

The Disproportionate Representation of African Americans in Special Education:

Looking Behind the Curtain for Understanding and Solutions

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The overrepresentation of African American children and youth in special education programs for students with learning disabilities, severe emotional or behavioral disabilities, and mental disabilities has remained a persistent reality even after more than 20 years of recognition. After reviewing these recurring patterns, a critical-theory mode of inquiry is used to discuss how certain basic assumptions, worldviews, beliefs, and epistemologies used by some special education knowledge producers serve to perpetuate the disproportionality drama. The author concludes by suggesting that the voices of qualitatively different knowledge producers, who are culturally and interculturally competent, are needed to bring resolution to this persistent challenge.

The overrepresentation of African Americans in certain special education programs (see Note 1) has been a persistent problem negatively affecting large numbers of African Americans and their families, the field of special education, and society at large. The sociopolitical and historical roots of the disproportionate representation problem addressed in this article predate the field of special education, with origins as early as 1619. They can be traced back to the arrival of Africans in America and their subsequent continuous, unequal treatment (Willie, Garibaldi, & Reed, 1991). The current reality of the overrepresentation of African Americans in special education classes perpetuates this sociohistorical legacy by allowing the general and special education enterprises to continue the creation of programmatic and classroom arrangements that jeopardize the life chances of large numbers of African American youth. The fact that disproportionately large numbers of African Americans are being persistently diagnosed as disabled and placed in special education programs constitutes a problem—for many of these students are inappropriately placed. The consequences, however, of such misidentification, classification, and placement are often deleterious. As an example, this problem is exacerbated by the fact that many African American youth today fail to receive a quality and life-enhancing education in precisely those special education programs in which they are often inappropriately placed (Heller, Holtzman, & Messick, 1982; Hilliard, 1992). In addition, the special education label borne by these students

often serves as a stigma, producing negative effects on the bearer of the label and others interacting with the stigmatized individual (Goffman, 1963). Furthermore, while these students are in special education programs, they miss essential general education academic and social curricula. This limited exposure with the core academic curriculum continues the spiral of "lower levels of achievement, decreased likelihood of post secondary education, and more limited employment" (Markowitz, Garcia, & Eichelberger, 1997, p. 3).

Concerns about racial discrimination and violations of civil rights are raised when African American youth are consistently misidentified and disproportionately placed in special education programs. Recently, renewed attention has been made regarding these issues. Reschly (1996) observed that this heightened awareness can be seen in recent reports to Congress and several initiatives funded by the U.S. Office of Education. The first initiative included a study conducted by the National Academy of Sciences of the National Research Council that critiqued the use of intelligence tests in special education and explored alternatives to these tests. This body noted the absence of "benefits" resulting from the use of these tests and their lack of pedagogical utility (Morrison, White, & Fever, 1996). A second initiative involved funding the National Association of State Directors of Special Education to examine policy issues around the disproportionality problem and to recommend practical solutions. Although interest in this area has been recently piqued, renewed interest without

a different analysis and different voices will not resolve this problem.

The purposes of this article are to look behind the special education ontological, axiological, and epistemological "curtain" and address the overrepresentation of African American learners in special education classes. I am convinced that important insights can emerge from exploring the beliefs, assumptions, worldviews, ways of knowing, and cultural inclinations of those writing the special education scripts, rather than perseverating our focus on those acting out various roles. Much has been said about the "actors," and little about the "playwrights." To accomplish this, initially, I will discuss briefly the persistent patterns embedded in the overrepresentation of African Americans in mildly disabled and emotionally disturbed programs in order to provide a convenient context, or marker, for subsequent discussions. Then, employing a critical theory mode of inquiry (Apple, 1990; Arnowitz & Giroux, 1991; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1988; Skrtic, 1991), I will discuss how the basic assumptions, beliefs, epistemologies, and worldviews employed by the major "script writers" in the field often serve to perpetuate the disproportionality drama. Relatedly, this narrative will be followed with an examination of special education knowledge producers and the role that these script writers play in perpetuating overrepresentation. I will then offer an ethical narrative that I hope will lead to problem solutions.

The Overrepresentation Problem: Persistent Patterns

The overrepresentation of African American children and youth in special education programs for students with learning disabilities, severe emotional or behavioral disorders, and mental disabilities has remained a persistent reality even after more than 20 years of recognition. The literature is replete with causal factors that range from failure of the general education system (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Deno, 1970; MacMillan & Hendrick, 1993; McDermott, 1987; Townsend, Thomas, Witty, & Lee, 1996) to inequities associated with the special education referral, assessment, and placement processes (Harry & Anderson, 1994; Mercer, 1973). Yet, the problem of overrepresentation of African Americans persists even after causes have been unequivocally noted. We know and have known for years, for example, that, in spite of all the study and scripting of this issue, the proportion of African Americans identified as mentally disabled has not changed much from 38% in 1975 when those students constituted 15% of the school population. In 1991 they made up 16% of this nation's school population and 35% of the special education population (Harry & Anderson, 1994). Further, it is well documented that African American males are particularly overrepresented both in disciplinary practices (i.e., recipients of corporal punishment and suspension) and in certain special education categories and typically receive their special education in segregated classrooms or buildings (Harry & Anderson, 1994).

We also know that the labels associated with the socio-cultural construction of the categories of mild mental disability, learning disability, and serious emotional or behavioral disability (SED) have definitional and validity problems with serious negative implications for African American learners. For example, Ysseldyke, Algozzine, and Thurlow (1992) observed that the arbitrary shifts in diagnostic criteria and frequency rates for the SED label coupled with the extreme variability in placement rates across the states call into question the validity of the SED category. These concerns and the attendant cultural variability of student behavior and teacher judgment place African American youth at great risk of being falsely labeled as SED. Similar arguments have been made for the educable mentally retarded (EMR) and specific learning disability (SLD) categories (Harry & Anderson, 1994).

The literature about this subject is also clear: Given the ambiguity and subjectivity embedded in the mild disabilities categories, teacher judgments in the referral process combined with the inherent biases of the assessment process contribute to the disproportionate referral and special education placement of African American students (Anderson, 1994; Artiles & Trent, 1994; Gould, 1981; Harry & Anderson, 1994; Nobles, 1991). The aspect of assessment has received the greatest attention in the research literature and in the courts in terms of its centrality to the overrepresentation discourse. There appears to be enough theoretical and statistical evidence suggesting that intelligence tests are biased and harmful to many African American learners (Gould, 1981; Hilliard, 1991; Jones, 1988; Patton, 1992). Furthermore, the deleterious effect of standardized intelligence testing is exacerbated by the fact that most of these tests are used for classification purposes rather than for diagnostic or prescriptive reasons. In that regard, these tests contribute very little to curriculum or pedagogical validity (Hilliard, 1991). Recently, the Board of Assessment and Testing (BOTA) of the National Research Council (Morrison et al., 1996) issued a report concluding that "the usefulness of IQ tests in making special education decisions needs reevaluation" (p. 27). Again, the report revealed a lack of connection between assessment practices and effective treatments (Morrison et al., 1996).

In spite of the presence of convincing data on the overrepresentation issue and the extant literature challenging special education processes that lead to identification and placement, this problem continues to persist. Its persistence will continue unless we reanalyze old premises and reconstruct new premises underlying the field of special education. An analysis of the deep structure foundations of special education will be discussed in the next section.

Special Education and Its Social Science Underpinnings

The dominant mode of inquiry in the field of special education has closely followed the "objectivist," or functionalist, tradition of theory development, paradigm construction,

research approach, methodology use, and research applications (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Skrtic, 1986). As a worldview, functionalism presupposes an objective, rational, orderly interpretation of social reality, whereby deviations to this view are placed under a pathology heading (Foucault, 1976). This functionalist framework leads persons to postulate that schools exist to transmit a body of "prescribed knowledge, skills, values, and norms that are essential for society" (Irvine, 1990, p. 2). Individuals so theoretically predisposed then engage in discourses and practices that lead them to constantly search for the "right" test, the "right" diagnosis, and the "appropriate" pedagogy, within the confines and restraints of their worldview, which often goes uncontested. This functionalist narrative, enjoined by the medical and psychological grounding of the field of special education, explains deviations from the norm as deficits or pathologies (Skrtic, 1991). Students, then, who fail in general education are viewed as defective and consequently as needing some "special" system to organize itself, develop a different set of norms, values, roles, expectations and procedures to "fix" these "defective" students. Skrtic (1991) pointed out that the creation of the special education system to deal with these "defective" students removed the problem from the general education discourse and compartmentalized it into a separate special education narrative. This special education narrative, according to that author, includes a language that developed four assumptions that have reinforced its functionalist/psychological/medical origins. These mutually reinforcing assumptions are that "a) disabilities are pathological conditions that students have, b) differential diagnosis is objective and useful, c) special education is a rationally conceived and coordinated system of services that benefits diagnosed students, and d) progress results from rational technological improvements in diagnostic and instructional practices" (Skrtic, 1991, p. 152). Such, therefore, is the language used by many of the key special education knowledge producers who are writing the scripts for others to play.

Critical Theory and Special Education

This functionalist, or positivist, view fails to recognize the socioeconomic and political nature of schooling. Nor does it imagine the role played by schools and the special education system in maintaining the existing social and economic stratification order, thereby exerting ideological, social, and political control of African American learners. As previously mentioned, a host of theorists, taking a more critical view, has created a body of literature that links school structures and processes, including those used in special education, with the values, attitudes, and needs that reflect the dominant social, economic, and political groups in this nation (e.g., Apple, 1981; Cherryholmes, 1988; Katz, 1971; Lipsky & Gartner, 1989; Skrtic, 1991). These critical, or conflict, theorists hold that education, and, thus special education, grounded in structured power relationships, is designed to serve the interests of

the dominant social, political, and economic classes and to place African Americans in a disvalued position. As such, the structures, processes, assumptions, and beliefs of the dominant classes are deeply embedded in the special education knowledge base and its knowledge producers, thus undermining its theory, research, and practice. These theories, assumptions, and practices also are enormously resistant to change. This coupling of special education with the needs of the dominant social, political, and economic classes in society has resulted in the maintenance of a special education system that is unjust to African Americans. Many of those major knowledge producers, or "gods," in the field of special education have played an essential role in maintenance of this injustice.

Special Education Knowledge Production: A Missing Discourse

The overrepresentation discourse has not, to my knowledge, been discussed within an analysis of the social, political, and cultural contexts of the major knowledge producers in the field and the ontologies, axiologies, and epistemologies they employ. In the main, those who create, manufacture, and produce the knowledge base in special education historically have not included African Americans, especially those directly affected by overrepresentation. There exists in special education a mismatch of chasm proportion between the social, political, and cultural backgrounds and experiences of its knowledge producers and those African American learners studied, placed, and overrepresented in special education classes.

It is axiomatic that knowledge and the production of knowledge is not culture free. In fact, Gordon, Miller, and Rollock (1990) have postulated that social science knowledge production operates within communicentric frames of references, whereby one's own "community" becomes the center of the universe and the conceptual frame that structures thought. Knowledge producers in special education, as in other social science disciplines, shape the explanatory parameters of issues such as paradigm formation, definitional constructs, theory development, and choice of research methods—all important foundational concerns that shape the overrepresentation discourse. The nature of meaning and the stances taken by knowledge producers in the important knowledge production process are influenced by their cultural and ethnic identities, which shape their notions of what is "real," "true," and "good." Accordingly, the "pseudo-objective" nature of knowledge production and of those who produce knowledge is influenced strongly by the culture, assumptions, and beliefs that knowledge producers hold about the "other." If they lack knowledge, experience, or "insider" insight into the culture of the "other," their theories and constructs face serious construct and predictive validity challenges.

An examination of the special education knowledge base relative to African Americans will reveal that many knowl-

edge producers have attempted to understand and explain the behavior and life experiences of African Americans through their own narrow cultural/ethnic perspectives and against an equally narrowly constructed cultural/ethnic standard (Gordon, 1985). As previously stated, the field's functionalist and positivistic core knowledge base further compounds the problem because of the culture-bound nature of this discourse and the limited explanatory usefulness embedded in this perspective. As such, many researchers and knowledge producers in special education generally explain and interpret the behavior of African Americans based upon their "outsider" beliefs and assumptions about the origins and meanings of behavior and the values placed on that behavior and the behaving person. Some have argued that this perspective represents a form of epistemological racism (Scheurich & Young, 1997; Stanfield, 1985). Underneath the processes of observing, identifying, and interpreting worth and behavior that one might say are deviant or different is the knowledge producer and his or her culturally bound frame of reference. This "filtering" process historically has not displayed enough of a passionate or empathic understanding and respect for the "other." The present critique of knowledge producers and production should better help us to understand the historical, sociopolitical problem of the overrepresentation of African Americans in special education programs. An important and missing context, I believe, is provided by this narrative. A new set of enlightened cultural filters and discourses is needed to replace the current language and narratives used to maintain the legitimacy of current special education social and political arrangements. It is essential that these discourses include important ethical themes heretofore missing from most disproportionality narratives.

Needed Ethical Discourses

If the social sciences and special education shifted from their rational, functionalist, and positivist grounding, the field of special education would move naturally toward the inclusion of human factors, especially those ethical and moral ones, in its epistemology, ontology, knowledge production, structure, and practices (Starratt, 1991, 1994, 1996). With this transformation, certain ethical themes would prevail and envelope the narratives around disproportionality. Starratt (1991) has synthesized some important and disparate pieces of ethical discourse that can illuminate the problem of overrepresentation. The three ethical themes of critique, justice, and caring, explicated by Starratt (1991, 1994), will be used as a framework for bringing ethical clarification and development to this discussion in the hope of helping to resolve the problem of the overrepresentation of African Americans in special education programs.

As noted, the current special education system is structurally flawed and thus in need of critique. The previously discussed critique of the dogmatic, structuralist grounding of special education and its knowledge producers provided a pre-

liminary lens into an ethic of critique. This ethic of critique employs a frame of reference to uncover the marginalization and dehumanizing effect of a system that disproportionately relegates large numbers of a cultural group into programs largely proven to be dysfunctional to their development. This stance is, by nature, an ethical one as it explores questions of social justice, equity, and human dignity on individual and collective levels (Starratt, 1991). For example, the critical ethicist understands that no knowledge production or the resulting understandings and practices that flow from that produced knowledge is neutral or culture free. Relatedly, no sociopolitical arrangement of human relationships that result from organizational, structural, or practical considerations have neutral antecedents. These arrangements are "usually structured to benefit some segments of society at the expense of others" (Starratt, 1991, p. 189). The application, therefore, of this framework of ethical critique to the disproportionality issue makes it clear that African Americans as a group are not best served by this arrangement and that the will and interests of the dominant social, economic, and political forces are indeed served. The ethical challenge of this ethic of critique is to uncover this inequality, confront, it, and begin to make bold social arrangements that are "more responsive to the human and civil rights of all and that enable those affected by these social arrangements to have a voice in evaluating the results and in altering practice" (Starratt, 1991, p. 190).

This essential ethical challenge has not been met on a grand scale thus far by the field. Heretofore, with few exceptions, deep structure theoretical and conceptual assumptions that drive this disproportionality reality have remained unchallenged. Often using ontologies, epistemologies, and axiologies that emanate from the social histories of the dominant race, the script writers continue to create dramas that have tragic endings for far too many African American learners. Rarely have alternative narratives been offered that make the system of special education and its major players accountable for the unethical consequences of large numbers of misdiagnosed African Americans labeled and placed in special education programs. There is a call, therefore, for some justice in the special education system.

This ethic of critique illuminates injustice and dehumanization and provides some markers for socially responsible corrective action, but an "ethic of justice provides more explicit responses" to these problems (Starratt, 1991, p. 194). In terms of overrepresentation, one might ask, "What common good is served by having disproportionately large numbers of African Americans, especially males, in special education programs?" Whose common good is served and for what purpose? How are the rights of individual African American students served by this arrangement? What kind of disservice does this arrangement, and the subsequent lack of contact with African American students, provide non-African American people individually or collectively? How does society benefit when the potentialities of large numbers of African Americans lie in a program for those with emotional

disturbance or mental disability? These are the types of questions asked by special educators who employ an ethic of justice. Are we, as a collective, in all of our various roles as researchers, theorists, and practitioners, asking and struggling with answers to these questions?

Starratt (1991) argued that an ethic of justice can serve a better purpose if it is complemented by an ethic of caring. Nel Noddings (1984, 1988) has offered a compelling discourse on the ethic of caring that has important implications for the present narrative. Grounded in psychological literature, especially that of women's moral development, an ethic of caring calls for its users to create natural relationships with the "other" that display absolute and unconditional regard for the "other." This ethic rejects means-to-end relationships and prefers acts "done out of love and natural inclination" (Noddings, 1988, p. 219). This ethic honors and extols the dignity, worth, and respect of every human being, individually and collectively, and places human relationships at the center of person-to-person interactions.

Special educators, especially its knowledge producers, can instill into their work and promote an ethic of caring by holding the integrity and goodness of each human relationship and each human being as sacred and by desiring to see individuals enjoy a complete life (Starratt, 1991). The persistent existence and perpetuation of the overrepresentation of African Americans in special education programs serves as counterforce against an ethic of caring. In loving relationships care is taken not to cause harm to the "other" in thoughts or actions. Many African Americans continue to be harmed by the unjust arrangements created by the presuppositions, theories, research, constructs, actions, behaviors, and processes that dominate the field of special education. The ethics of domination, control, oppression, and unjust treatment of African Americans that result in their disproportionate placement in special education programs serve to intrude on and block their human completion. An ethic of caring requires that all persons involved in the education enterprise, whether they are researchers, administrators, special education teachers, college professors, or school psychologists, treat African Americans and their culture with caring and respect and hold them in absolute regard.

With a few exceptions, ethnic minority knowledge producers, especially those of African descent, have largely been absent from writing these new ethical discourses or have been complicitous in their uncritical analysis of the hegemonic cultural base of special education knowledge producers (Gordon et al., 1990). It is essential that more ethnic minorities, from their own ontological, epistemological, and axiological perspectives, begin to write critical narratives about the philosophy, theory, values, methodologies, systems, and processes that undergird the field of special education. Such narratives should seek to amplify the muffled voices of those who seek to expose those ideologies, systems, processes, and practices that continue to marginalize African Americans—and that often culminate in their referral and eventual placement in

dead-end special education programs. African American knowledge producers, aligned with culturally sensitive and competent others, have an essential and vital opportunity to clearly identify all inequities in special education, including those epistemologies and axiologies that result from its functionalistic foundations and the communicentric hegemony of knowledge producers, which lead to distortions of knowledge and fact. Informed and enlightened knowledge producers are needed to create a constant, relentless, and caring set of discourses that can serve as a counterbalance to the dominant ideology of the field, which continues to perpetuate and maintain the hierarchical ordering of persons in society and to ensure that African Americans, especially males, remain at the bottom of the social-political-economic heap.

The Need for New Script Writers

The underrepresentation of African Americans and conscious others in the special education knowledge production process has had a strong impact on the character and nature of the knowledge that has been produced. Their relative absence from this story has limited some insightful knowledge production and, accordingly, our deep structure understanding of the disproportionality narrative. The knowledge, meanings, understandings, and principles that have guided the disproportionality discourse have largely been derived from the field's positivistic tradition in the western social sciences. This explanatory framework, largely ahistorical and lacking social, political, and economic considerations, has been inadequate in its explanations and solutions relative to the overrepresentation of African Americans in special education programs. New ways of knowing and valuing and new types of knowledge producers are called for. These knowledge producers are called upon to uncover the philosophical underpinnings of special education and replace them with a paradigm that expresses cultural "insider" knowledge, epistemologies, axiologies, and experiences that are social, political, cultural, and economic and that speak in multilectic terms (see Note 2). This grounding, then, by nature would require knowledge producers to understand and "be sensitive to the actual traits of populations under inquiry" (Stanfield, 1985, p. 411). In addition to rigor and methodological soundness in the inquiry process, this change calls for knowledge producers to develop a vast reservoir of cultural knowledge and experiences of African Americans, guided by "insiders" to this culture. This knowledge should serve to guide theory, research design, data collection, and interpretation (Stanfield, 1985). The need for this reformulated paradigm serves, then, as a special challenge to African American knowledge producers, as well as sensitive and caring non-African Americans knowledge producers.

Knowledge producers who would script the disproportionality problem with an ethic of critique, justice, and caring would offer the hope of replacing special education paradigms of domination and control with ones of liberation and emancipation. Resistance to such a paradigm shift is likely. The

knowledge and analysis that have been produced thus far as "scientific," "objective," and "rational" have in the main not served the field well as an explanatory model for problem identification and resolution. New structures, systems, and paradigms are needed that allow for new knowledge producers in special education to make their voices heard and to approach the task of analysis and problem solving in honest ways (Sullivan, 1984). With this perspective, the pitfalls of our current ways of perceiving and dealing with the disproportionately problem will be placed in full view, thus beginning the process of our philosophical liberation.

Concluding Statements

Artiles and Trent (1994) ended their treatise on the problem of disproportionate representation in special education by stating that some still find themselves asking the same basic question—whether or not overrepresentation is a problem. That is not a question that I have ever heard an African American special educator, sociologist, psychologist, anthropologist, barber, teacher, minister, social worker, custodian, business person, homemaker, or anyone else ask. Nor have I heard Latinos or Native Americans ask that question. We know the answer and it is *yes*. When this question is asked, the individual asking the question is usually from a European cultural background. The challenge and basis of analysis is to determine why this group, especially its knowledge producers, continues to beg the question. What is behind their question? It should be obvious to most people, professional and lay, that African Americans are overrepresented in large numbers in special education classrooms, particularly those for students with mild disabilities or emotional or behavioral disabilities. It is obvious, or should be, that many of these learners are misdiagnosed, mislabeled, and therefore misplaced.

It is obvious, or should be, that this reality has a historical legacy and has been (a) confirmed year after year by numerous scholarly studies, (b) recognized in U.S. law (the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990; P.L. 94-142), and (c) biannually confirmed by data from the U.S. Office for Civil Rights. It is obvious, or should be, that this reality is a symptom of a special education system run amok with many underlying problems in its deep structure philosophical and theoretical foundation, its ethics, processes, and practices. It is obvious, or should be, that its foundation, ethics, and practices have emanated from a set of knowledge producers outside of the affected population who have all too often created a system of false languages and knowledge production that continue to reinforce the dominant social, political, economic, and ethical order of things. Their beliefs, epistemologies, values, and presuppositions must be unveiled, analyzed, and made clear as an absolute precondition for resolving this problem—which has plagued this profession and nation for too many years. There is, however, a way out.

These same knowledge producers can begin to reevaluate their worldview, epistemologies, ethical themes, so-called

objectivity, methodology, and practice in light of the many muted voices of African Americans. They could employ a language of ethical critique, justice, and caring in their work and inject social, political, economic, historical, and ethical discourses into all that they do. They could go to those who are "studied" to listen and hear. They could go to "insiders" for critical insights into the "other" and be guided by those insights. They could allow the "other," African American knowledge producers, to teach and lead them in their quest for knowledge production liberation. The challenge is not just with the dominant European knowledge producers. African Americans have an equally large leadership challenge.

A system is needed in special education that nurtures, develops, and allows for the voices of African American knowledge producers to be heard, confirmed, and affirmed. Their voices will more closely represent those who are studied, tested, identified, labeled, and placed in special education programs—often at levels well beyond accepted rates. It is through looking behind the special education ontological, epistemological, and axiological "curtain" and bringing to center stage the voices, narratives, and discourses of African Americans and sensitive and aware others that this problem can be resolved. The criteria needed for these new knowledge producers are the same ones needed for all of those participating in an agenda that turns the corner in resolving the African American special education overrepresentation problem. The training and continual development of liberating knowledge producers and practitioners should be conditioned by these criteria. Out of this reflection, growth, freedom, and progression could emerge a grand story. The denouement to yet another story that threatens this society could conclude in a way that liberates those most negatively affected, as well as those perpetuating these threats.

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NOTES

1. The present analysis focuses on the overrepresentation of African Americans in certain special education programs. I have addressed the underrepresentation of African Americans in gifted programs in other writings (Patton, 1992, 1995).
2. The term *multilectic* is used here to refer to a multitude of theses, their opposites, and their syntheses, as opposed to the Hegelian/Marxist dialectic.

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