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Minority Students in Gifted and Special Education: Report of the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences. Overview

This overview is distributed to encourage its recipients to obtain the full report, and to alert faculty members at minority institutions of higher education to its implications for personnel preparation. The report's contents are as follows:

Executive summary

I. Setting the stage

1. Setting the context
2. Representation of minority students in special and gifted education

II. Pregnancy to preschool: Early influences on cognition and behavior

3. Influences on cognitive and behavioral development
4. Early intervention programs

III. From general to specialized education: Why and how students are placed

5. The general education context
6. The legal context and the referral process
7. Assessment practices, definitions, and classification criteria
8. Alternative approaches to assessment

IV. Improving outcomes

9. Weighing the benefits of placement
10. Recommendations

References, biographical sketches, and index

The web site offers a slow download and also shows how to purchase the report for \$44.50 online at: <http://www.nap.edu/books/0309074398/html/> It may also be purchased by mail or phone: National Academy Press, 2101 Constitution Avenue NW, Lockbox 285, Washington, DC 20055; 202-334-3313 (in the Washington DC metro area) or 1-800-624-6242.

National Research Council. (2002). *Minority students in special and gifted education*. Committee on Minority Representation in Special Education. M. Suzanne Donovan and Christopher T. Cross, Editors. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Overview of Findings

In January 2002, the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences released a pre-publication copy of its new report, *Minority Students in Gifted and Special Education*, which addresses disproportionality not only in special education but also in gifted education (where students of color are under-represented). The Council found special education enrollments in the following proportions: Asian/Pacific Islander, 5 percent; Hispanic, 11 percent; white, 12 percent; American Indian, 13 percent; African American, 14 percent. Although placements in the "mental retardation" category are approximately 25 percent lower than in 1979, the disproportion of African Americans in this category has continued. In addition, percentages of children identified as "learning disabled" have doubled in the past 20 years (from 3 percent to 6 percent nationally), and this category includes the greatest number of students of all races.

Among the other findings of the National Research Council are the following:

* Within the context of family and community, minority children are more likely than white children to be in poverty, which is associated with a variety of risk factors, such as poor nutrition and family/child care situations that do not stimulate cognitive and social development. Aside from poverty, other risk factors are involved. African American children at all income levels are more likely than other children to experience exposure to harmful levels of lead. Prenatal exposure to tobacco and alcohol are more prevalent among children of American Indian and Alaskan Native descent. The Council points out, however, that high-quality early intervention can improve the academic success of at-risk children and reduce their need for special education. The report places great emphasis on literacy and reading instruction at early ages.

* Reading difficulties and behavior problems are the reasons most often given by teachers when they refer children for special education evaluation. A body of evidence has shown that early identification and intervention are more effective in improving behavior and achievement than are later steps. In the high-incidence categories (learning disability, mental retardation, behavior disorders), however, identification for special education is typically delayed until children fail in school -- even though screening mechanisms are available for early identification of children at risk for reading and behavior problems. "Waiting to fail" actually leads to failure because children do not receive early supports. Further, when supports are delivered only after several years of failure, they are less effective in improving achievement and behavior.

* Research underscores the importance of context with regard to children's learning and behavior. A child may perform differently in response to different levels of teacher support, and negative behaviors can be reduced by effective classroom management but often intensify when management is ineffective.

* The process that general education teachers use to refer students for special education evaluation is often subjective, and there are procedural flaws in the assessment of learning disabilities and emotional disturbance. Again, context is important. The context surrounding assessment (including the student's test-taking skills and cultural compatibility with the school's norms and expectations) can negatively or positively affect scores on classroom tests and standardized assessments.

* Although some interventions are demonstrably effective in producing good results for students who have learning problems, the report questions how widely schools actually use validated interventions, and whether minority students have less exposure to high-quality interventions than white students. Research suggests that teacher competence and parental involvement in education correlate with high-quality interventions, but that both of these are less prevalent in low-income districts with high concentrations of minority children.

Recommendations

The complete text of the recommendations, with much more detail and extensive discussion, is located in Chapter 10. The following verbatim excerpts convey the essence of each recommendation. The Alliance Project has added bold type to draw attention to some implications for personnel preparation.

Special Education Eligibility (SE)

"SE.1. The committee recommends that federal guidelines for special education eligibility should be changed to encourage **better integrated general and special education services**. We propose that eligibility ensue when a student exhibits large differences from typical levels of performance in one or more domain(s) *and* with evidence of insufficient response to **high-quality interventions in the relevant domain(s) of functioning in school settings**. **These domains include achievement (e.g., reading, writing, math), social behavior, and emotional regulation**. As is currently the case, eligibility determination would also require a judgment by a multidisciplinary team, including parents, that special education is needed" (p. 10-5).

"SE.2. The committee recommends that states adopt a universal screening and multi-tiered intervention strategy in general education to enable **early identification and intervention with children at risk for reading problems**" (p. 10-9)

"SE.3. The committee recommends that states launch large-scale pilot programs in conjunction with universities or research centers to test the plausibility and productivity of universal behavior management interventions, early behavior screening, and techniques to work with children at risk for behavior problems" (p. 10-10).

"SE.4. While the United States has a strong tradition of state control of education, the committee recommends that the federal government support widespread adoptions of early screening and intervention in the states" (p. 10-11).

Gifted and Talented Eligibility (GT)

"GT.1. The committee recommends a research program oriented toward development of a broader knowledge base on early identification and intervention with children who exhibit advanced performance in the verbal or quantitative realm, or who exhibit other advanced abilities" (p. 10-12).

Teacher Quality (TQ)

"TQ.1. **State certification or licensure requirements for teachers should systematically require:**

- *" Competency in understanding and implementing reasonable norms and expectations for students, and core competencies in instructional delivery of academic content.
- * "Course work and practicum experience in understanding, creating, and modifying an educational environment to meet children's individual needs.
- * "Competency in behavior management in classroom and non-instructional school settings.
- * "Instruction in functional analysis and routine behavioral assessment of students.
- * "Instruction in effective intervention strategies for students who fail to meet minimal standards for successful educational performance, or who substantially exceed minimal standards.
- * "Course work and practicum experiences to prepare teachers to deliver culturally responsive instruction. More specifically, teachers should be familiar with the beliefs, values, cultural practices, discourse styles, and other features of students' lives that may have an impact on classroom participation and success and be prepared to use this information in designing instruction" (p. 10-15).

In addition, "states should require **rigorous professional development for all practicing teachers, administrators, and educational support personnel** to assist them in addressing the varied needs of students who differ substantially from the norm in achievement and/or behavior. The professional development of

administrators and educational support personnel should include enhanced capabilities in the improvement and evaluation of teacher instruction with respect to meeting students' individual needs" (p. 10-15).

"TQ.2. State or professional association **approval for educator instructional programs should include requirements for faculty competence** in the current literature and research on child and adolescent learning and development, and on successful assessment, instructional, and intervention strategies, particularly for atypical learners and students with gifts and disabilities" (p. 10-16).

"TQ.3 A **credential as a school psychologist or special education teacher should require instruction in classroom observation/assessment and in teacher support to work with a struggling student or with a gifted student.** These skills should be considered as critical to their professional role as the administration and interpretation of tests are now considered" (p. 10-16).

The committee points out that "**three significant challenges -- unresponsive educator preparation programs, a failure to infuse scientific advances into local practice, and the impending shortage of qualified individuals** willing to work in educational settings -- present the potential for significant barriers to the effective implementation of the committee's recommendations" (p. 10-17).

"TQ.4. The committee recommends that a national advisory panel be convened in an institutional environment that is protected from political influence to **study the quality and currency of programs that now exist to train teachers for general, special, and gifted education.** The panel should address:

- * "The mechanisms for keeping instructional programs current and of high quality.
- * "The standards and requirements of these programs.
- * "The applicability of instructional programs to the demands of classroom practice.
- * "The long-term influence of the programs in successfully promoting educational achievement for preK, elementary, and secondary students" (p. 10-17).

Biological and Social Risk Factors in Early Childhood (EC)

"EC.1. The committee recommends that all high-risk children have access to high-quality early childhood interventions" (p. 10-19).

"For children at highest risk, these interventions should include family support, health services, and sustained, high-quality care and cognitive stimulation right from birth. Preschool children (ages 4 and 5) who are eligible for Head Start should have access to a Head Start or other publicly funded preschool program. Intervention should target services to the level of individual need, including high cognitive challenge for the child who exceeds normative performance. The proposed expansion should better coordinate existing federal programs such as Head Start and Early Head Start, and IDEA parts C and B, as well as state-initiated programs that meet equal or higher standards" (p. 10-19).

"EC.2. The committee recommends that the federal government launch a large-scale, rigorous, sustained research and development program in an institutional environment that has the capacity to bring together excellent professionals in research, program development, professional development, and child care/preschool practice" (pp. 10-19 and 10-20).

Data Collection (DC)

"DC.1. The committee recommends that the Department of Education conduct a single, well designed data collection effort to monitor both the number of children receiving services through IDEA and through programs for the gifted and talented, and the characteristics of those children of concern to civil rights enforcement efforts" (p. 10-20).

"DC.2. The committee recommends that a national advisory panel be convened to design the collection of nationally representative longitudinal data that would allow for more informed study of minority disproportion in special education and gifted and talented programs" (p. 10-22).

Research and Development (RD)

"RD.1. We recommend that education research and development, including that related to special and gifted education, should be substantially expanded to carry promising findings and **validated** practices through to classroom applicability. This includes research on scaling up promising practices from research sites to widespread use" (p. 10-24).

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