THE PERCEPTIONS OF GENERAL EDUCATION TEACHERS
ABOUT THE OVER-REPRESENTATION OF BLACK
STUDENTS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

by

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Introduction

The disproportionate representation of Black students in special education has been among the most persistent unsolved issues in the field of education, defying a simple explanation for its causes and remedies. The problem has been well documented in empirical literature, since Dunn's (1968) seminal article on the over-representation of minorities in special education. Yet, to date, many of the same problematic issues identified over four decades ago are still prevalent throughout all levels of education.

Purpose of the Study

A qualitative study was used to examine the perceptions of general-education elementary teachers about the over-representation of Black students in special education, specifically why and how Black students are referred to special education. The study intended to capture the perceptions of 16 general-education elementary teachers from three districts in Connecticut's District Reference Group H about the over-representation of Black students in special education. One-on-one interviews took place at individual schools for approximately 60 minutes per teacher.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do teachers describe the classroom challenges that lead them to refer students to special education?

2. How do teachers describe the changes in their processes, attitudes, and behaviors as a result of their district's participation in *Courageous Conversations About Race*?

Research Design

Qualitative research, a naturalistic approach that seeks to understand phenomena as they appear in natural settings (J. Patton, 2001), is described as an umbrella concept covering an array of interpretative techniques to come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency, of natural phenomena in the social world. Qualitative research, broadly defined, means "any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 17) and, instead, the kind of research that produces findings arrived at from real-world settings where the phenomenon of interest unfolds naturally (J. Patton, 2001, p. 39). Qualitative research is used to gain insight into people's attitudes, behaviors, value systems, concerns, motivations, aspirations, culture, or lifestyles.

Purposeful Sampling

Purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2003) was used to select participants who were informationally rich and able to provide useful information for addressing the research questions (J. Patton, 2001). Sixteen teachers from three school districts located in District Reference Group H were selected for this qualitative study and also participated

in the SERC's program, *Courageous Conversation About Race*. Other criteria for their eligibility were: teaching fourth grade 3 or more years; a balance of gender, race/ethnicity; and a considerable numbers of referrals of Black students to special education. Each teacher chosen for the study had more than 3 years, teaching experience, and some had as many as 15 to 30 years, teaching experience. The names of each of the teachers and research sites have been changed to protect their identities.

Teachers selected to participate in the study were all from three school districts located in District Reference Group (DRG) H. Data collection consisted of interviews and a review of special education data submitted to the Connecticut State Department of Education from schools in District Reference Group H, specifically, School District A, School District B, and School District C (see Appendix A for full DRGs description). District Reference Group (DRG) is a classification of districts whose students' families are similar in education, income, occupation, and need, and that have roughly similar enrollment. The Connecticut State Board of Education approved DRG classification for purposes of reporting data other than student performance. DRGs are based on the following seven variables: income, education, occupation, family structure, poverty, home language, and district enrollment. They include nine groups from Group A (e.g., very affluent, low-need suburban districts) to Group I (e.g., high-need, low socioeconomic status urban districts).

Table 1
Characteristics of Participating School Districts

	School District A	School District B	School District C
Student Enrollment	7,459	6,372	3,992
Free and Reduced Lunch	3,356	2,752	2,199
PK-12 Students Who Are Not Fluent in English	479	470	383
PK-12 Students Receiving Special Education in District	1,058	634	574
American Indian	22	34	103
Asian American	445	259	289
Black	2,645	1,622	928
Latino/Hispanic	2,680	1,439	824
White	1,667	3,018	1,848

Note. From Students With Disabilities in Connecticut: A Statistical Report, by Connecticut State Department of Education, 2007-2011, Hartford, CT: Author

Population

The study included 16 semi-structured individual interviews with 16 fourth-grade teachers at their schools (Merriam, 1998) who participated in SERC's program, *Courageous Conversations About Race.* Questions asked during the semi-structured interviews with teachers were open-ended to allow for in-depth responses. Some responses led to additional questions, which enabled the respondents to elaborate further on their answers, thereby adding to the richness of the descriptions contained in this analysis. A set protocol for all interviews was followed in an attempt to address the research questions, while still allowing for dialogue and discussion to take place. Merriam (1998) noted that as the researcher conducts interviews, the main purpose is to obtain information of a special kind (p. 71). Conducting interviews requires the researcher to listen to what people have to say about their activities, their feelings, and their lives (Eisner, 1998, p. 183).

Table 2

Special Education Referrals: K-12 Students With Disabilities by Race/Ethnicity, District A

Disability Category	Students With Disabilities by Race/Ethnicity 2007-2008	Students With Disabilities by Race/Ethnicity 2008-2009	Students With Disabilities by Race/Ethnicity 2009-2010	Students With Disabilities by Race/Ethnicity 2010-2011
Learning Disability	23.6%	23.7%	20.7%	19.2%
Intellectual Disabilities	3.6%	3.9%	4.6%	4.4%
Emotional Disturbance	13.2%	10.6%	11.2%	10.5%
Speech or Language Impairments	23.8%	26.3%	28.0%	28.7%
Other Disabilities	14.5%	10.3%	11.2%	10.0%
Other Health Impairments	10.8%	17.3%	15.8%	17.3%
Autism	7.6%	8.0%	8.5%	10.0%
Total Sum of Black Students with Disabilities	380	388	411	411

Note. From *Students With Disabilities in Connecticut: A Statistical Report*, by Connecticut State Department of Education, 2007-2011, Hartford, CT: Author.

Table 3

Special Education Referrals: K-12 Students With Disabilities by Race/Ethnicity, District B

Disability Category	Students With Disabilities by Race/Ethnicity 2007-2008	Students With Disabilities by Race/Ethnicity 2008-2009	Students With Disabilities by Race/Ethnicity 2009-2010	Students With Disabilities by Race/Ethnicity 2010-2011
Learning Disability	38.8%	38.2%	37.7%	35.0%
Intellectual Disabilities	7.8%	7.8%	7.1%	8.3%
Emotional Disturbance	12.1%	13.2%	13.7%	15.0%
Speech or Language Impairments	10.7%	12.7%	12.7%	13.9%
Other Disabilities	11.7%	11.8%	11.9%	10.6%
Other Health Impairments	16.5%	13.7%	15.1%	14.4%
Autism	2.4%	2.5%	1.9%	2.8%
Total Sum of Black Students with Disabilities	206	204	212	180

Note. From *Students With Disabilities in Connecticut: A Statistical Report*, by Connecticut State Department of Education, 2007-2011, Hartford, CT: Author.

Table 4

Special Education Referrals: K-12 Students With Disabilities by Race/Ethnicity, District C

Disability Category	Students With Disabilities by Race/Ethnicity 2007-2008	Students With Disabilities by Race/Ethnicity 2008-2009	Students With Disabilities by Race/Ethnicity 2009-2010	Students With Disabilities by Race/Ethnicity 2010-2011
Learning Disability	24.3%	30.6%	37.7%	35.0%
Intellectual Disabilities	2.3%	1.4%	7.1%	8.3%
Emotional Disturbance	9.6%	8.2%	13.7%	15. %0
Speech or Language Impairments	27.1%	30.6%	12.7%	13.9%
Other Disabilities	16.1%	11.9%	11.9%	10.6%
Other Health Impairments	14.7%	12.3%	15.1%	14.4%
Autism	6.0%	5.0%	1.9%	2.8%
Total Sum of Black Students with Disabilities	218	219	220	213

Note. From *Students With Disabilities in Connecticut: A Statistical Report*, by Connecticut State Department of Education, 2007-2011, Hartford, CT: Author.

I followed the process outlined by both Creswell (2003) and J. Patton (2001) for data analysis, which included identifying key words and phrases, organizing the information thematically, interpreting the meanings of phrases, and analyzing the meanings for what they revealed. The goal of this approach is to uncover the meaning that an individual attributes to his or her understanding in a systematic way, using themes or clusters of data.

Theoretical Framework

Critical Race Theory suggested that over-representation cannot be solved without carefully considering how the racism experienced by Blacks drives the process (Delgado

& Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Hilliard (1999) noted that the knowledge and skills to educate all children already exist. However, the will of society to teach all children is questionable. Hilliard further concluded that because we have lived historically in an oppressive society, educational issues tend to be framed as technical issues, which denies their political origin and meaning.

CRT is an approach that seeks to transform the relationship that exists among race, racism, and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Given the often subtle way in which race and racism operate, it is imperative that educational researchers explore the role of race when examining the educational experiences of Black students. CRT is a useful perspective from which to explore such phenomena.

This study discussed ways that the five prominent tenets of CRT, namely Counter Storytelling, Permanence of Racism, Whiteness as Property, Interest Convergence, and Critique of Liberalism, can be helpful in illuminating institutional policies, practices, and structures that promote racism and racial inequity in schools, specifically as they relate to the referral of Black students to special education.

The data revealed that four of the five prominent tenets of CRT were evident in the results of interviews with teachers. The specific tenets included, Counter Storytelling, Permanence of Racism, Interest Convergence, and Critique of Liberalism.

Counter Storytelling focuses on a narrative that shines the spotlight on racism to counter accepted notions or myths held by members of the majority culture. Teachers in this study spoke negatively about students and their families. They appeared to not feel the need to filter their comments. Teachers shared that many families do not care about their students or their education. Furthermore, the teachers in this study mentioned that

families are never available to attend parent/teacher conferences, or other school events. In an attempt to counter comments made by teachers, I asked if they ever considered that many Black families have to work two and three jobs in order to support their children and to make ends meet? The comments from teachers seemed to be based on stereotypes and their own personal beliefs, values, and norms. Another one of the basic premises of CRT is the permanence of racism in society or as Bell (1992) states, "Racism is a permanent component of American life" (p. 13). Many of teachers' comments in this study were embedded with the permanence of racism. Teachers in this study had low expectations of Black students and seemed to think that they could not achieve high academic standards. Teachers mentioned that many Black students needed a different curriculum, other than the high-quality curriculum that other students are receiving. They also made assumptions about Black students (e.g., Black students do not belong in gifted programs, Black students are referred to special education in order to get the extra support and help they need). Teachers in this study seemed to be unaware of their own racial consciousness, prejudices, and biases.

The next tenet of CRT is interest convergence or self-interest. Bell (1980) contends that these very basic rights came only inasmuch as they converged with the self-interests of Whites. Citing the limited and uncertain gains of the *Brown* decision, Bell articulated that losses in terms of human capital by way of the dismissal of scores of Black teachers and administrators, school closings in Black neighborhoods, and the limited access to high-quality curricula in the form of tracking, inflated admissions criteria, and other factors, have made the so-called "gains" from *Brown* questionable. Many teachers in this study mentioned that Black students are usually

referred to special education to get the necessary help that they need. They discussed that Black students work best in small-group settings and benefit from one-on-one instruction. In referring Black students to special education, students will be essentially removed from the general education classroom. Teachers in turn would have smaller classes and be able to focus on those students who are reading on grade level, are well behaved, and are able to follow the norms and expectations of the classroom.

The last tenet of CRT is the critique of liberalism (Williams, 1997), as in (a) the notion of color blindness; (b) neutrality of the law; and (c) incremental change. Equal opportunity for all without favoritism is a desirable goal to pursue; however, given the history of racism in the U.S., rights and opportunities were both awarded and withheld based almost exclusively on race. The notion of color-blindness fails to take into consideration the persistence and permanence of racism and the construction of people of color as "Other." There was evidence of the critique of liberalism in the interview responses of teachers in regard to the notion of color-blindness. Teachers in this study commented that they did not see the color of their students. All of the students were viewed as the same. Living in a politically correct society, teachers appeared to have thought that not seeing the color of their students was the most appropriate response to make. However, they did not seem to realize that by saying that they did not see the color of their students was admitting that they do not see their students.

Results

This study used a qualitative research study method to examine how teachers described their working environment to provide services for students and how teachers described the ways they provide services for students has changed as a result of their

school's/district's participation in *Courageous Conversations About Race*. Several broad themes emerged from one-on-one semi-structured interviews with teachers. The four predominant themes that emerged included: (a) A Teacher's Dilemma; (b) I See Color Now; (c) Teacher Mis-Match; and (d) Affirming a Need for Ongoing Professional Development.

Research Question #1: How do teachers describe the classroom challenges that lead them to refer students to special education? This question is answered primarily by the theme "A Teacher's Dilemma."

A Teacher's Dilemma

The teachers in this study described their work environment to provide services for students as one filled with complex decisions that rely on many different kinds of knowledge and judgment. On a daily basis you find them managing between three to four reading groups, teaching below-grade-level students, large class sizes, dealing with challenging student behaviors, school and district priorities, and federal mandates and regulations. The teachers in this study expressed that they constantly are being challenged with a range of dilemmas from designing differentiated lesson plans to meet the individual needs of their students, to the organization and management of their classrooms. They are repeatedly in a dilemma regarding the implementation of various instructional strategies and methods to meet students' needs. The teachers noted that when students need extra support beyond what they can provide in the general education classroom, or when students are not making academic progress, they are in a dilemma as to what to do and which services would be most appropriate for the student.

The teachers in this study also reported that they are confronted every day with the dilemma of getting extra support for students who are not making progress in the general classroom setting. They further noted that special education was a means of getting additional academic support for struggling students. The teachers shared that many of their students required small-group or one-on-one instruction. Several teachers mentioned that they referred students to special education to get the necessary support they need. In addition, they contended that students of color are referred to special education because that it is the only way they will get the extra help needed.

Given that the average class size consists of 20 to 25 students, this makes it difficult to provide students with the attention that they need in the general education classroom. The implications of large, crowded classrooms are all too clear—issues with classroom management, time on task, and opportunities to provide students with individualized attention are all compromised. Challenging classroom behavior is an especially demanding issue for many of the teachers in this study. The teachers reported that they are persistently confronted with behavioral issues and are in a dilemma as they attempt to balance providing effective instruction and classroom management.

The teachers in this study pointed out that Black students are referred to special education because of behavior and assumptions by the teachers. They further noted that their decision as a teacher to refer a student to special education is not a decision that is taken lightly. In addition, they reported that they do everything possible to meet the individual needs of students prior to a referral for special education is considered.

The teachers in this study remarked that they are also often in a dilemma in meeting the needs of students with language and reading concerns. They commented that

students are referred to special education because of language and low reading skills. Teachers further pointed out that students with English as a Second Language (ESL) are often automatically referred to special education based on language alone. They also reported that many of their Black students are reading below grade level (e.g., reading on the first- or second-grade level) and have issues with language and speech. The teachers noted that they also face dilemmas when students are not performing as well as other students in the classroom and students are often referred to special education because of their inability to produce what is expected of them academically.

To further shape the theme of a *Teacher's Dilemma*, the teachers in this study reported that there are different beliefs about Black students and low expectations. They commented that Black students are not expected to achieve because of low expectations that are placed upon them by schools and a mostly White teaching staff. The teachers shared that the majority of teachers are not a cultural, racial, or socioeconomic reflection of American's changing student demographics.

The teachers in this study further pointed out that a teacher's knowledge and experience of the various cultures of his/her students are essential. They expressed that they help to build a positive relationship between teacher and student. Several teachers remarked that it is important for students to feel that their cultures are validated and honored. Many teachers in this study noted that they felt that there is an over-representation of Black students in special education because of a lack in understanding of their culture.

Some teachers in this study commented that racism was alive in schools, consciously and unconsciously. Many teachers noted that special education was a

superficial means of addressing the real issue—race. They further noted that racism is the "elephant" in the room that needs to be put on the table for discussion. Several teachers shared that Black students are sometimes referred to special education because of their appearance and where the student lives and the language spoken.

Research Question #2: How do teachers describe the changes in their processes, attitudes, and behaviors as a result of their district's participation in *Courageous Conversations About Race?* This is answered in the themes: *I See Color Now*, *Teacher Mis-Match*, and *Affirming a Need for Ongoing Professional Development*.

I See Color Now

The teachers in this study described changes in the ways they provide services for students as a result of their school's/district's participation in *Courageous Conversations About Race*. Several teachers in this study reported that student data are now being reviewed more through the lenses of race. They reported that they are speaking more openly and talking about race. In addition, the teachers noted that they feel comfortable going to their colleagues and initiating a conversation with them about various racial/cultural issues. The teachers shared that they were more careful and conscious as to how they speak about students of color and their families. Several teachers commented that they want to learn more about diversity.

The teachers in this study mentioned that through the follow-up *CC About Race* activities their racial consciousness has been increased. They reported that the activities have taught them that it is okay to see the color of their students and that if they did not see their color, then they did not see their students. Teachers reported that they are discovering many of the deeply held beliefs about race. The teachers also noted that *CC*

About Race has raised their conscious awareness about race. They admitted that they do not know everything about race or even shared similar experiences as their students. Yet, they were open to learning more about the cultures of individual students. In addition, the teachers reported that *CC About Race* increased self-awareness of their own culture, their students, and the culture of other people in general. The teachers expressed that there was always something new to learn and they were more open and willing to expand their own cultural knowledge and experiences.

The teachers reported that when student data are reviewed, they are hearing, "What color is this student?" "Most of the students not making progress are from what sub-group?" In addition, teachers mentioned that they are having more open and honest conversations about race as it relates to their students. The teachers expressed that they are reflecting and having conversations about their own teaching with others. Several teachers in the study shared that they are more aware of who they are as persons of color and their own prejudices/biases that they may bring to the classroom.

The teachers in this study shared that they no longer felt the need to filter their conversations about race. They reported that they were more comfortable discussing race, and what and how they teach. Since *CC About Race,* teachers noticed that they were more culturally aware, they were more open to various perspectives, and their knowledge of race has been heightened. As a result of this awareness, they examined the Connecticut's Mastery Test data by race and gender. In addition, the teachers noted that seeing color was also manifested in lesson design and instruction.

As a result of their participation in *CC About Race,* the teachers reported that the selection of curriculum materials is more intentional. The teachers mentioned that they

reflected more on their own teaching style to ensure that it is culturally relevant. The teachers reported that they shared information about their own cultures with students and asked students questions about their cultures as a way of building relationships and rapport with students.

The teachers noted that many of the stories read in class were about characters from different countries. Several teachers noticed that they were asking students to validate the settings and characters. They noted that many of their students were from Haiti and Mexico. Students were asked such questions as, "Does this look like the Mexico or the Haiti where you are from?" "How is it the same or how is it different?" Several teachers expressed that the majority of curriculum materials being used by schools are written from the perspective of White middle-class men and do not reflect the diversity of the students.

Teacher Mis-Match

The teachers in this study shaped the foundation for this theme by noting that the majority of the teachers in Connecticut were White, female, and from middle-class backgrounds. Moreover, the teachers reported that there was a mis-match between student and teacher. They specifically commented that while the student population is Black or of color and from low-income backgrounds, the teachers are mostly White from middle-class backgrounds.

The teachers in this study noted that there are preconceived ideas and assumptions about students and families. They discussed the important need for teachers to be culturally aware of their students. They further commented that a teacher does not necessarily need to be Black in order to teach students of color, but they need to have a

clear understanding of their own culture and understand the various cultures of their students. The teachers reported that there is a disconnection between the student and teacher.

The teachers in this study reported that a teacher's background is critical to a Black student being referred to special education. They noted that as teachers, we teach who we are and see things through our individual lenses and experiences. The teachers expressed that there are teachers who want students of color to conform to their ways of thinking and behaviors. The teachers acknowledged that they do not know anything about the culture of their students or take the necessary time to get to know their students in order to build relationships and to learn about their cultures.

The teachers in this study noted that *CC About Race* provided them with a different perspective of the over-representation of Black students in special education. The teachers reported that they have a greater understanding of the intersection between race and education. They maintained that by understanding cultural differences, norms, values, and behaviors, the classroom teacher will reduce the number of students of color referred to special education.

The teachers in the study made the point that, as teachers, they teach according to what they know about their own culture and norms. Several teachers noted that they are better teachers today because they are open to the diverse cultures of students and families.

Affirming a Need for Ongoing Professional Development

The teachers in this study reported that many schools and teachers are not prepared to meet an ever-changing diverse population of students. They mentioned that

professional development training is essential. The teachers further noted that *CC About Race* affirmed for them a need for ongoing professional training about different cultures. The teachers further commented that the seminars brought to the surface a need for training to assist them with effective instructional strategies and an understanding of different cultures, norms, and values. They also maintained that there is a significant need for professional development in the areas of race, diversity, culturally relevant instruction, and racial equity.

With the changing demographic landscape, the teachers in this study mentioned that they need ongoing, on-site job-embedded professional development tools and strategies to meet the ever-changing needs of students. Many of the teachers shared that the lack of training in cultural diversity contributed to the over-representation of Black students in special education. The teachers further noted that there was a need for more targeted professional development. They expressed that ongoing teacher training was needed to meet the changing demands of the classroom.

The teachers in the study reported that the demographic shifts in the student population along with accountability legislation have led to changes in school curriculum and instruction. Schools were being held accountable for the improved achievement of all students. However, they expressed that meeting the educational needs of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds was a major challenge for most teachers and professional development was needed.

Discussion

Connecticut has struggled to address over-identification and disproportion in special education for a number of years. While the state's overall prevalence rates for

identification of students in need of special education have declined during the past decade, there are proportional differences among Connecticut school districts within racial and ethnic segments of student populations. Specifically, data submitted to the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) indicated that African American and Hispanic/Latino students are two to three times more likely to be identified for special education than are their White peers in the categories of emotional disturbance, learning disabilities, and intellectually disabled.

In response to this ongoing concern about the over-representation of Black students in special education, the CSDE and SERC designed an intentional program effort to address the issue of the over-representation of Black students in special education. They worked closely with various districts in an engaging professional-development program. The program was designed to identify, define, and examine the connection between race and student achievement. In conjunction with Glenn E. Singleton, Director of Pacific Educational Group and SERC Coaches, participating districts have engaged in *Courageous Conversations About Race* as a means to examine philosophies, polices, procedures, and practices in their district, schools, and classrooms that reflect institutionalized racism (Pacific Education Group, 2004). The overall goal of an intervention program was an effort to reduce the number of Black students being referred and placed in special education. Although the intentional intervention program did not necessarily reduce the number of Black students being referred and placed in special education as expected (see Tables 2-4), it did yield other results.

1. The teachers in the study reported that they were speaking more openly about race with their colleagues.

2.   The teachers in the study were building relationships with students by sharing their racial autobiographies with them and asking students questions about their culture.

3.   The teachers in the study were seeing the color of their students, instead of saying that they did not see color, only the students whom they teach.

4.   The teachers in the study reported that they were reflecting on their own teaching style and methods. They were embedding culturally relevant pedagogy into their lesson design. Their lessons were more intentional.

5.   The teachers in the study acknowledged a need for targeted ongoing on-site professional development with follow-up to assist them in meeting the ever-changing diversity in our schools. They were open and willing to learn more about diversity.

CC About Race was a means to examine philosophies, polices, procedures, and practices in districts, schools, and classrooms that reflect institutionalized racism. It was designed to address what educators, families, and other community group members can do to improve teaching and learning across racial lines. *CC About Race* was one strategy to assist educators in addressing the issue of the over-representation of Black students in special education. However, leaders must facilitate opportunities for members of their staff and community to courageously dialogue about the intersection of race and education. The understandings generated by such dialogue served as the platform to develop structural systems, policies, and practices that lead to higher student achievement.

Table 2

Special Education Referrals: K-12 Students With Disabilities by Race/Ethnicity, District A

Disability Category	Students With Disabilities by Race/Ethnicity 2007-2008	Students With Disabilities by Race/Ethnicity 2008-2009	Students With Disabilities by Race/Ethnicity 2009-2010	Students With Disabilities by Race/Ethnicity 2010-2011
Learning Disability	23.6%	23.7%	20.7%	19.2%
Intellectual Disabilities	3.6%	3.9%	4.6%	4.4%
Emotional Disturbance	13.2%	10.6%	11.2%	10.5%
Speech or Language Impairments	23.8%	26.3%	28.0%	28.7%
Other Disabilities	14.5%	10.3%	11.2%	10.0%
Other Health Impairments	10.8%	17.3%	15.8%	17.3%
Autism	7.6%	8.0%	8.5%	10.0%
Total Sum of Black Students with Disabilities	380	388	411	411

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Table 3

Special Education Referrals: K-12 Students With Disabilities by Race/Ethnicity, District B

Disability Category	Students With Disabilities by Race/Ethnicity 2007-2008	Students With Disabilities by Race/Ethnicity 2008-2009	Students With Disabilities by Race/Ethnicity 2009-2010	Students With Disabilities by Race/Ethnicity 2010-2011
Learning Disability	38.8%	38.2%	37.7%	35.0%
Intellectual Disabilities	7.8%	7.8%	7.1%	8.3%
Emotional Disturbance	12.1%	13.2%	13.7%	15.0%
Speech or Language Impairments	10.7%	12.7%	12.7%	13.9%
Other Disabilities	16.1%	11.9%	11.9%	10.6%
Other Health Impairments	14.7%	12.3%	15.1%	14.4%
Autism	6.0%	5.0%	1.9%	2.8%
Total Sum of Black Students with Disabilities	218	219	220	213

Note. From Students With Disabilities in Connecticut: A Statistical Report, by Connecticut State Department of Education, 2007-2011, Hartford, CT: Author

Table 4

Special Education Referrals: K-12 Students With Disabilities by Race/Ethnicity, District C

Disability Category	Students With Disabilities by Race/Ethnicity 2007-2008	Students With Disabilities by Race/Ethnicity 2008-2009	Students With Disabilities by Race/Ethnicity 2009-2010	Students With Disabilities by Race/Ethnicity 2010-2011
Learning Disability	24.3%	30.6%	37.7%	35.0%
Intellectual Disabilities	2.3%	1.4%	7.1%	8.3%
Emotional Disturbance	9.6%	8.2%	13.7%	15. %0
Speech or Language Impairments	27.1%	30.6%	12.7%	13.9%
Other Disabilities	16.1%	11.9%	11.9%	10.6%
Other Health Impairments	14.7%	12.3%	15.1%	14.4%
Autism	6.0%	5.0%	1.9%	2.8%
Total Sum of Black Students with Disabilities	218	219	220	213

Note. From Students With Disabilities in Connecticut: A Statistical Report, by Connecticut State Department of Education, 2007-2011, Hartford, CT: Author

It goes without saying that teachers play a critical role in the life of their students. Both through a quality relationship (Ladson-Billings, 2000) and as "cultural agents" (J. Patton, 1998), students and teachers need to understand that they are cultural agents; they bring their own culture to the classroom and it influences how they perceive their students and how students perceive them. The research of Irvine (1990) and Ladson-Billings (1994) documented the critical role that teachers play in the achievement of students of color. "Not only do teachers influence the achievement and cognitive development of African American students; they also influence their self-concept and attitudes" (Irvine, 2003, p. 72). Students from culturally diverse backgrounds tend to be

more dependent on teachers than do their other-race peers and tend to perform poorly in

school when they do not like their teachers (Johnson & Prom-Jackson, 1986). Irvine

(2003) states,

> It does matter who the teacher is. Indeed, we teach who we are. Teachers bring to
> their work values, opinions, and beliefs; their prior socialization and present
> experiences; and their race, gender, ethnicity, and social class. These attributes
> and characteristics influence teachers' perceptions of themselves as professionals.
> (p. 46)

Ferguson (2003) noted that content, pedagogy, and relationships affect how well

ethnic and racial minority students learn. He contends that research has found that

students' relationship with their teachers differs by their backgrounds and affects their

overall academic achievement. Sather and Henze (2001) concluded that understanding

the students who walk within the hallways of schools is as important as the level of skills

each teacher brings with him or her. Building positive relationships can be linked to

increased student achievement. Schools can improve racial relations between principals,

teachers, parents, students, and the community by building bridges across the great racial

gap, thus implying the importance of reaching and developing strong interpersonal

relationships before teaching (Sather & Henze, 2001).

In a politically correct world, we are supposed to pretend that we do not notice

differences between people. But in our effort to make everyone feel good about how

racially sensitive we are toward others, we delude ourselves in thinking that race doesn't

matter anymore. Paying attention to the cultural experience of students is important,

given the differences between the demographics of American students and their teachers.

According to reports from the National Center for Education Statistics (2005), roughly

80% of American teachers are White, while children of color make up more than 40% of the student body.

Critical Race Theory adds that cultural awareness does not and should not include color-blindness or race-neutral policies. Liberalism does not mean that teachers should be color-blind or race-neutral because these two approaches ignore the importance of race and racism within American society. Color-blindness would devalue the experiences and realities of students of color by denying that race preferences and racism exist. Instead, teachers need to be aware of the White power and privilege system in American education. When teachers acknowledge that the system is racist, they can move forward to not only avoid socially reproducing the racism, but also to rethink the system, recognize their actions in it, change them if need be, and embrace all cultures as equally important.

Cole (1995) reported that good instruction is good instruction, regardless of students' racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic backgrounds. Unfortunately, numerous barriers can prevent lower income and minority students from receiving good instruction. These obstructions to effective instructional practices take the form of institutional programming, such as tracking, and as personal opinions, such as lack of cultural understanding. Research supports the belief that the effectiveness of a teacher, the attitude of a teacher, and the verbal and non-verbal expectations of a teacher are instrumental in tearing down barriers that interfere with effective instruction.

The over-representation of Black students in special education is an adaptive challenge that needs to move educators to do things differently. As the nation's demographics shift, the sight of a White teacher leaning over the desk of a "Brown or

Black" student is likely to become more and more common. In order to be effective, teachers have to learn about the cultural experiences of their students, while using these experiences as a foundation for teaching. Consistent with the literature, the teachers in this study noted that the cultural background knowledge and experience of a teacher is important. When a teacher understands a student's background, culture, and language, and uses these characteristics as strengths to build upon, the student is validated and more likely to succeed. Furthermore, teachers who understand their students' cultures and backgrounds are better able to design instruction that best meets their needs (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

This interest convergence, as defined by Critical Race Theory (CRT), acknowledges "the legitimacy of cultural heritages of different ethnic groups, both as legacies that affect students'" dispositions, attitudes, and approaches to learning and as worthy content to be taught in the formal curriculum (Gay, 2000, p. 29). The reality of today's classrooms is that a teacher will encounter students with identities different from his or her own (e.g., a middle-class White woman teaching a class of Native American/American Indian students), or, the classroom itself will be culturally diverse (i.e., composed of Black, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, and White students).

There are many districts that are attempting to fix the over-representation with (e.g., an adaptive issue) technical solutions. Technical solutions are the things that we already know how to do: Those things that have worked in the past and we are really good at them and are what we have always done. The problem arises when doing what we have always done, regardless of how well we are doing it, is not working. Heifetz and

Linsky (2002) call this "adaptive challenges." Adaptive challenges require that we learn new ways, not simply get better at the old ways.

We are reminded by Hilliard (2004) that in order to eradicate the racially predictability of the achievement gap, educators must have the skill, will, and knowledge to uproot the underlying factors that contribute to the predictability of the achievement gaps. He further commented that to pull up "these truths," we need to talk about institutionalized practices that perpetuate the isolation of students of color in an educational system that historically was not created for them. Hilliard (1999) noted that the knowledge and skills to educate all children already exist. However, the will of society to teach all children is questionable. He further concluded that because we have lived historically in an oppressive society, educational issues tend to be framed as technical issues, which deny their political origin and meaning.

This study supported the need for ongoing job-embedded professional development for teachers. Teacher education programs and professional development efforts must prepare teachers to work with culturally diverse students. These efforts must focus on teacher expectations in numerous of forms (e.g., biases, stereotypes, fears) so that deficit thinking and orientation are reduced and, ideally, eliminated. Teachers must participate in ongoing substantive self-reflection, and examine their biases toward and expectations of Black students. Ninety percent of U.S. public school teachers are White; most grew up and attended school in middle-class, English-speaking, predominantly White communities and received their teacher preparation in predominantly White colleges and universities (Gay et al., 2003). Thus, many White educators simply have not

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acquired the experiential and education background that would prepare them for the growing diversity of their students (Ladson-Billings, 2002; Vavrus, 2002).

It resonated with me that schools and districts going through *CC About Race* need to understand the change process. Change is development in use, and effective change takes time (Fullan, 1990). As a result of the districts' participation in SERC's program, *CC About Race* will eventually see changes in the over-representation of Black students in special education. Participating districts/schools going through the intentional intervention program reinforced for me the need for ongoing job-embedded professional development with follow-up technical assistance in order to see substantial changes in referral rates.

Hargreaves (1992) defined school culture as the existence of interplay between three factors: the attitudes and beliefs of persons both inside the school and in the external environment, the cultural norms of the school, and the relationships between persons in the school. Each of these factors may present barriers to change or a bridge to long-lasting implementation of school improvement (Hargreaves, 1992). I concur with the research on school culture that the attitudes and beliefs of persons in the school shape that culture. My research study confirmed for me the importance and need to create a positive school culture. The successful implementation of an initiative or innovation is dependent on the school culture. According to Fullan (1991), factors affecting implementation "form a system of variables that interact to determine success or failure" (p. 67).

Yukl (2002) noted that a leader can do many things to facilitate the successful implementation of change. Effective leaders establish moral purpose, build relationships,

generate knowledge, understand the change process, and build coherence. Educational change is technically simple and socially complex, and never a checklist. There are no step-by-step shortcuts to transformation. It involves the hard day-to-day work of re-culturing (Fullan, 2001). Central to systems change is climate.

The teachers in the study reported that the demographic shifts in the student population along with accountability legislation have led to changes in school curriculum and instruction. Schools are being held accountable for the improved achievement of all students. However, they expressed that meeting the educational needs of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds is a major challenge for most teachers and professional development is needed.

Over the years, incremental change has occurred regarding the over-representation of Black students in special education, yet limited in scope and usually an extension of the past and does not disrupt past patterns (Quinn, 1996). On the other hand, deep change is needed and requires new ways of thinking and behaving.

Conclusions

While this qualitative study showed promise for identifying factors contributing to the over-representation of Black students in special education, engaging in courageous conversations about race is clearly not an institutionalized practice in the schools represented in this study. However, as we consider the statistical facts, it is difficult not to think about racial inequality as a predominant factor causing today's achievement gaps. It is our responsibility, as educators, to garner the courage to disaggregate and interpret the

data through a "cultural eye" (Irvine, 2003). Only then can we engage in *courageous conversations about race in order to improve student achievement.*

Ninety percent of U.S. public school teachers are White; most grew up and attended school in middle-class, English-speaking, predominantly White communities and received their teacher preparation in predominantly White colleges and universities (Gay et al., 2003). Teacher education programs and professional development efforts must prepare teachers to work with culturally diverse students, namely Black students. These efforts must focus on teacher expectations in a myriad of forms (e.g., biases, stereotypes, fears, etc.) so that deficit thinking and orientation are reduced and, ideally, eliminated. Teachers must participate in ongoing substantive self-reflection, and examine their bias relative to expectations of Black students.

Qualitative research uses a naturalistic approach that seeks to understand phenomena as they appear in natural settings (J. Patton, 2001). This qualitative study examined how teachers describe their working environment and how teachers describe the ways they provide services for students and have changed as a result of their school's/district's participation in *Courageous Conversations About Race*.

Recommendations

For Schools

1. School districts and teacher preparation institutions must assume their important roles in educating teachers for the nation's increasingly multiracial student population.

2.   Schools should examine current school philosophies, policies, structures, and practices through a lens of race and equity to ensure that they are designed to meet the needs of all learners.

3.   School must examine their culturally based viewpoints, attitudes, and behaviors and recognize how their cultural beliefs may conflict with the cultural beliefs of their students (Obiakor, 1999).

4.   Schools should regularly engage in interracial dialogue through *Courageous Conversation* (Singleton & Linton, 2006b, p. 16) in order to increase individual racial consciousness and explore the impact of race in the lives of both students and teachers and expose and address entrenched attitudes that hold students (and teachers) back.

5.   Schools must engage in a variety of actions to address the disproportional use of exclusionary disciplinary practices with students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Townsend, 2000).

6.   Schools must engage in ongoing professional development and follow up technical assistant that includes a monitoring and evaluation in order to impact and effectiveness.

<div align="center">For Teachers</div>

1.   Teachers identify a variation of cultures within the classroom. Thus, by embracing the reality of diversity through such identification, seeing the color of their students is critical in creating an environment for equitable learning.

2.   Teachers should learn about the cultural experiences of their students, while using these experiences as a foundation for teaching.

3. In addition to promoting learning and academic achievement, teachers must become culturally relevant and foster and support the development of cultural competence. Cultural competence refers to the ability to function effectively in one's culture of origin (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

4. Teachers need to keep what is best for the child at the center of their decision-making.

5. Culturally responsive teachers must feel a strong sense of responsibility for all students, including students referred for or already placed in special education (Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

6. Teachers must build bridges of meaningfulness between home and school experiences and lived socio-cultural realities.

7. Teachers must use a wide variety of instructional strategies that are connected to different learning styles.

8. Teachers must encourage students to know and praise their own and each other's cultural heritages; and incorporate multicultural information, resources, and materials in all the subjects and skills routinely taught in schools (Gay, 2000).

Implications and Suggestions for Further Study

This study provides a basis for the examination of current local and state policies, practices, and philosophies regarding culturally responsive educational systems and informs pedagogical, curricular, assessment, and professional development. Specifically, the results of this study will assist the CT State Department of Education (CSDE) in their focused-monitoring efforts of local public schools in the area of over-representation of

Black and Hispanic/Latino students in special education. In addition, the results will

assist the State Education Resource Center (SERC) in the design of job-embedded and

state-wide professional-development activities in order to be more responsive to the

needs of local public schools in the following areas: (a) early intervening services; (b)

cultural-relevant instruction; and (c) the over-representation of Black students in special

education.

APPENDIX A

CONNECTICUT'S DISTRICT REFERENCE GROUPS (DRGs)

Connecticut's District Reference Groups (DRGs)

District Reference Groups (DRGs) are groups of districts that have similar student and family background characteristics. The State Department of Education (SDE) developed DRGs to assist in reporting and analyzing school district data. They will be used in SDE reports to place district resources into perspective. They replace ERGs, which were first developed using 1980 census data and were updated in 1996 when 1990 census data were available and analyzed. The state's 166 school districts and three academies have been divided into nine groups, based on indicators of socioeconomic status, indicators of need and enrollment. Because both the socioeconomic status and needs of people in neighborhoods or schools within a district may vary significantly, DRGs are used only to compare data that are aggregated to the district level.

The SDE used data elements from the 2000 Census that were based on the families of students attending public schools and from the 2004 Public School Information System (PSIS) data base. Three of the data elements - median family income, percentage of parents with a bachelor's degree or higher and percentage of children's parents holding jobs in executive, managerial or professional occupations - are measures of socioeconomic status. Three others (percentage of children living in families with a single parent, the percentage of children enrolled in public schools whose families have an income that makes them eligible to receive free or reduced-price meals and percentage of children whose families speak a language other than English at home) are indicators of need. Enrollment in the district in 2004 was a minor factor in the analysis.

DRG A: Darien, Easton, New Canaan, Redding, Regional District 9, Ridgefield, Weston, Westport, Wilton

DRG B: Avon, Brookfield, Cheshire, Fairfield, Farmington, Glastonbury, Granby, Greenwich, Guilford, Madison, Monroe, New Fairfield, Newtown, Orange, Regional District 5, Regional District 15, Simsbury, South Windsor, Trumbull, West Hartford, Woodbridge

DRG C: Andover, Barkhamsted, Bethany, Bolton, Canton, Columbia, Cornwall, Ellington, Essex, Hebron, Mansfield, Marlborough, New Hartford, Oxford, Pomfret, Regional District 4, Regional District 7, Regional District 8, Regional District 10, Regional District 12, Regional District 13, Regional District 14, Regional District 17, Regional District 18, Regional District 19, Salem, Sherman, Somers, Suffield, Tolland

DRG D: Berlin, Bethel, Branford, Clinton, Colchester, Cromwell, East Granby, East Hampton, East Lyme, Ledyard, Milford, Newington, New Milford, North Haven, Old Saybrook, Rocky Hill, Shelton, Southington, Stonington, Wallingford, Waterford, Watertown, Wethersfield, Windsor

DRG E: Ashford, Bozrah, Brooklyn, Canaan, Chaplin, Chester, Colebrook, Coventry, Deep River, Eastford, East Haddam, Franklin, Hampton, Hartland, Kent, Lebanon, Lisbon, Litchfield, Norfolk, North Branford, North Stonington, Portland, Preston, Regional District 1, Regional District 6, Regional District 16, Salisbury, Scotland, Sharon, Thomaston, Union, Westbrook, Willington, Woodstock, Woodstock Academy

DRG F: Canterbury, East Windsor, Enfield, Griswold, Montville, North Canaan, Plainville, Plymouth, Regional District 11, Seymour, Sprague, Stafford, Sterling, Thompson, Voluntown, Windsor Locks, Wolcott

DRG G: Bloomfield, Bristol, East Haven, Gilbert Academy, Groton, Hamden, Killingly, Manchester, Middletown, Naugatuck, Norwich Free Academy, Plainfield, Putnam, Stratford, Torrington, Vernon, Winchester

DRG H: Ansonia, Danbury, Derby, East Hartford, Meriden, Norwalk, Norwich, Stamford, West Haven

DRG I: Bridgeport , Hartford, New Britain, New Haven, New London, Waterbury, Windham

REFERENCE LIST

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