

Conceptual Framework to Address Disproportionate Representation of Minorities in Special Education

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Abstract:

Disproportionate representation of minorities in special education is a long-standing problem in American schools. The attributes of minority families and the way schools tend to operate often put minority children at risk of placement in special education. Special education is an asset for children who truly need it; but it is a disservice for children who simply need quality regular education. This paper surveys the literature for best teaching practices for appropriately reaching and teaching minority students. The practices are formulated into a conceptual framework for friendly use in the educational domain. Motivation, Assessment, Teaching, and Evaluation (MATE) are the principal components of the framework. It is posited that if MATE is effectively employed in teaching minority students, more of them will be adequately served in regular education classes and fewer will need to be referred for special education. Considerable evidence lends support to this proposition. A strong case is made for purposeful, structured teaching and learning in public schools.

Keywords: assessment, evaluation, minorities, motivation, regular education, special education, teaching

INTRODUCTION

The idea of conceptual frameworks is not new to special education. The concept dates back to the 1960s when Levine (1961) suggested a conceptual framework related to mental and physical disabilities from which theoretical propositions could be developed relative to personal and social development. Another framework was offered to consider some principal issues in special education such as the separation of children with disabilities due to the type of placement (Reynolds, 1962).

It is undisputed that minority students are disproportionately represented in special education. What appears to be lacking is a systematic way of impacting the problem. Numerous studies have been done on best practices for teaching but they are not presented in a domain for friendly use and major impact.

A conceptual framework has the potential for identifying some of the best practices in educating minority students and illustrating them in a manner for easy use in school systems. Thus, this is the focus of the current study.

The conceptual framework MATE has been designed to capture the best that the teaching discipline has to offer in educating minority students. Schools must effectively motivate, assess, teach, and evaluate all students. In essence, schools must motivate deeply, assess judiciously, teach enthusiastically, and evaluate responsibly; less a disproportion of minority end up being referred for special education.

PURPOSE

A clear perspective is essential for the resolution of a problem. Being presented with the issue of overrepresentation of minorities in special education, the purpose of this study was to fashion a conceptual framework for understanding and impacting the problem. The framework is structured into four domains: motivation, assessment, teaching, and evaluation (MATE). The proposition is that if schools sincerely MATE minority students, more of them will excel in general education and fewer will be referred for special education.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This review of literature is presented according to the topics: disproportionate placement of minorities in special education; existing conceptual frameworks in special education; and implications for a conceptual framework for minority students. Further attention is given to best practices for minorities in special education in a subsequent topic.

Disproportionate Placement of Minorities in Special Education

Minority students have long experienced disproportional representation in special education (Mid-Atlantic Equity Center, 2009). Factors cited as contributing to the excessive placement of minority students in special education are (1) inadequate classroom instruction prior to referral to special education; (2) being subjected to inconsistent or arbitrary placement policies and processes; and (3) living in low income communities which where placement in special education is due to the lack of effective schooling options (Harry & Klingner, 2007, 2006). Further amplification is that the over-identification of low-income and minority students for remedial and special education classes and the underrepresentation of diverse students in

gifted and talented programs is reinforced by cross-cultural misunderstanding, assessment bias, and teacher referral processes (Harry & Klingner, 2007, 2006; Ford, et al., 2004; Skiba, et al., 2008).

In order to address disproportionality, educators and policymakers are challenged to consider how to change the identification and placement procedures for special education and gifted programs, and improve services that address the academic needs and achievement of these historically neglected populations. A growing body of research has identified approaches to assessment, cross-cultural curriculum and program implementation, as well as interventions and structural changes to schooling that can improve proportionality when implemented in a culturally responsive manner (Briggs, et al., 2008; Joseph & Ford, 2006). To obviate the need for special education placement, schools need to identify children in need of additional help earlier and improve general education services, in conjunction with measures that improve teacher preparation and address the multiplicity of biological and social factors contributing to disproportionality (Donovan & Cross, 2002).

Herzik (2015) advocated for a nationwide definition for disproportionality to combat overrepresentation of minority students in special education. An examination was made of administrators' approaches for placement and minority students' participation in special education classes. Talbott, Fleming, Karabatsos, and Dobria (2011) studied how race and gender influenced identification of students in the areas of emotional disturbance, learning disabilities, and mental retardation. It was found that race and gender significantly predicted identification in all three areas. However when nested within school context variables, they were not significant predictors; school variables alone predicted identification. School variables (for one or more of the areas) that were crucial were school attendance rate, school mobility rate, teacher education, adequate yearly progress, size and locale of the district, low income families, average teacher salaries, district size, and ratio of pupils to certified staff.

Raines, Dever, Kamphaus, and Roach (2012) found that universal screening practices, as opposed to the usual method of teacher nomination, requiring a teacher, parent, or student to complete a rating scale could reduce disproportionality of minority students identified for emotional and behavior disorders special education programs. A strong case was made for the use of universal screening.

Echevarria, Powers, and Elliott (2004) noted disproportionate representation of minorities in programs of special education has been persistent for years and that the label has negative effects for the child when it comes to graduation and employment. General education practices were advanced as remedies to reduce the number of students inappropriately identified and referred for special education.

Existing Conceptual Frameworks in Special Education

As noted above, Levine (1961) offered a conceptual framework for establishing theoretical propositions on personal and social development and Reynolds (1962) provided one for viewing critical issues relative to separation of children with disabilities. Later Howell (1992) provided a conceptual framework for technology issues and trends in special education regarding the design of programs.

Hughes and Theodore (2009) considered a conceptual framework for arriving at the appropriate time to administer psychotherapy in schools. The objective was to strategically employ psychotherapy to facilitate academic and social enhancement of students.

Browder, Wakeman, Flowers, Rickelman, Pugalee, and Karvonen, (2007) assembled a team of professionals to development a conceptual definition and criteria for relating instruction and assessment to grade-level academic content for special education. The authors had found few articles linking teaching and assessment skills to grade-level content.

Schechter and Feldman (2010) investigated organizational learning through a structural concept of the learning values or culture of special education. The results of the study afforded a useful conceptual and empirical framework to evaluate special education schools as learning organizations.

Crockett (2002) provided a conceptual framework for preparing educational leaders for inclusive schools. Major points of consideration were ethics, individuality, equity, instructional programming, and professional and family partnerships.

Implications for a Conceptual Framework for Minority Students

Talbott, Fleming, Karabatsos, and Dobria (2011) presented Brofenbrenner's theory of nested ecological systems and their importance for human development to provide a framework for understanding the successful development of children and adolescents in multiple social contexts. The framework permits the study of continuity and change in children's development in places where they live and learn, rather than in isolation.

Boyd and Correa (2005) developed a conceptual framework to assist in developing proactive relationships between special education personnel and African American families. The objective was to minimize cultural conflicts and build positive encounters between the professionals and the families.

Stockall and Dennis (2015) provided a framework to facilitate decision making on ethical issues in special education. Through a case presentation approach, the authors enable readers to follow the framework.

Vasquez, Lopez, Straub, Powell, McKinney, Tracy, Gonzalez, Slocum, Mason, Okeeffe, and Bedesem (2011) examined the research on minority disproportionality. Increases were found, in contrast to an earlier study, in articles reporting ethnic minority information over a 15-year period. A gap was noted in the knowledge of evidence-based practices for ethnic minority students in special education.

BEST PRACTICES FOR MINORITIES IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

Boscardin, Brown-Chidsey, and Gonzalex-Martinez (2001) encouraged school personnel to closely collaborate with families of students with disabilities; they should engage in best practices to enhance the participation of the family. Here, attention is focused on motivation, assessment, teaching, and evaluation as components of best practice.

Motivation:

Bolkan (2015) posited that motivation is an important part of effective instruction. A key concern is how to promote motivation, especially intrinsic motivation. One way is through intellectually stimulating behaviors.

Madonna, Jr. and Philpot (2013) expounded on expectancy theory as focusing on outcomes as a function of behavior, and the value of the outcome. The theory is based on the individual's ability to make appropriate judgments leading to a desired goal. If a goal is attractive and individuals believe that it is obtainable, they are more motivated to act on it.

Garn and Jolly (2014) examined high ability students' expression on learning motivation. It was discovered that fun learning experiences when learning activities were personalized to interests and goals. Likewise, learning choices helped increase intrinsic motivation.

Assessment:

Horst, Ghant and Whetstone (2015) indicated the importance of all stakeholders accepting and appreciating assessment as a positive tool for innovation and progress. It was noted that the tide began to turn as students, faculty, and administrators embraced numerous assessment practices.

Krzykowski and Kinser (2014) emphasized the need to assess learning, use assessment data, and share assessment information. It was noted that student learning can be enhanced through a well-structured assessment program. Assessment increases accountability and improves student learning.

Teaching:

Wery and Nietfeld (2010) investigated self-regulated learning for children with exceptional educational needs and found that the key elements of SRL – attitudes, beliefs, cognitive strategies, domain knowledge, external supports, and flexibility of strategy use should be considered when working with students with exceptional educational needs. There are many ways teachers can apply these principles in the classroom.

Beach, Sanchez, Flynn and O'Connor (2015) offered suggestions on teaching academic vocabulary to exceptional learners. Explicit vocabulary instruction is necessary to improve students' academic achievement in diverse classrooms where many students are struggling readers. The tips offered for teaching academic vocabulary were select four key words each week, introduce the words, facilitate discussion of the meaning of the words, engage students in word play and provide scaffolded writing opportunities.

Scruggs, Mastropieri and Okolo (2008) explored the importance of science and social studies in the development of children with special needs. Various approaches were offered for development of specific talents among children with special needs. Students with learning disabilities can successfully engage in inquiry-based learning, though they may require more support than peers without disabilities.

Evaluation:

Fore III, Burke and Martin (2006) offered curriculum-based measurement as an alternative for the assessment of African American students. Norm-referenced tests have been viewed as biased against this population. A system is needed that is more reliable and valid, linked to the curriculum, and enables progress monitoring.

MATE FRAMEWORK FOR REDUCTION OF MINORITIES IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

The review of literature and other exposure in education led to the conclusion that effective teaching and learning to impact the problem of disproportionate representation of minorities in special education could be essentially reduced to four domains: motivation,

assessment, teaching and evaluation, thus, the MATE conceptual framework. The domains were configured with measures to enable their operationalization in the schools.

Table 1 illustrates the components of each MATE domain. The deep tenets for motivation begin with the development of intrinsic motivation with the student. It moves on to capitalizing on students' interests and life experiences, having and handling high expectations, acceptance of accountability as independent learners, and the school reinforcing student gains.

Judicial principles should underlie and guide assessment. Assessment may initially be viewed as a "get-to-know-you" measure in terms of what students bring to the table and what is needed for success in school. Assessment should begin at a point where the student can experience success and continue to ascertain what is needed for success in the curriculum. Students are not equally strong in sense modalities, so assessments should allow students to display their best in their strongest modalities. There is probably more to learn from a student's incorrect response than a correct response. The former ought to be used to guide future instruction. Above all, assessment should be with a watchful eye to build character; without which, the future of the nation will be at risk.

Teaching should be considered the real action part of schooling. Therefore, it should be evident with excitement and enthusiasm; boredom has never been a key to success. Certainly, teachers impart considerable knowledge; however, with knowledge all around, students can teach what they have acquired at any given moment. The classroom should afford students fundamental rights; actually, students should be considered citizens of the school with the right to speak, question, and even be silent as deemed necessary. Schools should accommodate student individual needs and develop within them character that will lead to a stronger nation in years to come.

Evaluation need not be considered the dirty work. It should be viewed as an opportunity to willingly reveal what has been learned. Teachers should be alert and not permit knowledge to go unevaluated. Even the testing environment should be of such to bring out the best in students. Finally, evaluation should be viewed as a stakeholder measure. If students perform well, it is a win-win situation for all constituents; if students perform poorly, everyone may be considered losers.

Table 1
MATE Conceptual Framework to Address Disproportionality in Special Education

Motivate (Deep Tenets)

- Help students discover their abilities and strive to develop their potentiality
 - Capitalize on students' interests and authentic experiences constantly
 - Have high, yet realistic expectations that can be achieved in small tasks
 - Encourage students to be accountable for their successes/failures
 - Reinforce achievement, even successive approximations
- (Bolkan, 2015; Garn & Jolly, 2014; Madonna, Jr. & Philpot, 2013)

Assess (Judicial Principles)

- Advocate assessment as "get acquainted" measure to aid further learning
- Ensure that assessment begins at mastery level and progresses to curricular standards
- Allow alternative means to display strengths and abilities
- Interpret embedded performances for both correct and incorrect performances

- Use assessment data to build character, encourage, and teach (Horst, Ghant & Whetstone, 2015; Krzykowski & Kinser, 2014)

Teach (Enthusiastic, Evidence-based Practices)

- Imbue the teaching and learning enterprise with excitement and enthusiasm
- Make instruction a reciprocal teaching and learning process, anyone may be the teacher
- Advocate learner's rights: to speak, to question, to waive, to explore, to navigate
- Respect and accommodate individual differences, balanced with group endeavors
- Make character building a constant in evidenced-based teaching and learning (Beach, Sanchez, Flynn & O'Connor, 2015; Scruggs, Mastropieri & Okolo, 2008; Wery & Nietfeld, 2010)

Evaluate (Responsible Procedures)

- Advocate evaluation as an opportunity to reveal accomplishments
 - Structure test items to be comprehension friendly and germane to the curriculum
 - Plan to tap all appropriate sensory modalities for inclusive attainment
 - Make testing environment familiar and comfortable for productive performance
 - Use test results for student, teacher and school edification (Fore III, Burke & Martin, 2006)
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Salend and Duhaney (2005) explored the disproportionate representation of students of color in special education. They noted that it is a critical challenge for educators and school districts. Information and guidelines were offered for delivering a wide range of effective services within general education.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

There is widespread agreement that disproportionate representation of minorities exists in special education and has existed over time. Some thought has been given to ameliorating the problem but little deep effort has been accorded the issue.

The MATE conceptual framework has been presented as a means to pull together what is known and what has been tried to some extent for greater impact on the matter. Four components are addressed in the framework: motivation, assessment, teaching and evaluation. Crucial tenets are provided for each component, noting in essence that deep motivation, judicious assessment, enthusiastic teaching and responsive evaluation can lead to more effective teaching and learning in the schools.

As schools effectively MATE minority students, more will prove successful in general education and fewer will be referred for special education. Special education teachers will then be able to better meet the needs of representative students with real exceptionalities.

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