Addressing the disproportionate representation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education through culturally responsive educational systems

Janette K. Klingner, Alfredo J. Artiles, Elizabeth Kozleski, Beth Harry, Shelley Zion, William Tate, Grace Zamora Durán, David Riley

Abstract

In this article, we present a conceptual framework for addressing the disproportionate representation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education. The cornerstone of our approach to addressing disproportionate representation is through the creation of culturally responsive educational systems. Our goal is to assist practitioners, researchers, and policy makers in coalescing around culturally responsive, evidence-based interventions and strategic improvements in practice and policy to improve students’ educational opportunities in general education and reduce inappropriate referrals to and placement in special education. We envision this work as cutting across three interrelated domains: policies, practices, and people. Policies include those guidelines enacted at federal, state, district, and school levels that influence funding, resource allocation, accountability, and other key aspects of schooling. We use the notion of practice in two ways, in the instrumental sense of daily practices that all cultural beings engage in to navigate and survive their worlds, and also in a technical sense to describe the procedures and strategies devised for the purpose of maximizing students’ learning outcomes. People include all those in the broad educational system: administrators, teacher educators, teachers, community members, families, and the children whose opportunities we wish to improve.

Keywords

special education; disproportionate representation; culturally responsive education; cultural diversity; linguistic diversity.

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Discussion

about the authors

Janette K. Klingner
University of Colorado at Boulder
Janette Klingner, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor at the University of Colorado in the Division for Educational Equity and Cultural Diversity. She was a bilingual special education teacher for ten years before earning her doctorate in reading and learning disabilities from the University of Miami. Research foci include reading comprehension strategy instruction for diverse populations and the disproportionate representation of culturally and linguistically
Alfredo J. Artiles
Arizona State University

Alfredo J. Artiles, Ph.D., is a Professor of Special Education at Arizona State University. His scholarship focuses on how constructions of difference (e.g., on the basis of race, class, language background) influence schools’ responses to the needs of culturally different students. Dr. Artiles’ research examines special education placement practices as a window into schools’ cultural constructions of difference. Some of his work tracks disability placement patterns to inform research and policy. A related strand of research focuses on how teachers learn to use a social justice perspective as they teach culturally different students.

Elizabeth Kozleski
University of Colorado at Denver

Elizabeth B. Kozleski, Ed.D., is a Professor and Associate Dean at the University of Colorado at Denver and Health Sciences Center. Her research interests include teacher learning in urban schools, multicultural educational practices in the classroom and the impact of professional development schools on student and teacher learning. Currently, she is a co-Principal Investigator (PI) for the National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems, and PI for the National Institute for Urban School Improvement.

Beth Harry
University of Miami

Beth Harry, Ph.D., is a professor in the Department of Teaching and Learning at the University of Miami’s School of Education. Her teaching and research focus on the impact of cultural diversity on education, on working with families of children with disabilities, and on qualitative methods in educational research. Dr. Harry earned her Ph.D. at Syracuse University.

Shelley Zion
University of Colorado at Denver

Shelley Zion, M.S., is the project coordinator for the National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems, working to provide technical assistance to states as they build their capacity to reduce disproportionality and build educational systems that are culturally responsive. Her research focuses on issues of student voice, engagement, and family participation in schools.

William Tate
Washington University

William F. Tate, Ph.D., is the Edward Mallinckrodt Distinguished University Professor in Arts and Sciences at Washington University. His research interests include Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) education in the urban context and the political and cultural dimensions of opportunity to learn.

Grace Zamora Durán
U.S. Department of Education

Grace Zamora Durán, Ph.D., is a Research Analyst with the Research-to-Practice Division in the Office of Special Education Programs at the U.S. Department of Education. She received her doctorate from The University of Arizona in Tucson in special education with a minor in bilingual education. She works with projects pertaining to disproportionality in urban schools, multicultural educational practices in the classroom and the impact of representation in special education, English Language Learners (ELLs), gender equity, assessment, and curriculum and instruction.

David Riley
Education Development Center

David P. Riley, Ph.D., is Executive Director of the Urban Special Education Leadership Collaborative at Education Development Center, Inc., in Newton, MA. A national network of special and general education administrators, the mission of the Collaborative is to improve outcomes for children and youth with disabilities in urban school districts through leadership development.
The overrepresentation of culturally and linguistically diverse children in special education and the quality of their educational experiences have been regarded as among the most significant issues faced by the U.S. public school system in the past 30 years. The Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) entitles all individuals with disabilities to a free appropriate public education (FAPE) and mandates nondiscriminatory assessment, identification, and placement of children with disabilities. Children are not to be identified as disabled because of poor achievement due to environment.

2. The disproportionate representation of ethnically and linguistically diverse students in high incidence special education programs (mental retardation, learning disabilities, and emotional disturbance) has been a concern for over three decades (Artiles, Trent, & Palmer, 2004; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Dunn, 1968). Indicator of disproportionate representation by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). Donovan and Cross used White students’ risk ratios as the denominators in calculating risk, as do we here. Why is disproportionate representation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education services problematic? If every child is provided opportunity and services that are perceived as positive and effective on the basis of his or her needs, disproportionality is not a problem in and of itself (although it could be a reflection of broader social problems). Therein lies the heart of the concern. Disproportionate representation of minority students in special education: Academic, economic, and demographic predictors. Exceptional Children, 70, 185–200. Examining educational equity: Revisiting the disproportionate representation of minority students in special education. Exceptional Children, 72, 425–441.