

ISSUES & RECOMMENDATIONS IN THE EDUCATION OF STUDENTS FROM MINORITY AND LOW SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS: WHEN IS SPECIAL EDUCATION PLACEMENT NECESSARY?

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There is a longstanding concern about the overrepresentation of students from low SES and ethnic minorities in special education classrooms. This article describes the challenges a teacher faces when a student's academic problems displayed in the classroom are misinterpreted as disabilities rather than cultural differences, and provides recommendations to meet the IDEA's nondiscriminatory evaluation guidelines.

As students go through years of schooling, some may require a referral for special education testing. But how does an educator know when to refer a student for special education testing? It is common for consistently low scoring students and students who have issues with classroom behavior over a period of time to be brought forth for testing. After testing is completed, a multidisciplinary team assembles to determine whether or not the student in question will need special education services

or placement. However, issues can occur when the process is occurring for students who come from an impoverished background. An aspect of great importance for educators to be aware of is the fact that although a student may fall behind in school or is dealing with a struggle in their learning, it does not mean that they necessarily have a disability or require special education placement. Extenuating circumstances, such as a troubled home life or limited access to academic resources may be the causes behind a student's academic

downfalls.

The Population of Students: What do they look like in a general education environment?

Minority and low socioeconomic students tend to be the low-performing students in the general education classroom (O'Connor & DeLuca Fernandez, 2006). There is a major achievement gap between such students and their middle-class and Caucasian counterparts. Several researchers have found throughout the years that race and ethnicity are common predictors of disproportional special education placement (Hibel, Farkas, & Morgan, 2010). Many of the minority and lower-income students in schools who go through special education testing are usually subject to being placed into judgmental categories of special education. Such categories are usually based off no known organic cause for the diagnosis and are instead being decided purely on someone's "professional" judgment. There is little concrete evidence to back the diagnosis of the student's disability. Also, a large impact of placement stems from poverty in the surrounding community and how students perform academically. It is common for those who are impoverished to live in a higher-risk environment that is not conducive to learning, (O'Connor & DeLuca Fernandez, 2006). High-risk environments, such as poverty, food scarcity, and issues in the family unit cause stress in students' lives that can affect their academic success. Stress has the potential to be a major distraction in a child's education and how they interact with their peers.

Parents and guardians of low socioeconomic status students commonly come from a similar background (Blair & Scott, 2002). When this is the case, the parents are more likely to also have

been students who struggled in school and therefore do not know how to help their struggling children. Also, minority and low socioeconomic students are more likely to come from a single-parent household in which the parent is likely to be frequently working and unable to be around to aid the student in their academic work, (O'Connor & DeLuca Fernandez, 2006). Lack of maternal education, in particular, can have a profound effect on a student's risk of special education placement by age 12 to 14, (Blair & Scott, 2002). This could be due to single-parent households being dominantly only mothers. The education of parents or guardians has a great influence on the education of the child.

Overrepresentation: History and its Current Status

In 1968, a researcher named Dunn found that 60 to 80 percent of students who identified as disabled came from a low socioeconomic or ethnic minority household, showing the disproportional representation of minority and low SES students in special education (Hibel, Farkas, & Morgan, 2010). Research shows that a low SES background can serve as a marker for students with an increased risk for a learning disability, (Blair & Scott, 2002).

Minority students who are most affected by misdiagnoses into special education placement are of African-American or Hispanic descent. In 1999, it was reported that African-American students were 2.4 times more likely to be diagnosed as mentally disabled (Hibel, Farkas, & Morgan, 2010). Commonly, there is a language barrier with some of these students that can make their educational goals difficult to obtain. In some cases, there is a great bias in special education testing against minority students. When a disability is

diagnosed with bias, it can be referred to as a “soft” disability because there is a greater consideration of social norms as the child is being diagnosed (Hibel, Farkas, & Morgan, 2010).

What are an educator’s challenges?

First, educators must understand that professionals are designated to perform assessments during the process of diagnosing a student’s possible disability. When such professionals are making decisions of how to help a student, there may be an element of bias and unfair judgment. When making judgments about the students, they are split into different categories, which can be described as judgmental and nonjudgmental. Consequently, there is an overrepresentation of minority students in special education based off of several factors. The bias of the professional diagnosing the student can influence the decision of placement because the educator brings personal feelings into the decision-making process, thus sometimes making an incorrect diagnosis. Minority students are more likely to be living in poverty and are therefore more likely to be exposed to health, environmental, nutritional, social, and economic factors that other groups of students are less likely to be exposed to (O’Connor & DeLuca Fernandez, 2006). Exposure to such detrimental factors can cause academic and behavioral issues for students who would normally be able to function well in the general classroom. The size of the school district and how it relates to the number of minority students enrolled in it may also influence the number of minority students placed into special education. According to Hibel, Farkas, & Morgan (2010), when a smaller school district has fewer minority students, those students may be more likely to be placed into special education due to the lack of exposure to different cultures.

It is important for the educators to be aware of such factors and to not allow them to sway them in their decisions. The student’s peers set the “norm” of standards that every child is compared to if they are being tested for a disability. Students become more likely to be placed in special education when their scores are below a certain mark when they attend a high-achieving school (Hibel, Farkas, & Morgan, 2010). However, if a school has limited resources to aid a student who is falling behind, they may have a higher likelihood to be placed in special education. Whether the students are placed in remediation, a lower-achieving group for instructional time, or a self-contained classroom, it may be because the school’s limited resources allow for the school may see fit in order to help the student.

Recommendations and Considerations

Special education placement should be one of the last resorts for students who may benefit more from receiving some remedial services or more academic attention. When a student is struggling, teachers should look at the outside factors that may be affecting them, such as family issues, socio-economic status, and living conditions. Next, the teacher can begin to run informal assessments to begin pinpointing where the student has gaps in their learning and what strategies may work best to help them. In order to do this successfully, general educators should collaborate with special educators in the school to insure assessments and strategies are performed in an efficient and informed manner.

An important issue to combat first would be that of unfair and biased testing questions. This is the starting point of the issue for students who may not have a disability, yet still end up in

special education placement. Depending on the child’s background and personal history, some questions may draw upon schema that they do not have. Screening tools must also be culturally sensitive in order to be fair. Pavri and Fowler (2000) suggests that the proctors of the test should work to become aware of the families values, rules, and behaviors so that she may be responsive to their cultural background. Those who proctor the test should be of an unbiased party that does not make decisions based off non-academic factors. This helps to ensure the fairest testing experience possible for the student. School districts should also be held responsible for giving students services and needed English language instruction in order for them to succeed when they are struggling, but do not have a diagnosed disability. Programs to aid students in need of extra help can help to save many of them from being put into unnecessary special education placement.

Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills, or DIBELS, can help guide educators when setting up curriculum or personal education plans for students. Using the tool indicates where the educator should focus the planning process in order to increase the benefits of student outcome. DIBELS can also be used as a progress-monitoring tool to ensure that students are on the right track since it can identify where they may need more assistance and support in their learning. A study from 2008 when researchers used DIBELS with first graders of a low SES background, found that by utilizing formative assessment tools and closely monitoring the student’s progress, teachers were better able to form lesson plans to fulfill the student’s educational needs. Additionally, students in turn showed steady performance results. While the students did not have an extreme growth rate in

their learning, they were more successful than they would have been without the use of DIBELS. The incorporation of close progress monitoring and teacher awareness of what types of instruction were needed helped both students and teachers become more successful (Hagans, 2008). Using a program, such as DIBELS, helps the schools intervene early on in the child’s academic career and before the learning issues have gotten to an extreme point.

Legal Aspects

While there are not specific laws for the issues of special education of minority and low SES students, they are still entitled to the same rights as any other students. A least restrictive environment, or LRE, and the right to a free, appropriate, and public education, FAPE, are both important aspects of a student’s academic rights, according to the law. Both of these are provisions of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA. According to Hallahan and Kauffman (2012), FAPE means that there should be no cost to the family of the student in question and the student is to be provided the most appropriate form of education in order to meet individual needs. LRE refers to a student’s right to be in the best fitting environment for the individual’s educational needs (Hallahan & Kauffman, 2012).

A court case, referred to by Hulett as the “Rowley Decision,” was one that helped to provide ground rules for the expectations of FAPE. Board of Education of Hendrick Hudson Central School District v. Rowley (1982) established that schools do not need to go above the “basic floor of opportunity” for students with special needs. In other words, schools only are required to provide the necessary instruction for students to succeed and nothing more. This is an

aspect of the IDEA that helps protect the schools from overspending on children who have parents or guardians fighting to receive extra instruction for them to reach optimal level of learning (Hullett, 2009). While this may be protective for the schools and what they are able to spend on students, it can be harmful for students who do not have a disability, but may need some extra services to aid them in their learning. Since there is no funding for these extra services, this becomes an issue, and it could influence some professionals' decisions about whether or not certain students should be placed into special education. If the student in need of services is placed into special education, they will then be able to receive them because they have an educational plan for special education, their rights fall under FAPE in the IDEA legislation. This is a major influence in some students' placement since they are then able to receive services.

The LRE legislation was created in order to protect students in special education placement. This means it should also protect minority and low SES students that have been wrongly placed into special education. A student's learning environment is critical to their academic success, thus the emphasis on finding the student's "least restrictive" environment that is conducive to learning. When a student is incorrectly placed, it can limit their abilities to learn and be successful. For example, if a student of normal intelligence were to be placed in a resource room that was teaching students material at a slower rate, this could be stifling to their potential if this is not the type of instruction they need. The LRE aspects of the IDEA are critical to student success in the classroom and help to give every child the chance for a fitting place of learning.

Conclusion

The issues of unfair special education placement are becoming an apparent social issue not only in the eyes of the low SES population, but also to the researchers and educators who are noticing disparity. Do students from low SES backgrounds really have disabilities, or are they cultural differences? Are the students being given options for being referred to special education services? Are these students receiving aids, resources, and services when they struggle that do not include putting the student into special education placement. Cultural awareness and sensitivity are also necessary efforts that need to be made in special education testing in order to test each student in a fair, unbiased manner. With the use of progress-monitoring tools, preschool education, access to academic resources, and cultural sensitivity, many students will avoid being incorrectly diagnosed with a disability and will instead receive services that they truly need.

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