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The Psychology of Disproportionality:

Minority Placement in Context

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Abstract

The National Academy of Sciences' panel report *Minority Students in Special and Gifted Education* represents an important contribution to the national dialogue on minority disproportionality. Yet the disparities in special and gifted education studied by the panel cannot be understood independently of a broad legacy of racial inequity woven into American public education. In this paper, the results of an ethnographic study, interviewing a diverse sample of school personnel, are presented to illustrate the context within which minority disproportionality occurs in schools and school districts. School respondents agreed with the panel's conclusion that biological and social factors related to poverty make an important contribution to the disproportionate representation of minority students in special education; yet the data suggests that the effect of poverty on disproportionality is by no means linear. In general, teachers and administrators we interviewed identified a number of factors in common with the NRC report, but also noted the impact of other contextual variables, most notably high stakes testing. In particular, we were struck by the difficulty some respondents exhibited in discussing issues related to race. In order to ensure that the panel's recommendations are implemented, it becomes highly important to understand and address broader issues of social and political context, in particular the extent of denial of the existence of racial disparities in the schools.

The Psychology of Disproportionality: Minority Placement in Context

There can be little doubt that *Minority Students in Special and Gifted Education* (National Research Council, 2002) is a critical milestone in the consideration of the disproportionate representation of students of color in special programs. The simple act of commissioning a panel of such distinguished scholars under the auspices of the National Academy of Sciences represents an important commitment. Certainly those scholars took their task extremely seriously, producing what is likely the most comprehensive consideration of the topic to date.

The report relies upon quality scientific scholarship, hewing to a rigorous examination of evidence relating to the four questions chosen by the panel. Such an approach, carried out faithfully, cannot help but clarify important questions and provide a more sophisticated analysis of important variables. Bringing these finer distinctions to light raises important questions, and provides an important guide for future research. Ultimately, the rigor of the panel's analyses may also be responsible for the detail the writers were able to bring to important recommendations in the areas of data collection, early screening and intervention, classroom behavior management, and the training of teachers and school psychologists.

Yet for all that is gained through the rigorous and careful application of traditional scientific method, there is also a risk inherent in a linear and focused examination of the phenomena, a risk that goes beyond the quantitative/qualitative debate that has percolated in the social sciences in recent years. In the physical sciences, the linear methodology of Newtonian physics has provided a model yielding three hundred years of remarkable progress in understanding our universe. Yet advances in non-linear systems dynamics, or *chaos theory* (Gleick, 1987) have demonstrated there are very basic physical processes, such as atmospheric

movement (Tsonis, 2001) or heart arrhythmia (Owis et al., 2002), whose complexity is far better described by emergent non-linear dynamic models. In short, there are phenomena in the physical world, and certainly in the world of human behavior (see e.g. Poole, Van de Ven, Dooley, & Holmes, 2000), whose richness and complexity cannot be fully captured by a linear model of scientific explanation.

This topic is certainly one such phenomena. The disproportionality of students of color in educational programs cannot be fully comprehended as long as it is considered a singular event, somehow divorced from the broader context of American education and American society. At the same time that scholars and policymakers in this venue consider the processes particular to racial disparities in special education, similar conversations are occurring in a number of other domains, including school funding (Rebell, 1999; Singer, 1999), school discipline (Advancement Project/Civil Rights Project, 2000; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, in press), the war on drugs (Human Rights Watch, 2000), and even traffic stops (Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, 2001). To ignore the striking similarity of these phenomena, or to treat their co-occurrence as somehow coincidental, is to risk an incomplete and perhaps inaccurate understanding of the problem at hand. The uniquely American experience of slavery based on racial characteristics has left a tragic legacy of institutional racial disparity that continues to plague our schools and society. In spite of the progress made since *Brown v. Board of Education*, the complex threads of that legacy remain woven into our educational system, and the true significance of the thread of minority placement in special education cannot be fully grasped without an awareness of that broader tapestry.

The purpose of this paper is to consider data that bear upon the context of disproportionality, data that may help illuminate the psychology within which the disparate

treatment of minorities occurs. These data were generated by the Indiana Disproportionality Project (IDP), a collaboration between the Indiana Education Policy Center and the Indiana State Division of Special Education to explore the extent of minority disproportionality in the state of Indiana. In particular, the project has conducted quantitative and qualitative analyses whose goal has been to a) recommend a methodology for identifying those districts and school corporations with consistent evidence of disproportionality, b) improve our understanding of the sources of disparate treatment of students of color, and c) use that understanding to develop interventions that can assist in remediating the problem.

Context and the Four NRC Questions

The four questions considered by the panel serve as the organizing framework for this series. In the following sections, each of the four questions explored by the NRC report are considered in turn, along with data that may help illuminate some of the context underlying disproportionality. These data are drawn from ethnographic interviews conducted by IDP staff in the spring of the 2002 academic year with school personnel in seven urban and near-urban districts with documented minority disproportionality in special education. The goal was to gain a ground-level perspective on variables that might be contributing to minority disproportionality in special education. Together, 65 interviews were conducted in 14 elementary schools during an eight week period with classroom teachers (n = 28), principals or assistant principals (n = 21), school psychologists (n=9), and directors of special education (n = 7).¹

1. Biological/Social Contributions to Early Development

In considering the first of its four questions, the extent to which biological, social and environmental factors contribute to minority disproportionality, the report undertakes an extensive review of biological and social-environmental influences on cognitive and behavioral

¹ For further information on the ethnographic study, contact the first author at skiba@indiana.edu.

functioning. The NRC report attempts to defuse the highly charged and often unproductive nature-nurture controversy by highlighting current thinking (e.g., Bidell & Fisher, 1997; Shore, 1997) regarding the transactional nature of genetic and environmental influences on development. Chapter 3 then reviews data concerning the influence on cognitive and behavioral functioning of a number of biological factors, including low birth weight, nutrition and development, fetal exposure to alcohol, tobacco or drugs, and exposure to lead. The review then considers the social and environmental impact of low SES and the particular stressors associated with poverty, including quality of parenting interaction, family interactions that contribute to language development, maternal depression, child care quality, and other risk factors. Finally, the report concludes that early intervention has been shown to make a significant difference in the school learning of students who arrive with poverty-related risk factors, and recommends a national commitment to early intervention programs to offset socioeconomic risk factors.

The strong contribution of factors associated with poverty to the problem of disproportionality was also emphasized by the school practitioners we interviewed as part of the Indiana Disproportionality Project. Almost universally, respondents commented on the devastating impact of poverty and identified a number of particular challenges that students from disadvantaged conditions bring with them. High transience, poor parenting skills and chaotic home situations, and behavioral expectations discrepant from school expectations (“Some of our children feel that fighting is the way to solve problems...”) were blamed by interviewees as contributing to a lack of preparedness at school entry among low SES students. As one principal noted, “We get kids in first grade that do not know their colors. They do not know their letters. They do not know what the alphabet song is....”

The NRC report identifies the relationship between sociodemographic risk factors and academic deficits at school entry in extensive detail. But what it cannot capture is the difficult and perhaps even demoralizing impact on teachers and administrators as they face what appears to them to be an ever increasing proportion of students suffering from the effects of poverty.

Some classroom teachers emphasized the impact on their students:

I can tell you honestly that some of the things that I hear that go on at home, you are just amazed by it, and you think ‘how can a child come in here and learn when they are dealing with all these issues at home?’ And some of those issues are mom and dad are fighting, there is abuse going on, someone shot someone, someone was killed.

Other teachers focused on the effects on their own teaching:

I don’t really get to teach as much as I want to teach because I’m dealing with social problems, discipline problems, the welfare of the students, do they have clothes, do they have shoes, do they have socks? Just basic survival things that I deal with before they can even do academics.

But a majority of teachers raised serious questions about the extent to which students can learn, and teachers can teach, in the face of extreme poverty backgrounds.

Like the NRC panel, many respondents shared the belief that school resources, especially early intervention programs, could have a positive impact on school readiness. Yet the experience of teachers and administrators was that, far from having the resources to help meet what are perceived to be increasing needs, school resources are shrinking. Many described the imminent loss at their school of social workers, teacher aides, or special program assistants in the face of state budget shortfalls. The feelings of frustration expressed by classroom teachers at lacking the resources to meet the needs of their students were palpable:

It gets to the point where they [my students] are asking, they are saying ‘I can’t do this, I need more help than I am getting’ with all of these other students around, ‘I need you.’...I help them but when you have other students there is only so much you can do....

There are days that I walk away with like 200 pounds on my shoulders thinking ‘it keeps getting worse.’ The stories are more bizarre, more traumatic; how can we possibly meet all these needs?

I’m tired. It gets harder and harder and there is less and less help for us.

Does SES tell the whole story? There can be no doubt that poverty in general, and in particular the biological, social and environmental stressors associated with low SES, have a profound impact on school readiness. Though obviously providing less detail and less evidence in support of the connection than the NRC panel, our interviewees were in strong agreement with the notion that poverty plays a key role in creating the conditions that result in minority disproportionality. Indeed, many respondents, like this director of special education, felt the emphasis on racial disproportionality was misplaced, since the influence of poverty on readiness for school learning is so strong:

I think we have to look not only at the race issue but at the socioeconomic issue because there are more people of color in lower SES...I am not sure that what we say is disproportionality of race is not more disproportionality based on poverty.

The view was widely shared by teachers, principals, and school psychologists.

The impact of poverty on educational readiness has been widely documented. Yet there is a danger that researchers and practitioners will tend to emphasize the relative contribution of sociodemographics to poor school performance because that is where the majority of research has been done. It is not always the case that SES is the most important source of racial disparity in educational processes. African American disproportionality in school suspension, for example, remains significant even after statistically controlling for socioeconomic factors (Wu et al., 1982), and SES may in fact explain a relatively small proportion of the variance in explaining disciplinary disproportionality (Skiba et al., in press).

More investigation needs to be undertaken to clarify the relationships among race, SES, and special education placement, but current findings suggest that those relationships are highly complex, vary considerably by disability category, and are sometimes in a direction opposite to that expected. For some disability categories, such as mild mental retardation, poverty appears to make a significant positive contribution to the disproportionate placement of students in special education programs (Oswald, Coutinho, Best, & Nguyen, 2001). For *serious emotional disturbance* (SED) however, African Americans have often found to be overrepresented in low poverty districts (Oswald, Coutinho, Best, & Singh, 1999; Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002). Even within a single disability category, the relationships between poverty, race, and special education placement are highly complex. Although Oswald et al. (2001) reported a simple correlation between poverty and increased referral of minority students for mental retardation, the inclusion of additional variables in the model resulted in finding an increased probability of minority disproportionality in low poverty districts, leading them to conclude: “These findings suggest that in low poverty districts, the increased rate of identification among students of color may be attributable to systemic bias” (p. 361).

The NRC review elucidates the important contribution of economic disadvantage to racial disproportionality in remedial and gifted programs. Yet, despite assumptions to the contrary by both scientists and practitioners, the relationship between poverty and overplacement in remedial programs is by no means strictly linear. It would be a mistake therefore to assume the primacy of SES as an explanatory variable in racial disproportionality. Until more sophisticated analyses allow us to estimate the relative proportion of variance accounted for by sociodemographic vs. other variables, there is simply no basis for judging the relative importance of poverty in contributing to minority overrepresentation in special education.

2. General Education Context

Special education research of the last twenty five years has provided unequivocal evidence that referral to special education, especially in the more judgmental categories of disability, is not simply a matter of individual difference or deficit, but takes place within the context of the resources of general education (see e.g., Gerber & Semmel, 1984). Thus it is appropriate and noteworthy that the NRC panel considers the extent to which schooling independently contributes “to the incidence of special needs or giftedness among students in different racial/ethnic groups through the opportunities that it provides” (NRC, 2002, p. 1-13). The panel affirms that schooling independently contributes to disproportionality by providing unequal educational opportunity. The review finds evidence that poor and minority students are more likely to be taught by teachers with less experience and expertise, in schools that have difficulty recruiting and maintaining both teachers of color in particular and a sufficient teaching force in general. Students of color are also more likely to attend more poorly funded schools with larger student-teacher ratios. Further, they may face lowered expectations by race, or a cultural mismatch regarding expectations concerning ability (Heath, 1982) or behavior (Townsend, 2000). Finally, the panel concludes that impediments to parent participation linked to cultural differences may make students of color more vulnerable to referral and placement.

Inequity in educational opportunity has been identified as an important contributor to lower African American educational performance in a number of areas even beyond those considered by the panel. Facilities in urban, lower socioeconomic catchment areas that are disproportionately minority in makeup appear to suffer from a number of structural disadvantages, including older, inadequate buildings, and out-of-date and insufficient supplies, curriculum, and equipment (Kozol, 1991; Oakes, 1990). Curricula in working class schools emphasize rote

learning over application and problem solving (Anyon, 1981), while surveys of standard curricula for grades 1 to 8 have revealed that whites dominate the story line and history presented in most textbooks (Sleeter & Grant, 1991). African American students are disproportionately represented in lower academic tracks, which are often handicapped by lower quality curricula, equipment, and instruction (Hallinan, 1996; Oakes, 1990). Since racial disparities in school discipline were first documented by the Children's Defense Fund (1975), there has been consistent evidence of significant minority overrepresentation in office referrals (Lietz & Gregory, 1978; Skiba, Peterson, & Williams, 1997), suspension (e.g., Costenbader & Markson, 1998; McCarthy & Hoge, 1987; Nichols, Ludwin, & Iadicola, 1999; Thornton & Trent, 1988; Wu et al., 1982), expulsion (Skiba et al., in press) and corporal punishment (Gregory, 1996; Shaw & Braden, 1990).

Respondents in the IDP study noticed and remarked on differences in the way in which poor and minority students were treated by schools that might make a contribution to special education referral. Of these, problems related to classroom management were mentioned by school personnel most frequently:

African American children seem to be more outspoken. They seem to be louder. They seem to be active. They seem to be what we would call 'disrespectful', and for that reason sometimes teachers don't want to deal with them. (Classroom teacher)

Sometimes we tend to put 'middle class' values and expectations on another group and another culture. And when you look at a school setting...the majority of teachers are Caucasian, middle class...as I said, I find a lot of my African-American boys need movement. They've got to be able to get up and move. So I've talked with these teachers and you know, just because they like to do that, it isn't ADHD or any of those things, this is just a kid who's got to move. So you've got to provide them the opportunity to do that. (Principal)

Respondents also echoed the need identified by the NRC panel for smaller class sizes, with several suggesting that reduced student-teacher ratios could significantly improve the capability of teachers to attend to student needs.

In addition, however, a surprising number of our interviewees identified a national policy choice that they believe makes a strong contribution to minority overrepresentation in special education: high stakes testing and accountability:

Our expectations for youngsters have sky-rocketed, more and more aren't attaining the standards the feds and state think should occur. A lot of stressed teachers feel tremendous pressure to get kids to a certain level and if I don't then by gosh I better...find a reason why. (Special Education Director)

We've gotten a huge increase in the number of parents wanting their child tested. And part of that has to do with our district policy on retention and the fear of ISTEP and all that so, whenever a teacher starts talking to a parent about the child being in trouble or probably going to be retained, then the parent asks for testing. (School Psychologist)

In at least one school, the relationship between the Indiana state minimum competency test and referral to special education was quite explicit:

This year we were told that we had to refer anyone who didn't pass ISTEP. So I had to refer 13 kids to [the school's teacher assistance team] and I don't really need that. (Classroom Teacher)

Minimum competency testing represents a fundamentally different kind of contributing factor to minority disproportionality in special education. In the main, the variables identified as possible general education contributions to disproportionality by the NRC panel were related to resource deficits at the classroom, school, or district level. High stakes testing, however, has its origin in policy at the federal level. It would be an uncomfortable and ambiguous position for policy-makers if a key national policy choice, minimum competency testing, makes a significant contribution to another federal priority, minority overrepresentation in special education.

3. Biases in the Process of Referral, Assessment, and Placement

The process that begins when a teacher considers referring a student to special education, and continues until that student is deemed either eligible or ineligible for services, is highly complex. Bias might occur at any of a number of junctures in the referral to placement process, including but not limited to teacher bias in judgment of social or academic behavior (Prieto & Zucker, 1977), issues of inadequate or differential treatment in classroom behavior management (Townsend, 2000), or examiner unfamiliarity during the testing process (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1986). Although the panel finds the evidence of bias at various points in the referral to placement process to be mixed, it does conclude that the entire process has sufficient conceptual and procedural shortcomings as to be unable to ensure that the “right students” are being identified. Further, the panel contends that the entire process is weighted toward referral and placement only after a student has experienced failure, thus ensuring that children’s problems will be relatively intractable by the time they are finally placed in special education (Kauffman, 2000).

Our respondents touched on a variety of themes addressed in the report. The process-oriented nature of special education that has been a focus of recent national discourse (see President’s Commission on Excellence in Special Education, 2002) was echoed by teachers and psychologists alike:

You had better have every single paper done exactly right. You’d better have all your boxes checked, and everything had better be exactly right. So what we end up doing is spending a lot of time with the process and not enough time with the kids. So that’s the issue. (School Psychologist)

Sometimes they’re referred and it seems like nothing is done because the process is so slow....It’s a time consuming process. And if you’re the teacher in charge of that individual it’s a real long time. (Classroom Teacher)

Interestingly, in the latter case, the teacher confided that such delays may cause her to *under-refer* students for determination of special education referral.

The central importance of behavioral issues and behavior management was another strong theme that emerged from the IDP interviews. Practitioners seem to concur with the report that inability to manage classroom behavior is a direct cause of many special education referrals:

When the behavior is a detriment to everybody in the class, you know you can't do anything with helping the other children because you're so busy wondering when this one is going to explode and try to keep them from exploding, then to me that's the point that child should be referred and something else needs to happen. (Classroom Teacher)

I think behaviors are driving referrals. A very quiet child who cognitively has a depressed IQ is much less likely to be referred than a child with acting out behavior. (Special Education Director)

In fact, many of the teachers interviewed expressed strong frustration at the gap between student behavioral problems and the resources available for dealing with such problems:

If we had more resources for behavior and we could take care of those problems and address those issues in class with peer mediators with different available resources [to the point] that we could get that behavior controlled in the classroom they might not need a referral. (Classroom Teacher)

Behaviorally I don't feel that the needs of the children are met adequately at all. (Classroom Teacher)

The respondents also understood, from their own experience, the connection between academic failure and the increased likelihood of disruptive behavior (Hinshaw, 1992):

But you do see behavioral problems for that reason [due to academics]...That is displayed in all sorts of manners, anger toward another student, anger at me, not wanting to do the work, and then it is up to me to realize that one of these scenarios is going on. (Classroom Teacher)

The perspective of classroom teachers on behavior and behavior management doubtless differs somewhat from that of the panel: Teachers experiencing severe classroom disruption will probably be more likely to emphasize the extreme nature of student behaviors rather than focusing (as does the panel) on teacher deficits in behavior management. Yet clearly these responses support and underscore the need identified by the NRC panel for a major national

initiative to ensure that all teachers have the tools and resources they need to address the behavior of their students in an effective and culturally competent manner.

4. Is placement in special education a benefit or a risk? Does the outcome differ by race or ethnic group?

Finally, the panel considers whether special education placement constitutes a benefit or a risk. The question reflects Reschly's (1997) logic that there appears to be less concern over whether students of color are overrepresented in other preventive programs, like Head Start, than in remedial programs like special education. After a review of the literature, the panel concludes that there are simply insufficient data to answer the question adequately.

Although the question "Is special education effective?" has become politically popular (see e.g., Finn et al., 2001), the more accurate and useful question is probably "Under what conditions is special education effective?" There doubtless exists an almost endless range of effective and ineffective special education programs. For students of color, the most important question then is not whether special education as a whole is effective, but the latter half of the panel's question: whether students of color are differentially likely to receive high quality instruction and interventions once found eligible for special education service. There is a dearth of research exploring the quality of special education services received specifically by students of color. Given ubiquitous disparities in general education in teacher training (Solomon, Battitisch, & Hom, 1996), classroom instruction (Greenwood et al., 1994), and educational resources (Oakes et al., 1990), one would expect little grounds for optimism that minority students in urban settings receive high quality of services once placed in special education. The problem, however, may have less to do with the overall effectiveness of special education, and more to do with the general distribution of resources for education in this country.

Like the panel's recommendations, responses by interviewees in the IDP study underscore the importance of improving both the quality and the variety of services to address the needs of students who are struggling in the classroom. In particular, it became apparent that special education was viewed almost universally in these districts as the primary or perhaps even the sole resource available for students with particular academic or social needs. Administrators tended to view this as a negative, increasing the probability of inappropriate referrals:

[Teachers] know that something is not working for a child and they feel that they can't tap into some resources. One stable resource that they have to tap into is special education. It has funding to support it, it's a process that is in place. So it is easy to tap into that subsystem. (Special Education Director)

Teachers, in contrast, viewed the availability of special education in a highly positive light, almost a lifeline in the face of a general scarcity of resources:

I am pretty open to referring any child that is not finding success. My goal is for every child to be successful. (Classroom Teacher)

If there's a chance they might qualify, it's always to their benefit to have them checked. (Classroom Teacher)

We are thinking of sending them on to middle school and they can't read yet. It is scary—let's get these kids tested, let's see what we can do. If we can give them a label, at least we can get them help as we let go. (Classroom Teacher)

For these teachers, it does not seem to matter whether special education has been documented to be effective. What matters is that it is there. Until a range of other resources that can support students with academic or social needs becomes available, teachers cannot be blamed for continuing to use, and perhaps overuse, one of the only reliable resources at their disposal.

The Panel's Recommendations

Based on its review of the four questions, the panel makes an extensive set of recommendations in the areas of referral and eligibility determination in special education and gifted and talented education, teacher training, childhood risk factors, data collection, and

research and development. Given that a number of researchers have cited the promise of pre-referral processes and pre-referral teams for reducing disproportionality (e.g. Harry, 1994; Maheady, 1983; NABSE, 2002), the absence of recommendations for implementing and improving pre-referral processes is somewhat surprising. But in general, the panel cannot be faulted for its thoughtful, comprehensive, and in some cases sweeping recommendations. If only some of the recommendations concerning early intervention, improved data collection, and teacher and psychologist training in behavior management could be implemented in schools, the probability of appropriate special education referrals might well increase dramatically.

Context and the likelihood of successful intervention. The report recognizes that some of its more sweeping recommendations would require a significant fiscal commitment. Yet there is another and probably equally significant threat to the likelihood of success of these recommendations, namely the political climate and social context within which the panel's recommendations would be implemented.

There are at least three different discourses in the academic literature surrounding racial and economic inequity, each providing a very different perspective on the meaning of racial disparities in educational outcomes. The most longstanding perspective grows out the *hereditarian* tradition in psychometric theory (Burt et al., 1934; Galton, 1869). Exemplified most recently by *The Bell Curve* (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994), this perspective tends to support fixed genetic over environmental explanations of the black-white test score gap, and typically attempts to make the case that social programs have not and probably cannot close the gap in measured performance on standardized tests (Jensen, 1969). A dramatically different theoretical perspective is provided by *critical race theory* (Delgado & Stefancic, 2002). Growing out of a discourse of legal scholars in the 1980's and 90's, critical race theory focuses on the concept of

race as a social construct, and on the ways in which that construct has been used to maintain the relative privilege and power of some groups with respect to other groups. A third academic discourse that has provided a productive framework for research is represented by *cultural reproduction theory* (Bowles & Gintis, 1977). Originally used to explain class differences, the model has been expanded (Mehan et al., 1996; Oakes, 1982) to provide a framework describing how everyday actions by institutions and individuals, conscious or not, support and reproduce both racial and socioeconomic inequity in school and society.

In general, the panel's report tends to abjure a philosophical orientation, preferring to allow the data to lead directly to its recommendations. Clearly, however, one's pre-existing theoretical perspective is key in determining how data and recommendations concerning racial disparities are received and interpreted. If for example, policymakers have been led by the hereditarian perspective of *The Bell Curve* to the belief that early intervention will not significantly impact outcomes on a group level, the panel's proposal for universal early screening and intervention may well face a difficult hearing. In the ideal paradigm of objective science, data are expected to be to some extent value free, leading ineluctably to certain inevitable conclusions. The unfortunate history of the "science" of race, however, suggests that more often than not purportedly objective data have been shaped for political, often racist, ends in the name of science (Gould, 1996; Tucker, 1994). The topic of race has never been value free in America, and there is no reason to believe that it has suddenly become so.

In addition to these scholarly discourses, the IDP interviews with teachers, administrators, and related services personnel have led us to believe that there may be a fourth paradigm that governs the thinking of some practitioners, a perspective that we have come to call "Maybe We Just Shouldn't Talk about It." In general, we found that, for many respondents,

especially white respondents, race proved a difficult topic about which to speak. Administrators who in general impressed our interviewers with their practical eloquence on a variety of topics became tongue-tied or taciturn when the conversation turned explicitly to race. Some teachers who demonstrated great precision in describing the disadvantages and educational needs of their students became unexpectedly vague when asked for detail about the ethnic breakdown of their class, as in the following exchange between a classroom teacher and one of our interviewers:

Tchr: I think we're over 52%, 53% percent, something like that. We're over 50%. So you would expect that percentage to be of....

Inter: To be of...52% minority?

T: Minority...yeah. I don't have those numbers.

I: Is that primarily one minority? ...like African-American?

T: I think that's all minorities.

I: So like do you have...

T: Indian, we have a lot of Hispanic....

We were surprised by one teacher's response to one of our early questions about demographics, and even more surprised that it repeated itself in an interview with another teacher:

When you say minorities, are you, what are you speaking of?...[INTERVIEWER: *Ethnic and racial minorities*]...Oh....OK...Alright...We have like...I guess we have about half and half. I don't know that I've ever really paid attention to it. (Classroom Teacher)

When you're speaking of diversity what are you referring to? (Classroom Teacher)

Race remains a difficult topic to discuss, and those difficulties may be compounded if one views oneself as a representative of an institution in which there is a possible racial disparity. In an ethnographic study of white attitudes towards racism, Trepagnier (2001) concluded that part of this difficulty may arise from a general tendency to view the concept of racism as categorical in nature. That is, the general understanding may be that either one is or one is not racist. If school practitioners implicitly accept that they and the institutions they belong to either are or are not racist, it may be important to one's self concept as "not racist" to ignore or even actively minimize evidence of racial disparity in the institutions they represent.

Change is difficult in any organization, even when it does not involve an emotionally-laden issue. If this analysis of the concept of racism is correct, however, it compounds the difficulty of change. School practitioners may well resist attempts to solve the problem of disproportionality if they believe they first have to admit they are currently engaging in racist practice. Further, it is highly unlikely that schools trapped in a paradigm of denial will see or accept the need for the sweeping changes in practice recommended by this report. Ultimately then, the ability to implement what are for the most part a strong set of recommendations may be dependent upon the context within which those recommendations are presented and understood. A clear challenge facing those seeking to bring an end to the remnants of educational inequity will be to find methods of information delivery that can enable evidence of racial disparity to become a motivator for commitment to program improvement, rather than a stimulus for defensiveness and denial.

Conclusions

The charge to the NRC panel was to explore minority placement in special education and gifted education, not equity in education in general. Yet certain phenomena cannot be understood apart from their context: The unequal placement of students of color in special education is by no means an isolated phenomena, but appears to be part of a complex of inequity in educational opportunity that pervades our public school system, and places certain students at greater risk of both academic and social failure.

As various sources of educational disadvantage for minority students in poor urban communities mount, they form a web of inequity that dooms a certain percentage of the population to academic failure. Even prior to school entry, the devastating consequences of poverty leave some children ill-prepared to meet the educational and behavioral demands of

school settings (Entwisle & Alexander, 1993). Many of these students attend neighborhood schools that, far from having the capacity to remediate such disadvantage, are hampered by personnel and material resource deficits that probably exacerbate pre-existing deficits.

Education for disadvantaged students in urban settings is more likely to occur in overcrowded and physically inadequate buildings not conducive to effective instruction (Kozol, 1991). A less well-trained and less committed cadre of teachers in poor urban schools decreases both the amount and quality of instruction (Greenwood et al., 1994; Solomon et al., 1996). As a result, a disproportionate number of students of color from poor communities will be at risk for placement in lower academic groups or tracks, which in turn provide a lower quality of instruction and lowered expectations (Oakes et al., 1990). The extent to which the disproportionate placement of minority students in special and gifted education is becoming a matter of national priority is encouraging. But it is also critical to understand that this issue is but one strand woven into the complex tapestry of educational inequity.

The well-documented relationship between academic failure and behavior problems (Hinshaw, 1992) makes it inevitable that some percentage of those students who fail academically will attempt to escape academic frustration through disruptive behavior. Inadequate training of classroom teachers in appropriate behavior management in urban settings makes it more likely that these minor disruptions will escalate into more serious conflict and confrontation (Brophy & McCaslin, 1992). A lack of cultural competence among teachers (Townsend, 2000) means that this cycle of misbehavior, misunderstanding, and escalation will occur more frequently for students of color. Finally, the more frequent use of suspension, expulsion, and zero tolerance in urban schools (Heaviside, Rowand, Williams, & Farris, 1998; Wu et al, 1982;) increases the likelihood that students of color referred out of the classroom will

be met, not with effective behavioral interventions designed to keep those students in school, but rather with punishment and exclusion that increase the risk of school dropout (Felice, 1981). Again, the overrepresentation of students of African American students in programs for students with emotional disturbance is a highly important topic for study. But unless all of these processes for responding to student misbehavior are wholly coincidental and independent, the overreferral of students of color to programs whose primary focus is on misbehavior must be understood in the context of an educational system and a society that seems to have a particular problem with the behavior of young males of color.

Until the data consistently and conclusively demonstrate that this nation has in fact become a color-blind society, syntheses of extant data such as the NRC report represent an important benchmark for tracking progress toward that ultimate goal. Ultimately, however, no matter how careful the science, the interpretation of scientific data and the use to which those data are put depend in large measure upon context. These voluminous data will be wasted to the extent that policymakers remain convinced that inequity in educational and life outcomes is largely a product of fixed genetic endowment, and that such deficits cannot be changed by “social engineering.” On the other hand, the data, analyses, and recommendations of the NRC report may be of tremendous value to those who are willing to make a serious commitment of effort and resources to remove all vestiges of racial inequity from American public education.

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