

The Possible Benefits of Response to Intervention on the Contributing Factors
Affecting the Disproportionate Representation of African American
Students in Special Education

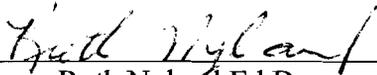
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ABSTRACT

The disproportionate representation of African Americans in Special Education is a significant issue. Flaws in the referral process, identification procedures, and ineffective intervention and instruction, are cited as the contributing factors affecting disproportionate representation. The changes apparent in the 2004 Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), suggest, implementing Response to Intervention (RTI) as a method of addressing some of these issues. This literature review explored the possible impact RTI may have on factors affecting disproportionate representation. Literature suggests a culturally responsive intervention model to be used in addressing contributing factors. The evidence based research on RTI'S impact on African American students is limited. Increased research in this area is imperative.

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Chapter I: Introduction

The success of African American students is a significant issue in education (Arnold, & Lassmann, 2003). African American students are disproportionately represented in special education in comparison to their Caucasian peers (Zhang, & Katsiyannis, 2002). According to the 2004 census report the graduation rate for African American students in 2004 was 50%, the lowest graduating class in America. “Within three to five years after leaving high school, the arrest rate for African Americans with disabilities is 40%, as compared to 27% for whites” (Oswald, Coutinho, & Best, 2001, ¶ 5). This disturbing fact raises serious questions as to the future success and opportunities of African American students. The overwhelming issues faced by African American student’s calls for a clear educational plan of action, to decrease the occurrences of these issues (Coutinho, Oswald, & Best, 2002). Programs that promote early, educational, and crisis intervention that is culturally sensitive may assist in addressing the many conflicting issues impacting the success rate of African American students. Response to intervention (RTI) as defined by Gresham (2005) is a problem solving approach that works to change specific behaviors and performance through interventions. This problem- solving model is designed to provide scientifically based research interventions and culturally sensitive evaluations. By promoting early intervention, restricting the use of diagnostic labels, rethinking the steps of comprehensive and inclusive evaluations, and providing a wide variety of interventions, RTI may assist in addressing many of the disproportionate and educational concerns that African American students face. Implementing such a program in schools may have many benefits for African American students (Harris-Murri, King, & Rostenberg, 2006).

Many of the issues facing African American students in public schools have been enduring unaddressed tribulations, specifically the issue of the disproportionate representation of minority students in special education. The placement of African American students in special education has been a constant concern that has affected children, families, schools and communities on a national level (Arnold, & Lessmann, 2003; Reschly, 2003; Daniels, 1998; Dunn, 1968; Patton, 1998; Valles, 1998; Zhang, & Katsiyannis, 2002). “The issue of the disproportionate representation of minority groups in special education, was discussed in the professional literature as early as 1968” (Arnold, & Lessmann, 2003, p. 231). International issues concerning disproportionate representation of socially disadvantaged students in special education has also been noted in foreign literature (Maxwell, 1994). Arnold and Lassmann (2003) suggest, the “issue is of critical importance and very complex” (p. 230). As the culturally diverse student population continues to rise in the United States public school system, it is increasingly more important to become accountable for high stakes decisions associated with special education identification and placement procedures.

Lloyd M. Dunn, a former president of The Council for Exceptional Children wrote a controversial article, published in 1968 discussing identification, placement procedures, and disproportionate representation in special education. This article is cited in numerous studies, most of which argue that; overrepresentation has continued to progress in the schools for more than 30 years (Coutinho, Oswald, & Best, 2002; Daniels, 1998; Hosp, & Reschly, 2002; Zhang, & Katsiyannis, 2002).

Despite the recognition of disproportionate representation in schools, African-American student’s presence in special education still remains an apparent and consistent

challenge. According to the 2005 IDEA report, 12.54% of the African American population between the ages of 6 through 21 was served under IDEA with a disability, in comparison to only 8.72% of the Caucasian population (n.d.). More specifically a 2005 IDEA report concluded that 5.57% of the African American students attending elementary or secondary schools were identified as Learning Disabled (LD) in comparison to only 3.74% of Caucasian students identified (2007). Many consider the 1.83% difference a minor statistic. However, when comparing the overall African American population 12.3%, to that of Caucasians 75.1 %, the overwhelming representation of African American students in special education is apparent. The fact that African Americans account for only a small portion of the American population emphasizes the fact that their current representation in special education is disturbing. (Gravios, & Rosenfield, 2006)

Statement of the Problem

There is a disproportionate representation of African American students being placed in the United States Special Education program. This is particularly true for African American students identified as Learning Disabled. There is a growing need to determine what techniques of assessment, and intervention work best in decreasing the overrepresentation, and increasing the success rate of African American students needing extra support and services.

Purpose of the Study

The goal of this literature review is to research the contributing factors of the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education. This literature review will also address the possible benefits of Response to Intervention and

problem solving approaches and how they may impact African American children in the United States Public schools.

Research Questions

The literature review will focus on answering the following four questions:

1. What historic trends and policies have impacted African Americans in America's public schools, and special education programs?
2. What is RTI, and how does it differ from the Discrepancy model in the identification of African American students with poor achievement and LD?
3. What factors contribute to the disproportionate representation of African Americans in special education identified as LD?
4. What ways does RTI address and decrease the contributing factors affecting the disproportionate identification of African American students as learning disabled in public schools?

Assumptions of the Study

This review assumes that literature will reveal, Response to Intervention and other problem solving approaches to be helpful in addressing many of the factors contributing to the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education.

Definition of Terms

The following terms and definitions are relevant to this Literature review:

Discrepancy Model - U. S. Office of Educations' (USOE) formula, used to verify the presence of a severe discrepancy between ability and achievement; and is determined "when achievement in one or more of the [academic] areas falls at or below 50% of the

child's expected achievement level, when age and previous experiences are taken into account" (Bradley, Danielson, & Hallahan, 2002, p. 33).

Disproportionate Placement - "...the representation of a particular group of students at a rate different than that found in the general population. Student placements can be considered disproportionate if they are overrepresented or underrepresented when comparing their presence in a particular class or category with the representation in the general population" (Gravois, & Rosenfield, 2006, p. 42)

Learning Disability - IDEA defines a learning disability as a "...disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations. . . ." (Public Law 108-446 108th Congress, n.d.)

Minority- "...the smaller in number of two groups: a group having less than the number of votes necessary for control: a part of a population differing from others (as in race)..." (Mish, & Morse, 1997, p.471)

Response to Intervention (RTI) – According to the National Center for Learning Disabilities, RTI is best defined as "an assessment and intervention process for systematically monitoring student progress and making decisions about the need for instructional modifications or increasingly intensified services using progress monitoring data" (National Center for Learning Disabilities, n.d., ¶ 1).

Special Education – "specially designated instruction, at no cost to the parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability" (Dean, Burnes, Grialou, & Varro, 2006, p.157)

Limitations of the Study

According to Arnold and Lassmann (2003) there is limited research on programs proven to decrease disproportionate representation. They suggest “much of what has been written, simply states that inappropriate placement exists, and that inappropriate placement leads to unfavorable outcomes for students and their families” (Arnold, & Lassmann, 2003, p.234). However, the specific causes of disproportionate representation are only speculated. In regards to this literature review it is difficult to assess the ways RTI may assist in disproportionate representation; if the factors affecting disproportionate representation are merely speculations and observations from specific areas and regions. There is little research on the universal causes of disproportionate representation, and therefore a literature review of these issues simply assesses the assumptions presented in research.

In addition to proven reliable causes of disproportionate representation, RTI is a fairly new concept. While current research does exist there are few studies on long term effects. While some schools have implemented problem solving approaches to special education, few have researched the direct effects their programs have had on disproportionate representation.

Chapter II

Introduction

The treatment of African Americans in America's public schools particularly, in special education, has been an ongoing issue since integration. There is a long and disturbing history of African Americans in America's schools. Court cases such as *Brown vs. Board of Education* or *Larry P vs. Wilson Riles*, have significantly impacted current educational policies and created legal precedent for the appropriate treatment of students in need of extra support. Some policies are specific to African American students while other policies have become a national voice for the expectations of public schools.

Educational policies have taken into account the importance in increasing the performance of all publicly educated children. Their determined ideology is to hold educational professionals accountable for student progress. On January 8, 2002, the Bush administration passed the *No Child Left Behind Act*. This act was originally designed to increase the success rate of all children and ensure that accurate yearly progress was obtained (Faircloth, 2004). Education professionals began to be held accountable for the performance of their students. This decision sent the message that all children need to be encouraged to reach their full potential. Children most likely to fall between the cracks are just as significant as students performing above or below the estimated level of achievement. (Faircloth, 2004)

Response to intervention (RTI) corresponds with new policies. It is a new method adopted in the identification of students needing extra support or exhibiting a disability, including Learning Disabilities (LD). This model is inclusive and considers a variety of factors that affect student achievement. RTI avoids the use of a single criterion in the

identification procedure RTI works to create the direct link between student's needs and individualized interventions. The interventions provided are monitored to ensure progress or determine alternative strategies. (Brown-Chidsey, & Steege, 2005)

RTI is not meant to become a replacement for special education evaluations (Reschly, 2003). Comprehensive evaluations do provide a great deal of valuable information about the child's overall level of abilities (Prasse, 2006). Dismissing its benefits would decrease the amount of information that school psychologists are able to obtain from students. Achievement tests are beneficial in their ability to assist professionals in linking specific performance results to possible recommendations. It is not the use of intelligence and achievement tests in the field of school psychology that causes a dilemma, but the misuse and avoidance of other strategies that adds to the disproportionate diagnoses. When used alone, current assessment procedures neglect the cultural, environmental, and social aspects of achievement.

Many professionals writing on the contributing factors of disproportionate representation in special education discuss the bias in assessment practices (Gravois, & Rosenfield, 2006). However, there are varied contributing factors discussed in the literature regarding the disproportionate representation of minority students. Much of the literature specifically addresses a plethora of the issues faced by African- American, Hispanic, and Native American students in special education. Among bias assessments, bias referrals, social factors, factors affecting achievement, and the effectiveness of interventions, are cited as the leading factors contributing to the disproportionate representation. The contributing factors effecting disproportionate representation need an effective system implemented in the schools to address the major concerns. It is not until

the contributing factors are addressed that there will be a decline in the current representation of African Americans in special education. (Oswald, Coutinho, & Best, 2001). Dunn's article written in 1968, on disproportionate representation of African Americans in Public schools is often cited as the earliest article addressing the contributing factors of disproportionate representation when the U.S was still ironing out integration.

The History of African Americans in Special Education

Dunn's 1968 article was instrumental in surfacing the disproportionate representation issues faced by minorities in special education. Many of Dunn's arguments focused on the grouping and placement of students by area of disability of presumed ability based on performance. Dunn's article, suggested that "we do away with many existing disability labels and the present practice of grouping children homogeneously by these labels into special education" (Dunn, 1968, p. 11). "Perhaps the reason special education research has failed to consistently show positive results is the reliance on categorical disability labels instead of the unique needs of children" (Dean, Burns, Grialou, & Varro, 2006, p. 157). Dunn reported that special education policies often labeled children and promoted the formation of segregated classes that housed children with similar educational diagnosis. He predicted that disproportionate representation of minority students would continue to rise as the racial issues in the country continued to change and add to the complexity of special education services for minority students. Dunn based these findings on integration regulations, policies being implemented that called for more special education classes, the steady hiring of special education

professionals and, the estimated fact that 60-80% of all students being referred for special education classes were minority students. (Dunn, 1968)

This separation was considered acceptable to educational professionals at the time because, many felt that although the environments were separated, they provided equal education in a more appropriate class to students with disabilities (Dunn, 1968). Alternative settings are currently practiced in education. Many continue to argue that African Americans who are placed in special education classes for a significant portion of the school day are not provided with equal exposure and experiences in the educational system (Patton, 1998). Controversy over separate but equal exposure to education for African Americans is dated as far back as the Plessy v. Ferguson Supreme Court case of 1896. The rulings from Plessy vs. Ferguson, concluded, separation according to racial background was constitutional, as long as all things considered were equal and proportionate. (Zimmerman, 1997). This instrumental case clearly suggested that separation of schools by ethnicity was justified by the constitution. According to Kids Rights, one court stated, "the most common instance of this is connected with the establishment of separate schools for white and colored children, which has been held to be a valid exercise of the legislative power even by courts of States where the political rights of the colored race have been longest and most earnestly enforced" (n.d., ¶ 1). Suggesting, as long as African Americans received equal access to education, the State had the right to separate schools based on race. This case was later nullified by the Supreme Court case Brown v. Topeka, Kansas, Board of Education in 1954.

The Brown v. Topeka, Kansas, Board of Education case reached its final conclusion in May, 1954. The arguments provided by Brown's legal team, supported by

the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), had provided valuable evidence on the destructive effects of segregation on the educational performance, and psychological health of African American children. They argued that issues such as illiteracy, and feelings of inferiority, apparent in school age children followed individuals into adulthood and later resulted in educational and social conflict for many African- American communities. (Orfield, 1996)

Expert witnesses Kenneth Bancroft Clark and Mamie Phipps Clark, the first African American woman to receive a Ph.D in psychology, were called to report their research findings from their 1940's study, "The Doll test". The "Doll Test" resulted in significant findings on the negative implications of racism on African American children. According to Klein (2004), this research studied the impact of race relations on African American children's self concept, and self-esteem. The method of the research conducted allowed small children the opportunity to choose between a doll of African American decent and one of Caucasian decent. The children's responses were later evaluated. Results showed, African American children preferred white dolls and often perceived themselves as having lighter skin. The Clark's concluded that children felt that white was good and pure while black was bad and represented evil. Racism and segregation had created feelings of internalized racism in African American children. This research played a crucial part on the concluding rulings of the Brown v Board of Education case. The final court ruling concluded that the separation of schools by race and ethnicity did in fact go against the 14th Amendment clause of Equal Protection, and was therefore considered unconstitutional. This ruling determined that America's schools would be

required to integrate. (Klein, 2004) Integration policies increased the varied concerns of education for African American children with below average achievement (Dunn, 1968)

Dunn's article appeared after several Supreme Court cases impacted the segregation policies of America's schools. Dunn suggested, integration issues had an immense impact on the causes of disproportionate representation of African Americans in special education. The referral and identification procedures for enrolling minority students in special education programs, added to the segregation of countless African American students from their Caucasian peers during the height of integration. Many minority students were identified with disabilities usually associated with alternative placement, resulting in a justified assessing and removing of African American students from integrated environments based on disability. Dunn (1968) found that many professional educators reported that "homogenous groupings" (p.6) were beneficial for students who performed below grade level expectations. These segregating practices later had a significant impact on African American student's performance. Research findings indicated African Americans were more likely to perform below educational standards even after alternative placement. Dunn reported several studies, all concluding that African American children performed poorer in segregated environments in comparison to their African American peers being educated in integrated settings. (Dunn, 1968)

Larry P. v Wilson Riles, a case regarding the inappropriate placement of African American children in separate class settings was originally filed in 1971. It was filed by the parents of six African American students attending public schools in San Francisco diagnosed as educable mentally restarted (E.M.R.). They argued that their placement was based on biased assessments that yielded invalid Intelligence Quotients (IQ), and

inappropriate identification policies that violated the equal protection clauses. (Larry P v. Riles, n.d.).

The children's intellectual abilities were being measured through Intelligence Tests. Intelligence is defined by Merriam Webster Dictionary as "the ability to learn, understand or deal with trying situations" (Mish, F. C., & Morse, J. M. (Eds.), 1997 p. 392). However, intelligence tests are developed and founded from various theories. Each theory differs in its view on what intelligence truly is, and how best to measure it. The first Intelligence tests were published in the United States in 1910. The publishers were Alfred Binet and Theodore Simon. In the 1930's, David Wechsler a former test examiner during World War II, developed the Wechsler Intelligence Scales. The intelligence tests grew in popularity and the newer editions are widely used in the field of school psychology. According to Weschsler's current theoretical foundation, intelligence can be broken down into two categories, Fluid and Crystallized intelligence. Fluid intelligence is best described as the ability to complete novel tasks. While crystallized intelligence is the ability to apply previously earned information and experiences. (Flanagan, & Kaufman, 2004)

Bias development and the bias use of intelligence tests, were the initial concerns in the Larry P case. By 1978, the case expanded to include all African American students attending schools in the San Francisco school district that may be assessed in the future using similar criteria. The final ruling concluded that IQ assessments used in determining the placement of African American children in specific educational settings, dishonored the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the equal protection clause of the federal and state constitutions, and the Education For All

Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (Larry P v. Riles, n.d.). This case continues to be cited in the literature as an instrumental example of the bias and disproportionate diagnosis and placement of African American children in special education (Coutinho, Oswald & Best, 2002; Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002; Green, 2005).

These instrumental court cases are only a few of the numerous decisions made by the Supreme Court regarding the treatment of African American students in this country's education system. Others include "Diana v. California State Board of Education (1970), Mills v. Board of Education of the District of Columbia (1972), and Pennsylvania Association of Retarded Children (PARC) v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (1972)" (Daniels, 1998, p.41). All of which have played a vital role in shaping education for America's minority students.

Current Policies & Procedures in Special Education

All of these cases and their decisions have helped to pave the way for the current policies and regulations that govern special education (Coutinho, Oswald & Best, 2002; Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002). One of the earliest policies created to monitor and enforce the equal treatment of students diagnosed with disabilities was the 1975 Education for all Handicapped Children Act (EHA) also referred to as Public Law 94-142 (P.L 94-142. n.d.). Signed by President Gerald R. Ford, this act worked to provide every student with a free and appropriate public education. Meaning, students and their parents had the legal right to be provided with an individualized educational plan, as well as state and federally funded special education programs (Faircloth, 2004; Prasse, 2006). The Individualized Education Plan (IEP) was designed to provide a written document of the student's specific educational needs. The plan was required to include the child's level of

performance prior to implementation, a detailed description of the services that were to be provided, the goals that the student would work toward, and an effective method of evaluating student progress. (Public Law 94-142, n.d.)

EHA set definitions and criteria for specific qualifications based on disability and needs. Many of these qualification criteria included exclusionary clauses. Exclusionary clauses expressed what each disability could not be. For example, originally the act's definition of a Learning Disability (LD) clearly eliminated persons who had motor, visual, hearing, emotional, or mental retardation diagnosis. In addition, the definition clearly stated that LD diagnosis could not be considered if cultural, economic disadvantage or, environmental influences were considered to cause the inability to perform. EHA also never required or promoted the classification of students by their disability, instead it simply required that all students met qualification criteria for the services they received (Prasse, 2006). However, as "programs evolved, a student's program was often synonymous with his or her eligibility label, the label and the program became one in the same" (Prasse, 2006, p.8).

The Education for all Handicapped Children Act later developed into the current Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) and is still used to guide the legal regulations present in today's public school system. Although IDEA has gone through several reforms each considering new methods of approaching special education, the act address the same general concern as the original, a free and appropriate public education for all students. Nevertheless, the 1997 IDEA reform challenged educational professionals to view special education as a variety of services provided to students, and not a specific placement. It also encouraged the use of early intervention prior to labeling and

mentioned the benefits of utilizing the problem-solving approach to special education services. According to Prasse (2006), the 1997 IDEA reform provided incentives and benefits for considering the problem solving model. One insensitive was allowing schools to use 5% of federal IDEA funds to pilot problem solving programs. IDEA 1997 also stressed the importance of considering individual needs and not specific disability labels (Prasse, 2006).

In 2002, the Bush administration's report *Revitalizing Special Education for Children and Families*, introduced several disturbing findings on the state of the special education services in public schools. The report findings concluded, there was an apparent test and place approach in special education, and methods used in assessment "lacked validity" (Prasse, 2006, p.11). The report suggested that, children regardless of their disability category should be viewed as a student in the general population (Prasse, 2006). Suggestions of increased interventions in place of general diagnosis appeared throughout the report.

According to Faircloth (2004), The Bush administration was also responsible for passing the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) P.L. 107-110 in 2001. NCLB is derived from the Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965 P.L. 89-10. Written by President Johnson this act attempted to provide better educational advantages for children from low social-economic (SES) families, and decrease the achievement gap based on income. The Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965, NCLB was originally designed to increase the success rate of all children and ensure that Accurate Yearly Progress (AYP) was obtained by all public and federally funded schools. AYP was measured by "content-based assessment, graduation rates, and other academic assessment" (Faircloth, 2004, p.

35). The act enforced policies that ensured, all children be provided with equal “high quality “curriculum in order to be exposed to equivalent opportunities necessary for reaching educational success (Faircloth, 2004, p. 35). NCBL evaluated public instruction across districts and based on the educational standards, the act held all individual schools and districts accountable for their student’s progress as measured by assessments based on national standards. (Faircloth, 2004) The NCLB act encouraged the use of research based instruction and called for an increase in teachers qualifications (Prasse, 2006).

Controversy surrounding NCLB generally argued IDEA and NCLB created a conflict between the diverse federal requirements and expectations. IDEA and the 2002 report encouraged an increase in individualized needs, yet the NCLB act required that all students regardless of ability area meet equal criteria and standards. All students regardless of ability were expected to be included when measuring schools AYP, as indicated by NCLB. Although modifications for students with disabilities were encouraged in both IDEA and NCLB, only NCLB held schools accountable for the performance and progress of students with disabilities that directly affect their academic achievement. Many professionals had mixed feelings about including students with disabilities in the AYP measures. Many argued that their inclusion may have negatively skewed impacts on testing results. Others argued that although ability level may be lower for students with disabilities programs and expectation on progress should be equal. (Faircloth, 2004) Yet the individual standards of children with disabilities varied from their non- disabled peers, creating controversy in what students should be included in the AYP assessments. In many ways educational professionals felt that No Child Left Behind expected all students to perform equally with the general researched based curriculum,

while IDEA expected individualized curriculum that meet the needs of the child.

(Faircloth, 2004)

The concerns apparent in NCLB and the Revitalizing Special Education for Children and Families report had a significant impact on many decisions made in IDEA 2004 reauthorization. Numerous modifications occurred in IDEA 2004, many of which included more demands to move education toward a Response to Intervention (RTI) or problem solving model approach. Although there were no immediate regulations to implement RTI, IDEA 2004's Committee Conference Report (CCR) clearly emphasizes the need for early intervention as implemented through RTI programs. IDEA gives schools the opportunity to use 15% of federal funds to assist in the development of programs specifically designed to ensure fewer students are ever classified or meet the criteria for a diagnosis. (James, 2004)

Identification and Learning Disabilities

The discrepancy model is the most widely utilized method in the identification of students with Learning Disabilities (LD). The U.S. Office of Education's (USOE) first adoption of a formula to determine a severe discrepancy was in 1977. The "public response to the notion of a formula was overwhelmingly negative" (Bradely, Danielson, & Hallahan, 2002, p. 33). Yet, the model continues to be highly associated with LD identification. The original criteria included no formulas or statistical equations on how best to numerically define a discrepancy. According to Meyers (2000), it was not until the 1990's that formulas such as "regression formulas, expectancy formulas, and standard scores differences..." (pg. 317), were utilized in the identification process.

The discrepancy model is a significant part of the definition of a Learning Disability. Barbara Bateman attempted to decrease the medical ideology of LD by including the discrepancy model. She believed, assessing the discrepancy between achievement and ability, decreased the medical terminology originally associated with the LD definition in 1965. Her attempt to decrease the medical rationale associated with the disability at that time, led to the use of the discrepancy model in the identification of LD. According to Dombrowski (2006), her inclusion of the discrepancy model was found to be relevant to education, and simplified methods of identification in the school setting. Early research on the discrepancy model was criticized, and the validity questioned. Many argued that it replaced one problem for another. (Dombrowski, 2006)

According to Dykeman (2006), the discrepancy model measures the difference between a child's ability level and their level of achievement. It is assumed that achievement and ability are highly correlated. Therefore, an average ability should yield average performance. If unknown factors create a significant gap or discrepancy in a child's ability and their achievement levels, it is assumed that something is impacting their ability to learn. Dykeman (2006) suggests, for those specific reasons, a learning disability is often determined by measuring the discrepancy between achievement and ability. Since the definition clearly states that a learning disability manifests itself as an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations, the discrepancy model is considered as one form of identification. (Dykeman, 2006) According to Meyer (2000), the model is founded on the idea that persons who have the intellectual ability to succeed, but exhibit low achievement have a learning disability. Students who appeared to have average intelligence, but failed

academically were generally classified as having a severe discrepancy between their ability and achievement (Meyer, 2000).

According to Friend (2005), assessments generally associated with the discrepancy model are standardized assessment tools. Standardized assessment tools measure a student's performance in comparison to their peers. These standardization groups are often based on age and grade level and are usually from a national population sample. The most popular standardized assessment tools associated with LD are Intelligence assessments and achievement tests like the Woodcock Johnson, or Wechsler scales. Many assessments are theory based and their scores are a result of measuring what the theories define as intelligence or achievement skills. Intellectual ability is assumed to be novel and not based heavily on experience and prior knowledge. While achievement assessments are generally associated with academic skills and knowledge learned through educational experiences, such as math and reading. (Friend, 2005)

Many professionals argue, there are many disadvantages to the discrepancy model (Arnold, & Lessmann, 2003; Coutinho, Oswald, & Best, 2002; Dykeman, 2006). According to Patton (1998) "the current special education system is structurally flawed and thus in need of critique" (p. 28). The ability-achievement discrepancy used in the educational system only considers the student's current performance. Bradley, Danielson, and Hallahan (2002) suggest, while the discrepancy model may provide some level of information concerning the child's current level of ability, it fails to provide the intervention. "The most serious flaw in the current process is the absence of a direct link between assessment procedures used for identification and the subsequent interventions

that might be prescribed based on these assessment procedures” (Bradley, Danielson, & Hallahan, 2002, p. 472).

Response to Intervention increases the opportunity to close the gap between identification and intervention (Brown-Chidsey, & Steege, 2005). Brown-Chidsey and Steege (2005) suggest “RTI is an objective examination of the cause and effect relationships between academic or behavioral intervention and the student’s response to the intervention” (Brown-Chidsey, & Steege, 2005, p.2). The purpose of RTI is to provide an immediate response to students exhibiting academic or behavioral difficulties through researched based interventions, and to guarantee that data on student’s progress is monitored and assessed to determine their response to interventions implemented.

(Friend, 2005)

This three or more step approach provides various stages of instruction or intervention to increase students’ chances of success. This method includes an inclusive team of educational professionals that suggest student interventions, screen for at risk students, and monitor students receiving interventions in general education settings. Its goal is to identify the specific area of need and implement various levels of interventions to determine the most effective method of providing assistance. (Reschly, 2003, p. 25)

RTI has no single model. The U.S Department of education realizes that there are numerous methods and model possibilities associated with implementing RTI in public schools. IDEA regulations are not rigid or direct in their guidelines for RTI. Instead IDEA regulations do specify that at risk students must be given various interventions, and their response monitored prior to completing a comprehensive evaluation and placement procedures. “RTI is not a substitute for comprehensive evaluation” (Reschly, 2003 p.10).

There has been increased concern by educational professionals questioning the implementation procedures of RTI. However, while RTI implementation is becoming a reality, the specific approach allows educators to create RTI models that work best for their school. (Reschly, 2003)

Interventions are implemented at every level or tier. However, they differ in the level of intensity and frequency in which the interventions are implemented (Compton, Fuchs, Fuchs, & Bryant, 2006). A tier also referred to as a step, usually begins with the identification of the student's area of need, followed by interventions which are implemented in the students' general education class. At this first tier, school wide screening for students at risk may take place. The first tier can be seen as a prevention stage. The goal of RTI's first stage is to catch problems before they affect achievement. (Arnold, & Lassmann, 2003) If a student is performing lower than expected or if a teacher feels they may benefit from a specific intervention then the first tier of RTI begins.

According to Friend (2005), the second tier of RTI increases in the intensity of the interventions implemented. This varies depending on the child's area of need. A student with academic concerns may receive entirely different interventions from a child exhibiting behavioral concerns. The second tier may include small group instruction. The intervention at the second level is usually determined by a larger team. The team may include a specialist, the principal and at times the parent's presence may be requested in determining the next step or intervention. (Friend, 2005) The second tier is monitored for a pre determined period of time. The team generally makes the decision on the length of time the student will be monitored in the second tier. The students' response to

intervention determines the next step. If the student shows significant progress in the time allowed they are returned to the first tier. If adequate progress is not reached, the child progresses to the third tier. According to Friend (2005), during the third tier the team will decide if special education evaluation is appropriate, or if an alternative intervention should be implemented. If the team chooses to evaluate the child's eligibility for special education the data collected regarding the child response to instruction may also help in determining the most appropriate services or the best setting in which to place the child. (Friend, 2005) At the third Tier, former identification and evaluation techniques are still being used to complete comprehensive evaluations. As stated earlier the RTI is not meant to take the place of comprehensive evaluations. (Reschly, 2003)

The decision to implement RTI in public schools brings a lot of controversy and change (Brown-Chidsey, & Steege, 2005). However, there is a need to consider the ethical dilemma in the disproportionate identification of a certain group of students in special education. The message that the discrepancy model conveys, significantly affects both the system of special education as well as the ability of African American students. (Patton, 1998)

Current factors affecting African American in special education

It has been confirmed by research and legal policies that overrepresentation of minority students is an increasing concern (Arnold, & Lessmann, 2003; Daniels, 1998; Dunn, 1968; Patton, 1998; Reschly, 2003; Valles, 1998; Zhang, & Katsiyannis, 2002). Several theories have been addressed in the literature regarding the contributing factors of disproportionate representation. However, many have found that the reasons vary greatly and, no proven explanations exist, only theoretical rationalization (Arnold, & Lessmann,

2003; Oswald, Coutinho, & Best, 2001). According to Oswald, Coutinho, and Best, (2001), “a critical gap exists between what is now known and what is needed to improve the experiences of minority students” (¶. 11). Consistent theories present in literature suggest, overrepresentation is effected by “discriminatory professional practice, problematic eligibility practices, sociopolitical factors” (Coutinho, Oswald, & Best, 2002, p.50), disregarded mental health identification (Voisin, 2007), and “effectiveness of instruction and intervention” (Gravois, & Rosenfield, 2006, p. 43). Generally the literature suggests that the crisis associated with overrepresentation of minorities in special education needs to be defined and addressed. In addition to addressing and defining the situation there is a need for the creation and implementation of interventions proven to specifically assist in the instruction of minority students. (Gravois, & Rosenfield, 2006)

Gravois and Rosenfield, (2006) argue, there are three main factors that affect overrepresentation. Cultural factors affecting referrals, assessment bias, and ineffective prevention interventions. According to the authors these are the three factors that need to be addressed to help decrease overrepresentation. Teaching a diverse group of children may be difficult for teachers who lack the exposure and experience in dealing with varied populations in a single class. Teacher’s expectations regarding performance and behavior are set by their personal beliefs and previous experiences. However, according to Gravois and Rosenfield (2006), culture does play a role in behavior. Teachers who fail to acknowledge that, and teacher certification programs who fail to teach that fact, develop preconceived ideas of average. Many of these teachers are referring students at increased rates because they are unable, or unwilling to deal with the factors associated with

teaching students from a variety of cultural backgrounds. (Gravois, & Rosenfield, 2006)
“Very often, biased teachers predict an ominous cloud of doom for African American students who fail to conform to their individual standards” (Obiakor, & Ford, 2002, p.7)

As far back as 1981, Reschly argued that minority students, especially African American males were being refereed because of behavior problems as expressed by their general education teachers. Meyer (2000), suggested that many students who truly fit these special education labels are never identified, because teachers are more confident in their ability to teach them. Teachers who feel that they are comfortable in meeting the unique needs of a student are more likely to implement interventions on their own to improve that child’s performance. However, when teachers feel that they are incapable of addressing the students needs they refer them to special education. Meyer argues this significantly impacts disproportionate representation, because teachers are less likely to address the unique behaviors and concerns of African American students in their class. “Teacher judgments in the referral process combined with the inherent biases of the assessment process contribute to the disproportionate referral and special education placement of African-American students” (Patton, 1998, p. 26). Teachers exhibit less tolerance for these students and refer them more often for special education (Arnold, & Lessmann, 2003; Meyer, 2000). Teacher’s bias perceptions of African American student’s impact the referral process (Arnold, & Lessmann, 2003; Gravois, & Rosenfield, 2006; Meyer, 2000; Reschly, 1981).

Bias assessments have been discussed in literature as early as 1973. Culturally–fair assessments are being developed in educational assessment. However, Gravois and Rosenfield, (2006), confront the reality of developing assessments that are entirely

sensitive to every culture. A 1989 study on a Weschsler intelligence scale found, some factors such as vocabulary and comprehension “heavily weighed toward acquired learning” (Meyer, 2000, p.327). These research findings suggest, some IQ assessments measure acquired knowledge. Acquired knowledge is significantly impacted by experience and exposure to items being assessed on IQ tests. (Meyer, 2000)

Intelligence Quotients, as used in special education, also bring into question the correlation between ability and achievement. Nisbett (2005) argues IQ and achievement assessments are highly correlated. Because of the high correlation, measuring student’s ability and achievement is a reliable predictor of a learning disability. Meyer (2000) disagrees. These statistical analyses according to Meyer are only predictors not measures of future success. He argues that these assessments “disregard individual profiles and variability inherent in growth and development” (Meyer, 2000, p. 326). They fail to consider the cultural and environmental exclusionary factors required for a learning disability. These clear exclusions are apparently disregarded, and at times completely ignored when assessing students from minority backgrounds. (Meyer, 2000)

The correlation found between achievement and ability as argued by Nisbett (2005), tells us little about what effects achievement. The overall view of the discrepancy model is, children’s “failure to learn was both unexpected and unexplained” (Meyer, 2000, p. 317). It is significant to assess the unexplained view of the LD definition. Student’s access to education and their motivation among many other factors, may impact poor achievement. Student’s environments and quality of instruction may also significantly impact their achievement level. According to Meyer if exclusionary factors

are not addressed as accurately as other behaviors that do meet criteria, then only half of the assessment is truly conducted. (Meyer, 2000)

Some literature suggests economic status and social standing plays a key role in the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education (Coutinho, Oswald, & Best, 2002; Daniels, 1998; Soobader, & Leclere, 2000). However, in a study conducted by Coutinho, Oswald, and Best (2002), research showed, poverty was highly correlated with being identified as LD but, only for African American and Hispanic children. Results showed a significant decrease in the odds of being identified LD as poverty level increased for Caucasian students. A study conducted by the same researchers in 2001 found that overrepresentation for African American students was “most pronounced in relatively low poverty communities” (Oswald, Coutinho, and Best, 2001, ¶. 24). These inconsistent findings suggest that students being referred and identified because of poverty are still only indicators for minority students and not for their Caucasian peers. These inconsistent findings continue to indicate the continued bias of LD identification and assessment procedures for African American students. If bias exists because of poverty, then it should be apparent across all ethnicities, if it is to be justified. Coutinho, Oswald, and Best’s (2002) disturbing results also found, LD diagnosis tends to decline in schools with a high population of minority students. Suggesting that the more Caucasians attending a particular school the more minority students tend to be identified as LD. Concluding results and further research suggested an expressed need for professionals to improve assessments and consider the effects of poverty on achievement in both Caucasian and African- American students equally. Professionals need to be trained in ways to identify behaviors affected by poverty and

those that reflect a disability and separate the students exhibiting these two individual issues appropriately (Coutinho, Oswald, & Best, 2002).

A similar study conducted by sociology professionals Soobader and Leclere (2000) concluded, income inequality had indirect relationships on children with LD. They argued that poverty in itself was not the basis of the problem, but the “residential segregation by income” (p.3) that, affects student’s ability to gain access to equal resources (2000). This argument like many others suggests that students in poverty exhibit behaviors similar to LD and that economic status maybe an indicator of diagnosis. However, as stated in Coutinho, Oswald, and Best (2002) “students whose learning or behavioral problems are due primarily to environmental causes are not to be identified as LD” (p.57).

Another factor that may impact African Americans achievement is their exposure to violence. According to Voisin (2007), student’s exposure to violence can significantly impact academic performance. The motivation to learn is decreased when the desire to survive is heightened by past and present experiences. According to Voisin (2007), the number one cause of death for African American youth is homicide. African Americans exposure to violence in their neighborhoods is constant and frequent. Research shows that out of 203 teens in a Chicago, 61% witnessed stabbings, and 45% had seen someone killed. Voisin (2007) argues that children’s exposure to violence can increase chances of developmental, cognitive, and language delays. These factors significantly impact the reasons that “African American youth are also at greater risk for academic problems compared to white youth” (Voisin, 2007, p.55). However, this cause does not justify the overrepresentation issues. There needs to be an increase in detecting and assessing a

child's exposure to violence prior to special education identification. There is also an increased need to implement "evidenced based interventions" for student exposed to violence" (Voisin, 2007, p.56).

Arnold and Lessmann (2003) discussed the pros and cons of special education. They expressed that, while beneficial for students with severe disabilities, special education often provides negative outcomes for students with mild disabilities. Students with learning disabilities and mild behavior disorders are all too often left with what the student and parent may view as an undeserving label. The authors addressed the "unconscious bias" (p.232), which is present among school personal when assessing students of minority groups. Originally school personal were given the opportunities to recognize bias practices and implement programs to decrease their overrepresentation issues. Because there was bias in the referral, assessment, and placement process, there was a need to find a variety of methods to address bias on many levels. One method of decreasing bias in referrals and assessments was enforcing regulations that required data to be collected from a variety of sources. (Arnold, & Lessmann, 2003) According to IDEA statute § 300.535, procedures for determining eligibility and placement must be drawn "upon information from a variety of sources, including aptitude and achievement tests, parent input, teacher recommendations, physical condition, social or cultural background, and adaptive behavior" (National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities (n.d.). IDEA also requires professionals to "...ensure that information obtained from all of these sources is documented and carefully considered" (National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities, n.d.).

It is important to address the contributing factors of disproportionate representation if there is to be any improvement in the current state of education for African American children. There are a variety of contributing factors expressed in the literature, and just as many suggestions on how best to address each one. All seem to suggest a need for increased cultural sensitivity and awareness. (Oswald, Coutinho, & Best, 2001) However, Green (2005) suggests, if a culturally sensitive RTI was developed it may impact some of the factors affecting African American students in special education.

RTI's impact on the identification of African American Students

According to Steele (2004), early intervention may hold the key to increasing the success of students who exhibit LD characteristics. Research suggests that early intervention has the ability to decrease anxiety and low motivation generally associate with poor achievement. (Steele, 2004) If students who exhibit learning difficulties do not receive early intervention the “learning problems continue and could lead to more students dropping out of school, exhibiting behavior problems, and developing greater academic deficiencies” (Steele, 2004, p.76) RTI has the benefit of obtaining “data for more effective and earlier identification of students with LD, and a systematic way to ensure that students experiencing educational difficulties receive more timely and effective support” (National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, 2005, p.249). In regards to RTI, the models association with early intervention addresses many of the educational problems with the wait to fail approach. (Bradely, Danielson, & Doolittle, 2007) One reason that RTI was a welcome alternative to the traditional discrepancy approach is that teachers no longer would have to wait for students to fail before the

students could receive services” (Brabley, Danielson, Doolittle 2007, p.8). RTI decreases the chances of leaving out students who are not failing, but still not reaching their full potential. (Brown- Chidsey, & Steege, 2005)

Green (2005) suggests early intervention for at risk African American students are an imperative necessity to decrease overrepresentation. She argues that community and school intervention need to be implemented early to increase the chances of improvement. “The results of the intervention may prevent LD identification or, if insufficient gains are made, these same results are useful in LD identification and designing more intensive interventions in special education” (Reschly, 2003, p. 25). Because, there is a need for early intervention to decrease overrepresentation of African Americans in Special education, (Green, 2005); RTI may be beneficial to African Americans because it promotes early intervention (Harris- Muri, King, & Rostenberg, 2006).

In addition to early intervention, bias referrals are often cited as a contributing factor of overrepresentation (Arnold, & Lessmann 2003; Green, 2005; Harris-Murri, King, & Rostenberg, 2006). However, interventions in the first tier are often implemented in the general education class (Arnold, & Lassmann, 2003). According to Brown-Chidsey, and Steege (2005) the general education teacher plays an active role in implementing interventions and monitoring students’ response. The general education teacher is often held accountable for implementing in class interventions. Brown-Chidsey, and Steege (2005) suggest, when teachers ask that the student be moved to the second tier of RTI, the teacher is also responsible for being an active member of the team that, provides that data reflecting the students’ inability to exhibit progress. Brown-

Chidsey, & Steege, 2005; Green, 2005; and Harris-Murri, King, & Rostenberg, 2006 suggest, if enforced these expectations may effect the bias referrals associated with disproportionate representation.

According to Green (2005) assessment procedures under RTI may be another area that effects disproportionate representation. “Culturally responsive assessment can also help to ensure that African American children are assessed on the basis of nondiscriminatory testing and evaluation procedures, which may help to reduce and prevent overrepresentation in special education” (Green, 2005, p. 39) Assessments, should include a variety of data sources in order to be reliable and valid. No one assessment measure should be conducted if all contributing factors of achievement are to truly be assessed. Again, IDEA 2004 regulations require that the identification procedures adopted by the state, “must not require the use of a severe discrepancy between intellectual ability and achievement for determining whether a child has a specific learning disability, as defined in 34 CFR 300.8(c)(10). Data on the environmental factors that may contribute to the student’s performance are also an intricate part of the assessment procedure. (Arnold, & Lessmann, 2003)

Harris-Murri, King, and Rostenberg, (2006) suggest, if implemented effectively, RTI has the ability to assess and address a wide range of contributing factors effecting poor achievement. “RTI, focuses on broader contextual factors which impact student achievement and behavior” (Harris-Murri, King, & Rostenberg, 2006, p. 80). It is important to consider the many factors effecting achievement in African American students (Arnold, & Lessmann, 2003). Meyer (2000) argues, assessing all factors that contribute to poor achievement will impact the identification of LD students. According

to Brown-Chidsey, and Steege (2005) culture affects everything that we do. Disregarding its impact on education particularly achievement decreases the effectiveness of any assessment system. Dykeman, (2006) agrees, and he cautions that, an apparent discrepancy between achievement and ability, “does not necessarily implicate a special need’ (p. 267). IDEA regulations state, “... the group must consider interventions, as part of the evaluation described in 34 CFR 300.304 through 300.306” (National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities, n.d, ¶.2).

When measuring a student’s response to the interventions implemented it is important to consider all areas that may affect their response. This includes cultural and linguistic considerations. Dykeman (2006) mentions several methods of measurement in assessing students’ response in the tiers of RTI. He argues, regardless of the specific method used, they all have to be capable of assessing both functional development and academic performance. Dykeman (2006) suggests, it is important to assess both areas so that data on why students are responding a particular way is understood. Students receiving extra support in developmental areas, such as language may simultaneously receive support in reading. However, monitoring their progress in reading without considering their language progress sends a false picture of their response to the interventions being implemented. A students reading performance in such a case, may academically reflect their progress of lack thereof in their communication skills. (Dykeman, 2006)

African American students need to have assignments that relate to their lives and incorporate their culture into the curriculum (Harris-Murri, King, & Rostenberg, 2006). CampbellJones and CampbellJones (2002) argue, many African Americans “define

themselves by their color” (p. 145). The inability to associate themselves with positive aspects of their identity, especially through instruction or school interactions, may decrease overall motivation. CampbellJones and CampbellJones (2002), and Harris-Murri, King, and Rostenberg (2006), call for a “culturally responsive classroom” (p.785). They also caution that old policies and views should not be carried into the RTI model. There should not be an assumption by educational professionals that all interventions work well across cultures. (Harris-Murri, King, & Rostenberg, 2006)

According to Green (2005), African Americans, especially those at risk benefit from curriculum that includes multicultural concepts. Research indicates that students who are exposed to instruction that address the cultural aspects of the individual, show improvement in academic achievement. Student’s interest increases when they are given the exposure to instruction that is directly related to them. For African American students considered at risk their motivation to improve academically is even more difficult when the instruction is so foreign. Green (2005) suggests, multicultural instructional interventions be implemented to assist in improving the achievement of at risk African American students. She argues that improving achievement is key to decreasing the referral of African American students for special education. (Green, 2005)

African Americans, in “certain special education categories typically receive their special education in segregated classrooms or buildings” (Patton, 1998, p. 26). IDEA requires the least restrictive environment (LRE) always be considered when deciding to remove a student from the general education environment for any portion of the school day. However, According to Patton (1998) all too often special education placements such as a resource room for learning disabled students are used as an

intervention and not a resource. Patton (1998) suggests “while these students are in special education programs they miss essential general education, academic, and social curricula” (p. 25). Students with mind disabilities being in segregated classes can have negative effects on overall motivation, academic performance and potentially increases their chances of dropping out. (Patton, 1998) RTI’s implementation of in class interventions may impact the view that services and interventions are best served in separate environments. (Brown- Chidsey, & Steege, 2005)

There was a recent study conducted on a Washington DC high school, nominated as a good school. Results revealed, valuable insight into what factors contribute to effective instruction practices and overall positive school climate. Middletown High School is an open enrollment 9-12 school that offers an inclusive program to all students. The school promotes inclusion. Many of the special education students receive their services in general education settings. According to Aguilar, Morocco, Parker, and Zigmond (2006), the school reports that 75% of their special education students are classified as LD. Yet they are determined to implements their theme of “equal opportunity for achievement” (p.160). Their educational view reflects the idea that, all students regardless of their Honor, LD, or poor achievement status, deserves an opportunity to equal access to education. According to Aguilar, Morocco, Parker, and Zigmond (2006), the theme encourages the placement of students based on the need, and their goals and not by specific labels. While many students have IEP’s, their services are received through co-taught courses. The school wide learning communities are held daily. This community is a 30 minute study hall in which all students work in small

groups, seek individual assistance, or work with special education professional to receive extra support. (Aguilar, Morocco, Parker, & Zigmond, 2006)

According to Aguilar, Morocco, Parker, and Zigmond (2006), the school ratings as reported by students have high ratings in overall satisfaction. Students with IEP's specifically reported that the school provided a wide variety of learning opportunities. African American students in particular reported that the teachers showed respect and concern toward them. Aguilar, Morocco, Parker, and Zigmond (2006) reported, overall academic performance of students with disabilities was also significantly higher than many schools. The 2001-2002 State assessment results indicated that over half 56% of students with disabilities passed the English and Math (67%) assessments. Overall, research found that the schools theme of inclusion helped to increase the academic performance of students identified as LD. (Aguilar, Morocco, Parker, & Zigmond, 2006)

Overall, the “scientifically based school wide instructional interventions” (Bradley, Danielson, & Doolittle, 2007, p.8), associated with RTI are specifically important to students with specific learning disabilities (Bradley, Danielson, & Doolittle, 2007). Bradley, Danielson, and Doolittle (2007) suggest, the history of Specific Learning Disabilities was so focused on the process or identification of the exact problem within the child, that interventions were often neglected. (Bradley, Danielson, & Doolittle, 2007) If RTI considers the culturally sensitive approaches to the identification, and services for African American students, it may impact the factors contributing to disproportionate representation (Green, 2005; Harris-Murri, King, & Rostenberg, 2006).

Chapter III Summary and Recommendations

The current discrepancy model used in the identification of students with learning disabilities, fails to consider intervention strategies prior to labeling. The disproportionate number of African-American children being diagnosed with learning disabilities suggests it is time to consider the validity of current identification procedures. (Harris-Murri, King, & Rostenburg, 2006) For years, the uses of intelligence and achievement assessments have been considered the ideal method in determining eligibility for a learning disabled diagnosis (Meyer, 2000). However, “research has demonstrated that, the use of this IQ discrepancy model for the determination of SLD contributes to the disproportionate representation of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students in special education” (Harris-Murri, King, & Rostenburg, 2006, p.780). Although the use of psycho-educational assessment does provide valuable information, it is generally an analysis of struggles apparent within the child (Harris-Murri, King, & Rostenburg, 2006). According to Meyer (2000), assessment procedures should include methods to assess some of the environmental influences of achievement. Methods that consider a student’s exposure to education, cultural background, and socio-economic status, may assist professionals in identifying a more appropriate plan or intervention.

RTI avoids the use of a single criterion in the identification procedure (Bradley, Danielson, & Doolittle, 2007). RTI may benefit low achieving students, particularly African-American low achieving children, by providing a program that rules out the existence of all other environmental factors affecting poor achievement, prior to diagnosing (Green, 2005; Harris -Murri, King, & Rostenburg, 2006). The debate over RTI versus ability-achievement discrepancies in the LD identification procedure is a

current issue in the field of school psychology (Green, 2005). When considering what is best for each child, professionals have an ethical obligation to do no harm. The current measures of LD diagnosis may cause harm, because they fail to inclusively consider all areas affecting student achievement prior to labeling. The discrepancy model assumes that a significant discrepancy usually equals LD. However, “without consideration of how culture mediates and influences everything we do, the potential for inappropriate eligibility decisions are still present if the team does not apply a Culturally Responsive RTI model to such determinations” (Harris-Murri, King, & Rostenburg, 2006. p.781).

RTI assists in constructing a truly individualized method of educating at risk students. RTI’s focus is on both prevention and progress. Students receive individualized interventions that work best for their learning style, are based on their specific area of need, and consider the importance of environmental influences. If students fail to respond positively to the interventions implemented they are moved through several levels until they respond positively to the interventions the team implements. Each level varies in intensity. The first intervention often begins in the general education classroom. The fact that the general education teacher is often responsible for implementing the intervention helps to decrease the test and place approach associated with at risk students. (Brown-Chidsey, & Steege, 2005)

Limitations

Response to intervention is a fairly new concept. This is a significant limitation of this literature review. It was not until 2004, and the IDEA reauthorization requirements, that a system wide RTI implementation was truly mandated. Therefore, the research on the actual benefits is limited. While much empirical research suggests, RTI may decrease

the factors contributing to disproportionate representation, there has been little research to confirm hypothesis. The long term effects of RTI are another limitation of this research. Because, RTI is a fairly new concept there is little information known about long term effects for African American students.

Conclusions

According to the Brown-Chidsey and Steege (2005), Response to Intervention promotes early intervention as well as evidence based interventions. RTI encourages professionals to collect data over a period of time to ensure that all factors were taken into consideration and properly addressed (Reschly, 2003). If effective interventions are developed during the stages of RTI, there may be a decrease in the amount of African American students diagnosed with LD (Green, 2005). Bradley, Danielson, and Hallahan (2002) agree. They suggest that RTI works to create the direct link between student's needs and individualized interventions. The interventions provided are monitored to ensure progress or determine alternative strategies. They also suggest that, this method may help to decrease the misdiagnosis and overrepresentation associated with the learning disabled. (Bradley, Danielson, & Hallahan, 2002)

According to Gravois and Rosenfield (2006), the major contributing factors of disproportionate representation are the referral process, bias assessment procedures, and lack of effective instruction and intervention. They argue that Instructional Consultation teams would benefit the overall performance of minority students exhibiting difficulty. These teams would evaluate instruction, and interventions to determine the best fit for the child. (Gravois, & Rosenfield, 2006) These teams are similar to RTI, in that they both

attempt to determine the best fit for the child. Gravois and Rosenfield (2006) found that by providing these forms of teams, disproportionately slightly declined.

According to Hosp and Reschly (2003), the major issue with disproportionate representation is the restrictive environments in which African American children are placed. They report, "African Americans spend more time outside the general education classroom than do Caucasians" (p.228). The statistics show that identification often leads to separate placement for African Americans (Greene, 2005; Patton, 1998). African Americans diagnosed with disabilities are often placed in special education classes (Hosp, & Reschly, 2003). As early as 1968 Dunn, suggested, the disproportionate placement of African Americans in special education was related to segregation practice. Dunn (1968), argued, "we must stop segregating them by placing them into our allegedly, special programs" (p.6). Current policies such as the discrepancy model maintain the routine of test and place. Comprehensive evaluations rarely lead to interventions. However, with RTI services are not pre-determined by labels and identification. The child's performance or response to interventions is what ultimately determines the students' least restrictive environment (Brown-Chidsey, & Steege, 2005).

Despite the uncertainty of some professionals in the field concerning RTI, the most important issue is that something must change. Educational professionals can not continue the use of identification procedures that contribute to the overrepresentation of African American children in special education. Assessments procedures are beneficial only in their ability to link problems, to possible solutions (Patton, 1998). Recent changes apparent in IDEA 2004 indicate a need for RTI's problem solving approach in identification procedures.

RTI is an inclusive method that stresses the ideology that all factors should be given equal consideration prior to diagnosing learning disabilities. An analysis of implemented interventions, environmental factors, and student achievement need to be included to help decrease the overrepresentation of African-American students in special education. RTI may assist in decreasing overrepresentation by identifying environmental and cultural factors affecting achievement, monitoring interventions, decreasing the weight given to testing results, decreasing separate settings for minority students, and providing individual assistance to African American students identified as at-risk. It is important that the public education system adopts RTI and other policies that ensure the success of all students, regardless of their race or area of need.

Recommendations

Green (2005) argues, one of the contributing factors to overrepresentation is, the “...lack of knowledge that the problem exists” (p. 34). She argues that overrepresentation is “...not just a problem for numbers” (p. 34). Instead it is an issue that affects the educational and future success of African Americans. The chances of students diagnosed with disabilities attending college, or even finding a job is much lower in comparison to their Caucasian peers. The overall African American community is significantly impacted by disproportionate representation. African American families with misdiagnosed children often distance themselves from the school system. In the long run, disproportionate representation leads to mistrust between the school system and the African American community. Greene suggests that early identification, culturally responsive practices, instructional interventions may help to decrease the overrepresentation of African Americans in special education. (Green, 2006)

Response to Intervention promotes evidence based interventions as a way of assisting at risk children. The interventions are often implemented prior to special education referrals, and intervene before poor achievement. These interventions provide the assistance needed for the improvement of many students academic performance. Because, these issues are addressed prior to special education placement, there is an increased understanding of interventions effective in increasing academic achievement. (Harris-Murri, King, & Rostenberg, 2006)

Green (2006) argues the field needs to implement a culturally responsive, response to intervention. She suggests, policies should be put in place to ensure that the transition to the RTI model includes established interventions and strategies that increase the performance of African American students. Assessment methods should be culturally sensitive, and referrals based on students lack of response to appropriate interventions. More research needs to be conducted in the area of effective instruction techniques for African American students, as well as the impact of RTI on the contributing factors of disproportionate representation. (Green, 2006)

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