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Chapter 5
Promoting Fair Assessment of African American Students

Public schools have the essential task of providing students with skills to be successful, capable of functional independence, and to contribute to society at large. Schools are charged with the task of providing students with a foundation of academic knowledge and are also responsible for helping students develop life skills, to socialize with others, and manage themselves in a society that contains people from diverse backgrounds. An expectation of success for all students is essential. Information gathered from the Minnesota Department of Education, Parents Know website, indicates students who meet state academic standards are “prepared to meet state graduation requirements and will have mastered knowledge and skills necessary for college and career readiness.”

Parents and caregivers of African American students share the hope of an education for their child that provides nurturance, safety, maximizes their child’s potential, and provides students with the necessary skills for success in life. Another aspect associated with a positive educational outcome includes the fostering of identity development (including racial identity).

When students experience difficulty with aspects of their education, prevention and intervention supports should be available to them. Screening for intervention is utilized when students show signs of struggling to meet academic demands or when they experience adjustment problems within the context of school. In most settings this intervention system is conducted in a collaborative fashion, involving parents and caregivers.

Specially designed interventions within a multi-tiered system of support are applied to assist students who require modifications in teaching strategies or in how information is presented. Preventative services and initial interventions for students fall under the broad domain of Tier 1 services, designed to promote the success for all students within the general education population and curriculum. Modifications in teaching strategies within the traditional classroom are an example of Tier 1 universal strategies.

Despite the application of well-designed, research-based interventions, conducted with fidelity, some students may continue to struggle and fall behind their peers with regard to academic skills, social skills, or the ability to manage their behaviors. More intensive strategies may be introduced under the broad domain of Tier 2 services. Tier 3 services may be utilized for those students who require focused and intensive interventions at the individual level.

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1 Minnesota Department of Education, Parents Know (n.d.) Academic standards: Why they are important to your child’s success. Retrieved from http://www.parentsknow.state.mn.us/parentsknow/grade_k_2/topicsAZ/PKDEV_000437
Some students may continue to struggle despite focused interventions designed to remediate difficulties they have encountered. Based on lack of success with well-designed interventions, or following up on parent request for services, a comprehensive evaluation is utilized to identify the needs and status of students, and to determine if special education services under one of the broad disability categories is appropriate for the student.

An individualized evaluation is initiated when a student show signs of difficulty meeting specific expectations associated with academic skills, functional and communication skills, or with social or behavioral adjustment. Although well intended, referral and evaluation for academic, developmental, or social concerns does not always provide the intended positive consequences for every student.

Unintended negative consequences associated with the referral or evaluation process is particularly detrimental to many African American students (Vincent, Randall, Cartledge, Tobin & Swain-Bradway, 2011). Part of the difficulty stems from the (a) inability of some educators to utilize multiple modes in presenting information, (b) use of inappropriate questioning techniques that do not support development of student’s critical thinking skills, or (c) failure to include the student’s culture as an asset to learning.

The referral and evaluation of students who are not from the majority culture is an important and sensitive issue for educational systems. Some systems may not perceive of diversity as a gift to be celebrated, but rather take a perspective of neutrality so as not to be seen as promoting one group over another. Such an approach may not only diminish the rich heritage and unique differences among all students in a school, but may also contribute to lack of understanding of the cultural dynamics which influence Minnesota’s population of African American students.

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Understanding African American Cultural Identity and Culture of Today

The culture of African Americans has been shaped by their history in the United States, as well as by the transmission of African traditions across time and distance. African Americans are not a homogeneous group. Most definitions of African Americans include a descendant of slaves component, or one of having an ancestor who was born in America. The term Black is often used as a generic reference but actually refers to a much broader group of students. The term Black includes students who are immigrants and English Language Learners (ELL), typically from African countries. Examples of variations within African American populations include

- religious beliefs,
- geographic origins,
- educational background,
- immigration status,
- native language,
- socioeconomic status, plus other factors.

Across just these few variations, a wide variety of cultural differences can be observed. Educators working with families must work to understand the needs of students and the families they are working with, rather than generalize expectations based on limited understanding of a few factors.

A White middle class value system, defined as economic security through home ownership and caregiver level of education with a 4-year college degree\(^3\) is often imposed on students who come from diverse backgrounds. While this definition may be consistent with a large number of students in schools in Minnesota, in urban centers and suburban settings the student population may be discrepant from this model. This issue is important because African American students, as a minority group, experience the negative impact of disproportionate representation in special education programs.

**Language issues and their cultural impact.** Some, but by no means all, African Americans speak a variation of Standard American English (SAE) that is referred to in the literature by several names such as Black English, Ebonics, African American English (AAE) and African American Vernacular English (AAVE). African American English reflects the complex racial and economic history of African Americans, including their origins in western Africa as well as more recent migrations from the rural south to the urban north. For consistency, the term African American English, or AAE, is used in these guidelines.

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African American English evolved over time from contact and convergence among various languages. AAE and SAE have influenced each other over time. Some words used in Standard American English are derived from western African languages, such as “OK” which is derived from “wa kay.” In Minnesota, youth can be observed using vocabulary and expressions from African American English in communications with others. An important aspect of the language use is the connection to a sense of cultural identity.

African American English is sometimes misperceived. “When a dialect is associated with a traditionally stigmatized and marginalized group, the dialect tends to be viewed negatively” (Cheatham, Armstrong, & Milagros Santos, 2009, p. 5).4 Furthermore, “individuals’ perceptions of nonstandard dialects have deep historical and social roots and can be difficult to change” (Cheatham et al., 2009, p. 3).

Dialects have strong connections to culture and play an important role in the formation of children’s identities. AAE cannot be understood without considering African Americans’ history of enslavement, oppression, as well as past and present discrimination (Hilliard, 2002, cited in Cheatham et al., 2009).

Dialect is important to consider in the context of a classroom, where students have a dual audience of teachers and peers. Students may choose to use AAE to establish group affiliation and create meaning. Language becomes a method to crystallize identity and culture. When educators adopt the approach of correcting the dialect of an AAE-speaking student and force students to use SAE, they are devaluing and rejecting not only that student’s speech, but also the student’s identity as an African American. “Consequently, these children may silence themselves or resist or withdraw from school” (Corson, 2001, cited in Cheatham et al., 2009, p. 4).

Some African American students may feel rejection or may question their ability when they perceive that their social language is not accepted within the school setting. The important factor is to help students understand that they are capable of using both AAE and SAE. Where African American students need support is in understanding when to transition from one form of speech (AAE) to another form of speech (SAE).

A review of recent literature on the topic of Ebonics in schools revealed that many educational barriers remain for African American students who use Ebonics or African American English. AAE continues to be overlooked and misunderstood by educators, which negatively impacts student identity and school engagement. Failure to recognize the use of AAE by students contributes to inadequate instruction, particularly with regard to literacy. When AAE is not recognized, it can contribute to inappropriate referral, assessment, and placement in special education for African American students (Grant, Oka, & Baker, 2009).5

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Some lessons from bilingualism can be applied to bidialectals, or persons who speak two dialects. Similar to bilingual students, bidialectal students can experience a negative socioemotional impact when they perceive their first language spoken in the home is replaced by a second language. As well, it may be more confusing for students when their first language is taken from them at a time in development when language fluency is crucial for learning and critical thinking skills (Lambert, 1977, and Han, 2010, cited in Pearson, Conner, & Jackson, 2013).

**Assessment of African American students is impacted by dialect.** According to Wheeler, Cartwright, and Swords (2012), “assessment manuals do not explain what counts as dialect features or how dialect can affect decoding. Without specific guidelines and specific knowledge of their students’ dialect patterns …teachers will be unable to factor dialect into reading assessment” (p. 418).

Assessors are left to their own judgment as to what is a dialect. This subjective component increases errors in assessment. If educators cannot separate dialect influence from a decoding error in SAE, students are not assessed accurately, and opportunities to determine instructional strategies or interventions that will help them be successful are missed (Wheeler, Cartwright, & Swords, 2012). “This distinction—dialect influence versus reading error—carries profound implications not only for the child’s current reading placement, but also for his or her longer trajectory in school, and even for later adult life… Simply put: Considering dialect can transform reading assessment and intervention” (Wheeler et al., p. 424).

Considering the dialect of a student would also likely transform the referral, assessment, and identification of AAE-speaking students for special education services. Children who speak nonstandard dialects are often misdiagnosed as having a disability” (Rickford, Sweetland, & Rickford, 2004, cited in Cheatham et al., 2009, p. 3). Many standardized assessments do not accept responses based on AAE responses or have not been normed on AAE-speaking students (Gopaul-McNicol, Reid, & Wisdom, 1999).

For ethical and legal reasons, “assessors should not use an assessment on a population for which it is not normed” (Grant et al., 2009, p. 120). Overrepresentation is a complicated issue with no single solution, but it is clear that traditional assessment approaches often fail some AAE-speaking students. Evaluators and those making placement decisions about African American students need to understand how their performance on standardized tests is influenced by language spoken at home and cultural orientation of the student.

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Recommendations for accurate and fair assessment of AAE-speaking students include incorporating a variety of methods in assessment, using alternative assessments, and practicing dialect-sensitive assessment. “Children who speak nonstandard dialects of English can be assessed informally, incorporating the assessor’s knowledge of dialects as well as observations and family interviews” (Cheatham et al., 2009, p. 9).

Other assessment choices include curriculum-based assessment and ecological assessment approaches.

One dialect-sensitive option for assessments “has been to modify their scoring so that appropriate dialect responses would be accepted. However, this practice invalidates the test’s standardization, and then results can only be used descriptively” (Wyatt, 2002, p. 427, cited in Pearson et al., 2013, p. 34). This strategy is consistent with the approach of testing the limits, where the assessors present selected items in a different form to determine if the student has an understanding of the concept tested. Testing the limits is done as a means to separate confusion with the instructions from understanding the concept examined.

Implications for schools. AAE shares many similarities with Standard American English (also called General American English, GAE), although there are important differences between the two that have serious implications for educating AAE-speaking students. The linguistic differences between AAE and SAE, such as tense morphology, “can give rise to subtle misinterpretations that may go unnoticed by speakers of either AAE or SAE, and therefore result in only partial understanding, a phenomenon referred to as pseudo-comprehension” (Stewart, unpublished remarks, cited in Beyer & Hudson Kam, 2012, p. 366).

Often classroom context, familiar routines, and non-linguistic cues provide the AAE-speaking student with additional information to guide responses and behavior and may mask the fact that the student may not be interpreting speech correctly (Beyer & Hudson Kam, 2012). Since teachers often interact and observe students in the classroom—an environment abundant with non-linguistic cues—they may not identify the student’s dialect as a factor impacting learning. “Thus appropriate language-based interventions may not be offered to students who are otherwise quite capable of learning. This lack of appropriate language-based intervention for students who speak non-mainstream varieties of English, therefore, may unnecessarily impede academic success.” (Beyer & Hudson Kam, 2012, p. 378). “Although there are numerous studies that legitimize AAVE as a linguistic system, many practitioners continue to struggle with the successful implementation of instructional strategies that support the literacy learning of AAVE-speaking students in their classrooms” (Cooks & Ball, 2009, p. 140).

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Overlooking and/or misunderstanding AAE in education results in inadequate instruction of AAE-speakers. Of particular concern is the potential negative impact on acquisition of literacy skills. Students who speak a non-standard dialect, such as AAE, may have additional challenges when it comes to literacy, such as making sound-symbol associations, because the representation of sounds is different from their dialect (Cheatham et al., 2009).

Pearson, Conner, and Jackson (2013) advocate for dialect-sensitive literacy instruction that includes dialect-sensitive reading curricula. Creating innovative learning environments may also help AAE-speaking students succeed.

Educators can also help children develop their own sociolinguistic and language use awareness. Cheatham, Armstrong, and Milagros Santos (2009) recommend that teachers develop “thematic units based on aspects of language diversity and include the use of books that contain dialects” (p. 8). Teachers can also conduct age-appropriate discussion on the use of different dialects in different settings and for different audiences (Cheatham et al., 2009). “Children should be provided with opportunities to take control of their language choices as they interact in different social situations with others who speak in diverse dialects” (Dyson & Smitherman, 2009, cited in Cheatham et al., 2009, p. 9).

In social situations many students may use informal language to communicate. The informal language used by students may differ from the structured language required for demonstrating academic proficiency on tests. In reviewing the performance of students, distinctions can be made according to their performance on informal communication skills, and formal communication skills. The use of informal communication skills is referred to as Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS). BICS involves social language necessary to communicate with others within specific settings. Schools and educational settings may expect or require a social language that can be different than the social language used by the student at home. Varying expectation between social language of the school and the home places the student in a position similar to that of bidialectals.

As well as considering the student’s level of social language, it is also important to determine the level of language skills needed for success on academic tasks, referred to as Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). Cues for language skills are typically not present in formal tests and assessments when stakes might be high (Beyer & Hudson Kam, 2012).

Beyer and Hudson Kam (2012) conducted a study on 1st and 2nd grade AAE- and SAE-speakers that found “while all children correctly interpreted shared forms, only the SAE-speakers, but not the AAE-speakers, successfully interpreted SAE tense morphology” (Beyer & Hudson Kam, 2012, p. 365). Their findings suggest, “mere exposure to SAE is insufficient to support the complete learning of these specific SAE morphemes” (p. 377) and “support the notion that like English language learners, young AAE-speaking children could benefit from direct instruction” (p. 378). In other words, African American students benefitted from specific

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instruction on tenses. Simply hearing tenses used by other speakers was not sufficient to benefit their understanding. Overlooking the differences between AAE and SAE causes AAE-speaking students to spend a substantial amount of time with dual processing of morphemes, which can create a substantial disadvantage during crucial educational stages. Beyer and Hudson Kam go on to state, “since performance in school is highly dependent on competence in SAE, any student whose home language background is different should receive language-based intervention” (p. 378).

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<tr>
<th>Instructional Recommendations to Support AAE-speaking Students</th>
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<tr>
<td>Dialect-sensitive literacy instruction</td>
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<td>Direct instruction on tenses and morphemes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Direct instruction on understanding environmental cues for language</td>
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<tr>
<td>Creation of innovative learning environments that allow for use of AAE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Help children expand their sociolinguistic and language use awareness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communicate classroom spoken language expectations clearly.</td>
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Elements of a Home Language Survey, to use with caregivers, can further support direct instruction by obtaining answers to the following questions.

1. What language do you use with your child?
2. When did your child first acquire language?
3. What language does your child use with siblings…with peers?

An example of a home language questionnaire used by the Minnesota Department of Education can be found in Appendix A. These and other related home language questions could be incorporated into the Sociocultural Checklist.
Embracing linguistic diversity. Resolving the issue of overrepresentation, as well as the achievement gap between African American and White students will require changes in approach and practice within educational systems. Recent literature provides recommendations for staff development, school climate change, instruction, and assessment in relation to AAE. It is crucial for educators to develop linguistic and cultural sensitivity.

Negative perceptions can be deeply rooted and not easily changed. “The widespread stigma means that a large number of people are not predisposed to see advantages in AAE. Most people learning about AAE are not just learning something new: They are being asked to accept something new” (Pearson et al., 2013, p. 36). To serve AAE-speaking students, educators must not only understand language diversity, but they must also develop linguistic awareness of their own attitudes about language (Pearson et al., 2013).

Many educators will need to be informed of the value of accommodating more than one language variety in the classroom (Pearson et al., 2013). Linguistic awareness must also be increased, or underlying attitudes will continue to impede success. “Since expectations and language patterns are so strongly implicated in practices by which teachers can unwittingly undermine their own educational goals, it will be important for culturally responsive teaching to begin by cultivating positive attitudes about language diversity as a cultural asset, not a deficit” (Hoover, 1990, cited in Pearson et al., 2013, p. 38).

Staff may need direction and guidance “in discussing the social and political motivations for misunderstandings” about different dialects (Cheatham et al., 2009, p. 10). Training may also be necessary to specifically address “the negative consequences of stereotyping on the basis of faulty definitions of ‘correct’ speech” (Corson, 2001, cited in Cheatham et al., 2009, p. 10).

To create a school climate that is accepting of linguistic diversity, it is important to address language diversity with students, staff, and parents. “Schools and programs can work with staff and parents to develop a policy on language diversity that responds to local concerns and local norms” (Cheatham et al., 2009, p. 10). Since some people may not recognize the value of linguistic diversity, it is important to identify the positive outcomes associated with linguistically diverse students who can use SAE in school, community, and eventually work (Cheatham et al., 2009). Educators must be careful not to make assumptions about students or families and instead take steps to learn about students, families, and communities “to determine the extent to which they adhere to particular dialect characteristics” (Cheatham et al., 2009, p 9).

Code switching. It is important to address code switching with AAE-speaking students. Code switching refers to the ability to change linguistic codes, or manner of speaking, based upon the situation and speaking partners. Some African American students may use AAE while among group members but use SAE with members of other racial groups.

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Educators can incorporate techniques to address code switching in the classroom. For example, they can facilitate “children’s creation of a standard and nonstandard dialect dictionary, allow all children to try out SAE in puppet shows, and read books to children that contain nonstandard dialects” (Cheatham et al., 2009, p. 9).

Code switching is a skill that requires development. According to a study of AAE-speaking student perspectives by Godley and Escher (2012), students believe that classrooms should be a safe place to practice code switching and SAE without fear of judgment. Godley and Escher (2012) found that teachers’ and students’ perspectives on the use of language in the classroom are different, and they advocated transparency in classroom language expectations. “It is unfair to hold students to expectations for spoken language that are never explicitly shared in the classroom” (Godley & Escher, 2012, p. 712).

Educators must change their approach in relation to AAE-speaking students. “Rather than being forbidden or ignored, children’s dialects are resources from which to expand their language repertoires” (Cheatham et al., 2009, p. 3).

### Preparing a Student Who Speaks AAE for Success

- Discuss code-switching at the beginning of the year with students and create explicit, shared expectations for language use in the classroom
- Provide Opportunities to speak both AAE and SAE
- Provide appropriate opportunities for students to practice SAE, explaining the purpose, and creating a nonjudgmental environment
- Use authentic language and dialect examples for discussions about the complexity of language
- Acknowledge the presence of linguistic prejudice in society and discuss with students
- Use literature to spark discussion about issues of linguistic prejudice and language differences.

**Family stress.** Child welfare data from the Minnesota Department of Human Services indicates that African American Children are five times more likely than students of other races to be in out-of-home care. The reasons for out-of-home placement vary, but can include exposure to domestic violence, homelessness due to poverty (the child is removed for protection and provision of basic needs, such as shelter), or limitations in the caregiver’s ability to provide support due to problems, such as chemical addiction. It is important for educators to recognize the support needs of children in out-of-home placements and recognize that family stress may momentarily interfere with academic focus. Developing social support networks to assist the student and family becomes a desired goal.

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Learning characteristics of African American students. Boykin (1994)\textsuperscript{19} and Boykin, Tyler and Miller (2005)\textsuperscript{20} proposed several learning characteristics that may be a foundation for learning by African American students. Educator misunderstanding of these factors could become a source of error in how educators consider learning differences/disability and decision making about services for African American students. Some educators may misinterpret these factors if their background is significantly different from the student’s.

- Spirituality (positive outcomes attributed to higher power)
- Harmony (perceptive of connection between people and environment)
- Affect (expressing emotion)
- Communalism (prefer working cooperatively)
- Movement (prefer active learning)
- Verve (psychological facet of movement)
- Expressive individualism (enjoy unique self-expression)
- Verbal Expression and verbal directness (prefer verbal communication, enjoy debating and bluntness)
- Social time orientation (track events, not time passing)

The achievement gap. Any approach to addressing the needs of African American students must recognize a number of systemic factors that contribute to their disproportionate representation in special education programs. The African American Leadership Forum/Education and Life-Long Learning Committee (AALF/ELL)\textsuperscript{21} reported that Minnesota is facing a crisis where the education of African American students lags behind that of their White peers. This achievement gap and other difficulties encountered by African American students can be attributed to five gaps. The areas where there are gaps in development, intervention, treatment, or services for African American students fall under (a) preparation, (b) belief systems, (c) time for learning, (d) teaching strategies and methods, and (e) leadership.

The Preparation Gap involves the lack of basic school readiness skills. Exposure to language and literacy skills, such as reading and vocabulary development at home, establish a foundation of skills to meet the initial demands of the school setting. Factors such as poverty or stress within the home setting can interfere with personal, social, physical, and emotional development underlying basic academic readiness skills. For those African American learners who are in homes stressed by poverty or other factors, their development of baseline skills to enter schools may be altered.


The Belief Gap relates to establishing and maintaining belief in the capability of African American learners to achieve and learn, and to ultimately defeat the achievement gap, allowing African American students to achieve success at the same rates as other learners. Belief in student success and capability is an aspect of school climate, where student and family successes are championed and opportunities for reaching goals are provided.

The Time Gap is evident when students enter school, lacking basic readiness skills: This gap becomes greater as students progress from grade to grade without receiving adequate or enhanced time devoted to core instruction. In circumstances where students have fallen behind their peers, it is critical to understand and anticipate their learning trajectories and provide remedies, such as extended school day/year. Collecting data that assess rate of learning or rate of skill acquisition and comparing those rates to expected outcomes for grade levels helps establish meaningful goals and interventions for students. This approach is consistent with an evidenced-based approach to making decisions about students. When students have fallen behind their peers, it is not acceptable to ignore questions about where they are within the curriculum or social areas and where they should be.

The Teaching Gap can be described in terms of inadequate teacher preparation and expertise, as they relate to culturally diverse classrooms, pedagogy, and content knowledge. High staff turnover is a common problem, particularly in lower performing and culturally diverse schools. Programs such as those for students with emotional or behavioral disorders often have staff changes from year to year, yet students in such programs would benefit most from strong teachers and staff stability. In some settings, frequent changes in staff contribute to a pattern of ineffective instruction and instability, which impacts the overall educational experience for many African American students.

The Leadership Gap is most visible in school districts/schools where student outcomes are consistently poor. “School districts that have been most effective in closing the achievement gap are headed by strong and effective district leaders, including district superintendents and school principals” (see Footnote 170). Leadership that tackles the achievement gap by embracing and activating a systematic and inclusive “cradle to career” approach will realize the greatest success in closing the achievement gap for diverse student populations. Critical elements of an effective, inclusive approach include (a) universal early childhood education; (b) sustained, responsive family supports; (c) extended instruction that is culturally relevant; and (d) high expectations, high standards, and high quality teachers. District and building administrators are the ones who must set the tone for school climate and direction by welcoming diversity and holding high expectations and standards for all.
Disproportionality. Factors that contribute to disproportionality involve issues of race, culture, social-economic status, educator stereotyping of students and their families, and the school climate. Unfortunately, the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education programs and disciplinary actions that remove them from the traditional classroom settings remains a persistent problem (see Figures/Tables).

Multiple factors contribute to disproportionate representation of African American students in special education or other services outside of the traditional classroom. In some circumstances this includes failure to understand the cultural dynamics of African American students and curriculums that are not culturally responsive. Additional concerns relate to bias in referral processes, assessment practices, and placement decisions. These factors combine with inequities in opportunity based on socio-economic factors, such as poverty.

Particularly distressing for those concerned about disproportionate representation of African American students in special education programs is research in the area of emotional and behavioral disorders. Recent findings suggest “many school personnel, regardless of their ethnicity, combined their belief in ED (emotional disorder) as an intrinsic condition with firmly held stereotypes of African American families in poverty” (Hart, Cramer, Klingner, & Sturges, 2010, p. 159). 22

Some educators or professionals erroneously assume that when an African American learner shows difficulty with managing emotions, feelings, or behavior, the problem exists solely within the child. Such quick assumptions show a lack of empathy and a failure to understand that some of the child’s responses could be attributed to prior negative experiences. External causes or situational factors that might be provoking the behavior are not considered or examined. Important environmental, language, cultural, and social factors that contribute to the child’s reactions or response to services are excluded in attempts to understand the behavior.

As has been stated, disproportionate representation of African American students can involve overrepresentation in some programs and underrepresentation in others, such as those for students identified as gifted or talented. It is important for school systems, educators, and caregivers to be vigilant about promoting services for African American students who show promise across a wide range of domains, including intelligence; social/emotional; traditional content areas, such as sciences and math, as well as music and the arts.

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Underrepresentation. Ford (1998) stated “concerns over recruiting and retaining minority students in gifted education programs has persisted for several decades” (p.4) and she identified factors that could contribute to underrepresentation of diverse students for gifted education. These include (a) recruitment issues, (b) personnel training, and (c) retention issues.

With varied definitions of giftedness and confusion about identifying factors for gifted students, recruitment efforts are inconsistent. Instruments used to identify students often have a White middle class orientation, thus students from diverse backgrounds may not perform in a pattern similar to the standardization group on which the assessment was based.

Educators may lack common training on identifying signs of giftedness for African American students, relying on their own expectations and experiences to guide them. However, given the significant difference, in some settings, between the backgrounds of educators and those of their students, failure to identify potential gifted students among African American populations may be higher than for other groups. The U.S. Department of Education Condition of Education Report (2011) concluded that while the student population within public schools continues to diversify along racial, ethnic, and linguistic factors, the demographics of school educators remain relatively stable at 85% white and 75% female. Differences in attitudes, experiences, beliefs and expectations can occur between professional educators and the diverse student population they are expected to serve.

In some settings, when a student from a diverse background has been identified for services it may be difficult to retain them in a program. If separated from their traditional peer group the student may feel isolated or unsupported, which could negatively impact their response to an accelerated curriculum.

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Culturally Responsive Teaching

Pearson et al. (2013) surveyed educational programs and based on the information gathered, offered three exemplary models of culturally responsive teaching.

- Programs that harness the power of high expectations; presenting new and challenging materials, not remedial exercises that focus on making up a deficiency.
- Programs that appreciate linguistic diversity; using multicultural curricular materials that resonate with children’s own experiences and are designed to engage students and motivate them to learn.
- Programs that develop different kinds of linguistic awareness, especially dialect awareness. They give children tools to increase their awareness of what systematic changes are being asked of them when they learn the mainstream dialect.

As proposed by Corey, Corey, & Callanan, (2007) persons in professional development programs (teachers, counselors, school psychologists), “come into training knowing only their own culture, which can lead to cultural tunnel vision, a perception of reality based on a very limited set of cultural experiences” (p. 114). Faulty vision or misperceptions about the ability, skills, or behavioral intent of African American students contribute to erroneous judgment of those students, suggesting interventions that are not warranted or placement in services that are not appropriate. A model of one size fits all does not apply (Guerrero & Leung 2008).

All educators, professional support staff, and administrators must work from a culturally competent perspective. A culturally competent perspective is one that identifies behaviors, attitudes and policies within a school system and among professionals to enable the setting to be responsive to the needs of students. Cultural competence is defined as a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals to enable those involved to work effectively in cross-cultural situations (Cross, Bazron, Dennis, & Isaacs, 1989).

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Educators recognize ethnicity, race, and culture as important factors in formulating their understanding of a child. Most professional training programs have specific guidelines or position papers that provide a framework for services to diverse populations. For example, the American Psychological Association (APA) states that psychologists assess how their own experiences influence their behaviors, while seeking to minimize prejudices or bias. Within the APA guidelines, emphasis is placed on the examiner recognizing the client’s background, belief systems, and language.

Educators and administrators need to develop an understanding of the process of acculturation, for the diverse students they work with, and their own process of identity formation and views of culture. Sattler (1998) defined acculturation as “a process of cultural change that occurs in individuals when two cultures meet; it leads the individuals to adopt elements of another culture, such as values and social behaviors” (p. 264). Acculturation may be an issue when a child from a traditional African American family seeks to work, socialize, or live within the majority culture.

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<th>Factors Impacting Acculturation.</th>
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<tr>
<td>History/Life experience (brought against will - African Americans or conquered - Native Americans)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Length of experience in country</td>
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<tr>
<td>Degree of ties and identification with native culture</td>
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<tr>
<td>Make-up of neighborhood - integrated versus segregated (those in isolated neighborhoods are more likely to retain traditional beliefs and customs than those living in diverse neighborhoods)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strength of language and customs (those with well-developed customs and beliefs will have a more difficult time “crossing cultures”).</td>
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</tbody>
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The process of cultural adaptation can be viewed on a continuum, ranging from Traditionalism to Biculturalism (Sattler, 1998).  

- Traditionalism: the practices of a culture are followed.
- Transitional Period: old and new cultures are used, with some individuals struggling with identity issues as they compare values of home culture and new culture.
- Marginality: struggle continues for the individual, where one may experience isolation from both cultures due to uncertainty about where he or she should be.
- Assimilation: person may embrace the new culture while rejecting the old.
- Biculturalism: person is able to integrate the traditional and new by following positive aspects of both, while maintaining a sense of identity.

Those involved in the instruction of children from diverse backgrounds should be sensitive to cultural development and consider stages of acculturation. Issues such as lack of identification with majority culture values might account for differences in tests scores. A child from a family that maintains strong identification with traditional culture, such as an African American family that reads African fairy tales or folk stories, may have a strong literature base, but not score as well on tests that assume a majority culture focus of experience, with questions drawn from folk stories more common to White or Euro-centric literature.

Members of evaluation teams must use sound professional judgment based upon a review of comprehensive information about a child when recommending interventions, services, or change of placement for students. Such decisions should also be based on sound data and incorporate information from caregivers. Professionals need to demonstrate that they are using sound, ethical practices and always held accountable for issues of validity, reliability, or appropriateness of methods used with their student populations.

A key aspect in developing proactive caregiver involvement is the cultural competence of the educator (NEA Policy Brief). Educators who work to understand the culture and climate of their school, their own cultural background, and who work to develop an understanding of the different cultural backgrounds of the students within their system are role models for other educators.

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31 http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/PB13_CulturalCompetence08.pdf
Working with African American Families

Within any process where decisions are made about student educational services, caregiver involvement is essential. Caregiver involvement is a broad term inclusive of several types of participation and is important for all families. However, African American caregivers and parents often report more conflict with educators regarding communication and involvement than do other ethnic or cultural groups.

It is important for educators to understand a parent/caregiver’s history with school. Educators can shift the paradigm by getting to know caregivers, respecting their views, and including them in the process rather than blaming, or treating them with little or no respect, as some families report.

As an example of working to understand the characteristics of a family, the following are several recommendations for education staff suggested Lynch & Hanson (2004).32

Research shows when parents are involved in their child’s education, children have better attendance rates, earn higher grades, and achieve higher graduation rates than their peers where parent involvement is lacking (Darch, Miao, & Shippen 2004).33 It is incumbent upon schools to encourage and secure caregiver involvement, starting with effective communication.

Educators and administrators should work to make schools inviting and inclusive of parents and caregivers, and proactively engage them as partners in their children’s education.

Methods to Foster Relationships with African American Families:

Capitalize on kinship bonds. Focus on family strengths rather than on weaknesses in developing and implementing interventions. If extended family members are primary caregivers include them in the intervention.

Utilize informal support networks such as the church, neighbors, or friends whenever possible.

Address family members formally, using titles and last names, until given permission to be more relaxed.

Assess resources in the African American community in your area and develop relationships with those resources (extend invitations to join committees).

Assess the effects of poverty on families and determine which issues are related to culture and which are related to socioeconomic status.

Avoid generalizing about students from African American families based on the behavior or lifestyles of a few.


Parents and caregivers are the expert on their child, and can be expected to contribute knowledge of family history, developmental history, social history, medical history, and the characteristics, strengths, and needs of their singularly unique child.

Students benefit from the support they receive from their caregivers both in and outside of the home environment. Research supports that parents also benefit from being more involved in their child’s education. Domina discussed the benefits experienced by parents of diverse children (2005). Parents involved in schools become more familiar with the educators who work with their child. If the environment is inclusive and inviting, parents and caregivers develop knowledge of the school’s climate and culture. Once parents become familiar with teachers, specialists, and administrators in the setting they can build relationships with them. A strong relationship contributes to caregivers feeling at ease with raising questions about the progress of their child, which will help parents and caregivers advocate for appropriate supports for their child (Turney & Kao, 2009). They also are better able to understand the range of services offered by schools, and the reasons for such services.

Bridges to Communication, Family Involvement & Partnerships

Schools have a climate, culture, language, and multiple layers of complexities arising from the constant interplay of numbers and variety of people who work within its four walls. For educators and other school staff, administrative demands, high stakes testing, changing expectations, and ever evolving policies, can, at times, make it difficult terrain to navigate. Added to this environment are students and families who enter and hope for success regardless of any life challenges they may be facing. It should be clearly understood that by virtue of cultural and demographic status, American Indian and African American students often must deal with circumstances and challenges that the dominant culture knows little of. It should also be no surprise for culturally diverse students and families to experience education as very rocky terrain as well. One challenge that educators and families can face together is that of building collaborative relationships to ensure effective instruction and successful outcomes for students. In this section, some of the bridges and barriers to open communication, family involvement, and educator/family partnerships are presented.

Communication Barriers

Use of Jargon

It is important for educators to assist caregivers in understanding the dynamics of the school. Most educators (classroom teachers, school counselors, specialists in disability areas, school psychologists, social workers, speech/language pathologists) complete professional training programs where they learn the lingo or the vocabulary and language of their field. This language, often referred to as jargon, can create a barrier to effective communication between educators, staff, and families if adjustments are not made to communicate in a manner that does not require a professional degree or training to understand.

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Communication Bridges
Active Outreach and Multiple Means of Communicating

Schools must actively engage in outreach and support activities that maximize home-school communication. Proactive methods to communicate include email, traditional mail, Friday folders, communication notebooks, phone calls, and home/school visits.

Caveats:
Does the family have easy, reliable access to email at home?
Do caregivers have leeway to take time off from work?
Is transportation an issue for meeting?
If needed, is childcare available…affordable?

Federal and State Legislation
Federal special education (IDEA) and general education (ESEA) legislations have strong mandates for caregiver involvement. National organizations such as the National PTA, Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education (NCPIE), and federally funded parent training and information centers (PTIs), and parent information resource centers (PIRCs) support parent involvement with opportunities for training, and sharing of resources to schools and families.
Communication Barriers

**Educators**

Active *resistance* to communication with parents and caregiver. Some educators may be resistant out of fear of conflict or lack of confidence.

Fear *loss of control* over their classroom environment or educational setting (Lazar and Slostad, 1999).36

Concerns about *lack of time* in their daily schedule.

Communication that is *dismissive* of caregiver’s beliefs; *assertions* that school’s proposed action or suggestion is the only “correct” step to take.

Assumptions about caregiver’s level of education; lack of concern over child’s education

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**Caregivers**

Some caregivers may have *different belief systems from school personnel* about how concerns for their child should be resolved. (If unable or unwilling to consider other views, this can be a barrier.)

Feelings of *stigma* associated with referral for special services.

Lack of *self-confidence*, feeling *intimidated or overwhelmed*.

*Mistrust* of professionals

Past *negative personal educational experiences*.

* Historical factors associated with concerns about the meaningfulness and validity of intelligence testing for diverse populations, may cause parents to be suspicious and guarded about the use of such measures with their children (Larry P. vs. Riles).37

* If communication is not clear and understandable, suspicion about the meaningfulness of interventions is crystallized and resistance develops. This resistance is a combination of rejection of poor information, unclear information about the purposes and use of test scores, and families working to protect the esteem of themselves and their children.

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37 Larry P. vs Riles Retrieved from: http://www.leagle.com/decision/19791421495FSupp926_11265
Communication Bridges

Personal Perspective/Attitude

Educators

Educator preparation programs can provide training to new generations of professionals on methods to support parent and caregiver involvement from a cross-cultural perspective.

Preparation programs can help candidates develop cultural competence through course/field work that is intentional and addresses cultural competence education.

Schools can support educators by providing mentors to ensure they develop cross-cultural skills and expertise in communicating with caregivers.

Caregivers

Some caregivers focus on resolving emotional or behavioral difficulties experienced by their child with religious leaders through their church, or with respected elders within their family (Katz and Pinkerton 2003). *Schools must be respectful of caregiver’s beliefs and decisions.

Ways to Increase Caregiver Involvement

1. Remind caregivers that they are their child’s primary educator and encourage them to become active in their child’s education or remain active if they already are.

2. Work as a team (administrators, teachers, and caregivers) to ensure that students receive a quality education and that the child understands the importance and value of education.

3. Identify factors that hinder caregiver involvement by conducting a case history of the family and develop a strategy to address barriers identified.

4. Establish positive rapport with parents through positive communications (communicate successes!)

5. Empower caregivers and respect their decision-making authority as part of a team-oriented approach. Empowerment is shown by supporting decisions made by caregivers when service options have been explained to them.

6. Develop a network of parents supporting parents.

7. Maintain high expectations of caregivers and parents and avoid a judgmental perspective about caregivers.

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Additional Ways to Support Caregiver Involvement

Make sure collaborations are ongoing and two-way. Methods to support ongoing communication include offering periodic workshops to parents on topics on various ways to support children, or workshops about types of services offered within the schools.

Document and review outreach efforts through parent-teacher communication logs.

Call or send notes home when students do something well, have good days, or complete an achievement.

Identify Cultural Liaisons and support their work in communicating with families.

The role of cultural liaisons. A cultural liaison is a person who has experience, expertise, or training in issues related to services for diverse populations. The liaison may be a member of a specific cultural group, or a person who otherwise has training in working with diverse populations. Cultural liaisons are available in some school districts to support families through the special education process, or to assist in mediating conflicts between families and educators. First and foremost, they are hired to facilitate outreach and collaboration with culturally diverse families. Cultural liaisons provide support to caregivers, consult with educators, and help other school staff understand the impact of culturally specific behaviors.

A cultural liaison may work with students and caregivers in school, home and community settings. Cultural liaisons work directly with caregivers, acting as a guide through the assessment process, attend child study conferences, and conduct home visits to communicate information about a student's need to caregivers, and can provide direct student support. Direct support with students may involve organizing assignments or monitoring completion of homework assignments.

Cultural liaisons are expected to have knowledge of diversity, cultural issues, and community resources so that they can provide families with information and supports. A successful cultural liaison has strong interpersonal communication and organizational skills.

Specific responsibilities of cultural liaisons are set by the position description created by the school district. Examples of some of these responsibilities are shown in the table below.

[^40]: http://www.pta.org/
### Examples of Cultural Liaison Responsibilities

Facilitate meetings between school staff, students, and parents from diverse cultural, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds to facilitate communication and assist in the resolution of misunderstandings and conflicts.

Meet individually with students to gather information about needs or concerns.

Provide direct assistance to students experiencing a variety of academic, social and/or emotional concerns; work with students of color and monitor their academic progress, behavioral adjustment and attendance.

Serve as a role model and mentor for students; encourage good attendance, and promote and support achievement.

Serve on school committees representing caregivers and/or students of color; represent the views of diverse families; explain the goals and objectives of the school to families in culturally sensitive language.

Assist families in overcoming barriers to attendance at parent-teacher conferences; help identify barriers and suggest methods to overcome them; attend conferences to assist parents in communicating with school staff, as needed.

Support educators in interactions with culturally diverse students and their families.

Consult with administrators to develop strategies that include families in the implementation of school behavior and social skills programs.

Consult with administrators and/or the district volunteer coordinator to recruit, train, and schedule tutors and volunteers from diverse communities that mirror the school's student population.

Consult with parents and seek their suggestions on methods to make the school an inviting place; assess environment for respect for diversity and inclusivity.

Develop resources on after school and community-based programs to meet the academic, cultural and social needs of the school's diverse student body.

Work with the administrators to develop team-building and leadership opportunities for students of color and facilitate leadership development opportunities for culturally diverse families.

Refer students and/or their families to appropriate social service agencies or community groups.
Recommendations for School Systems to Support African American Caregivers

Caregiver involvement in education is important because parents are not only considered the primary educators of their child, but they also serve as decision-makers and advocates for their child’s education. Caregiver involvement and empowerment positively impact outcomes in urban schools. When parents are involved, there is a positive impact on academic achievement and cognitive development, as well as behavior (National Parent Teacher Association). This positive impact on behavior is particularly important because African American students are more likely than any other ethnic group to be suspended, expelled, or placed in special education programs for children with emotional/behavior disorders (EBD).

When educators have low expectations of caregiver and family involvement, the potential for a self-fulfilling prophecy exists. These low expectations, which are based on reactions to race, socioeconomic status, or gender, are also sometimes applied to the student. When parents are involved, they can help educators understand and appreciate their family’s values and culture, keep expectations for their child high, and ensure the child’s educational needs are met effectively.

School systems have the capacity to provide support and training for educators, administrators, and other school staff to work effectively with African American caregivers. Training should be directed at methods to increase cultural competence for working with diverse populations. Cultural competence involves understanding the dynamics of groups that have a different experience and history than one’s own, as well as understanding one’s own history and perceptions about others. Cultural competence means understanding one’s own identity and cultural heritage and how it influences interactions with others.

Recommendations:

• Create a caregiver involvement policy and assess it for cultural sensitivity (TIER 1 Service).
• Create a Caregiver Involvement Committee involving educators, administrators, caregivers and liaisons.
• Insure that any caregiver involvement policy has multiple means of ways parents and caregivers can be involved.
• Monitor caregiver involvement, collect data about percentage of caregivers/families that regularly participate, identify those parents who are regularly absent and develop strategies for outreach to those families.
• Survey families on needs (childcare, meeting times) and engage in discussions about barriers they may identify.

Retrieved from http://www.pta.org/
• Inclusion of caregivers through all levels of tiers of educational services insures that collaboration and communication occur between home and school and that caretakers have the information they need to support their children. Moreover, with good communication and cooperation with school staff, caregivers are in a better position to make decisions about their children when they feel that their questions have been heard, and when they feel they have clear answers to their questions.

• Through the establishment of good communication and an atmosphere of collaboration, caregivers feel included. Moreover, through communication between home and school, and intentional efforts by staff to understand the family, parents and caregivers feel empowered in their ability to maintain their role as their child's advocate. Through open communication, respect for differences among families, and trust, barriers of suspicion and mistrust are reduced between caregivers and educators, and the focus of achieving success for the child is retained.

One Caregiver’s Experience: African American Case Study 1

One African American parent spoke of her experience with her two sons in an urban school district. The students were a second grade student, and a fourth grade student. The young boys attended different schools within the same district. As they progressed through school the parent developed concerns about specific skills, such as their ability to stay focused on tasks, follow through on requests, or complete activities once they started them. The lack of development in these areas made it difficult for the boys to learn from typical activities for their ages. In addition to concerns about their ability to acquire academic material, social concerns developed due to the frequency of off-task behavior.

As the parent began to communicate her concerns about her sons to classroom teachers and administrators, she noted that her experience with her children varied greatly between the two schools her children attended. In one setting the parent felt school staff listened to her concerns about her child and were responsive to her concerns. In the other school, staff either ignored her concerns or failed to validate her concerns about the needs of her son.

Experience with the referral process:

Action related to the referral process was one domain where the parent reported significant differences between her sons’ schools. When she made a formal request for an evaluation, the reactions she received from the schools differed. For her son in second grade, within a few days of making her request she received information about due process and the timeline for processing the evaluation for her son, complete with a targeted date of an assessment conference, within the timeframe according to state guidelines. An administrator followed up with a personal telephone call to find out if she had any specific questions about the evaluation process, and asked if she understood or had any questions about how the referral process would unfold.

In the second school for her older son, the reaction she received was much different. Initially educators spoke with her about her request for a referral. From her perspective it was clear that school staff did not support her request for an evaluation, and staff made specific suggestions that she should withdraw her request for an evaluation. She stated she felt confused by their
suggestions that she withdraw her request, as she thought she was within her rights as a parent to make the request based on her concerns about her child’s academic and social skill development.

Despite her stated concerns that her son had failed to make progress after several months of the current school year, together with minimal academic skill development in reading from prior exposure to education, she believed that a continued lack of intervention would leave her son further behind and impair his ability to gain any enjoyment out of the act of reading. Reading had become a significant struggle for him, and she was concerned that he was developing a resistance to looking at books and attempting to read because reading was difficult for him. The parent believed that school staff minimized her concerns about her son's lack of progress, despite their own academic evidence based on grade reports and state testing results that placed the student well below his peers as far as reading ability.

The parent persisted with pursuing her request, but did not get an official letter to begin the process until another three weeks had passed; time where her son continued to operate in school without meaningful interventions. One educator told the parent the school hesitated because they did not want to “label” her son. The parent's reaction was that she understood that labeling is a sensitive issue, yet her concern was about accessing services so that her son could get help, and less about the use of a label. As well, she was concerned that her son was already being labeled as a bad kid as a result of behavioral reactions related to frustration with reading, and off task behavior when he was confused in school. More than concerns about his reading ability, school staff (classroom teacher and administrator) stated concerned about her son’s behavior. However the teacher and administrator rejected possible links to reading frustration and off task behavior.

Differences in Definition of the Problem:

Despite feeling support in one setting for the referral requests, in both settings the parent and school staff disagreed about the central issue regarding the needs of her sons. The parent had a clear understanding that her children were not meeting academic goals. However teachers and administrators responsible for discipline in her son's schools suggested that her son's issues were primarily behavioral.

The parent reported that she struggled with the perception that she had bad kids. She acknowledged that her boys had challenges with off-task behavior, but she considered her son's challenges as more attentional than behavioral. As well, given their frustrations with learning to read, it was reasonable to consider that some of the student’s off task behavior were related to frustrations with decoding content and understanding information. She sought an outside opinion and an investigation from an outside assessment documented evidence of both young boys meeting the criteria for a diagnosis of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Resistance:

Following the diagnosis of ADHD for her children, the parent educated herself on the meaning of the diagnosis, including books on the subject and resources from Children and Adults with Attention Deficit Disorder (CHADD). She conducted her own review of information on the Internet so that she could become a better advocate for her kids. She found material that discussed school based interventions and she sought to share interventions she found with educators at school.
Despite evidence from an assessment that documented ADHD, the parent was met with resistance from school staff who seemed to be unwilling to consider attentional problems as a factor in her sons' behavioral difficulties at school. The parent was aware that services under a category of health impairment were an option, as opposed to services under the category of emotional or behavioral disorder. From a labeling perspective, the question was about which category was a more accurate representation of the needs of the children. It is possible that a student with ADHD can be served under services for Other Health Impaired (OHI) or EBD, so long as they meet the criteria for the specific category of service and have an educational need. However, negative connotations for EBD are stronger than for OHI.

The parent reported her dismay that school staff were uninterested in the information she gathered to help her be a better parent to her children, or the modifications suggested to increase the chances for school success. The parent asserted that "I feel it didn't matter what I suggested, the teachers were not willing to allow me to educate them on issues”. The parent stated her respect for the knowledge educators had for the areas they were responsible for, but she did not feel that most school staff reciprocated their respect for information she could share about what might help her sons.

Methods to Support Parents:

As she reflected on her own experience, the parent discussed ideas to support other parents who have a background similar to hers:

Develop a network of parents who have been through the assessment process and who can provide mentorship to other parents who are new to special-education assessment procedures.

Investigate parent concerns with the same degree of value that teacher based reports are responded to: school staff should be receptive to the idea that although parent concerns may be different than those expressed by a teacher, they are important.

Use components of active listening where restating the concern to the parent is used to assess accurate perception of the caregiver's perspective.

Implement data-based assessment systems.

Include culturally relevant material into the curriculum to show a need for learning specific academic material.

Obtain sufficient bias-free materials and supplies to meet the needs of each student in the class (textbooks, materials represent a variety of cultures).

Use hands-on, visual and kinesthetic instructional activities to teach concepts and skills.

Understand that resistance from parents and caregivers can be a natural protective reaction when concerns are raised their child. It is important to recognize that parents and caregivers can be vulnerable to feelings such as loss of hope when educators express concerns about their child's development. Some of this resistance occurs when potential labels are used to describe the condition, and caregivers understand that many labels have negative connotations associated with them, as well as the potential for reduced expectations about the child.

Address policies and procedures to increase fairness in services for African American students. Policies developed within a district that focus on reducing overrepresentation should have an
evaluation component, completed by teachers, parents and students, if appropriate. Aspects of policy and procedures include:

Assure that the academic content is free from stereotyping of African American students and families.

Adapt the curriculum to the cultural needs of the students (e.g. infusing African American stories, traditions, and history in course content).

Ford cited previous research regarding the various ways to measure overrepresentation, and suggested that the field reach consensus on how to measure overrepresentation.

- Bias and unfairness in testing must be addressed regarding how they contribute to overrepresentation, accommodations must be addressed, and differences in outcomes between various minority populations must be determined.
- Special educators need to “examine the pipeline to special education, which often begins with suspensions and expulsions, primarily among Black and Hispanic males” (Ford, 2012, p. 402).
- Prevention should be emphasized (family collaboration, early childhood programs) to prevent developmental issues from requiring special education services.
- Special educators must acknowledge the impact that overrepresentation has on our nation’s place in the world, as it leads to fewer students being appropriately prepared for college.
- An emphasis on data on teacher referral rates by race/ethnicity/gender may help understand overrepresentation, and strategies to prepare culturally competent educators may be helpful.

http://www.pta.org/ Formal preparation in “culture and cultural similarities and differences (Ford, p. 403) is necessary for special educators to reduce referrals and overrepresentation.

While there continues to be a variety of concerns for African American students in schools, there are actions that can be taken to improve the experiences and outcomes for this population of students. Educators must make thoughtful and purposeful changes to their approach and practice to better serve these students. Changes at a systemic level can help ensure a long-term commitment to the success of African American students. Those who are responsible for monitoring the success of students should not be satisfied until African American students are no longer grossly overrepresented in regards to special education, and the achievement gap is closed.
Moving Forward

Many factors contribute to the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education programs. Solutions to overrepresentation in special education programs, or in suspensions/expulsions from school require dedicated efforts from educators and administrators, working collaboratively with parents and caregivers to identify interventions and services that benefit students without reliance on services that remove and separate students from their peers.

The culture of African American students is broad, encompassing degrees of use of African American English and cultural identification. Educators and administrators who operate from a culturally competent perspective support the culture of African American families.

Ford summarized previous research regarding educators’ responses to overrepresentation and provided a clear statement of educators commitment. Educators must “(a) neither ignore nor negate cultural differences, (b) not misunderstand cultural differences, and (c) not penalize children for their cultural differences” (Ford, 2012, p. 400).^42

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Chapter 5 Footnotes/References


37. Larry P. vs Riles
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   http://www.leagle.com/decision/19791421495FSupp926_11265


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