

Special Education and the Mis-education of African American Children:
A Call to Action

A Position Paper of The Association of Black Psychologist

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Executive Summary

This paper, commissioned by The Association of Black Psychologists, reviewed the literature on the disproportionate placement of African American children in special education. It traced the long standing nature of the problem, and reviewed a number of causes of the disproportionality. These causes focused on teacher training, teacher attitudes and behaviors, the cultural mismatch between African American children and their schools (and teachers), school psychologists and assessment, student and family factors, and historical and ecological factors. A review of the literature on effective schools, including effective teaching and effective school leadership, suggested strategies for remediating the problem of disproportionality. Solutions were reviewed, including teacher training, teacher diversity, attitudes and behaviors; and changes in the school psychology profession. Solutions also included changes in student attitudes and behaviors, parental attitudes and involvement, and most critically the remediation of structured inequalities that result from institutional racism. The paper concluded with a call for the creation of an African Centered Education Reform Think Tank, changes in legislation, and for “go for broke” advocacy on behalf of minority children in the U.S. and around the world.

Special Education and the Mis-education of African American Children: A Call to Action

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Overrepresentation occurs when the percentage of students with specific characteristics (e.g., race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, language background, gender, etc.) is higher than their proportion in the general population. For more than four decades, the overrepresentation of African American students in special education classes has been evident (Blanchett; 2009; Gardner & Miranda, 2001).

More than a decade ago, the United States Department of Education identified disproportionate minority representation in special education as a critical problem, chiefly affecting African American boys. The *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) of 1997 documented alarming statistics: although African Americans represented only 16% of elementary and secondary students in the U.S., they constituted 21% of total enrollments in special education, and poor African-American children were 2.3 times more likely to be identified by their teacher as having mental retardation than their White counterparts. The 1997 IDEA also recognized that some minorities (mostly African American boys) were misdiagnosed and misplaced into special education programs. The act noted that greater efforts were needed to prevent the intensification of problems related to the mislabeling of minority children with disabilities.

Despite specific IDEA regulations for federal, state and local educational agencies, the overrepresentation of African American children in special education continues to be a critical problem. The *29th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2007* revealed the following trends (based on data collected in 2005): Black students 6 through 21 years of age were about 1.5 times more likely to receive special education services under IDEA than same-age students in all other racial/ethnic groups combined. The national data were even more disconcerting when specific special education categories were closely examined. Black students between the ages of 6 and 21 were 2.86 times more likely to receive special education services under IDEA for mental retardation, and 2.28 times more likely to receive services for emotional disturbance than same-age students of all other racial/ethnic groups *combined*.

This paper reviews the literature on African American students' placement in special education. After this introduction and overview, the paper provides a statement of the problem (history and consequences of special education), the causes of the disproportionate representation (including the roles of teachers, special education professionals, students, parents and societal factors), and proposes solutions to disproportionality.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Inequality of Opportunity

African Americans have been subjected to inequality in educational opportunity for more than 100 years. Despite the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision, that outlawed segregation in public schools, African American children have remained in segregated and unequal educational environments (Blanchett, Mumford & Beachum, 2005; Coutinho & Oswald, 2000; Green, McIntosh, Cook-Morales & Robinson-Zanartu, 2005).

A key stratagem in maintaining school segregation has been the disproportionate assignment of African American children to special education classrooms (Blanchett, 2009). This persistent problem has been the subject of many reviews (e.g., Gardner & Miranda, 2001; Powers, Hagans-Murillo & Restori, 2004; Waitoller, Artiles & Cheney, 2010; Ward, 2010). The disproportionate placement of children in special education classrooms has been persistent for African Americans (e.g., Gardner & Miranda, 2001), Latinos or Hispanics (e.g., Rostenberg, 2011; Rueda, Klingner, Sager & Velasco, 2008), those learning English as a second language (e.g., Artiles & Klingner, 2006; Baugh, 1995; Shelton, 2008; Sullivan, 2010), and Native Americans (e.g., Ward, 2010). Yet the disproportionality of African Americans in special education has been nearly two and a half times that of non-African Americans (Oswald, Coutinho, Best & Singh, 1999).

The problem of disproportionality has been especially problematic for African American males (e.g., Irving & Hudley, 2005, 2008; Sample, 2010; Wilson & Banks, 1994), those who speak an African American dialect (Baugh, 1995; Champion & Bloome, 1995a, 1995b; Fairchild & Edwards-Evans, 1990; McCray & Garcia, 2002; Norton, 2009; Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Gallini, Simmons & Feggins-Azziz, 2006), African American deaf (Moores, 2010; Myers, Clark, Musyoka, Anderson, Gilbert, Agyen & Hauser, 2011) or physically challenged students (Parette, Huer & Wyatt, 2002), and foster care students (e.g., Theiss, 2011). At the same time, African American (and Latino and Native American) students have been under-represented in special education classes designed for the academically gifted (Beljan, 2011; Ford, 2008; Ford & Harris, 1993; Ford & Webb, 1994; Hébert, 2002; Kearney & LeBlanc, 1993; Robinson, 2003; Romanoff, Algozzine & Nielson, 2009). These patterns of ethnic or racial disproportionality were enhanced for those living in poverty (see, for example, Scarborough & McCrae, 2010; Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Simmons, Fegins-Azziz & Chung, 2005), or attending low SES schools (Oswald, Coutinho, Best & Nguyen, 2001).

The disproportionality problem also occurred in international contexts (see Artiles & Bal, 2008, for a review). In England, disproportionality was more tied to broad social inequalities, rather than minority status (Dyson & Gallannaugh, 2008; Dyson & Kozleski, 2008). Gabel, Curcic, Powell, Khader and Albee (2009) showed disproportionality to be related to migration and minority status in a comparison of trends in the U.S., Canada, Germany, and New Zealand. Similar patterns have been documented in Spain (Harry, Arnaiz, Klingner & Sturges, 2008).

Consequences

The consequences of special education disproportionality are profound. Despite possibly good intentions, children in special education are most often relegated to learning environments with less academic rigor, as the focus is often on the management of emotional and behavioral

issues, learning disabilities, and other “impairments” rather than on academic excellence, capacity development or preparing students to participate in the global marketplace. Special education classes tend to be in the most restrictive environments, which retard academic achievement, stigmatizes students, and limits access to services (Brown, 2010; Osher, Cartledge, Oswald, Sutherland, Artiles & Coutinho, 2004). Special education programs often lack a pedagogy that challenges and develops students’ analytical and critical thinking skills. These children are often held to lower standards due to low teacher expectations. In many ways, these children are conditioned to underachieve--to jump no higher than the glass ceilings of their classrooms. Their educational and social development is stifled as their access to general education curriculum is limited. Low teacher expectations yield low quality instruction. Low quality instruction yields low quality education. Low quality education is detrimental to children in an era in which human capital determines personal productivity and the forward movement of a people.

The long term placement of cultural and linguistic minorities in special education classrooms may cause even misdiagnosed students to take on the characteristics of the disability (Reschly, 1980). Since special education placements often come with lower teacher expectations, segregation from the general school population, and a negative impact on students’ self concepts (Dunn, 1968; Goffman, 1963; Harry & Anderson, 1995), these outcomes tend to reinforce the classification. Whether misdiagnosed or appropriately classified as a special education student, the long term, detrimental effects of labeling, stigmatization, lowered expectations, inadequate instruction, limited access to enrichment opportunities, and spatial segregation can be debilitating.

The lifelong implications of special education for culturally and linguistically diverse students include higher rates of dropout and arrests, lower status employment and wages, and lower rates of independent living (Affleck, Edgar, Levine, & Kortering, 1990; Losen & Wellner, 2001).

Restrictive school settings have been a “warehouse” principally for African American males, which led to continued warehousing in correctional facilities (Brown, 2010; Krezmien, Mulcahy & Leone, 2008; Morrison & Epps, 2002). Zabel and Nigro (1999), in a study of incarcerated juvenile offenders, reported that they tended to have had prior special education experiences.

In sum, the disproportionate placement of African American (and Latino and Native American) students in special education programs reverberates throughout the lifespan: higher incarceration rates, lower college attendance, blunted employment opportunities, lower socio-economic well-being, more dire health statistics and lower life expectancies (Frazier, 2009; Garibaldi, 1992). Given that culturally and linguistically diverse students, particularly Black children, are less likely to make academic progress and exit special education placements than their White counterparts (Blanchett, 2006), they are more likely to suffer from these long term consequences and become locked into a disempowering life context. With this understanding, the magnitude of the crisis becomes clear. The overrepresentation of African Americans in special education is not merely an educational dilemma. It is a civil rights violation and a major culprit in the “school to prison pipeline.”

Echoes of Jim Crow

Special education has been a holding place for Black youth, similar to how prisons have become the holding place for Black men. As Michelle Alexander (2010) has argued—that the prison industrial complex is “the new Jim Crow”—the overrepresentation of African descended children in special education serves as another manifestation of institutional racism. That is social structures become vehicles for racist or discriminatory practices. Specifically, the American public school system has such a disproportionate number of African Americans in special education, that it has come to resemble the era of racial segregation where Blacks were relegated to “separate but (un)equal” schools. Although the *Brown vs. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision of 1954 declared racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional, more subtle and sophisticated forms of racial discrimination have persisted within this country’s educational system. African American students continue to be denied equal educational opportunities through their misplacement into special education. Such misplacements are a byproduct of culturally biased referral, testing, and placement processes, which perpetuate the ideology that Blacks are innately inferior and chip away at the self-concept of African American children. In essence, educational policies and practices that contribute to disproportionality in special education have created a new, 21st century manifestation of segregated schooling (Blanchett, et al., 2005).

CAUSES OF SPECIAL EDUCATION DISPROPORTIONALITY

Researchers have identified a wide array of causes of special education disproportionality, with race as a powerful predictor of the placement of children into special education (Patton, 1998). Causal explanations do not justify disproportionality, but they provide insights to possible solutions. These center on teachers, school psychologists, school culture, student attitudes and behaviors, parental and family factors, ideological and political-economic environments, and a combination of these.

Systemic Factors

Institutional Racism

When the issue of disproportionality is viewed with a critical eye, one that is attuned to the socio-political history of African-descended people in this country, the connection with institutional racism becomes readily apparent. America is profoundly organized by race, with the dominant group (Whites) utilizing various instruments of hegemony to maintain power and racial privilege. Education is one such instrument. Knowledge is power, as one’s potential or abilities in life are maximized with education. Withholding, limiting access to, or decreasing the quality of education has been one of America’s built-in racist tendencies against people of African descent and a primary tool of White supremacy.

Consider the historical background of education in this country: it includes legal proscriptions against African American literacy and longstanding separate and unequal educational opportunities (Coutinho & Oswald, 2000; Powers, et al., 2004). The attitudinal climate – in the popular culture and the scientific community – has been one that presumed intellectual inferiority of African people (and others of non-European descent). The negative attitudinal climate is supplemented by a disenfranchised political context and a history of

economic impoverishment and “hyperghettoization” (Khalifa, 2010), in which people of African descent have been concentrated in poor, disadvantaged, inner-city neighborhoods. This is often done by design through structured inequalities and discriminatory practices intended to preserve White suburbs, such as redlining and the construction of highways to divide and isolate Black neighborhoods (e.g., Birmingham, Alabama’s 1926 racial zoning law). These neighborhoods are often characterized by an underserved student population with scarce educational resources (e.g., textbooks, computers, fully credentialed teachers, advanced courses, etc.) and dilapidated facilities.

Several authors have spotlighted the structured inequalities inherent to America’s education system and recommended systemic change. Coutinho and Oswald (2000) underscored the importance of the historical context at local and national levels, and called for effective advocacy to correct these socio-political contexts. Powers, et al. (2004) traced the history of disproportionate special education placement in California, particularly after the historic *Larry P.* case that outlawed the use of IQ tests for African American children in special education placement. More than twenty years after the use of such tests was outlawed, disproportionality continued due to the violation of the spirit of the *Larry P.* ruling in numerous policies and practices of the California Board of Education (Powers, et al., 2004). Similarly, Daniels (1998) showed how the disproportionality of African Americans in special education included both gifted and remedial programs.

Robinson (2003) concluded that innocent children were being punished for the “sins of a society” that has been unable—or unwilling—to conquer the problems of structured inequalities. The pernicious educational effects of these structured equalities have been shown for other minority groups (e.g., Ward, 2010) and in international settings (e.g., Dyson & Gallannaugh, 2008 reviewed comparable situations in the United Kingdom).

Contemporary institutional racism in schooling is subtle, as opposed to the blatant racism during the “separate but equal” era of segregation. White privilege and racism contribute to and maintain disproportionality in special education through its impact on educational resource allocation (i.e., insufficient funding for schools attended primarily by African American students), culturally inappropriate and unresponsive curricula and pedagogy, and inadequate teacher preparation (Blanchett, 2006). Additionally, there is an undercurrent of disregard for landmark legal cases that uncovered and documented systemic bias and discrimination in the special education system. Institutional racism in education is alive and well in the 21st century and is the proximate cause of educational inequality (Fuller, 1969). Whether overt or subtle, intentional or unintentional, school systems are tools for maintaining the status quo, which systematically relegates people of African descent to a subordinate group status.

Amos Wilson has done much to confront and deconstruct the role that White supremacy and racism play in the disproportionate placement of Black children in special education. In examining the sociopolitical context of education, Wilson (1992) asserted that Africans in America have been subjected to special education since enslavement. He posited that Africans were “specially educated” for the same reasons then as they are now: the education of Africans in America has always revolved around the education for servitude. That is, the main purpose of educating Black children was preparing them to serve White people and their primary interest: maintaining White power as the central power of the world. Wilson identified this as one of

several “European constants” that have characterized the relationship between Whites and African-descended people throughout history.

Although the face of education of African peoples has changed, the power relations and European intentions that shape it remain constant. Wilson (1993) illuminated this in a seminal lecture on special education. He explained that education (through the seasoning process) that focused on building docile, loyal, and diligent slaves and other patterns of behavior considered essential for the survival of the slavery economy has changed; so too has “separate but equal” schools that perpetuated notions of Black inferiority and low self-esteem among Black children. However, education ultimately remains a means of preparing Africans in America to maximize profits for Whites and establishing patterns of behavior considered essential for Whites’ survival and dominance. Today, it manifests as the push for Black students to stay in school and attend college ultimately for the purpose of “getting a good job” in a White-dominated society and aiding the capitalist economy.

This education for servitude, as a “European constant,” can be observed throughout the African Diaspora. In discussing the educational system within continental Africa, Chinweizu (2010) asserted:

no conscious campaign has been made to change the colonial character of our education. . . .we still produce Black Africans who are fascinated with European ways, who are mindlessly obedient servants of Europe; who are filled with inferiority complexes; who are culturally de-Africanized, Europhile and Afrophobic, just like those produced by colonial schools” Furthermore, our neo-colonial education does not teach us how to face the perils of today; does not teach us to create our own future; does not prepare us to face the perils of the future (pp.4, 7).

Chinweizu, like Wilson, pointed out that a primary focus of colonial education was producing clerks and auxiliaries for the colonizers, rather than providing creative economic producers of necessary goods and services for the Africans themselves. Despite so-called liberation, many African countries are still plagued with the psychological residue of colonialism through educational systems entrenched with neo-colonial values and intentions.

An historical and diasporic analysis of the political and economical function of educating African peoples is an essential first step in understanding the problem of disproportionality in special education placement in the United States. If the problem is not situated in the right global-political context, attempts to solve it will be misguided. Consider this: Wilson’s tenant that the basic function of education for African descended people is to prepare them for servitude to Whites, has led to his critical analysis of how this “European constant” has managed to survive for so long in the United States. Wilson (1993) asserted that changes in the physical manifestations of education serve to deceive African peoples. These changes create the illusion of progress, restore hope in the idea that their lot in life as African Americans is changing, and move the definition of the problem away from the social and political system, to the individual. As a result, Wilson proclaimed that Africans in the U.S. no longer demand social/political change, demand a change in power relations, or engage in revolution. They are urged to take their child to the doctor to have medicine prescribed when problems with school success arise. Wilson (1993) referred to this as the “medicalization of behavior,” in which learning and conduct

problems are seen as the expression of medical problems, categorized with apparently morally-neutral labels, and used to maintain the status quo. This strategy has helped to maintain an education of servitude for African descended children in the U.S., and must be understood as a present-day permutation of age-old intentions aligned with White domination and institutional racism.

Finally, Wilson (1993) asserted that schools in the United States are generally not designed for African descended children or based on their psychology. Consequently, a discontinuity exists between the philosophy and methods of teaching and the true psychology and intentions of African peoples. Thus, the problem of disproportionality in special education is generated by the very nature, structure and intention of the schools themselves. We must remember Wilson's assertions when embarking on efforts to resolve this problem, and not continue to be deceived by surface-level solutions that do little to dismantle power relations and confront the longstanding intentions of those in power.

Ecological Context

In addition to the structured inequalities embedded within the educational system, the disproportionate placement of African American students into special education has occurred within a specific environmental context. Several authors have explored the links between neighborhood characteristics and disproportionality. Findings have shown that environmental, economic, and community factors differentially affect susceptibility to educational disability (Coutinho & Oswald, 1999; Coutinho & Oswald, 2000).

Poverty has been a persistent predictor of special education disproportionality (Scarborough & McCrae, 2010; Ward, 2010). Mothers living below the poverty line, typically with low educational attainments themselves, have children that repeat the vicious cycle of mis-education, poor life opportunities, and lifelong economic challenge (Morgan, Farkas, Hillemeier & Maczuga, 2009). Poverty magnified racial disparities in educational opportunity (Skiba, et al., 2005), signaled by low birth rate (Temple, Reynolds & Arteaga, 2010).

A concomitant of neighborhood poverty is neighborhood violence. Solberg, Carlstrom, Howard and Jones (2007) showed that Latino and African American youth were most exposed to community violence, and such exposure led to the greatest vulnerability for academic failure. Systemic factors -- whether toxic social conditions or structured inequalities embedded within the educational system itself--must be addressed in order to resolve the crisis of disproportionality in special education.

Teachers

Teachers have been implicated as part of the problem because they typically make the initial special education referrals. The literature on teacher effects has focused on inadequate training, cultural insensitivity, biased thinking, and processes endemic to the referral process.

Teacher Training

Moore's (2002) interview of teachers revealed their sense of inadequate training with respect to the behavioral styles and educational needs of African American students. Moore (2002) also reported that African American teachers held higher expectations for African American students than their White counterparts. Similarly, Serwatka, Deering and Grant (1995)

reported that disproportionality decreased with increases in the number of African American teachers. These studies suggested that, in addition to training, teacher-student ethnic congruence was important in special education referrals. Other interviews with educators have reported their difficulties in knowing how to interact with economically non-advantaged students, and how behavioral styles are misunderstood across cultures (Skiba, Simmons, Ritter, Kohler, Henderson & Wu, 2006). Skiba, et al. (2006) also reported a “surprising reticence” to get the teachers to talk about racial issues.

Cultural Insensitivity

Several scholars have pointed to the mis-match between the culture of the school and the home culture of many African Americans, particularly those living in more impoverished conditions (e.g., D. Alexander, 2010). Ford and Webb (1994) suggested that cultural misunderstandings – and inadequate teacher training – contributed to the under representation of African American students in gifted programs. They concluded that such programs need to be desegregated and they called for multidimensional assessment strategies (Ford & Webb, 1994).

Gilbert and Gay (1985) also noted that African American students were often misdiagnosed and misplaced because general education classrooms did not meet the needs of culturally different students. Wilson (1992) showed that much of what is perceived as a learning “disability” in Black students is a reflection of the conflict between the African oral tradition and European literary conventions and standards. Other researchers (Taylor, Gunter & Slate, 2001) have suggested that the cultural match (or mis-match) between teachers and students also interacted with teachers’ gender, with African American female teachers most sensitive to the needs of African American students (and White females least sensitive).

Although some education scholars argued that teachers misinterpreted the behavior of African American students and misunderstood cultural differences, teachers may have been faced with strong anecdotal evidence that many African American students had low academic skills, learning disabilities or behavioral disorders that truly warranted a different learning environment. However, this anecdotal evidence ignores how the lack of culturally responsive pedagogy (curricula and instruction) or inadequate resources may affect student performance.

Teacher Bias (Deficit Thinking)

Education scholars have identified bias in teacher perceptions as a contributing factor to special education disproportionality. Hilliard (1980) suggested that educators perceived cultural “differences” as indicative of “deficiencies.” This bias resulted in the misdiagnosis of African American children as mentally retarded or emotionally disturbed—two classifications that are more based on subjective criteria (i.e., interpretations of normal/adaptive behavior).

Armstrong (1995) provided a list of special education industry terms that are highly subjective and often the basis for teacher referrals. He compared these negative terms with a positive reframe (e.g., hyperactive vs. energetic; impulsive vs. spontaneous, distractible vs. creative, inattentive vs. global thinker with a wide focus, aggressive vs. assertive) to help shed light on the problem of teacher bias and the myth of the ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder) child. Because ADD/ADHD represents a large percentage of the diagnoses of all children placed in special education, teacher bias or deficit thinking along these behavioral dimensions is a major factor driving disproportionality

Many teachers made special education referral decisions chiefly on the extent to which they considered a student as unteachable or threatening (Hale-Benson, 1982; Harry & Anderson, 1995; Kunjufu, 1985). Such referrals were based on subjective criteria that were influenced by cultural beliefs, norms, and biases. According to Artiles and Trent (2000), group membership was a key factor in children's placement in special education, in that racial, class, economic, linguistic, and family of origin issues impacted how teachers and other decision makers formed opinions about the potential of children and their referral to special education.

D. Alexander (2010) described how the typical public school classroom embodied White cultural values, and how teachers abdicated their responsibility by assigning culturally different students to special education. Harry and Anderson (1995) emphasized that teachers should not view "differences" as "deficits," and that teachers should do more to recognize the talents possessed by African American students. Others have noted an atmosphere of negativity among school personnel, particularly directed at lower income African American students and families (Harry, Klingner & Hart, 2005). Some of this negativity is tied to prejudicial biases against students who speak an African American dialect, sometimes referred to as "Ebonics" (Fairchild & Edwards-Evans, 1990; Seymour, Abdulkarim & Johnson, 1999). African American students—especially males—have been negatively stereotyped for a variety of behavioral styles, such as manner of dress or walking (Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson & Bridgest, 2003).

Teachers' prejudicial attitudes may then be translated into a decision to refer to special education programming. These biases were more pronounced for male students (Andrews, Wisniewsky & Mulick, 1997), and less pronounced among African American teachers (Serwatka, et al., 1995). In a study involving 364 elementary and middle schools, Skiba, Horner, Chung, Rausch, May and Tobin (2011) reported that African Americans and Latinos were two to four times more likely to be referred for problem behaviors than Whites (who exhibited the same behaviors), and these referrals more often led to suspension and expulsion.

School Psychologists

School psychologists are the educational professionals who assess and prescribe special education placements. Like teachers, they suffer from inadequate training, cultural and class insensitivities (Kearns, Ford & Linney, 2005), and prejudicial biases. School psychologists have been especially challenged with inadequate tools (tests and measures) to assess culturally diverse students for special education.

Racially biased assessments, thus, are a primary factor in disproportionality. Intrinsic problems with standardized tests have been noted for some time. Grant (1992) documented the problems related to standardized testing—and the classification and placement of African Americans—dating back to the *Larry P v. Riles* case of 1979, in which IQ tests were found to discriminate against Black children. In this case, the legal precedent was established that tests administered to minority children must have been validated for use with that population. Since then, IQ tests have been found wanting in their utility for special education placements (Ford & Webb, 1994; Slate & Jones, 1995; Warner, Dede, Garvan & Conway, 2002). These problems have been sufficiently documented to outlaw the use of IQ tests, for the purpose of special education placement, in the State of California (for a review of the *Larry P. v. Wilson Riles* case, see Powers, et al., 2004). Behavior rating scales have also been shown to mislabel African American students due to their cultural inapplicability (Reid, Casat, Norton, Anastopolous &

Temple, 2001; Reid, Riccio, Kessler, DuPaul, Power, Anastopoulos, Rodgers-Adkinson & Noll, 2000).

Grant (1992) noted that the continued use of culturally biased assessments, despite the legal precedent, likely accounted for the disproportionality at the time of his study: African American children constituted 17% of all American students but 41% of all special education students (primarily found among those classified as “educable mentally retarded and behavior disorders”). In another study, when special education placement was based on measures not known to be discriminatory, the percentage of African American students was more proportional in the overall public school population (Serwatka, Dove, and Hodge, 1986).

Student and Family Factors

A fair amount of research has “blamed the victim” (Ryan, 1976) by suggesting factors within the students that contributed to their special education placements. Irving and Hudley (2008), for example, suggested the African American males’ cultural mistrust and “oppositional” attitudes served to undermine their educational attainment. They suggested that inculcating a stronger cultural identity within this cohort would help to reverse this trend. Similarly, Hamovitch (1999) found that at-risk youth rejected the ideology of status attainment promoted in an after-school program.

A risk factor for female students is early pregnancy. Prater (1992), in a case study of ten African American adolescent mothers, documented problems in completing school for this cohort. They recommended school-based clinics, teacher training, sex education, and the creation of support systems within the school and community.

As with students, many parents have been alienated from formal education (Brandon, Higgins, Pierce, Tandy & Sileo, 2010). Parents who were themselves victimized by mis-education are hard pressed to encourage their children to attend to schooling. Parents with college degrees, and higher incomes, were inoculated from this cycle of educational alienation (Zhang, 2005). But these victim-blame explanations fail to acknowledge the historical, cultural and systemic forces that contribute to victims’ complicity in their own victimization.

SOLUTIONS

Under federal law, all children are entitled to free and appropriate education. Although education may be free, it is not always appropriate. The overrepresentation of African American students in special education has been identified as a critical issue for education reform for more than 50 years. Disproportionality has been targeted by Congress through the creation of, and revisions to, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. The federal government has utilized data experts (e.g., the National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems) to track disproportionality. Numerous researchers have released studies on this issue with recommendations and have inspired robust debate about why disproportionality exists and what can be done to resolve the problem. However, African American children remain misdiagnosed, misplaced, and overrepresented in special education, causing them to be vulnerable to a host of negative outcomes. What is needed to correct this massive educational failure?

The causes of disproportionality suggest solutions. The multifaceted origins of special education disproportionality—within an historical context—mandate multifaceted and long-term solutions. These solutions must focus on teacher attitudes, behaviors and training; the role of

school psychologists (including attitudes, training and assessment techniques); diversifying the professional workforce; creating new research and policy agendas; and continuing to eliminate structured inequalities and institutional racism. At the same time, students, parents, families and the broader communities have roles to play in redressing the problem of special education disproportionality.

Teachers

If teachers are the first offenders in special education disproportionality (given that they make the bulk of the referrals), they are also the first line of defense against practices that contribute to the mis-education of African American children. To meet the needs of African American students, educators and the designers of the instructional curricula must develop a familiarity with and understanding of the culture of this group of students through systematic pre-service and in-service training (Hilliard, 1980).

Perhaps most important, the teacher workforce must be diversified. A number of researchers have documented how African American teachers are more sensitive to the backgrounds and needs of African American students, and are therefore less likely to refer these students to special education programming (Serwatka, et al., 1995; Talbert-Johnson, 2001; Taylor, et al., 2001). Yet, the numbers of African American teachers have declined in recent years (Welch, Patterson, Scott & Pollard, 2007). Therefore the chronic shortage of African American K-12 educators must be addressed (Wood, 2002).

A critical need exists for African American male teachers who offer cultural and gender consonance with African American male students (Brown, 2009; Brown & Butty, 1999; Frazier, 2009; Jackson, 2005; Mabokela & Madsen, 2007; Miller, 1993; Sullivan, 2010). Miller (1993) demonstrated the particular efficacy of African American male teachers for African American male students; and Mason (1997) showed how African American males are uniquely positioned to intervene in anger management and other behavioral issues involving African American male students.

Teachers must be trained to adjust their pedagogical strategies for culturally and ethnically different students (Fearn, 2002; Ford, 1992; Olmeda & Kauffman, 2003; Rodriguez, 2011). Multi-cultural curricula are needed to be responsive to the needs of diverse students (Sullivan, 2010). Culturally responsive pedagogy involves teaching that embraces diversity, develops respectful relationships, affirms cultural identities, and displays genuine concern (Sullivan, 2010).

Veney (2008) defined multicultural competence as involving nine interrelated factors: (1) respect for diversity, (2) an intense curriculum, (3) communicating high expectations, (4) motivating students, (5) modeling positive attitudes and behaviors toward learning, (6) using curricular materials that are culturally inclusive, (7) teaching students to be proactive in dealing with prejudice and discrimination, (8) acknowledging linguistic diversity, and (9) identifying and utilizing the cultural strengths that students bring to the school. Teachers must be sensitive and responsive to the needs of linguistic minorities – whether they are speakers of African American dialects or another language (Baugh, 1995; Champion & Bloome, 1995a, 1995b; Fairchild & Edwards-Evans, 1990; McCray & Garcia, 2002; Norton, 2009; Seymour, et al., 1999; Sullivan, 2010).

Teachers must recognize that positive teacher-student relationships are beneficial for student achievement and reducing special education referrals (Adams, 2007; Decker, Dona & Christenson, 2007; Long-Mitchell, 2011). The development of positive teacher-student relationships may differ for different ethno/cultural groups (Webb & Neuharth-Pritchess, 2011). Teachers must recognize their own positionality in terms of race, ethnicity and gender. Inasmuch as the majority of teachers of African American children are of European descent, these teachers must acknowledge how race affects their own identity in order to avoid the pitfalls of teaching from positions of power and privilege (Lockhart, 2002). Finally, teachers must look beyond the socio-economic circumstances of students and see that giftedness is present in all student populations (Beljan, 2011; Hébert, 2002).

Teachers must be trained to handle the different behavioral styles of students in order to manage their classrooms without simply referring non-cooperative students to special education programs (Ford, 2008; Kamps, Kravits, Stolze & Swaggart, 1999; Neal, et al., 2003). Kunjufu (2005) advocates for looping “master teachers” (where the same superior teachers accompanied students from grade to grade) and serial teaching (requiring several teachers per grade) to help neutralize risk factors in children prone to special education referrals. These methods are aligned with the goal of holding teachers and schools responsible for the problem of disproportionality, rather than placing the burden on the child to fix it.

Conahan, Burggraf, Nelson, Bailey, and Ford (2003) focused on redesigning teachers’ referral process to address disproportionality. The authors piloted an aggressive program aimed at reducing the overrepresentation of African Americans in one middle school in Charles County, Maryland. Their goal was to make sure that all students in the pilot middle school’s special education program were appropriately placed. The intervention involved changes on multiple levels. The authors required teachers to implement (and document) differentiated instruction techniques and behavior management prior to referring students for special education testing. Faculty and administrators were provided with special training in legal and inclusion issues, differentiation of instruction, and the pre-referral screening process. The authors assisted the school staff in monitoring referrals and intervening in cases of multiple failure or persistent problem behavior. When problems did arise, they were dealt with in the classroom if possible, so that only students who actually needed assistance beyond differentiation in teaching and classroom management were referred for further testing. The authors found that, as a result of this pre-referral intervention process, no students were tested or placed in special education at this school, and the disproportionate representation of African American students was reduced by 68%.

Similarly, Dawson’s doctoral dissertation (Dawson, 2008) illustrated the benefits of pre-referral teams in reducing the disproportionate placement of African American students in special education (also see Henderson, 2009, in this regard). In like manner, Fearn (2002) pointed to pre-referral processes in reducing the incidence of special education disproportionality. Gravois and Rosenfield (2006) also found that instructional consultation teams reduced special education disproportionality by half.

These studies provide evidence that the pre-referral screening process for special education needs to be redesigned and closely monitored in order to address disproportionality. Typically, children are referred for special education if they are failing or exhibiting behavior

problems in the classroom, and an evaluation is conducted to determine the need for special education services. If some deficit is found through the evaluation, the child is classified and special education services are identified. According to Conahan, et al. (2003), disproportionality is a direct result of people doing what they have been trained to do. Specifically, teachers are trained to see failure chiefly in terms of students' disability, rather than what might be lacking in the classroom environment (such as differentiated instruction and behavior management strategies—and culturally-relevant curriculum). Evaluators are trained to measure that disability. Special educators are trained to help students compensate for that disability. Nowhere in this process is a plan to hold schools accountable for resolving systemic issues before the child is placed in special education.

In light of this research, teachers should be required to develop and document their use of a pre-placement intervention before any child is placed in special education. This would include differentiated and culturally relevant instruction and behavior management strategies that are implemented for a period of time before a child is referred for testing, classified, and placed into special education. Educators should be assisted in meeting this requirement through training and consultation provided by the school, district, or state Board of Education. In essence, placement in special education can do little to help African American students if nothing is done to solve the original problem, which exists in general education.

This approach of reforming general education services as a means of reducing disproportionality is supported by the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). Specifically, NASP (2009b) has recognized the problem in focusing the blame for school failure on the child. NASP has called for assessment and intervention strategies to link with the specific needs of students beginning in general education. NASP recommended general education instructional options and support services that are based on the individual psychoeducational needs of each student, evidence-based, and a result of collaboration between general and special education personnel (NASP, 2009a).

Teacher Education Programs

Disproportionality must be addressed before teachers enter the classroom as an educator. The curriculum within teacher education programs should include a focus on institutional racism. Student teachers should be mandated to complete anti-racism training such as the Undoing Racism Workshop by the People's Institute, and increase their awareness of racially biased ways of perceiving students.

Teacher education programs need to address the racial imbalance between students and teachers, particularly in urban schools where the population is primarily comprised of students of color and many White, middle class, female teachers. Further, student teachers and educators in general, and in special education, must learn culturally responsive pedagogy and be equipped to create a learning environment that is conducive to achievement for African American students, particularly males. Student teachers must understand why many Black youth equate being smart with acting White; code-switching (in terms of communication styles); the impact of neighborhood disadvantage on learning and behavior; the significance of music, respect, and self-defense in many Black youth subcultures; how to teach so that African-descended children see themselves in the curriculum; and how to create lesson plans for different learning styles/

Moreover, given that one of the major contributing factors to disproportionality is poor classroom management, teacher education programs must do more to adequately prepare educators to understand and appropriately respond to the challenging behaviors of students, particularly those of African descended students. This is especially important given that the majority of the educators for Black male students (who are placed in special education at the highest rates) are White, middle-class, female teachers. Teacher education programs must critically examine the ways in which this cultural dissimilarity affects the interpretation, management, and emotional reactions (e.g., fear, hostility) to challenging behaviors that might be culturally-based. Teacher education programs should confront this dynamic through research and literature that explore relative differences in how White teachers respond to Black students.

For example, in *Kill Them Before They Grow*, Porter (1997) described five types of teachers that varied in the degree to which they believed African American children can learn, endorsed stereotypes of African men, felt comfortable being near African American students, and employed Eurocentric theory on African American students.

Delpit's (1995) *Other People's Children* and Kunjufu's (2002) *Black Students – Middle-Class Teachers* are other books that teacher education programs can use to raise critical consciousness about the role that race, class and other cultural variables play in classroom management and subsequent special education referrals.

Kunjufu's (2005) *Keeping Black Boys Out of Special Education* also provides an extensive description of the attributes of "master teachers," which teacher education programs should focus on developing. Kunjufu asserted that the problem of disproportionality can be resolved with the development of more master teachers, who have culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy, culturally appropriate behavioral expectations, an understanding of how to form a significant relationship with students, multicultural values, superior classroom management techniques, and an ability to inspire and motivate diverse students.

School Psychologists

As with teachers, a new paradigm of training school psychologists is needed to reverse the deficit view of African American students and families (Harry, 1992; Hilliard, 1992). School psychologists must develop cross cultural competencies to deal with the unique needs of ethno-cultural minorities (Kearns, et al., 2005).

Hilliard (1980) noted that professionals in education often view cultural differences among African American students as personal deficiencies. These misperceptions can lead to African Americans being identified as below normal on measures of adaptive behaviors, which impact determinations about learning disabilities. Therefore, in addition to widespread training in cultural responsiveness (e.g., understanding how race, ethnicity, language and experience influence learning and achievement; challenging assumptions of power and privilege that create inequitable educational opportunities), needed are more African American school psychologists are needed. Indeed, the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) concluded that there are disproportionately few culturally and linguistically diverse school psychologists to serve the increasingly diverse student population in both regular and special education (2009a). The organization called for a greater number of culturally and linguistically representative school psychologists to be recruited in schools, to serve as trainers in school psychology programs, and

to be enrolled in graduate programs. Specific strategies were also recommended for increasing minority recruitment (NASP, 2009a).

School psychologist training must also include ways to enhance parental involvement and more importantly, to challenge the failures of educational systems (Kearns, et al., 2005). Instead of focusing on student inadequacies, school psychologists must include an exploration of problems in the school or classroom environments (Hart, Cramer, Harry, Klingner & Sturges, 2010). It is critical to expand assessment beyond the testing of the individual student's knowledge, skills, and abilities. The person-environment fit must also be critically examined.

In that vein, NASP (2009b) has recommended that the psychoeducational needs of children be identified through a multidimensional, nonbiased assessment process. The organization proposed that this process evaluate the match between learners and their educational environment and determine whether scientifically validated curricula are in place. Rather than referring students to categorical special education groups, schools would implement a comprehensive, evidenced-based model of support for students with learning problems on a school-wide basis -- typically referred to as "Response to Intervention" (RTI; e.g., Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2005). Then, when necessary, schools would provide additional instructional support to students on a small group or individual basis, along with frequent formative assessments to monitor their progress and make decisions about the need for modified or additional instructional strategies. Such assessments would factor in awareness of students' race, cultural background, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and educational needs.

This process would help to hold schools accountable for meeting the needs of all students instead of directly placing children in restrictive, special education environments. However, the use of a multi-tiered model to determine students' need for special education services/supports—and of science-based instruction to meet the needs of all students—is aligned with existent federal legislation (The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004, and No Child Left Behind Act, 2001, respectively). Yet, countless school psychologists still implement the same traditional special education service delivery models as they did prior to this legislation. Many students are still subjected to categorical labeling based on predetermined criteria for special education, and are unable to receive individualized support until placed in restrictive, special education settings. Thus, solutions are only as good as the accountability system that accompanies them. Solutions for enhancing accountability are addressed in the forthcoming section on Legislation and Policy.

In addition to NASP, others have suggested that assessment be more based on the curriculum than arbitrary norms (Fore, Burke & Martin, 2006), and that assessments must be sensitive to the unique cultural positionality of the students (Kea, Campbell-Whately & Bratton, 2003; Skiba, Knesting & Bush, 2002). Still others have advocated for functional behavioral assessments and behavioral intervention plans – particularly for the reduction of special education disproportionality among African American males (Lo & Cartledge, 2006). Regardless of what assessment is used, school psychologists must transform their attention from identifying student deficits to exploring the systemic factors – in classrooms and schools – that

systematically disadvantage African American students (Skiba, et al., 2002). Further, this transformation must be reinforced by a swift, effective system of accountability.

Lastly, if and when tests are used, school psychologists must avoid inherent biases in assessment, particularly those involving the use of so-called IQ tests (Edwards, 2006; Fearn, 2002). Current assessments in special education need to be critically examined for cultural bias. Discriminatory assessments should be banned from use by the Board of Assessment and Training (BOTA) and prohibited by federal law. School psychologists should be trained on non-biased tests (e.g., the System of Multicultural Pluralistic Assessment / SOMPA). African American representation in special education has been found to be proportional when the placement was based on measures that were non-discriminatory (Serwatka, et al., 1986). Thus, eliminating test bias is a key strategy for reducing disproportionality.

Effective Schools

Researchers must advance knowledge of what makes schools effective, particularly for African American students. Pressley, Raphael, Gallaher & DiBella (2004), in a case study of Providence-St. Mel School, found that strong leadership, accountability, orderliness, and a focus on academics were conducive to African American student success. Others have identified similar features of schools that lead to academic success for African American students (Osher, et al., 2004).

Ball (2009) focused on effective schools, particularly for African American females, and underscored the development of a positive and caring environment, developing a trusting relationship with a teacher, being accepted, and getting personal attention. Ball (2009) pointed to the value of positive teacher expectations, an emphasis on academic rigor, and teacher genuineness. Denbo (2002) focused on school cultures that had effective leadership, support for professional development, teacher diversity, and the use of data to improve instruction.

Many studies of effective schools have pointed to strong leadership (e.g., Dean, 2011; Foster, 2005; Khalifa, 2010; Lomotey, 1990; Mack, 2011; Miles-Brown, 2011; Pressley, et al., 2004). Felder (2008) reported that effective leaders in predominantly minority elementary schools were visionary, emphasized classroom instruction, shared leadership, were effective managers, and involved family and community members in the educational enterprise. Foster (2005) reported that effective leadership in African American schools were aware of the cultural context of the school and reflected interpersonal and institutional caring. Lomotey (1990) suggested that the qualities of effective African American principals included commitment to the children's education, compassion and understanding of the children and their communities, and had confidence in the children's ability to learn .

Other researchers focused on schools that were especially formed for African American students. McDonald, Ross, Bol and McSparrin-Gallagher (2007), for example, described three inner-city charter schools that were effective due to a strong school climate, positive teacher and parent perceptions and involvement, and academically focused teaching. Moseley's (2007) case study found that an effective school was one with strong cultural norms, values, beliefs, assumptions, and parental involvement. Rivers and Rivers (2002) described a charter school in Lansing, Michigan, that was developed with a number of African-centered philosophical underpinnings. It was a school that worked well for African American children (Rivers &

Rivers, 2002). Willis (1996) found themes of a “family culture” in a predominantly African American school where all of the teachers were African American. The school was seen as a family, the students were viewed as children (in the spirit of the African proverb, *It takes a village to raise a child*), and the teachers treated each other as members of a large extended family (Willis, 1996). The school was efficacious because of the family culture, high teacher expectations, and teachers taking responsibility for the learning outcomes of the students.

The African centered education campaign has emerged as the leading thrust in the movement for education reform for students of African descent. African centered education is not designed to address the dilemma of disproportionality in special education specifically, but rather to address the chronic failure of the general education system to provide equal educational opportunities—and outcomes—for African Americans. Education must incorporate culturally-relevant curricula and pedagogy that builds the self-esteem, self-image, and racial identity of African descended children. Curricula must present historical truths about Africa and its peoples.

Wilson (1992) urged African people to construct and apply new African theories of education and pedagogy. He asserted that when schools are redesigned to meet the needs of African-descended children and to be based on the African psychology, they will reflect the great learning capacity of our children. Wilson suggested a design of schools that is aligned with African intentions, needs, and African psychology. African children have a different destiny: the major problem that African children must solve is the problem of oppression: to overthrow the system of White domination and to gain liberation. Therefore, the fight for equal schools should not be confused with the drive to adopt White standards and intentions of education. Rather, it is to have equal access to educational resources and equal power to determine the pedagogy, curriculum and standards of behavior for African descended children (Wilson, 1992).

This solution for addressing disproportionality cannot be applied to all students: African centered education is a viable option for students of African descent, who are most vulnerable to misdiagnosis and misplacement in special education.

Student Attitudes and Behaviors

African American students, and the African American community more generally, have been *victimized* by systematic denial of equal educational opportunities (Fairchild & Edwards-Evans, 1990; Osher, et al., 2004; Powers, et al., 2004). Yet African American students have a role in reversing this long-standing problem.

An unfortunate level of cultural mistrust has been pervasive in the African American community, and this has undermined African American academic achievement (Irving & Hudley, 2005). Irving and Hudley (2005) showed that, among African American males, higher levels of mistrust were related to lower academic expectations and achievement motivation. They reported that cultural mistrust was often accompanied by “oppositional cultural attitudes” that contributed to educational failures, low test scores, and high school drop-out (Irving & Hudley, 2008). They suggested that students need to develop a strong cultural identity that was consistent with academic achievement. Similarly, Grantham and Ford (2003) called for elevating the racial identity and academic self-esteem of African American students in order to enhance achievement and socio-emotional well-being.

An oppositional cultural attitude – antipathy toward schooling – may be implicated in some aspects of youth culture that embrace counter-culture styles of dress (such as sagging—the practice of wearing pants very low around the hips) or walking (Baxter & Marina, 2008; Hamovitch, 1999; Kaiser & McCullough, 2010). Neal, et al. (2003) showed that African American males’ style of walking could lead to teachers’ presumptions of lower achievement potential, higher aggression, and greater likelihood of needing special education. Adams and Collins (2010) suggested a program to challenge African American males’ expressions of antipathy to conformity in their styles of dress. Garibaldi (1992) suggested that negative peer pressure towards academic success must be reversed, in the same way that students are rewarded by their peers for athletic success.

Students may also be part of the solution of special education disproportionality by working in a more cooperative style with teachers and with each other. Cochran, Feng, Cartledge and Hamilton (1993) showed benefits of cross-age tutoring on low-achieving males. Here, 5th grade boys were effective in tutoring 2nd grade boys in reading assignments. This educational practice resulted in better social interactions and teacher ratings for both groups of boys. In this vein, Edwards, Kahn & Brenton (2001) described a summer program in mathematics to reverse the “national tragedy” of the underrepresentation of African Americans in mathematics, and to counter the problem of “dis-identification” with the educational system.

Parental and Community Participation

African American parents, like their children, have been alienated from public education, perhaps for good reasons. The entirety of American public education has been marked with systemic exclusion from quality instruction with presumptions of racial inferiority. The cultural mistrust among students was often a reflection of a similar mistrust on the part of parents. Such mistrust may, in fact, be well deserved (Ryan, 1976). Yet, African American parents must be engaged and involved in their children’s education if the problem of special education disproportionality is to be solved (Harrison, Arnold & Henderson, 1995).

Much of parents’ lack of participation has been tied to levels of respect – or disrespect – that they perceived emanating from school personnel (Zionts, Zionts, Harrison & Bellinger, 2003). School professionals – teachers, counselors and psychologists – must therefore eschew their negative stereotypes of African American families and consider their familial strengths as cultural capital that can assist in the education process. Harry (1992), in discussing this problem, noted that special education professionals often had deficit views of African American students and their families. Harry (1992) called for the restoration of a “balance of power” between African American parents and special education professionals.

Martin and Martin (2007) suggested that families and schools form a partnership to benefit children. Their description of the “Williamson Project” involved parents, community leaders and school personnel in a collaboration to improve achievement and reduce behavior problems. The aims were to change student attitudes and behaviors, and to restructure school environments, in order to produce more consonance between the cultural elements of the family and school.

Similarly, Kunjufu (2005) discussed the benefits of the “Wimberly Initiative,” developed by 100 Black men of America in 1990. This initiative was aimed at reducing the number of Black males in special education and has been implemented in several cities. It involved a

parent-directed program to assist families in better representing their sons in IEP meetings, individual mentoring of Black boys, professional development for staff (including diversity training), and an after school program to enhance students' academic, behavioral, and social skills. Kunjufu also advocated for rites of passage programs, particularly for Black boys, to help increase their awareness of the criteria for manhood and limit showdowns and power struggles with their female teachers.

Others have underscored the importance of parental participation in the schooling enterprise (Brown & Medway, 2007; Rao, 2000; Zhang, 2005). Barbee (2010) identified specific parental behaviors to promote their children's learning: open communication, support for the school culture, participating in decision making, emphasizing learning at home, and collaborating with community leaders. Joe and Davis (2009) emphasized the role of parents in the education of African American males. In addition to discussing subject matter, Joe and Davis (2009) suggested that parents read books with their children, and discuss their family and racial/ethnic heritage in a way that would help motivate their male children.

A novel program of community intervention utilized a church-based after-school program to benefit African American males (Gardner, Cartledge, Seidl, Woolsey, Schley & Utley, 2001). This peer-mediated program produced substantial improvements in reading and math achievement among at-risk male elementary school students. Other programs have emphasized early intervention – prior to the school years – to address the unique educational needs of African American children (Campbell & Ramey, 1995). Others have focused on adolescent girls and the delay of sexual initiation (Tortolero, Markham, Peskin, Shegog, Addy, Escobar-Chaves & Baumier, 2010).

Benefits have also been documented by the establishment of effective school-university partnerships, where research informed educational practices and those practices led to new research directions (Johnson & Timmons-Brown, 2009; Tucker & Herman, 2002).

Systemic Remediation

The mis-education of African American children occurs within a societal context that includes ideological beliefs, economic realities, and institutional processes. These must be addressed in a holistic plan to correct the problem of special education disproportionality.

The belief in White superiority/Black inferiority must be challenged and disproven. A mass media campaign, coupled with relevant training of education professionals (teachers, social workers, school psychologists, administrators, etc.), must be launched in order to counter the pernicious myths of African American intellectual inferiority. These changes in ideological climates must be accompanied with changes in institutional practices that perpetuate the cycles of mis-education of African American students and other students who fall into second class citizenship in public and private schools.

The economic well-being of communities of color must be improved (Robinson, 2003). Political and economic institutions must continue the process of dismantling the legacies of Jim Crow (segregation, discrimination, and “separate and unequal”). We must halt the punishment of innocent children who have been victimized by societies that have been unwilling, or unable, to conquer its problems of structured inequality (Robinson, 2003). Investments in community revitalization, the provision of health and social services, and the creation of jobs that pay livable

wages, must be embraced at the local, national, and international levels. Current investments in the prison-military-industrial complex must be redirected to peace, education, health and holistic human development.

Legislation and Policy

Under the 1997 IDEA, the federal government recognized the needs of an increasingly diverse society and providing equal educational opportunities for all students. Part of that recognition was a recommendation to diversify the ranks of special education professionals in order to provide knowledge, role models, and human resources to address the changing demography of public education. How are schools and districts being held accountable?

In the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA, Congress made monitoring disproportions in special education a priority. But what occurs if states continue to have disproportionate numbers of minorities in special education classes?

An African-Centered Think Tank

New, culture-specific standards and policies regarding the referral, testing, and placement of children of African descent should be developed based on an interdisciplinary, African-Centered Education Reform Think Tank. This think tank or consortium would serve as educational consultants to the U.S. Department of Education and can be comprised of experts and organizations committed to education reform for children of African descent, such as (but not limited to) The Association of Black Psychologists, National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems, National Black Education Agenda, the Multicultural Committee of the National Association of School Psychologists, and Children's Defense Fund, The National Association of Black School Educators as well as parents and parent advocates representing districts with the highest rates of disproportionality. This proposed solution is aligned with previous writers' notion that an organized implementation of efforts to address the overrepresentation of African American students in special education classrooms requires a grassroots organization to assume leadership responsibility (Serwatka, et al. 1986).

These standards and policies should be adopted by Congress, incorporated into legislation, and become federal law. To increase accountability, schools should receive sanctions and loss of funding when their referral, testing, and placement policies and procedures do not conform to these standards. Rather than being able to profit from special education students, funding practices should be reversed: schools should be ineligible for federal funding when there is evidence of disproportionality. Such schools should be provided with African centered consultants to assist in implementing aggressive interventions aimed at reducing disproportionality. The African Centered Education Reform Think Tank should provide oversight to the implementation of their multi-level interventions in failing schools.

If disproportionality is viewed as one of many manifestations of institutional racism, then policy makers may perpetuate (even unintentionally) the status quo, and they cannot be relied upon to monitor school districts. The education reform process should be re-designed so that grassroots organizations and African descended scholars and stakeholders comprise the leadership body that is able to directly inform policy and develop the vision for change.

Policy changes must increase accountability to current federal guidelines. Disproportions should be tracked, yearly, by external organizations funded by the federal government, such as

the National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems. School and state funding should be based on this data, with funding being provided when the numbers show little or no disproportionality. The U.S. Department of Education should mandate: (a) cultural competency training for all school personnel involved in the referral, assessment, and placement process of special education students; (b) the provision of educational advocates to all parents of children referred for special education; and (c) the provision of benchmarks for statewide reduction of disproportionate representation and a plan for monitoring and holding state departments of education accountable.

In addition, the National Association of School Psychologists' Legislative Priorities to the 112th Congress relating to disproportionate representation in education should be considered with regard to policy changes. These priorities, presented by NASP at the Association of Black Psychologists' Legislative Priorities Session in July of 2011, provided support for several acts focused on education reform. Specifically, NASP advocated for: (a) S. 919 Successful, Safe, and Healthy Students Act of 2011, which "directs the Secretary of Education to award grants to states to develop, improve and implement state reporting and information systems that measures condition for learning, based on surveys of school students and staff"; (b) H.R. 2437 Academic, Social, Emotional Learning Act, "to amend the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) to include teacher and principal training in practices that address the social and emotional development needs of students among the activities funded under the Teacher and Principal Training and Recruiting Fund program"; (c) S. 541 Achievement Through Prevention Act, "to amend ESEA to allow state educational agencies, local educational agencies, and schools to increase implementation of school wide positive behavioral interventions and supports and early intervening services in order to improve student academic achievement, reduce over identification of individuals with disabilities, reduce disciplinary problems in schools, and to improve coordination with similar activities and services provided under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act"; and (d) H.R. XXX Positive Behavior for Safe and Effective Schools (expected to be introduced July 2011), "to amend ESEA to allow state educational agencies, local educational agencies, and schools to increase implementation of school-wide positive behavior supports."

CONCLUSION – A CALL TO ADVOCACY

Special education placement can be beneficial to some students. However, students who are misdiagnosed and inappropriately placed often suffer more than they benefit. Instead of receiving the individualized, special education they need and deserve by law, they are often lost in the special education crowd. Much has been uncovered about the dehumanizing effect of a system that misdiagnoses large numbers of African American children and relegates them to restrictive, special education placements. Undoubtedly, the federal government and local school districts need to aggressively address disproportionality and bring forth parity of representation among racial groups. However, the cycle of disproportionality will likely continue in the face of federal regulations (e.g., IDEA) unless there is an acknowledgment of its connection to institutional racism.

Racism, by design, denies African descended peoples of economic, social and political equality in order to maintain White domination. The design is sophisticated and has many

permutations. One mechanism of perpetuating the arrangement of White domination is through controlling education policy and the degree of adherence and accountability to extant legislation.

We must learn from history: selective enforcement of laws is an essential ingredient of White domination. Enslaved Africans continued to be deported to this country decades after the importation of slaves into the United States was outlawed in 1807. The 13th Amendment was superseded by the Black Codes, ensuring that Blacks continued to be subjected to involuntary servitude in the service of Whites. Discussions about the overrepresentation of African American students in special education must grapple with this reality, and antidotes must be based on a strategic, holistic plan to dismantle institutional racism in all of its forms. This is considered the single most impactful approach to resolving disproportionality given that institutional racism is a powerful force that can and will counteract progress made on any other level. Efforts focused on altering the environment (e.g., designing supports for impoverished neighborhoods that have greater susceptibility to disproportionality) or altering the individual (e.g., teaching educational advocacy skills to parents) can be helpful, but will not resolve the dilemma.

Wilson (1992) warned about focusing on a particular problem without critically examining the political and economic contexts. True change requires a change in power relations to reverse the “European constants” that support White dominance (Wilson, 1992).

We recognize that federal regulations such as Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and No Child Left Behind Act are changes that were prearranged. It is the power to define what is normal (with respect to intelligence vs. disability, criminal/deviant vs. socially acceptable behavior) that creates the justifications for differential treatments of African peoples and maintain White dominance. As long as the behavior, learning style, and ability and achievement levels of African descended children are defined by White constructs of normality, they will continue to be placed into special education at disproportionate rates, which maintains extant power relations. In order to transform the education of African descended children and resolve the problem of disproportionality, we must take on the ultimate struggle of transforming the power relations and redefining what is normal.

According to Wilson (1992), “the major function of education is to help secure the survival of a people” (p.1). He charged us to focus our efforts on self-definition of intelligence and normal behavior and the creation of African-centered schools that are based on the African experience. Only then will African descended children be prepared to solve their own problems, with liberation as the ultimate objective. Further, given that the definition of special education classifications (such as “learning disability” and “emotionally disturbance”) is not a psychological process, but a psycho-economical and psycho-political process, and the problem of disproportionality is a political/social problem of conflict between groups, political and revolutionary leaders must be part of the solution.

The disproportionate assignment of African American students to special education has been a long standing problem. Its remediation necessitates multifaceted and long term strategies to bring it to an end. Educators, policy makers, social scientists and regular citizens must embrace a “go for broke” mentality (Blanchett, 2009) in order to become advocates for our children and our children’s children. Such advocacy must embrace all at-risk children – African American, Latinos, Native Americans, physically challenged, foster children, homeless children,

and poor children of all ethnicities – in the U.S. and internationally. Such advocacy must recognize the political and economic functions of education along with the underlying, unchanging intentions of those in power. Such advocacy must move from being child, parent, school, and district-focused, to sniffing out the hidden manifestations of neo-colonialism (as urged by Kwame Nkrumah in 1973) and dismantling power relations that maintain disproportionality in the face of federal law.

Finally, such advocacy must be done with revolutionary spirits. It is absurd to put the responsibility of liberation for African peoples in the hands of the oppressor, or to believe that the utterances or written laws of those in power will be to the benefit of those that are disempowered. Answers to the problem of disproportionate placement of African descended children in special education will not come from the U.S. Board of Education, federal government, or any other body of individuals that is entrenched in the intentions of an oppressive system that has worked for centuries to protect White interests. Answers will and must come from African descended people themselves, after engaging with the fundamental realities of their socio-political history, seeking knowledge of self as African beings, and embracing the idea that education is inextricably tied to the struggle for power, prosperity, and the collective survival of a people.

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