

The Misrepresentation of Students of Color (SoC) in Special Education

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### **Introduction and Problem of Practice**

Student teaching and working as a building substitute in an urban district, I was not shocked to see a majority of the students in special education were Black and Hispanic students, simply because a majority of students in the school were Black and Hispanic. I had heard the buzzword “overrepresentation” in many of my undergraduate courses, and I knew it meant a racial or ethnic group that had greater representation in special education compared to the general population, but I was unsure why it was relevant. Classes with Dr. Jacob Bennet, Dr. Henry Milner, and Dr. Doug Fuchs are a few of the classes that have pushed my thinking and allowed me to not only see the controversy around overrepresentation and underrepresentation, but has also showed me the potential consequences of labeling a child as *disabled*, which is so often what happens in society.

A body of literature suggests that African American students may be overrepresented in special education, especially in the category of emotional disturbance (ED) (Wiley, Brigham, Kauffman & Bogan, 2013). Similarly, Hosp & Reschly (2004) found that African American students are overrepresented in the category of ED, as well as mental retardation (MR) which is now referred to as intellectual disabilities (ID). SoC may also be overrepresented in programs such as Head Start, free/reduced-cost lunch and Title I services (Echevarria, Powers & Elliott, 2004). According to the United States Department of Education, “American Indian students are over three times as likely to be identified as learning disabled as Asian American students” (Echevarria, Powers & Elliott, 2004, p. 20). On the contrary, there is literature that suggests SoC may actually be underrepresented in special education (Arnold & Lassman, 2003; Morgan, Farkas, Cook, Strassfeld, Hillemeier, Pun & Schussler, 2017). There is a third body of literature that highlights how SoC are often underrepresented in gifted and talented education (Hosp &

Reschly, 2004; Souto-Manning, 2009). Due to these conflicting bodies of literature, I have come to understand there is a misrepresentation of SoC in special education. Similarly, although Wiley and colleagues (2013) refer to the mismatch as *disproportionate representation*, in this paper, I use both misrepresentation and disproportionate representation to mean:

“...a group’s representation in special education is different from that group’s proportion of the overall population, and/or that a group’s proportion in special education is different from that of a comparison group (e.g., Caucasian students or all other ethnic groups combined)” (Wiley et al., 2013, p. 30).

Many scholars have argued that one potential factor leading to a misrepresentation of SoC in special education is educator bias (Wiley et al., 2013; Matias, 2013; Hosp & Reschly, 2004; Kincaid, Kincaid, & Sullivan, 2017; Echevarria, Powers & Elliott, 2004).

When thinking about educator bias being a factor of misrepresentation of SoC in special education, it is important to consider that disability can be viewed as a social construction (Baynton, 2013; Echevarria, Powers & Elliott, 2004). Collins (2011) highlights how disabilities are situated in the environment, rather than a person. Collins (2011) discusses how students are positioned by their teacher in various ways, including as disabled, potentially incompetent or less able than their peers. Matias (2013) acknowledges this misrepresentation and deficit ideology could be due to educators’ lack of knowledge on Whiteness, privilege, power and systemic racism. Often, students’ abilities are overlooked simply because they are not part of the dominant culture (Echevarria, Powers & Elliott, 2004). Kincaid, Kincaid and Sullivan (2017) suggest that students’ “low performance may be a consequence of [educators’] interpersonal and systemic bias” (p. 168). Walker (2008) highlights a disproportionate representation exists due to (1) biased assessments and evaluative tools and (2) educator bias.

**Research Question**

Knowing educator bias is potentially influencing this overrepresentation and/or underrepresentation of SoC in special education has led me to the following research question: How can we support educators, especially general education teachers, to ensure there is minimal misrepresentation of students of color in special education and gifted and talented programs?

This research question focuses on general education teachers because these educators often make the initial referral for special education evaluation and services. As mentioned above, Echevarria, Powers and Elliott (2004) highlight how educators often overlook students' abilities if they differ from the dominant culture. General education teachers may not tolerate behaviors such as "low performance" in their class, or may even refer a child for special education evaluation so the student's state test scores do not negatively impact the teacher (Echevarria, Powers and Elliott, 2004).

**Design**

I designed an online professional development learning module for educators (administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals) to interrogate their own biases. My primary learners were general education classroom teachers because these educators often make the initial referral of a student for special education evaluation. My secondary learners were administrators and paraprofessionals. I included administrators because these leaders typically set the tone of the building. If a principal is focused on equity and justice, professional development, weekly newsletters, and staff meetings may all focus on these topics. Administrator buy-in is important, so educators have a space to grapple with the ideas of equity, privilege, marginalization, systemic racism, Whiteness, etc. In addition, paraprofessionals were included because they often work one-to-one with students with disabilities or students considered "at-risk."

In the online professional learning module (a website), there are four different pages. First, there is a home page. This section outlines the objectives, lists the materials needed, and provides information on the creator. Throughout the module, educators can expect to: (1) interrogate their own biases, (2) critically reflect on the power structures in society that privilege and marginalize certain groups of people, and (3) rethink how to structure classrooms/schools to create more equitable learning environments for all students. The second section of the website is a literature review with three subheadings examining different themes in special education—the history, ideological undercurrents and the misrepresentation of SoC. I then provide examples of how educators can rethink their classrooms by (1) using an asset-based approach to education, (2) using equitable principles, and (3) utilizing culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP). In the third section of this module, there is an opportunity for educators to self-reflect through The Privilege Walk Simulation, Wheel of Privilege, and Milner, Cunningham, Delale-O'Connor and Kestenberg's (2018) self-reflection questions from *"These Kids Are Out of Control: Why We Must Reimagine 'Classroom Management' for Equity"*. Lastly, there is a 'future resources' tab with books, Instagram accounts, movies, podcasts, and website links, so educators can continue to learn about these concepts.

This learning module was intentionally designed in a sequential order. I want participants to start with the literature review, so educators have an idea of the problem of practice. In addition, I think to challenge someone's thinking (with the self-reflective questions), there first needs to be something that has pushed educators' thinking. Ending the module with future resources was intentional because I wanted to signal to all the learners that a mindset shift does not happen overnight. Rather, educators will have to engage in continuous reflection and learning to challenge their old ways of thinking. I intentionally chose resources that are

accessible and available online or at the library, rather than peer-reviewed journals, for example, that could be difficult or costly to obtain. With that being said, I chose to create a website because I wanted it to be accessible to everyone, especially for a sustained amount of time. This online learning tool is free, accessible, and allows time for growth and change. Educators can choose to complete the module all within a day, over the course of weeks, a month, or even over the course of a year. I firmly believe if people are not ready for change, they will experience a lot of resistance with new ideas, especially ideas about racism, sexism, classism, and ableism. Learners should question the ideas in this module and have a safe space to experience discomfort. I hope the learning module can be something educators can return to each year before they start teaching, or pre-service educators can engage with this module before they enter their student teaching or practicum experiences. I strongly believe that through a literature review, self-reflective questions, and future resources, educators will be provided an opportunity to engage in meaningful reflection to eventually sustain change.

### **Theory of Change**

The primary underlying theory of change in this design is that reflection is necessary for change to occur (Freire, 1992). This mindset shift will not occur immediately and requires continued, sustained engagement around these topics. In addition, this design has been informed by Matias' (2013) idea of emotionality. Matias (2013) argues that educators need to engage in emotionality, a process of feeling, and reject the White savior complex. There has to be an active, continuous fight against these oppressive structures. I included the future resources section because this module is not enough to change someone's bias or ways of thinking, but it is an entry point to consider some of the inequitable structures within society. Engaging in Matias' (2013) idea of emotionality and reflection are important for educators' growth because,

according to Collins (2011), students are positioned as “abled” or “disabled.” Over time these identities are “thickened” or confirmed (Collins, 2011). When educators fail to view students through an asset-based approach, they are failing to recognize the lived experiences of students (Matias, 2013). Similarly, there are long-term effects for students pushed into special education, especially at disproportionate rates, including an impact on students’ social relationships, graduation, and employment (Echevarria, Powers & Elliott, 2004). Without educator reflection and change, students are indirectly impacted in negative ways.

### **Research Informing the Design**

#### *Context*

The partnership site, a school within a large urban district in a southern state, has 500 students in the school. Of those 500 students, 47% are White, 44% are Black, 4.8% are Hispanic, 3.6% are Asian and 0.2% are Native American. However, 12/13 students on the third and fourth-grade special education teacher’s caseload are Black, which is about 92% of students receiving special education services in those grades. To me, this highlighted the need for professional development on equity, justice, Whiteness, bias, racism, etc. In fact, the special education teacher voiced concern about how “some teachers are so rooted in ‘old’ beliefs.”

#### *Teacher Survey on Professional Development*

To ensure this design met the expectations of educators in the field, I surveyed teachers to gather information about what they expect from a professional development training, specifically an online, self-directed module. One educator highlighted the importance of being able to “re-watch certain sections [if she] need[s] more understanding.” As mentioned above, the goal of this online learning module was to provide an accessible space that educators could continuously access. Out of all respondents, 88.9% of educators surveyed highlighted the importance of

learning new information, while 77.8% of survey respondents wanted a list of future resources and/or materials for the classroom. Both new information (a literature review) and future resources were included in this learning module to meet the expectations of educators. Lastly, 8/9 survey respondents said they could stay focused on an online professional learning module for at least 30 minutes at a time. Five of those respondents said they could stay focused for an hour or more, especially if the information was chunked. I intentionally chunked each section of the learning module to be no more than thirty-minutes; however, a majority of the sections are not more than ten minutes each. The reflection questions could take a bit longer, depending on how in-depth respondents choose to answer the question(s). Throughout the creation of this online learning module, I intentionally partnered with teachers in the field and actively sought their feedback to strengthen my design, so it can lead to meaningful change within our public-school systems. With that being said, there are certainly areas I want to build upon in the coming months.

### **Reflection**

If time allowed, I would have loved to iterate the online learning module, continuously eliciting feedback from teachers, administrators, professors, and pre-service educators. Here are some of the questions I would ask: What are three things you learned from the module? What are two things you enjoyed about the learning module? What would you change about the learning module? How can I further develop this module to suit the needs of educators, including pre-service educators? Have any of your thoughts or ideas evolved from engaging with this online learning module and any of the future resources? How does the module impact your practice or your teaching on a daily basis? What concepts are you still struggling with? What supports should be built-in for educators dealing with topics around racism, sexism, ableism, classism,



Whiteness, privilege, and power? Have you used any of the future resources? How long did it take you to complete the module? Did you complete it in one sitting? Do you see yourself returning to this module at all? Ideally, I would love to interview these different learners to understand how the module can be more fully developed to meet the needs of those in the field.

In addition, all educators in the survey highlighted their desire for in-person professional development because they are engaged, can ask questions, and problem-solve with colleagues. Despite knowing educators prefer in-person professional development, I felt it was important to create an online professional development module due to the accessibility, low cost and time it provides educators to grapple with these concepts. With that being said, I think it would be important to build a face-to-face component, a critical debrief co-constructed with educators, to enhance this learning module. I imagine creating a set of questions (co-created with educators and tested in the field) that help foster a conversation amongst a small group of educators. For example, a second-grade team at an elementary school may all decide to engage with this learning module to fulfill part of their professional development requirements for the year. Although these educators will complete the module independently, how can they come together to discuss the information in the module? What role will each educator have in the teacher-led debrief? What questions can I provide educators to all discuss about how this module can influence their teaching on a daily basis? Building out the rest of this online professional development will take time, but it is critical to help shape the mindsets of educators. As Freire (1992) acknowledges, we need reflection in order for change to occur within our schools and communities.

Lastly, I would like to partner with teacher preparation programs to see how this module could be used with pre-service educators. I think these pre-service educators are critical learners

because they are the future of our education system. Many colleges and universities do not offer courses specifically on culturally responsive pedagogy or Whiteness. I am curious how this module can be an extension of the work pre-service educators are already doing. Educators are consistently doing amazing work and rise to new challenges each day. With the recent pandemic of COVID-19, educators began teaching online within a day, even though their training has minimally, if at all, addressed remote learning. But educators rose to the challenge. This module is not to discredit the knowledge and talents educators bring to their classrooms each day, but rather is a stepping stone to help educators reach *all* students in their class, regardless of the child's race, ability, sexual orientation or socio-economic status. Hosp and Reschly (2004) said it best, "By being cognizant of the academic performance of different groups of students and taking steps to improve achievement of all groups, educators can influence the alterable variables that predict disproportionate representation" (p. 187).

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