Disparate Access: 
The Disproportionality of African American Students With Disabilities Across Educational Environments

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ABSTRACT: This study investigated the extent to which the overrepresentation of African American students in more restrictive special education settings is attributable to their overrepresentation in disability categories more likely to be served in more restrictive educational environments. Within 5 disability categories (emotional disturbance, mild mental retardation, moderate mental retardation, learning disabilities, and speech and language), African American students were overrepresented in more restrictive educational environments and underrepresented in less restrictive environments relative to all other students with the same disability. Disproportionality was most evident in those disability categories served primarily in general education settings. Given the social consensus regarding inclusion, disproportionality in restrictiveness of educational environment may represent a more serious challenge than disproportionality in disability categories.

The overrepresentation of minority students in certain disability categories continues to be one of the most persistent and complex issues in the field of special education, and has received a great deal of attention over the past 20 years (Chinn & Hughes, 1987; Dunn, 1968; Finn, 1982; Harry & Anderson, 1994; Hosp & Reschly, 2002, 2003; Ladner & Hammons, 2001; Losen & Orfield, 2002;
Recent national data from the NRC indicate that when compared to European American students, African American students are overrepresented in the categories of mental retardation (MR), emotional disturbance (ED), and multiple disabilities; that American Indian/Alaskan Native students are overrepresented in the category of learning disabilities (LD); and that Asian/Pacific Islander and African American students have slightly higher rates of identification in autism spectrum disorders. Parrish reported that African American students are the most overrepresented group in special education programs in nearly every state, and that disproportionate representation is most pronounced in MR and ED: African American students are 2.88 times more likely than European American students to be labeled as MR and 1.92 times more likely to be identified as ED.

In contrast, far less attention has been paid to disparate representation in educational environments that are more or less restrictive; only a handful of studies have explored disproportionality across educational environments (Fierros & Conroy, 2002; Hosp & Reschly, 2002; Skiba, Wu, Kohler, Chung, & Simmons, 2001). The Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA 2004) mandates that students with disabilities be served in the least restrictive environment (LRE) that is appropriate for their needs; disproportionality in access to LRE may be more important conceptually than disparities in disability category. The purpose of this study was to explore the disproportionate placement of African American students in more or less restrictive educational environments, and in particular to test the hypothesis that such disparities are due to the influence of certain disability categories.

**SERVICE IN THE GENERAL EDUCATION ENVIRONMENT**

Over the past 20 years, the field of special education has seen a significant shift in the location of special education service. Seminal works in the 1980s by leaders in the field called for increased service of students in general education settings (Reynolds, Wang, & Walberg, 1987; Will, 1986); and the field has moved increasingly to meet that goal. Currently, IDEA 2004 requires that to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities . . . are educated with children who are not disabled; and special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability of a child is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily. (612(a)(5)(A))

Service of students with disabilities in general education settings has increased substantially in the last 15 years. In 1999–2000, 95.9% of students with disabilities were served in general school buildings; of those students, 47.3% were served outside of the general classroom for less than 21% of the school day (McLeskey, Henry, & Axelrod, 1999). The Office of Special Education Program's IDEA Report to Congress (OSEP, 2002) documents a fairly dramatic increase in special education service in general education classrooms: Between the 1990–1991 and 1999–2000 school years, the number of students served outside of the general classroom setting for less than 21% of the day increased 87.1%, while the number of students served in public separate facilities decreased 15.3%.

Both research outcomes and expert opinion appear to be mixed regarding the benefits of inclusion. Students with disabilities who are included in general education classrooms have been found to complete more assignments (National Center for Educational Restructuring & Inclusion, 1995); show significant gains in reading performance and general academic functioning (Carlson & Parshall, 1996; Marston, 1996; Shinn, Powell-Smith, Good, & Baker, 1997); and demonstrate improvements in social interaction, appropriate behavior, self-esteem, and language development (Lewis, 1994). Nondisabled students who have the opportunity to interact with disabled peers also improve their interpersonal, social, and behavioral skills (McGregor, 1993; Salend & Duhaney, 1999). Yet there is by no means complete agreement about the extent to which inclusion has fulfilled its promise in practice (Kavale & Forness, 2000; Salend &
Duhaney). Some have questioned whether general education personnel have the training, supports, and resources necessary to provide quality inclusive services to students with disabilities (Evans, Townsend, Duchnowski, & Hocutt, 1996; Smetler & Rasch, 1994). In addition, some studies examining the effectiveness of inclusion have failed to find significant positive gains, and have even shown negative outcomes for students with disabilities educated in general education settings (Vaughn, Elbaum, & Schumm, 1996; Zigmond et al., 1995).

Yet despite the lack of a complete consensus, it is clear that educating students with disabilities in less restrictive environments with their nondisabled peers has become a widely accepted social value. The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education, adopted by the 1994 World Conference on Special Needs Education (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, 1994), called for access to the general education curriculum to the maximum extent appropriate as the norm for all students regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, or emotional capabilities.

MINORITY DISPROPORTIONALITY IN EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENTS

Regardless of divergent opinion about the effects of inclusion in practice, the goal of serving students with disabilities in general education settings to the extent possible is firmly established by both social consensus and federal mandate. Unfortunately, research suggests that access to the general education curriculum and instruction is not equally distributed across all ethnic groups.

Research suggests that students of color, especially African Americans, are overrepresented in more restrictive educational environments and underrepresented in less restrictive environments. Analyzing data from the Office for Civil Rights 1998 compliance report, Fierros and Conroy (2002) found that among students with disabilities, 55% of European American students as compared to only 37% of African American students were educated in inclusive settings (defined as spending less than 21% of the school day outside of the general classroom). Conversely, 33% of African American students with disabilities received services in substantially separate class placements, compared to only 16% of European American children with disabilities. Skiba et al. (2001) reported similar findings in analyzing data from one Midwestern state. Although accounting for 11% of the total population in the state, African American students represented only 8% of the general class special education placements, while accounting for 27% of students placed outside of general education 60% or more of the school day. Serwatka, Deering, and Grant (1995) found that African Americans are placed more frequently in more segregated settings than European American students across a range of disability categories.

IMPLICATIONS OF DISPROPORTIONALITY IN EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENTS

The evidence of minority disproportionality in special education suggests that students of color, in particular African American students, may receive differential access to a consensually validated social value: the opportunity to be educated with nondisabled peers in general education settings. Yet the meaning and cause of minority disproportionality in educational environments is not clear.

The implications of racial disparity in special education environments differ depending upon the causal hypothesis applied to the data. On the one hand, it is possible that disproportionality in educational environments could be partially or wholly explained by differences between special education categories. OSEP's Report to Congress suggests that "it is possible that the differences in placement by race/ethnicity may reflect the disproportionate representation of some minority groups in disability categories that are predominately served in more restrictive settings." (OSEP, 2002, p. III-45) On the other hand, failure to confirm such a pattern may suggest that disproportionality in special education settings is driven to some extent by systemic responses (Oswald, et al., 1999).

This study explored the disproportionate placement of African American students in more
or less restrictive educational environments. Specifically, we tested the hypothesis that disparities in educational environments are due to the influence of certain disability categories that more often result in service in more restrictive placements. This study assessed disproportionality across two educational environments—the general education classroom and separate class settings—within five disability classifications (emotional disturbance, mild mental retardation, moderate mental retardation, learning disabilities, and speech and language). This disaggregation enabled us to examine the extent to which African American students are disproportionately served in more restrictive educational environments than their peers with the same disability.

The evidence of minority disproportionality in special education suggests that students of color, in particular African American students, may receive differential access to a consensually validated social value: the opportunity to be educated with non-disabled peers in general education settings.

**METHOD**

**CONTEXT**

The work reported herein is part of a broader project to (a) monitor the disproportionate representation of minority students in special education in the state of Indiana, (b) increase understanding of the conditions causing or maintaining disproportionate representation, (c) and develop strategies for addressing disproportionality at the local level. The project, known as the Indiana Disproportionality Project, is a collaboration of the Indiana Department of Education's Division of Exceptional Learners, the Indiana Center for Evaluation and Education Policy, and 10 school districts in the state.

Table 1 summarizes special education service data for the state for the 2001-2002 school year, and disaggregates overall enrollment and special education service data both by race and by disability category. The disaggregated data by race at the state level indicate only a slight degree of over-representation for African American students and some underrepresentation of Hispanic American students in overall special education service. These patterns regarding overall service do not mean that the state is free of disproportionate representation, however. Data in Tables 2 and 3 (below) indicate significant disproportionality for African American students in a number of disability categories.

**SAMPLE AND VARIABLES**

The data for this study included individual records of all students with disabilities in Indiana during the 2001–2002 school year. Data for disability category and educational environment for students with disabilities in each of the state's 295 school districts was collected by the Indiana Department of Education as part of its IDEA reporting requirements. This investigation focused on disproportionality for African American students for two reasons: First, disproportionate identification and service are most consistent and severe for African American students across numerous disability categories (NRC, 2002); second, statewide representation of other minorities has not been high enough in the target state to permit accurate assessment of disproportionality across a number of categories and educational environments.

We used the data to construct a set of disability-environment variables for African American students, and similar comparison figures for all other students. Data were aggregated at the state level and merged with statewide enrollment data disaggregated by race/ethnicity in order to calculate disproportionality in each disability category and educational environment.

**DESIGN**

In Indiana, public school enrollment is approximately 1,064,240; African Americans comprise 11.3% of the total enrollment. We considered data for both general education class placement (defined by state statute as removal from general education for less than 21% of the school day), and separate class placement (defined by state statute as removal from general education settings for more than 60% of the school day), within five disability categories: mild mental re-
Table 1: State Demographics for 2001–2002 School Year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>All Students</th>
<th>% of Total Enrollment</th>
<th>Students With Disabilities</th>
<th>Statewide Risk Index %a</th>
<th>Statewide Composition Index %b</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Racial/Ethnic Category</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European American</td>
<td>865,326</td>
<td>81.19</td>
<td>122,974</td>
<td>14.00</td>
<td>82.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>120,504</td>
<td>11.30</td>
<td>19,186</td>
<td>15.92</td>
<td>12.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic American</td>
<td>44,548</td>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>3,840</td>
<td>8.62</td>
<td>2.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiracial</td>
<td>22,167</td>
<td>2.08</td>
<td>2,104</td>
<td>9.49</td>
<td>1.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian American</td>
<td>11,417</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>463</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>0.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>278</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disability Category</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning disabled</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech and language</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mild mental retardation</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional disturbance</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Moderate mental retardation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note. Data for calculations are from the Uniform Ethnic and Racial Questionnaire and the Uniform Federal Placement Questionnaire, and statewide enrollment data.

*aThe percentage of the racial category group which is classified as disabled (Total number of African American students with disabilities/Total African American enrollment).

*bThe percentage of all students with disabilities represented by this racial category (Total number of African American Students with Disabilities/Total number of Students with Disabilities).

*Percentages are based on total number of disabled children in the state, not just the disability categories represented in the table, and will not sum to 100%.

Tardation (MMR), moderate mental retardation (MOMR), emotionally disabled (ED), learning disabled (LD), and speech and language (SL). This resulted in a total of 10 disability-environment dyads. Each of the five disability categories had two sets of disproportionality calculations: one for separate class placement and one for general education class placement. There are minor differences between Indiana and federal terminology for some disability labels (e.g., emotional disability in Indiana vs. emotional disturbance in IDEA 2004). This report uses federal terminology for all disability categories, with the exception of mild and moderate mental retardation, which are not listed as separate categories in IDEA 2004 but are categorized separately by the state of Indiana.

We first calculated measures of disproportionality at the state level for each of the five disability categories and the two educational environments. The second step was to disentangle disability category and educational environment by examining the extent to which disproportionality in educational environments was evident within each disability category.
Measures of Disproportionality

Recent scholarship in the field of minority disproportionality (Hosp & Reschly, 2003; NRC, 2002; Parrish, 2002) has identified three primary measures for analyzing proportional discrepancy: the composition index, the risk index, and the relative risk ratio. The composition index is the percentage of a given disability category that is represented by a given racial group (NRC). For the current study, the composition index represents the percentage of the total population in a given educational environment that is comprised by the target group (e.g., African American students); we calculated it by dividing the number of African American children in a disability-environment dyad by the total number of children enrolled in that same disability-environment dyad. It reflects the proportion of all children served under a given disability-environment dyad who are members of a given racial/ethnic group, and is interpreted by comparison to the proportion of the target group in general education enrollment. Although there are no empirically validated cutoff criteria, Chinn and Hughes's (1987) widely used criterion for determining substantial disproportionality establishes a bandwidth around the general education enrollment proportion for the target group of plus or minus 10% of that proportion; special education enrollment rates that fall within that bandwidth are considered proportionate.

The risk index is the percentage of a given population in a given category, calculated by dividing the number of African American students in a given disability category (e.g., LD) or educational environment (e.g., general education classroom) by the total enrollment of African American students in the state. For our purposes, the population of interest is not all African American students, but only those served in a particular setting within a particular disability category. To identify a "placement risk index" (the rate of placement for a particular group in a particular educational environment), we divided the number of African American students in a particular disability-environment dyad (e.g., African American students with ED served in a separate classroom) by the total number of African American students in that disability category. Note that the appropriate comparison group for assessing disproportionality in educational environments is not the total enrollment of a given group, but rather the enrollment figures for that group in special education or, in this case, in a particular disability category (Westat, 2003).

To interpret the risk index for a particular minority group, that risk index is compared to the risk index for another group of students (e.g., European American students), or to the risk index for all other students combined, producing a relative risk ratio. There appears to be no consensus in the extant literature on a criterion for the relative risk ratio that would indicate significant disproportionality (Westat, 2003). Nor is there consensus concerning the most appropriate comparison group: although some studies have used only European American students as the comparison group (Hosp & Reschly, 2003; NRC, 2002; Parrish, 2002), others (Fierros & Conroy, 2002; Oswald et al., 1999) have used students from all other groups as the comparison. The use of European American students as the comparison group is defensible on the grounds that European Americans represent the largest racial category and that public perception of discrimination typically is judged against individuals who are European American (Coutinho & Oswald, 2000). On the other hand, Westat recommends comparing the risk index for a given racial category to all other racial categories, because this allows the calculation of the risk ratio for all groups, including European American students. Given that the two approaches have been judged to be equally defensible (Coutinho & Oswald, 2000), the Indiana Disproportionality Project elected to use all other students (e.g., total population minus African American students) as the comparison group. Project analysis comparing risk ratios using European American students versus all other students as the comparison group produced virtually no differences based on differences in the denominator.

In this study, the relative risk ratio (RRR) compares the risk for African American students in a given disability category to the risk for other children in the same disability-environment dyad, and is simply a ratio of the risk index for minority students to the risk index for other students. An RRR of 1.00 indicates no disproportionality; African American children in a given disability-
environment category would have equal risk of being in that category as all other children. An RRR greater than 1.00 indicates overrepresentation of African Americans in that disability-environment category, while an RRR less than 1.00 would indicate underrepresentation. Finally, because both the composition and risk index compare an observed value with an implicit expected value, the statistical size of the difference can be tested with chi-square. The chi-square statistic allows one to interpret the statistical significance of discrepancies based on the composition index and RRR. We calculated several statistics from the current database: percentage of African American children within a disability category, composition index, placement risk indices for African Americans and other children, RRR, and chi-square statistic.

RESULTS

DISPROPORTIONALITY BY DISABILITY CATEGORY AND PLACEMENT

Table 2 presents disproportionality statistics for disability categories and educational environments at the state level. The composition index refers to the proportion of a given category (disability or placement) represented by African American students. For the purposes of interpretation, it is compared to the overall enrollment of that population in public education. For example, African American students comprise 11.3% of the total school population, but 23.2% of the enrollment in ED classrooms. The risk index represents the rate of placement of a given population in a given category (i.e., 1.4% of all African American students in this state are served as ED). The relative risk ratio compares the risk index for the target group (African American) to the risk index for all other children. Chi-square statistics reflect statewide data with $df = 1, N = 1,064,240$.

State-level aggregation, illustrated in Table 2, indicated that African Americans were overrepresented in the ED ($RRR = 2.36$), MMR ($RRR = 3.29$), and MOMR ($RRR = 1.91$) categories; underrepresented in SL ($RRR = .65$); and approximately proportionally represented in the LD ($RRR = .94$) category. Discrepancies between African American representation in these categories and what one would expect given their proportion of the population are statistically significant at the $p < .001$ level for all categories.

Statewide analyses of educational environment for all students in special education revealed that African Americans are underrepresented in general education classroom settings, defined as removal less than 21% of the school day (RRR = .71), and overrepresented in more restrictive placement settings, defined as removal greater than 60% of the school day (RRR = 2.94). As with the disability category, the discrepancies between African American representation in these settings and what one would expect given their proportion of the population is statistically significant at the $p < .001$ level (Table 2).

DISPROPORTIONALITY BY EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT WITHIN CATEGORY

Given general findings that African American students with disabilities are disproportionately represented in both the general education setting and in separate class settings, the question to be addressed is whether such disparities are due to disproportionality in disability categories that are likely to result in more restrictive placement. Thus, the next set of analyses examined disproportionality within disability categories in order to determine the extent to which placement disproportionality was independent of disproportionality in disability categories. If the disproportionate placement of African American students in more restrictive settings is entirely due to their disproportionate representation in certain disability categories, one would expect to find little evidence of disproportionality in placement within each disability category, suggesting that apparent disproportionality in educational environments is simply an artifact of eligibility decision making. If, on the other hand, one finds significant disproportionality in placement in different educational environments within disability categories, it would tend to suggest the influence of other factors such as systemic variables.

Table 3 shows that of the 10 disability-placement dyads examined in this study, 7 displayed significant disproportionality, 2 were nonsignificant, and one could not be calculated due to


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>African American Composition Index %</th>
<th>( \chi^2 )</th>
<th>African American Risk Index %</th>
<th>Other Children Risk Index %</th>
<th>Relative Risk Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Disability category</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional disturbance</td>
<td>23.20</td>
<td>879*</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>2.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mild mental retardation</td>
<td>29.67</td>
<td>520*</td>
<td>4.41</td>
<td>1.34</td>
<td>3.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate mental retardation</td>
<td>19.67</td>
<td>218*</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>1.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning disabilities</td>
<td>10.76</td>
<td>433*</td>
<td>5.63</td>
<td>5.98</td>
<td>0.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech and language</td>
<td>7.67</td>
<td>19.6*</td>
<td>2.34</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>0.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Educational environment</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General education class</td>
<td>8.36</td>
<td>684*</td>
<td>6.07</td>
<td>8.54</td>
<td>0.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separate class</td>
<td>27.37</td>
<td>583*</td>
<td>5.51</td>
<td>1.87</td>
<td>2.94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\* Appropriate comparison figure is statewide percentage of African Americans in total enrollment, 11.30%. b Appropriate comparison figure is statewide percentage of African Americans in special education, 12.89%.

\*p < .001 level.

insufficient number of cases. While comprising 23.2% of the total ED population, African Americans represented only 14.2% of the students with ED in general education classrooms, and 26.2% of the students with ED found in separate classrooms. African American children served as ED were 1.2 times more likely than their peers with ED to be placed in separate classrooms, and about 50% less likely to be placed in general education classroom environments. Similarly, African Americans comprised about 29.7% of the total MMR population, yet accounted for nearly 39% of the students with MMR placed in separate class educational environments and only 25.1% of the students with MMR placed in general education settings. Relative risk ratios for African American children served as MMR indicate that African Americans were about 1.5 times more likely to be placed in separate classes than their peers served as MMR and about 20% less likely to be found in general education classrooms than others served as MMR. The discrepancies between the expected number of African American children served in each setting and their actual proportion of the population in each disability category were significant for both ED-separate class \( \chi^2 = 17.92 \) \((1, N = 4504, p < .001)\) and MMR-separate class \( \chi^2 = 204 \) \((1, N = 7156, p < .001)\) as well as ED-general classroom \( \chi^2 = 21.35 \) \((1, N = 607, p < .001)\) and MMR-general classroom \( \chi^2 = 22.87 \) \((1, N = 3411, p < .001)\). Placement disproportionality appeared in categories that tend to be served in less restrictive environments as well. African Americans represent about 11% of those identified as learning disabled in this state, but 27.8% of those served in separate classes for LD, and only 7.8% of students with LD served in a general education placement. Relative risk indices indicate that African Americans are 3.2 times as likely as other students with LD to be served in separate classes, and 30% less likely than other students with LD to be served in general education classes; both overrepresentation in separate classes and underrepresentation in general education were highly significant.

Statewide analyses of educational environment for all students in special education revealed that African Americans are underrepresented in general education classroom settings, and overrepresented in more restrictive placement settings.
TABLE 3
Disproportionality Within Disability Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disability-Placement Dyad</th>
<th>Composition Index (Disability-Placement Dyad) %</th>
<th>African American Placement Risk Index %</th>
<th>Other Children Placement Risk Index %</th>
<th>Relative Risk Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ED-Separate Class</td>
<td>26.24</td>
<td>71.48</td>
<td>60.72</td>
<td>1.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ED-Regular Class</td>
<td>14.17</td>
<td>5.20</td>
<td>9.51</td>
<td>0.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MMR-Separate Class</td>
<td>38.88</td>
<td>53.10</td>
<td>35.23</td>
<td>1.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MMR-Regular Class</td>
<td>25.21</td>
<td>16.42</td>
<td>20.54</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOMR-Separate Class</td>
<td>20.79</td>
<td>92.49</td>
<td>79.12</td>
<td>1.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOMR-Regular</td>
<td>7.56</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>0.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LD-Separate Class</td>
<td>27.83</td>
<td>18.75</td>
<td>5.86</td>
<td>3.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LD-Regular Class</td>
<td>7.78</td>
<td>28.07</td>
<td>84.06</td>
<td>0.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SL-Separate Class</td>
<td>36.17</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>7.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SL-Regular Class</td>
<td>7.56</td>
<td>97.12</td>
<td>98.61</td>
<td>0.98</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The appropriate comparison for the Disability-Placement Dyad Composition Indices is special education enrollment. African American students represent 12.89%.
ED = emotional disturbance. MMR = mild mental retardation. MOMR = moderate mental retardation. LD = learning disabled. SL = speech and language.
*There were only six African American students in the entire state designated as MOMR and placed in a general education setting.
*p < .001.

Discussion

Students with speech and language disorders in Indiana tended to be served overwhelmingly in general education settings: less than 1% were served in separate class settings. African Americans represented 36.2% of speech and language students placed in separate classes, even though they represented only 7.67% of those students served for speech and language disabilities. African American students were 7.7 times as likely as other speech and language students to be served in separate settings. We found no significant underrepresentation of African American students in general education class settings in speech and language.

Discussion

Almost since the inception of special education law, there has been strong consensus for servicing students with disabilities in the general education environment to the maximum extent appropriate. Sarason (1996) argued that the 1974 Education for All Handicapped Children Act was in fact intended as a mainstreaming law. Certainly, IDEA, 2004 has strengthened the notion of the general education classroom as the default placement. Although there is by no means complete consensus concerning the extent to which inclusion as practiced is meeting its theoretical goals (e.g., Kavale & Forness, 2000), dramatic increases in placement of students with disabilities in general education settings clearly establishes inclusion to the greatest extent possible as the consensually validated norm for special education service.

The current results join previous literature (Fierros & Conroy, 2002; OSEP, 2003) in finding that African American students with disabilities are significantly underrepresented in general education classroom placements, and significantly overrepresented in separate classroom settings. In Indiana, African Americans represent around 13% of students served in special education, a figure that is close to proportionate with respect to their overall percentage of enrollment. Yet African American students with disabilities represent only...
8.4% of students in the general education setting, and over 27% of those served in separate class settings. Expressed in terms of a risk ratio, African American students with disabilities are only .71 times as likely to be served in general education settings as other students, and almost three times as likely to be served in a classroom outside of general education 60% or more of the school day.

The causes and meaning of disproportionality in educational environments have not been widely explored. One hypothesis (OSEP, 2002) is that disparate rates of placement in less restrictive settings are due simply to minority overrepresentation in those disability categories that are more likely to lead to more restrictive placement. To test this hypothesis, we explored the extent to which African American students are proportionately placed in more and less restrictive settings within five disability categories. Of 10 possible disability-placement dyads, 7 yielded significant levels of placement disproportionality within category. We found significant disproportionality in the two educational environments in four of the five disability categories tested. Thus, in almost all disability categories, African American children were more likely than their peers with the same disability to be placed in more restrictive settings and less likely than their peers with the same disability to be served in the least restrictive environment. These results do not support the hypothesis that disproportionality in educational environment is an artifact of disproportionality in disability category.

It could be argued that disproportionality within disability category is due to increased severity of all disabilities for certain groups. The importance of poverty as a predictor of racial inequity has been well represented in the literature (Hodgkinson, 1995; MacMillan & Reschly, 1998); it is possible that African American students, being disproportionately exposed to the ravaging effects of poverty, are more likely to need a higher intensity of service across all disability categories. Yet the evidence does not support a link between socioeconomic status and special education disproportionality. Analyzing national Office for Civil Rights data, Oswald et al. (1999) reported that, although disproportionality in MR increased as poverty increased, disproportionality in ED was more likely to be found in wealthier districts. Indeed, in a study across several disability categories, Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Simmons, Feggins-Azziz, and Chung (2005) found that free lunch status proved a weak and inconsistent predictor of disproportionate minority service in special education.

In addition, it would be difficult to explain the patterns of results from the current study in terms of increased intensity across all disability categories for African American students. Disproportionality in the current sample was greater as the disability category became more judgmental. African American students identified as LD in this sample were more than three times as likely as other students with learning disabilities to be placed in a separate class setting. An extremely small proportion of students with SL are placed outside the general education classroom; our results indicated that African American students with SL were over seven times more likely to be served in separate classrooms. In contrast, disability categories in which there was the least evidence of disproportionality in educational environment were those categories (e.g., ED, MOMR) that might be expected to yield more restrictive placements. It is difficult to understand why African American students would have inherently greater need for more intensive services primarily in disability categories usually served in less restrictive settings.

As within-child explanations are insufficient for explaining disproportionate representation in special education, it becomes increasingly likely that systemic variables contribute to racial disparities (Ladner & Hammons, 2001; Oswald et al., 1999; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). A number of issues particular to general education, such as classroom management competencies, have been found to have an influence on differential rates of referral (NRC, 2002). Hosp and Reschly (2002) examined the case files of 240 students identified as learning disabled in order to explore the relationship between instructional and demographic variables and restrictiveness of placement decisions. African American students with LD with poor anger control were more likely to be placed in more restrictive settings. Such results are consistent with other research showing that classroom teachers may differentially interpret the behavior of African American students as
threatening or confrontational (Hosp & Hosp, 2002; Townsend, 2000), and that teacher skill in classroom behavior management is a clear predictor of minority disproportionality in special education (Harry, Klingner, Sturges, & Moore, 2002; NRC, 2002). In addition, Hosp and Reschly (2002) reported that African American students who received less individual teacher attention as a prereferral intervention spent more time outside the general education classroom setting. Others have suggested that the learning style of African American and other minority students is more relational and that the absence of such relationships may differentially disadvantage those students (Townsend).

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Disparate placement of minority students in more restrictive settings might also be due to irregularities in the special education eligibility determination process itself. NRC (2002) concluded that there was mixed quantitative evidence for the contribution of the special education decision-making process to disproportionality. Although analogue studies (e.g., Prieto & Zucker, 1981) reported evidence of bias among decision makers when presented with referral data differing by race, large-scale field studies have found less evidence of bias (MacMillan, Gresham, Lopez, & Bocian, 1996). Qualitative results provide suggestions about how the referral and eligibility process might contribute to disproportionality. Harry et al. (2002), in an ethnographic study of the referral process in kindergarten through third grade, reported that team decisions regarding special education eligibility often were influenced by non-data-based processes, including teachers’ informal diagnoses of children’s problems, the influence of school personnel’s impressions of the family, and external pressures for identification and placement. Certainly, further research is necessary to determine the extent to which either classroom management issues or special education eligibility decision-making processes contribute to racial disparities across special education environments.

Although using data from a single state allows a more intensive focus on variables of interest than a national study, its limitations should be noted. The Indiana data are not unique in showing evidence of disproportionality in restrictiveness of placement; OSEP’s Annual Report (2002) documents extensive minority disproportionality across educational environments in a majority of states. Yet we cannot assume that the current results for specific disability-placement combinations generalize to other states; it may well be that patterns of and reasons for disproportionality vary considerably from state to state. Indeed, research on regional variations in minority disproportionality in special education would be highly valuable. For example, one would expect a difference in special education disproportionality between northern or midwestern states—where minority populations are concentrated in urban areas—and southern states, where minority populations are more evenly distributed geographically.

These results join previous research in demonstrating the underrepresentation of African American special education students in least restrictive environment (LRE) settings, and overrepresentation in more restrictive classroom settings. They do not support the hypothesis that such disparities can be explained by disproportionality in those disability categories more likely to yield more restrictive placements. Rather, racial/ethnic underrepresentation in the least restrictive placement appears to be largely independent of disproportionality in disability categories.

The disproportionate representation of African American students in educational environments has been relatively unexplored; this makes it difficult to offer clear recommendations for practice. Clearly, however, the new IDEA 2004 mandates that local education agencies and state education agencies monitor the extent of disproportionate representation across educational environments. It may well be that such monitoring may in and of itself create a feedback loop that can assist in addressing such disproportionality (Johnson, 2002).
It may be possible to craft an explanation of these data that attributes causation to individual rather than systemic characteristics (e.g., students of color have more severe deficits within each category than other students); however, as Valencia (1997) noted, that deficit thinking—reliance on within-student causes to explain racial disparity—has often been used as a means of avoiding or postponing reforms that could reduce inequity. As other explanations for minority disproportionality prove insufficient, it is increasingly incumbent upon educators to identify and address practices in special and general education that differentially disadvantage culturally and linguistically diverse students, in order to remove the remaining institutional barriers to equal educational opportunity.

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