



Disproportionality: Too Much (or too little) of a Good Thing

By Jody Mashek, ASK Resource Center

What is disproportionality?

If you have done a significant amount of reading about special education and/or the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), at one time or another you may have come across the term *disproportionality*. Within the framework of special education this term refers to students of a particular race or ethnicity who are either over-identified or under-identified for special education. Concerns have existed for quite some time that children from minority groups and/or children who do not speak English as their first language are identified as needing special education services at a much greater rate than the general population. In addition to a child's ethnic or racial background, there may be other differences, such as cultural and social factors, that lead to a student being identified in need of special education services when, in fact, that child may not have a disability at all. When this over-identification does occur at a **higher rate than the general population**, that particular group is considered **overrepresented** in special education enrollment. Similarly, if a particular group is identified for special education at a percentage rate less than the general population, they would be considered **underrepresented**.

What does IDEA say?

You may be wondering if disproportionality is a major problem in our nation's educational system, as well as in the state of Iowa, or why we need to pay attention to it. As a starting point, let's begin with the amendment of IDEA in 1997. At that time Congress determined that there were significant questions as to whether some populations were either over or under-identified for special education services. Therefore, provisions were included that required states to collect data and analyze the number of students identified for special education. IDEA was most recently amended in 2004. In addition to the previous requirement, the regulations now require states to collect data about disproportionality in relation to suspensions and expulsions of students identified for special education, as well as the placement of students identified for special education in their least restrictive environment. IDEA also includes stipulations about what a state must do once it has identified instances of disproportionality.

So far, the data collected by school districts and states points to the existence of disproportionality in many areas. For example, statistics have indicated that in general, African Americans are identified for special education at a greater rate than the overall school population. The same holds true for Latino and American-Indian students in certain circumstances. Other reports have pointed to discrepancies between minorities and the general population in relation to placement in their least restrictive environments and over-identification in certain disability categories, among other issues.

Why is this important?

Special education is designed to meet the needs of students with disabilities. When students with cultural differences or limited English proficiency are identified for special education, the special education system may be overwhelmed with students who do not belong there. More importantly, these students' true needs are not being met appropriately. Disproportionality also affects classmates as they are not afforded the opportunity to gain knowledge or a greater understanding of other cultures and languages from their classmates who are inappropriately removed from the general education setting.

What can we expect?

According to the National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems (NCRREST), minority students represent the segment of the national population that is increasing at the fastest rate, and by the year 2025 half of all school children will represent a minority race or ethnicity. This trend is also true in the state of Iowa. For example, there are nearly 109,000 people of Latino origin living in Iowa, making it the state's largest minority group. By the year 2030 this number is expected to triple. Since 1999 the enrollment of Latino students in Iowa schools has increased 87.7 percent. (Source: Iowa Division of Latino Affairs).

If current trends of disproportionality continue, Iowa schools will continue to see a rise in the number of students each year who are not being educated in their least restrictive environment, who have been misidentified as needing special education services, or who receive services that do not adequately meet their needs. If needs are not met, they will struggle academically, which could cause dropout rates that are already elevated to increase even further.

School district, state, and federal policies and procedures must address the sensitive cultural and language needs of students who are in need of support in these areas. Developing and implementing culturally responsive services and supports not only includes providing interventions early in the student's education, but providing interventions that avoid cultural assumptions and biases as well.

For further information, visit www.nccrest.org or www.wrightslaw.com and search for 'disproportionality.'