills needed to reduce any challenges that may lead to bullying (2015).

The research highlighted previously, indicated different experiences of treatment in various placements for minority students. In addition, students' economic situation and background play into their overall success in the classroom. Research showed that a student's potential to graduate is influenced by a variety of factors including, race and behavior, specifically among African American and Hispanic students. This was the focus for Florida University faculty members Gonzolez & Cramer. Students in 11th and 12th grade with SLD and EBD with high dropout rates were analyzed. The educational setting, academic history, and behavioral history were accounted for by the researchers. For students SLD and EBD, behavioral history was the strongest influence over graduation rates. Academic performance was the strongest predictor for graduation. "Only the variable race/ethnicity approached significance

indicating that Blacks were more likely to graduate than Hispanics" (Gonzalez & Cramer, 2010, p. 117).

Inclusive learning environments made for positive academic outcomes. Approximately 90% of students graduated and 72% graduated who were in more restrictive settings. Inclusive learning also made for positive behavioral trends (only 72% suspension), whereas restrictive environments had a 22% suspension rate. There was better academic success and experience in inclusive settings, as evidenced by higher rates of passing grades (2010). These statistics highlight that students with disabilities should be given access to inclusive settings more often given these positive outcomes, especially for "students that are in urban schools where students tend to be placed in more restrictive settings" (Gonzalez & Cramer, 2010, p. 122).

Suggestions and Possible Solutions for Improving Patterns of Disproportionality and Inclusion

Previous research has shown that African American, American Indian, and Latino students are most subject to disproportionality. American's in the past have been given special education labels based on low- socioeconomic status and lack of resources as well as home life. Due to these factors, these minority groups have been placed in programs because they are "deemed too difficult to teach" (Echevarria, Powers & Elliot, 2004, p. 20). These researchers highlighted multiple factors that influence this commonly held outlook and placement including standardization, ineffective instruction, and the referral/assessment process.

With standardization, there is pressure from the administration to meet certain benchmarks, therefore, teachers place these students based on the belief that minority students with disabilities are unable to meet the "high-stakes" mainstream environment fit for standardized testing. A referral often takes place in order to positively influence district

performance outcomes. At the same time, there is a lack of access to a standardized curriculum in restrictive settings. This also contributes to performance on the standardized tests districts emphasize so much.

With such a strong emphasis on standardization, naturally, individualized instruction is lacking. Echevarria, Powers & Elliot found that teaching methods oftentimes do not align with minority student populations, as differences in background, level of exposure to content, and cultural differences all amount to learning that is not culturally sensitive (2004). Due to these factors, students will not perform adequately and will require placement. In order for instruction to meet the needs of students, educators must take the time to develop instruction and utilize methods that target minority populations. From experience, the author has learned that culturally sensitive approaches that would improve these common occurrences include learning about students personally and academically, emphasizing vocabulary through visuals, or integrating cultural aspects into lessons. All of these implementations are appropriate for any special education student, however, it is likely that minority students will respond positively to these efforts.

As mentioned previously, flaws within the referral system impact placement as evidenced by Yell, Shriner & Katsiyannis (2006) and Hosterman, DuPaul & Jitendra (2008). Along with this, Echevarria, Powers & Elliot noted that this process can be influenced by a teacher's tolerance, perceived student ability, or a teacher's approach to behavior management (2004). It is evident that non-biased assessment methods as well as neutral methods could greatly reduce discrepancies in this process.

Overall improvements surrounded teacher preparation when it comes to diversity, language acquisition, and culturally sensitive instruction that help teachers address issues

appropriately and accurately. Early intervention is also stressed, as it helps reduce referrals. Most importantly, early behavior interventions help identify areas of concern before a situation warrants more drastic action. It is helpful for teachers to be proactive with assessments and interventions. This means providing support in the mainstream classroom before alternative placement is decided. Some of the most impactful efforts to reach students involve utilizing small groups and utilizing behavior management tactics in an effort to reach minority students in a mainstream environment (Echevarria, Powers & Elliot, 2004).

Praisner (2003) pointed out that creating inclusive school cultures starts at the administrative level. Especially because educational leaders and principals have the strongest influence over staff to develop purposeful policies and practices that make a difference. Billingsley, DeMatthews, Connally & McLeskey (2018) analyzed the role of principals play further as well as efforts to be made by leaders that can improve inclusion. First and foremost, principals are a chief tool in spreading the word. They can share its importance with educators, support staff, and parents in order to understand potential benefits, encouraging others to adopt the idea, planning programs, and signaling out issues related to inclusion (2018). Secondly, they help educators feel equipped to teach all types of learners. Through professional development offerings, principals can help teachers learn about how to implement this practice, differentiating delivery of content, use evidence-based practices as well as implement behavioral interventions and classroom management strategies (2018).

In order for inclusive practices to be implemented, these researchers pointed out that there must be a shift in school structures. Adjustments could include schools revisiting grading policies, getting rid of special education classes, and adopting progress monitoring, as well as teachers adopting the same state standards for all students, co-teaching among teachers made for

cohesive planning among general educators, as well as special educators and paraprofessionals supporting special education and mainstream students (2018).

It is unrealistic to present inclusion and not discuss the potential pitfalls of implementation. Inclusion is an ideal outlook for districts to adopt, however, a variety of barriers could influence the extent to which it is successfully implemented. Parents' comfortability with current structures should be acknowledged. If schools already have a separate program in place, families may be resistant to inclusion because they prefer the separate nature of learning for their child and "...are overly cautious of losing services for their child to benefit from an educational program" (p. 70). Related to this is the challenge of transitioning to an inclusive program. Depending on previous placement, students may have been neglected support wise, which results in a weak relationship with families and a lack of communication. Any issue with these aspects will make shifting to inclusive learning more challenging. Another drawback is that the disability label carries a certain level of weight in an inclusive classroom. In a separate environment, a student with a disability may thrive along with similar performing students, however, students may notice when they are learning differently than their peers in an inclusive setting. The power of a disability label is stigmatizing and "...often has a lasting effect on a student's identity and their own beliefs about ability" (Billingsley, DeMatthews, Connally & McLeskey, 2018, p. 70). Students can internalize differences and may feel inadequate and underperform as a result. Another aspect to consider is that a student's level of engagement may not actually embody an inclusive outlook. Even though students may be present in the mainstream classroom, it is common for individuals to remain excluded from the class (2018).

Research suggests that learning alongside peers with access to peer support within an inclusive classroom can improve high need students socially and academically. This was

explored by Brock, Biggs, Carter, Catty & Raley, all of whom are contributors to the Hamill Institute on Disabilities. In this study, researchers analyzed the effects of peer support for middle school students with an ID or DCD label. Participants must meet specific criteria including qualification for alternative testing, enrollment in one general education class, and receiving support from a paraprofessional. Student IQ and social/emotional functioning were also considered low for these individuals (2016). Data was gathered through a case study analysis for four student groups.

From the research highlighted thus far on restrictive settings, it is clear that the overall experience is somewhat limited. Students with disabilities tend to get limited social interaction with their peers; this study highlights the implementation of peer support plans that aim to increase the social environment for students with a variety of disabilities, as it is pivotal during middle school years (Brock, Biggs, Carter, Catty & Raley, 2016). Additionally, these students naturally lack opportunities to interact due to proximity from others, lack of exposure to students with special needs, and the due to the fact that support is given by adults in the classroom (Brock, Biggs, Carter, Catty & Raley, 2016). Peer supporters are given direction from paraprofessional staff in order to increase meaningful and purposeful interactions with high need students and their peers. Demographics related to experience in the field and race for all providers were accounted for, as this could potentially influence the level of effectiveness in implementing this inclusive plan.

The first student participant was Mark who had an ASD label. His paraprofessional, Katie, possessed a two-year college degree and his special education teacher Michelle had twenty-five years of experience. The second student was Brian. This student had an ASD label along with limited verbal skills. The paraprofessional Angela was Caucasian and had twelve

years of experience while the special education teacher, Rachel who was African American had eight years of field experience. Third, Josuha, an 8th-grade student with ASD has some hearing loss and limited vision. His paraprofessional Dave had a four-year degree and the special education teacher had a master's degree along with eight years of experience. The final participant was Faith, a student with limited verbal skills who regularly uses gestures to communicate. The paraprofessional Wanda was an African American who had a bachelor's degree with five years of experience. Faith's special education teacher is Ben, the same individual who manages Dave (Brock, Biggs, Carter, Catty & Raley, 2016).

Students, Faith and Brian, were in a computer class with lectures and large group and were supported by another student with a disability. Mark and Joshua were included in an art class that was structured through large and small groups, and independent work time. These students were also supported by peers with disabilities. The paraprofessionals and special education teachers received training on how to implement peer support methods specifically focusing on a particular behavior and an academic goal outlined on his/her IEP (2016). In addition, special education teachers identified a strategy to help students improve specific behavior.

Brock, Biggs, Carter, Catty & Raley found that all paraprofessionals successfully facilitated peer support implementations. All participants improved their peer interaction, implemented a support behavior as well as achieved a defined goal. Interestingly, paraprofessionals working with students that had limited verbal skills were more successful. Results showed that "peers increased their rates of prompting and reinforcement after paraprofessionals oriented them in their new roles and provided facilitation" (2016, p. 230). It was a challenge for peer participants to implement support with multiple steps, which indicates a

need for additional support. In addition, it was more difficult for paraprofessionals to provide this support when students with disabilities transitioned back to their regular setting. This makes sense given the structural differences and routines that can exist in individualized spaces. This study concluded that teachers should work directly with paraprofessionals to find target goals to develop with students in a mainstream class as well as create effective ways for peers to be more successful supporters. Most importantly, the more teachers prioritize peer-based support, the more students with disabilities are able to be given experiences that allow them to grow socially and academically (Brock, Biggs, Carter, Catty & Raley, 2016).

The research presented in this chapter has communicated evident disproportionality when it comes to program structures, personal views, experience in the field, and trends related to minority students. Each of these aspects greatly influences students' experiences and academic outcomes. Institutions must address the policies and practices that directly contribute to unbalanced environments within special education. With the evidence presented, it is clear that educators are prioritizing restrictive spaces and failing to be proactive in providing the least restrictive environment. A shift towards more obvious attempts at inclusion would greatly improve the special education representations among all students, regardless of their race or level of ability.

CHAPTER III: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Summary

Disproportionality in special education and among minority students is a direct result of flaws within the educational system. These flaws are largely based on inconsistencies in follow through with educational mandates, program and placement trends as well as personal and slightly biased assumptions of student ability. As mentioned in previous chapters, the LRE is the starting point for all learning. It should always be assumed that this is the most appropriate place for students until proven otherwise. Despite this, it is clear that practices do not embody this outlook through and through. For example, programs either appear to offer an inclusive environment or LRE justifications are restrictive in most cases. Furthermore, the more severe individual needs are, the more restrictive placement is chosen.

Minority students are a subgroup of special education students that are subjected to unfair treatment, reduced expectations, and unnecessary placement. These students receive placement based on widely held assumptions that they themselves cannot meet the demands of learning. This can be because of socio-economic status or negative assumptions of academic potential. Oftentimes teachers feel that high behaviors in minority students warrant more restrictive environments because teachers assume that minority students are inherently behavior prone. Also, teachers, specifically general educators do not always feel comfortable making the adjustments necessary to accommodate individual needs. With this, a stronger case can be made for special education placement. Along with this, due to lack of understanding and proper training, there can be delays in the referral process and a lack of proactive measures influences the level of support students are given. Most often, teachers can mistake cultural differences for a disability, which can lead educators to decide they are fit to learning outside the mainstream

classroom. While this is appropriate for some students, there is a certain level of inaccuracy that comes with misidentification. It is possible that needs are actually less severe than assessments signify. If this is the case, then needs can in fact be met adequately in the mainstream classroom. A change in identification practices and non-biased assessment will improve this common issue.

I came to find that many perceptions of student ability, minority, or not have to do with feeling pressure to have students meet standardized expectations. With this, teachers can hold the assumption that those with limited resources or family involvement are more likely to struggle academically. This creates an extremely negative mindset among educators. Holding this view perpetuates the widespread idea that somehow low economic standing warrants restrictive placement. Again, this may actually fit some students, however, this does not mean that every minority student cannot meet expectations. With culturally sensitive approaches to learning and offering mainstream support, all students, especially minority individuals will make the necessary gains needed to be successful.

In my opinion, I strongly agree that a deficit mentality has plagued many high need, special education students. This influences their social and academic experience. Students are more likely to be recommended for restrictive placement. As a result, students get limited interaction with their mainstream peers due to receiving the majority of their specialized services through pull out programs or being in a center-based environment. I believe that students' access does not match the expectations outlined by regulations. Trends suggest that staff are not putting forth enough effort to make learning possible within inclusive environments; they are assuming that special education students can only succeed in separate environments. Research has proven that this assumption greatly influences the referral process. I found the arguments made about common trends in disability identification to be the most compelling and sound explanation for

uneven representation. The most significant flaw in the system is that teams' responses towards disability identification are not proactive enough. There is often a prolonged period that results in students not getting needs met at the proper time. Students then miss out on either necessary special education services or the opportunity to learn in the mainstream classroom. It is evident that students are too often wrongfully placed in both environments. Thoughtful considerations prior to referral would be best because this would lead to correct placements.

A stronger case against restrictive placements can be made based on the reality of the environments through the eyes of students. Researchers highlighted evidence that illuminates decreased performance in academics and increased behaviors among students in separate spaces away from peers. From personal experience, students can feel a sense of inadequacy if they are learning differently from others or not getting the attention they need. I firmly believe in the research regarding disability labels referenced by Billingsley, DeMatthews, Connally & McLeskey (2018) has a lot to do with student perception of individual ability and overall performance. Students recognize when their learning environment is different than those around them. Oftentimes, this difference stands out in and away from the mainstream classroom, and students internalize this difference and experience self-doubt, which influences performance.

It is clear that the realities and current trends of the educational system are also a direct reflection of the administrator's priorities. These can be seen in the emphasis of district-wide standards as well as keeping costs down by reducing necessary referrals. While the educational system operates through various policies, mandates, and practices, this should not mean that a student's experience or outcome is compromised in primarily focusing on these aspects. Attention should be pointed toward offering inclusive opportunities and placement in line with regulations. The best way to improve the evident discrepancies presented is to shift and expand

the priorities of administrators, as educational leaders have the strongest influence over the district's ability to successfully embrace and implement an inclusive outlook.

Limitations of Research

A limitation of this research was the lack of elaboration regarding the influence of gender, age, or race of both the adult and student participants within the studies presented. It would make sense to draw some conclusions about how these factors influenced representations, however, it was challenging to include this in my own analysis because many of the author's research failed to include detailed hypotheses addressing these aspects. For example, many articles mentioned having both male and female participants for students and staff, and at times the population of participants was skewed toward a specific age, gender, race, and level of experience. It seems to me that these factors would influence results more significantly. However, the information did not allude to this. I believe that more complete conclusions could be drawn about disproportionality if these factors were discussed in-depth.

Implications for Future Research

As mentioned in the limitations for research, I would like to see more elaboration in the studies on how race, gender, age, or experience level influenced placement trends and the participants. This would lead to a more comprehensive review in my opinion. Additionally, it would be more meaningful to come across studies with efforts of improvement. Many of the studies commented that inclusion or disproportionality is an issue, however, some researchers have failed to present in-depth steps of action to get us closer to changing school cultures. Further research should be conducted in order to provide individuals with a road map on how to address in more detail, specific factors that contribute to systemic educational disproportionality

such as bias, referral, and/or racial prejudice when handling the special education process for all students.

Professional Application

I came to explore this topic because I have experienced structures and trends through field experiences that do not follow regulations and are not in line with inclusive practices. Students are primarily included in pull-out programs, they experience different treatment and academic expectations and needs do not get addressed properly. The research presented also reflects this unfortunate reality. It is important for me as a new educator to follow inclusive practices in all that I do, especially with students that have more severe needs. I need to make sure expectations are high for all students, establish a growth mindset, and remember that there is *always* a way to meet individual needs in the mainstream classroom. This disposition will allow me to properly address student needs and make sure every student makes academic gains.

Throughout my time at Bethel, I have learned about the importance of inclusion and opportunity for students with disabilities. Special education is all about giving students the chance to learn regardless of the severity of their needs. It is evident that educators should prioritize this inclusive outlook and operate under the assumption that all students can learn along with their peers. Working as a Direct Support Professional serving adults with various needs has also influenced my conceptualization of disabilities and the need for inclusion. Individuals with disabilities are "different" to some degree, but these differences should have no bearing on how society views those with intellectual differences and whether or not they are included in the mainstream classroom.

My outlook towards inclusion is further fueled by the wisdom from various scriptural messages. For example, a central message of inclusion can be seen in the 'Golden Rule' which

embodies the standards of kindness, selflessness, and compassion. In addition, equality is an extension of this. The Golden Rule has allowed me to see that teachers should extend these qualities to students. Secondly, specific verses such as Ephesians have impacted how I see instruction and opportunity with students. It proclaims, " Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us" (3:20). I believe that inclusive environments, along with equal opportunity and access provide students a more enriched academic experience. Thinking about inclusion, having an open mindset means that there is always more humility that can be shown. Teachers have the ability to provide more approaches to reach students, there are more ways teachers can give academically and personally, and make a positive impact on students' lives. Taking these ideas into account, it is easy to see that educators should consciously aim to work against any propensity for disproportionality for all students.

The best way I can ensure inclusive practices exist for my students is to be responsive and proactive during the referral process. When issues come up, I will work with special education support staff on ways to meet needs in the classroom first before resorting to a different setting. I want my students to be able to experience the mainstream classroom as much as possible and receive that support in their main classroom. There is no doubt that restrictive settings will be the most appropriate for some students; I often advocate for this if students seem to do better with extensive or 1:1 support. This is often the best way to target needs. However, this should be utilized once the mainstream or special education classrooms are determined to be unfit environments. Additionally, I want to do everything possible to make sure students' needs get addressed in a timely manner, as this prevents needs going unnoticed or students being unnecessarily placed in special education or mainstream environments. Needs must be met as

soon as possible in order to acquire the best possible space for academic, social, and personal growth.

In order to address minority students or any student in special education, practices need to be culturally sensitive. This means taking into account a student's culture, core language, home life, and academic and behavioral history. As someone who is familiar with trauma-informed teaching, it is important that I tap into the level of family involvement or issues that may be taking place at home. Situational factors can create challenges throughout the learning process and influence placement to some degree; I must be mindful of these when working with students. It is also important for me to operate under the assumption that cultural differences do not automatically signal issues. As discussed earlier, language differences can be mistaken for deeper issues. Proper monitoring of ELL students' learning, for example, will likely lead me to address a language barrier in a way that does not require me to consider a disability label. This helps create an inclusive learning environment. In addition, as a teacher, I must develop teaching methods that acknowledge students' uniqueness and find ways to get to know students on an individual level. This will allow students to feel a sense of trust within me as I work to get students learning in a way that elicits progress; this is the only way to get students to learn.

Placement can drastically impact a student's disposition towards themselves personally and academically. I can attest to this from personal experience. I know that students have the capacity to recognize when they are learning differently from their peers, especially if they are included in the mainstream classroom. They can compare themselves to others and experience a loss in confidence internalizing their own learning. Along with this, students may feel like they do not belong. It is imperative that I make each and every student feel free to be themselves and be accepted for exactly who they are regardless of their ability, learning style, or challenges. This

is what true inclusion looks like. Disproportionality will be reduced if I hold these values each day in my own classroom and trends towards inclusion will begin to happen more and more if I surround myself with like-minded educators that share this same outlook. In addition, teacher word of mouth is just as powerful as administration and we have the power to dismantle all types of disproportionality together if individuals make a conscious effort.

Conclusion

Through this process, I have learned the prevalence of the issues explored in this thesis. Inclusion is obviously lacking and disproportionality exists because of deep-rooted issues that continue with various processes in the educational system. It is important to examine these structural flaws and make this a top priority in schools. I believe this begins by looking internally at our own dispositions. Unfortunately, our attitudes, biases, and assumptions have such a strong influence over student placement, as many researchers have pointed out. These assumptions are understood, however, they should not dictate outcomes for students, as they are often incomplete or incorrect. There are many more factors to consider when analyzing disproportionality, but this is a sound place to start. As with anything, switching the focus to address this ongoing issue will take efforts being made by multiple players in the educational field, and in time, I believe inclusion will naturally be adopted in schools nationwide.

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