

California State University, San Bernardino

**CSUSB ScholarWorks**

---

Theses Digitization Project

John M. Pfau Library

---

2004

## The representation of African American students in programs for the mild mentally retarded

Peter Laurance Gennaro

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/etd-project>



Part of the [Race and Ethnicity Commons](#), and the [Special Education and Teaching Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Gennaro, Peter Laurance, "The representation of African American students in programs for the mild mentally retarded" (2004). *Theses Digitization Project*. 2538.

<https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/etd-project/2538>

This Project is brought to you for free and open access by the John M. Pfau Library at CSUSB ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses Digitization Project by an authorized administrator of CSUSB ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@csusb.edu](mailto:scholarworks@csusb.edu).

THE REPRESENTATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN  
STUDENTS IN PROGRAMS FOR THE  
MILD MENTALLY RETARDED

---

A Project  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

---

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
in  
Special Education

---

by  
Peter Laurance Gennaro

March 2004

THE REPRESENTATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN  
STUDENTS IN PROGRAMS FOR THE  
MILD MENTALLY RETARDED


---

A Project  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

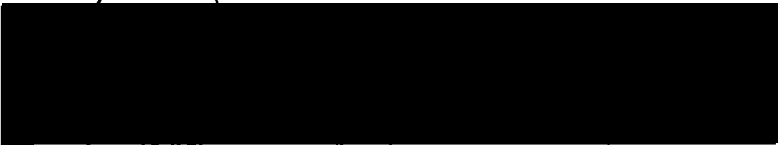
---

by  
Peter Laurance Gennaro  
March 2004

Approved by:

  
Dr. Jeff McNair, First Reader

1/23/04  
Date

  
Dr. Marjorie McCabe, Second Reader

## ABSTRACT

For more than 30 years, it has been acknowledged that African American students have been overrepresented in programs designed for individuals with mild mental retardation (MMR). That is to say, the number of African American students in MMR programs is significantly higher than would be expected when comparing their representation to the percentage of African Americans in the total student population. This project was designed to explore the history and literature of the research that has been conducted on this subject over the past three decades. Additionally, the project was undertaken to determine if overrepresentation of African American students in programs for the mild mentally retarded is a condition that exists in Riverside County, California.

While each particular body of work discussed in the review of literature is unique, the bulk of the research was divided into particular categories. Specifically, it focused on the five aspects of the research conducted that appeared most often within the entire body of sources used for the project. Those five aspects were:

- 1) Statistical data presented on the percentage of African Americans represented in programs for individuals

with mild mentally retardation; 2) The use of IQ assessment instruments as a means of placement into such programs; 3) Additional causes of overrepresentation into such programs; 4) Results of placement and it's effect on special education for African American students; and 5) Possible solutions to the problem. These five issues were not found in each individual source used for this project, but they occurred with a frequency that permitted this researcher to conclude that they were the most pressing aspects of the problem.

Some of the literature obtained for this project was fairly specific and dealt exclusively with the topic of African Americans and their representation in these programs. Much of the literature, however, dealt not only with this issue, but with the fact that minorities in general tend to be overrepresented in these programs. Further, some of the literature dealt not only with programs for the mild mentally retarded, but with other categories of special education. This researcher was able to isolate the needed information to explore the topic without fear of straying from the original purpose of the project. There were occasions, however, that it was necessary to discuss programs outside of MMR in an

effort to call attention to what a particular researcher was reporting in his or her work. Additionally, it was necessary on occasion to discuss representation of more than just the African American population for purposes of comparison.

For the data collection component of this project, information was gathered on African American representation in MMR programs in Riverside County, California with the intention of comparing those numbers to what was being suggested in the literature. This researcher wished to draw conclusions as to whether similar issues currently existed in this part of California.

Along with the review of related literature and a presentation of statistical findings, the project offered pre-research assumptions, questions to be discussed, definition of terms used, limitations of the research conducted, and recommendations for future research. An effort has been made to be clear and accurate with the information being presented, however, there are limitations in reporting on and comparing bodies of research conducted decades apart.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT . . . . .	iv
LIST OF TABLES . . . . .	vii
CHAPTER ONE: PRELIMINARY INFORMATION	
Assumptions . . . . .	1
Project Questions . . . . .	2
Definition of Terms . . . . .	3
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE	
Summary of Statistical Data . . . . .	6
Use of Assessment Tools for IQ Testing and Adaptive Behavioral Measures . . . . .	14
Additional Causes of Overrepresentation . . . . .	24
Impact of Overrepresentation . . . . .	30
Suggestions and Possible Solutions . . . . .	36
CHAPTER THREE: DATA COLLECTION . . . . .	43
CHAPTER FOUR: PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS . . . . .	45
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION	
Limitations of Design . . . . .	56
Additional Comments . . . . .	59
Recommendations for Future Research . . . . .	63
REFERENCES . . . . .	65

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Riverside County Districts. . . . . 45

Table 2. Percentage Comparison for  
Riverside County . . . . . 46

Table 3. Large Districts, High Populations of  
African American Students . . . . . 49

Table 4. Large Districts, Low Populations of  
African American Students . . . . . 50

Table 5. Small Districts, High Populations of  
African American Students . . . . . 52

Table 6. Small Districts, Low Populations of  
African American Students . . . . . 54



## CHAPTER ONE

### PRELIMINARY INFORMATION

#### Assumptions

There exist several assumptions that were made prior to researching this topic, examining the data, and presenting findings. The first was, a disproportionate number of individuals from a particular group (e.g. ethnic) placed into programs for the mild mentally retarded, represents a weakness in the placement system of special education. This includes those groups that are overrepresented as well as those underrepresented. The second assumption was that there is general intellectual equality among races. This is to say that no one racial group within the population has a greater or lesser cognitive ability than another. The third assumption was that placement decisions have been made them with the best of intentions. Any over or under representation that has existed in the past or may exist today is not the result of educators deliberately segregating students of a particular race into a category of special education. It was assumed that the many people involved in these decisions do so based on their

training and the resources at their disposal. The final assumption made was that should weakness exist in the system of special education, it is to the benefit of all educators, students, and families to rectify the situation.

### Project Questions

This project was undertaken with the objective of exploring the history of, and current trends of, African American representation in programs for individuals with mild mental retardation. This researcher sought to answer four specific questions. First, "In the United States, has there been a history of overrepresentation of African American students in program for students with mild mental retardation?" The second question, a follow up to the first, is, "If an overrepresentation has existed, to what degree did it exist?" Thirdly, "In Riverside County, California, does current data suggest that historical trends are continuing along the same paths, or moving in a different direction?" Finally, "Do districts with certain population characteristics have a greater chance than others to over represent African

American students in the category of mild mental retardation?"

#### Definition of Terms

Virtually all of the recurring terms used for this project should appear familiar to the reader. However, it is possible that some of them have multiple definitions. While it was not the intent of this researcher to describe these words in terms of absolute meaning, it was determined that it would be to the readers benefit to define them for the sake of clarity. Those terms are listed below.

#### Special Education

For this project, special education is a service or placement that would result in a student being served in an educational program outside of a traditional general education setting.

#### Mental Retardation

This is a condition where a student has cognitive functioning at or below an IQ of 70, with deficits in the areas of adaptive behavioral skills. This includes all students in the mild, moderate, severe, and profound range of retardation.

## Mild Mental Retardation

A condition found in students with cognitive scores in the 62-70 range of IQ. Students in this category tend to have cognitive and adaptive deficits that are less acute than those found in the moderate, severe, and profound range of retardation. The literature does not always make distinctions between the varying levels of retardations. This is further discussed in the section on Limitations of Design. Additionally, the label of MMR is a category that has also been referred to as EMR, or, educable mentally retarded. Depending on when the research was conducted, either of the terms may have been used. This researcher used the term MMR unless specifically quoting sources that used the EMR term.

## Programs for Students with

### Mild Mental Retardation

These are programs for special education students where emphasis continues to be placed on academic achievement despite learning difficulties that may exist. This differs from programs for students with more severe mental retardation that would include basic life skills curriculum and self-care goals. For this project, the programs primarily designed for students with mild mental

retardation are Special Day Classes (SDC). Some programs for these students, however, will include Resource Specialist Program (RSP) classes.

#### Overrepresentation

For this project, overrepresentation refers to a situation in which a particular sub-group makes up a greater percentage of a special education category than it does for the general education population. This researcher did not set minimum criteria for the term "greater," and it is acknowledged that there are varying degrees of overrepresentation. This matter is taken up in more detail in the Limitation of Design portion of this project.

#### Similar Districts

Those districts that had similarities in total student population, representation of African American students, or both.

## CHAPTER TWO

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### Summary of Statistical Data

Statistics were used in virtually every information source that made up this review of literature. Data collected by scholars ranged from studies national in scope, to single district reviews. Sifting through statistical data can at times be an arduous task, even when one considers that more often than not, findings of the researchers were in agreement with each other. However, there were certainly times when individuals doing the research were not in total agreement as to what the data represented.

Many, if not all, individual states have conducted studies that have statistically analyzed the ethnic breakdown of their special education programs. For reasons that will be discussed in a later portion this review, California appears to have attracted the most attention. Statistical analyses in California date back to pre-1970 studies. The majority of this research used similar criteria to reach a conclusion as to whether African American overrepresentation existed in California

public school programs for students with mild mental retardation. The researchers assumed that should the number of African American students in the state be a certain percentage, then that percentage should be the same for their representation for the classification of MMR. "Overrepresentation occurs when the percentage of minority students in special education exceeds the percentage of these students in the total student population" (Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002, p.181).

According to the literature collected, this kind of overrepresentation is exactly what has occurred in California and in the entire country. "For the 1974-75 school year...black children provided approximately 10% of the student population but 22.6% of the EMR population" (Brady, Manni, & Winikur, 1983, p.296). This is nearly identical to what the majority of interested scholars were reporting during this period. In a like article, it was written that, "...figures from the California Department of Education revealed that black students in the state represented 9.5% of the total student population, but 27.5% of the educable mentally retarded (EMR) population" (Wright & Cruz, 1983, p.387). These researchers went on to write that during the same time

period in San Francisco, "...black students...represented 28.5 percent of the total population vs. 66% of the EMR population" (Wright & Cruz, 1983, p.387).

By the fall of 2000, some of the numbers being used to describe California's ethnic disproportionality issues had changed. McDaniel (2002) reported that by the year 2000, the population of African American students in California had dipped to 8.49%. This was roughly a 15% drop in the total population of African American students in the state. At the same time, African American students comprised 12.2% of the MMR population. When compared to the literature published in the early and mid 1980's, it appears that the percentage of African Americans being represented in the category of MMR was halved by the year 2000. However, McDaniel does not refer to prior data. "This offers another way of noting the discrepancy between the percentage of ethnic groups in the general population, and the percentage of those students identified with this particular disability" (McDaniel, 2002, p.3). Despite the changing numbers in this category, McDaniel continued to view the matter as an on-going weakness in California schooling rather than one that may have been improving. The significance of



these numbers will be explored more thoroughly in a later section of this project.

California is by no means unique when it comes to this issue. "In a study conducted by the New Jersey Department of Education, it was found that while black children accounted for 17.8% of the public school population, they represented 43% of the total children in the EMR group" (Brady, Manni, & Winikur, 1983, p.296). The same was found for numerical breakdowns of this type in large cities. One particular study was conducted in metropolitan Atlanta and it was found that, "...in children followed to age 7 years, the prevalence of mild mental retardation was nearly four times higher among Black than among White children" (Yeargin-Allsopp, Drews, Decouflé, & Murphy, 1995, p.324).

There are several examples in the literature where alternative measures were used to describe similar circumstances. In one study, reverses, or under representations, were discussed in an effort to show that disproportionate numbers of students were being served depending on ethnicity. That is, "Conversely, whites constituted 81% of the public school population [in California] but they represented only 32.1% of those

placed in classes for mentally retarded students" (Chinn & Hughes, 1987, p.41). Outside of basic percentage comparison, the most widely used numerical model employed by researchers was a probability model. In a national study it was found that, "African-American children are 2.3 times more likely to be identified by their teachers as mentally retarded than their white counterparts" (Oswald, Coutinho, Best, & Singh, 1999, p.194). Similarly, this method of reporting data was used to describe the circumstances in the state of Iowa. "The percentage of black students in programs for students with mild mental retardation was 3.23 times the white percentage in 1978, but 2.64 times the percentage in 1986" (Reschly & Ward, 1991, p.261). In still another model, the flat rate of each ethnicity was broken down to determine what percentage of each ethnic group was represented in the MMR category independent of each other. It was in this model that the only difference of opinion could be found as to whether the available data was significant.

MacMillan & Reschly (1998) reported on the frequency of occurrence of certain ethnic groups being represented as MMR in the nation as a whole. They wrote that in

1978, the percentage of African American students classified as MMR was 3.46%. In 1986 that number changed to 2.3%, and in 1990 it had decreased to 2.1%. For the same period, the percentage of white students in the MMR category went from 1.07%, to 0.87%, to 0.81%. This supported work by Reschly that reported a problem appearing to be in a state of self-correction. Some years earlier, Reschly (1981) reported that while African Americans were indeed overrepresented in the category of MMR,, "...a very small percentage...only slightly higher than that of white students...[are] classified and placed in programs for the mildly retarded" (p.1094). Reschly's optimism was countered by the more recent work of McDaniel who wrote, "The disproportionately high identification of African American students with mental retardation continues to exist, despite efforts by courts and the CDE to address this issue (McDaniel, 2002, p.10). McDaniel cited the fact that in California, the total number of all students being served as mentally retarded is 0.62% while the total population of African American students being served in this category is 0.89%, an overrepresentation of 43.5%

The difference between the Reschly and McDaniel articles was in how the numbers were perceived. "In California, the actual percentage of the total black student population placed in special classes for the mildly retarded was just over 1%" (Reschly, 1981, p.1097). For Reschly, the fact that one percent represented such a small portion of the total African American student population makes the "overrepresentation" argument less meaningful. For McDaniel, who reported 21 years after Reschly, the current representation of African Americans in MMR programs, even having dipped to 0.89%, was too high because of how it compared with their totals in the general education.

If there was a problem with the statistical portion of the sources used for this review, it was that the data were at times inconsistent. Earlier, national statistics were cited that described African American students as having 2.1% of their total student population categorized as MMR in the year 1990. This represented a continuing decline. Statistics from the National Academy Press however, report that the most current number for African American representation in this category is 2.6%

nationally. The question can then be raised as to whether the trend of decline had reversed itself or weaknesses existed in the researcher's data collection. Even if the data were accurate, there tended to be discrepancies from one state to the next. Statistics such as the fact that, "...ten times as many children are served as mentally retarded in Alabama as in New Jersey" (MacMillan & Reschly, 1998, p.23) exacerbate the fact that educational practice is inconsistent from one state to the next.

The preponderance of evidence is that there is no doubt as to whether African Americans have been over represented in programs for the mild mentally retarded. This researcher had the opportunity to explore works written over the last 30 years and at no time found any source to seriously argue otherwise. While the numbers varied, and at times tended towards inconsistency, the trends found nationwide were quite similar. Looking at the statistics chronologically, the evidence was also clear that the actual percentage of overrepresentation has declined as years have passed.

Finally, among the most common similarities that exist in the collected articles was the fact that after

the late 1970's, most of the researchers did not feel the need to make their articles statistical proofs of any kind but rather, accepted the existing numbers as given so they could explore other aspects of the issue. These other aspects will make up the remainder of the literature review for this project.

#### Use of Assessment Tools for IQ Testing and Adaptive Behavioral Measures

While there was little doubt from a statistical standpoint that African American students have been overrepresented in programs for the mild mentally retarded, the available literature was not as definite when it came to other aspects of the issue. The use of assessment instruments has been a topic of debate over the last thirty years and has earned a tremendous amount of attention in the literature. The argument has been about whether the assessment tools, primarily the WISC series, used to determine eligibility for special education services, were racially or culturally biased. Two distinctly different points of view emerged in this area. One such viewpoint reported that the psychological testing instruments were valid across races and cultures.

The contrary viewpoint reports that assessments were biased against particular groups of students.

Several researchers have reported that the testing instruments used for special education placement should not be automatically labeled as racially biased. This group most often began with a similar assertion: "Simply showing that groups perform differently on tests is not a defensible criterion of test bias" (Lambert, 1981, p.941). Among the supporting reasons for such an assertion was the manner in which race was viewed. Lambert, for instance, is unwilling to assume that all those of a particular race are culturally similar. "It is important to remember that when we assign a value representing economic or cultural status to a group of children, we reduce the variance within that group to 0; in other words, we treat them as if cultural factors affected them all the same way" (Lambert, 1981, p.941). This was an important and effective argument against a popular assumption. That is, if the WISC series is biased against some African American students, it must be assumed that a similar conclusion can be drawn across the entire African American student population. Lambert (1981) went as far as to question whether there is even

such a thing as a white or black culture. Lambert's arguments were well developed, however, a surprisingly small amount of that scholar's work cited research that suggested that testing is actually non-biased. The defense of the testing instruments was based primarily on the idea that the evidence did not strongly support a label of bias. "There is no...evidence that the WISC or WISC-R are biased instruments. Regardless of differences in relative performance, the validity of the test for predicting a variety of outcomes for children of different ethnic groups is now established" (Lambert, 1981, p.946). Thus, the WISC series could be considered unbiased by default.

Most notably, Sandoval (1979) defended the WISC series of tests in several other of his writings during this period. In the research that Sandoval would conduct in the next two years, he asserted that African American students were not at greater risk for entering programs for the mild mentally retarded simply based on bias testing instruments. He stated that "...most critics of the WISC-R seem to ground their charge of bias on the finding of significant mean differences in performance on the test for majority and minority children" (Sandoval,



1979, p.919). He was unwilling to dismiss the possibility of other factors being present that could cause such placement. "They make the assumption that there is no reason to suspect differences in genotype or innate intelligence between groups, and they assume that cultural and language differences are benign in influencing intellectual development" (Sandoval, 1979, p.919-920). As others would declare in future research, Sandoval also reported that other factors beyond the available testing instruments are the primary cause for overrepresentation of African American students in the MMR category.

Research conducted in defense of standardized testing during this period often used the same method of approach. That is, the literature called to question the assumptions of earlier researchers. It was common to find researchers opening by outlining the work of Williams (1971), who was among the first to assert that the testing instruments used for classification of mental retardation are culturally or racially biased. "He [Williams] argues that because the mean score of minority children is lower, the test must be biased. He points out that certain items...may be more difficult for black

children to answer because of differences in culture and experience" (Sandoval & Miille, 1980, p.249). These researchers then proceeded to argue against the idea that African Americans were at a disadvantage on standardized tests that were thought to "...include questions that rely on subjective judgment in scoring based on white, middle-class values" (Sandoval & Miille, 1980, p.249). They presented a study in which one hundred college students of African American, White and Hispanic origin were asked to review test items and then choose which of them they felt was a question that would put any particular culture or race at a disadvantage. The judges were unable to consistently detect items that were being presented by the "anti-WISC" camp as easier for Anglo American children. "These results refute the claim that subjective judgments can be used to determine...bias without the aid of empirical evidence" (Sandoval & Miille, 1980, p.252). These researchers admitted that a study such as the one they conducted was not necessarily proof that the opposite had been proven true. They were, however, unwilling to accept the idea that a difference in test performance can be the final determiner of test bias.

The literature that presented a defense for the validity of the WISC assessments was written in a traditional and seemingly objective manner. That is to say, there was little in the way of an appeal to emotion. This changed to a significant degree when the literature reviewed was that of the scholars who attempted to present the argument that standardized testing was biased against African American students and was a primary cause for their overrepresentation in programs for the mildly mentally retarded.

"There appears to be enough theoretical and statistical evidence suggesting that intelligence tests are biased and harmful to many African American learners" (Patton, 1998, p.26). This simple premise was used not only by Patton, but by many researchers to proceed with scathing reports on the weakness of tests, their, "...inherent bias..." (Patton, 1998, p.26), and the ineffectiveness of special education in general. Patton wrote that testing was used for, "...classification purposes rather than for diagnostic or prescriptive reasons" (Patton, 1998, p.26).

Much of the literature presenting arguments that testing is indeed biased, made assumptions about the very

nature of the tests. "When IQ tests are given, they are administered holding environmental...and other extraneous independent variables, which may likely affect test outcomes, as constant" (Agbenyaga & Jiggets, 1999, p.627). That is to say, the tests do not allow for the possibility of other factors to play a role in the results or findings. This fact, "...makes test results irrelevant, very suspect, and a tool for biased decision-making and placement" (Agbenyaga & Jiggets, 1999, p.627). Like many of their predecessors, Agbenyaga and Jiggets made the assertion that IQ testing is "...a sampling of white cultural, social, and linguistic attitudes and styles, but administered to black and minority children which makes their statistical interpretation very suspect" (Agbenyaga & Jiggets, 1999, p.627). Like the Patton article, the information cited here was used as a launching pad for heated discussion about perceived political influences, which included racism, that had allegedly shaped special education. While they were certainly passionate about their topic, these authors treaded dangerously close to political grandstanding during the course of their work.

One particular article neither defended nor attacked the validity of standardized testing, but rather, explored a comparison of a more current version of the WISC series of tests, the WISC-III, with an assessment instrument gaining use as an alternative. That instrument is the Cognitive Assessment System, or the CAS. When comparing the two tests, the "...WISC-III classified disproportionately more Blacks than Whites as having mental retardation as compared to the Cognitive Assessment System" (Naglieri & Rojahn, 2001, p.359). These authors reported that the age of the WISC approach to testing was no less than 60 years old. It was thus possible to conclude that although the WISC goes through periodic re-standardization, the very approach it is based on is antiquated. The more recent CAS is a test of, "...intelligence based on the Planning, Attention, Simultaneous, and Successive (PASS) cognitive processing theory" (Neglieri & Rojahn, 2001, p.360). The CAS differs from the WISC scales in that the former is not content based while the latter is based on general ability. It should be noted that at the time of this writing, the re-standardized WISC-IV is in the process of replacing the WISC-III.

The CAS is gaining in popularity in California, although it is not thoroughly understood whether it is an inroad to relief of the currently perceived crisis. The CAS may not necessarily lower the number of African American students being identified as mild mentally retarded, but rather increase the number of white and other non-African American groups being identified. This may help to solve one problem while creating another.

Part of the result of Larry P. v. Riles and similar litigation was that more emphasis was to be placed on the use of adaptive behavioral measures as a means of determining if a child, African American or otherwise, is most appropriately identified as MMR. However, years after landmark court cases, the question continuing to be asked was whether African Americans, "...in programs for students with mild mental retardation have adaptive behavior deficits or whether their classification and placement are based primarily on IQ" (Reschly & Ward, 1991, p.257-8). It was and continues to be feared that despite changes in law and mandates from the courts, African American students continue to be categorized MMR without the use of additional methods of assessment. "Apparently, despite legal requirements and court cases,

some evaluation teams have not incorporated the collection of adaptive-behavior data into their assessment practices" (Brady, Manni, & Winikur, 1983, p.298). Further, there tended to be inconsistency in the manner in which adaptive behavior was measured and the degree to which it played a role in the definition of MMR. "Assigning adaptive behavior to a secondary role is not...consistent with the AAMR definition of mental retardation..." (Reschly & Ward, 1991, p.258). The literature reported that equal use of adaptive measures is not always considered, and the question remains as to whether, "...black students in programs for students with mild mental retardation [have] adaptive behavior deficits" (Reschly & Ward, 1991, p.258).

The evidence was not entirely clear as to whether the intellectual assessment tools we use to assist in determining programming are racially or culturally biased. Further, the researchers did not reach clear consensus as to whether adaptive behavioral measures are being used to the extent that the law requires. The more recent literature assumed that these are general weaknesses in the system and used this premise as a springboard into other aspects of the issue. It is

interesting to note that this researcher had difficulty locating sources written within the last ten years that were willing to argue against perceived testing bias of WISC and other IQ determiners. This is not to suggest that such literature is non-existent. It is simply that the majority of literature secured for defending the validity of the WISC was produced during a time when the issue was being challenged in the courts during the late 1970's and early 1980's. The vast majority of the researchers admitted that the question of test bias is one not soon to be resolved. There is certainly research to be conducted on the matter, but it appears that current and future work will focus more sharply on causes other than testing bias. This review of literature will now shift to some of these other causes.

#### Additional Causes of Overrepresentation

While exploring the issue of African American representation in MMR programs, a good deal of the literature focused on how these students are affected by the system of public education. Specifically, much of the cause for the high number of African American students in most special education programs was due to



the fact that a much higher than average rate of these students were being referred for special education consideration to begin with. It was this referral process where the road to an MMR designation began.

Jones & Menchetti, (2001) reported that "...teacher expectation is the most important factor in academic achievement" (p.621). It was reported that much of the low achievement leading to special education referral was due to a lowering of expectations from teachers based on race, gender, or appearance. This "institutional racism" (Jones & Menchetti, 2001, p.620) coupled with other environmental factors was thought to lead significant portions of the African American population away from a willingness to succeed academically. "These actions result in many African American males becoming ill-prepared and totally demoralized..." (Jones & Menchetti, 2001, p.621).

This idea, that the educational system was a primary cause of this overrepresentation, was not an isolated one. "It is surprising that the myth continues to prevail that scores on IQ tests are the primary source of information used in the process of being placed in an EMR class" (Lambert, 1981, p.940). During a time when the IQ

testing instruments were being challenged in court, researchers were cognizant of the fact that, "...the child must first fail in a regular school program and be referred for evaluation before a test is administered" (Lambert, 1981, p.940). It is "...failure in school, rather than test scores, that initiates action for special education" (Lambert, 1981, p.940). For these scholars, it was the "...failure of our schools to meet the educational needs of a significant portion of children..." (Lambert, 1981, p.941), which led to this state of affairs. Criticism of current educational practice was not limited to the "system" alone. African American "...disproportion in EMR programs is not the result of a biased IQ test but rather is due to the failure of the professional to execute his or her duties in a comprehensive manner" (Brady, Manni, & Winikur, 1983, p.299). However, the idea that the school systems, along with the individual teacher's inability to bring along the African American student population, does not easily lend itself to statistical proof or research. Ideas and claims similar to those presented here tended to be sweeping generalizations. This makes for difficulties in

finding solutions, as will be discussed in a later section of this review.

Aside from the use of assessment tools, the most widely discussed cause for African American overrepresentation in programs for the mentally retarded was the connection between the designation of MMR and poverty. It was widely held that "...an overwhelming majority (i.e., 60% to 80%) of students served in programs for students with MR come from low status backgrounds (e.g., Latino, African American, Native American groups, broken, disorganized, and inadequate homes)" (Artiles & Trent, 1994, p.412). It was also held that poverty increased the risk of poor development, and in that, an African American youth was "...more likely than their white counterparts to have experienced poor prenatal, perinatal, or post-natal health care and early childhood nutrition which may have resulted in actual disabilities" (Artiles & Trent, 1994, p.414). This assertion was made more powerful by Yeargi-Allsopp, Drews, Decouflé, and Murphy (1995) when they wrote, "Black children may be at increased risk for mental retardation because they may be more likely than White children to be exposed to the cumulative effects of

deleterious postnatal factors such as ambient lead or anemia." Poverty rates for African Americans are extremely high when compared to other sub-groups in the country. While not all of the data is consistent, "...the poverty rate for African American families in the United States is estimated to be about three times that for all families" (Oswald, Coutinho, Best, & Singh, 1999, p.196). These studies asserted that the excess prevalence of MMR among African American children can be attributed to the realities of low socioeconomics, and that, "...MMR and low socioeconomic status have been empirically linked for decades..." (MacMillan & Reschly, 1998, p.26).

For African Americans living in poverty, bi-products of this status include homes consisting of teenage mothers, low maternal education, divorced parents, and/or "latchkey" situations (CDC, 1990). All of these categories were thought to increase the risk of special education and MMR placement. Additionally, poorer urban areas suffered from "...inappropriate enrolment increases in special education...to the detriment of African American children..." (Agbenyaga & Jiggets, 1999, p.20).

Statistically, these urban areas are populated by a significantly higher percentage of African American

families than their percentage of the county's population in general.

The preponderance of evidence presented in the literature was that there were several causes for the problem of African American overrepresentation in the category of MMR. Poverty, for instance, has a definite affect on the probability that a child will eventually be served in not only MMR programs, but in nearly all available programs of special education. In addition to this, the researchers appeared to be in consensus that the groups most likely to be a member of this low socioeconomic strata are minority families, specifically, African Americans. There does not appear to be evidence presented that would lead this researcher to conclude that simply being poor in and of itself is a cause of MMR placement. However, the effects of living in poverty certainly increase the risk of two possible outcomes. The first outcome is that children living in poverty will develop disadvantaged with respect to health care. The second outcome is that the resources of the surrounding schools in urban poor locations are less able to meet the needs of the overwhelming amount of academically challenged students that populate their schools. These

realities, according to the literature, lead to increases in special education referral and the likelihood that an African American child will eventually be placed in programs individuals with mild mental retardation.

#### Impact of Overrepresentation

According to the literature, the impact of African American overrepresentation in MMR programs had three primary components. The concern that generated the most attention was the resulting predicament for students who would not have access to the same opportunities as non-MMR peers. The fear was that, "...misclassification or inappropriate placement may result in significant consequences for [African American] students, especially when they are removed from the general education curriculum" (Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002, p.186). For African American students, more restrictive placements, "...often result in fewer opportunities...to access post-secondary education and ...fewer employment opportunities" (Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002, p.186). The key assumption by Zhang & Katsiyannis was that of "misclassification." They were willing to accept that a significant number of African American students were misplaced in MMR programs

based on their own research. As has been brought out in this review, the quality and accuracy of classification, assessment procedures, referral processes, and decision-making are not matters that have found consensus in the field. The argument of Zhang & Katsiyannis did not distinguish between African American students who may actually benefit from such placement, and those that are "misclassified." This omission substantially weakened their argument.

Another impact of overrepresentation was the landmark court cases that took place as a result. The "...massive changes to MMR over the past fifteen to twenty years have been driven by the litigation" (Reschly, 1988, p.287). The most notable litigation was the case of Larry P. v. Riles that occurred in California from the mid to late 1970's. Placement bias cases were, "...initiated by minority advocacy groups alleging discrimination against minority students due to their overrepresentation in special education programs for the MMR" (Reschly, 1988, p.285). The Larry P. case asserted that the reliance of IQ testing as a basis for MMR placement was a discriminatory practice and it was ordered that California, "...develop plans to eliminate the

disproportionate enrollment of African American children in classes for the EMR" (Russo & Talbert-Johnson, 1997, p.136). Much of the ruling was based on the assumption that the labeling of African American students as EMR was stigmatizing and had adverse effects on their self-esteem and future academic success. This notion was challenged unsuccessfully by the defense and in the end, the Larry P. decision would change the manner in which African American students entered special education.

Despite the impact of the ruling in the Larry P. case, change did not necessarily transfer to all other parts of the country. "In the Illinois case of PASE v. Hannon (1980), IQ test use in special education was upheld despite the over representation of black students in MMR programs" (Reschly, 1988, p.286). The judge in this case ruled that the then current IQ tests had few if any biases.

The third and most prominent feature in the literature regarding the impact of African American representation in MMR programs was the perceived "shift" that took place during the years after the Larry P. decision. The data showed that for African American students, there was a, "...steady decline in the overall



enrollment in programs for individuals with mental retardation, and a sharp increase in the enrollment in programs for individuals with learning disabilities" (Artiles & Trent, 1994, p.415). According to the literature, placement categorization had shifted from one designation to another. Argulewicz (1983) was among the first to recognize this development when he wrote that, "...while school personnel appear to be achieving proportionate racial and ethnic representation of students in classes for the educationally mentally handicapped, an increasing number of minorities have been placed in learning disabled classes" (p.195). The same was argued by Chinn & Hughes (1987), and it was found that the same situation existed for most minority groups. McLeskey, Waldron, & Wornhoff (1990) wrote that, "While it is...clear that black students are over represented in classes for students with [MMR], this overrepresentation has declined somewhat in recent years...and the proportional representation of black students in classes for students with learning disabilities has increased significantly". It was argued in other articles that after Larry P., some of the drop in African American enrollment in MMR programs was due to an unwillingness to

risk the repercussions of such placement. In several states, the average IQ for an African American student being referred for special education services was significantly lower than referred white students. "Such a finding suggests that the reluctance on the part of regular classroom teachers to refer mildly handicapped learners for evaluation may be exacerbated in cases of minority children" (MacMillan, Hendricks, & Watkins, 1988, p.428). In fact, this may have actually resulted in a form of reverse racism as the situation begged the question of whether there then existed African American students in need of services who were unable to secure them because of past litigation designed to halt what was considered a discriminatory practice.

It was noted in several of the articles that the litigation, while addressing the issue of African American overrepresentation in MMR programs, ignored other instances of possible discrimination. Using the same comparison models as those employed by the plaintiff's attorneys in the Larry P. case, the same discriminatory practice can be said to exist with other population sub-groups. Male students, for instance, are represented in greater numbers than their participation

in the total student population. This is consistent across all categories of special education, but these findings have not been challenged or criticized to the extent that Larry P. attacked racial overrepresentation.

The research was consistent with findings and opinion in this area across the majority of the literature used for this project. There remains little doubt that while the numbers of African American students being represented as MMR has declined since the Larry P. v. Riles case, most of the students in this group are still being served in special education programs, usually under the category of learning disabled. The effects of this shift were not explored to any degree in the literature. With regard to litigation, the evidence in the literature is that after the considerable amount of legal action that took place in the 1970's, the court challenges slowed down across the country and eventually ceased. What was left was decision-making inconsistency between states, and the question of whether or not the groups discriminated against had improved access to better opportunities than they did prior to this period.

## Suggestions and Possible Solutions

The more comprehensive articles not only discussed the various aspects of this issue, but offered suggestions and possible solutions for remedying the problem. Many of the suggestions were similar to one another and did not appear to be out of the ordinary with system-improvement suggestions that occur across other domains of education. Other proposed solutions were quite unique and very much out of the ordinary.

The idea of early intervention was one projected solution that often surfaced in the literature. For the purposes of African Americans and their representation in MMR programs, the practice of early detection was cited as a preventative measure that could lessen the severity of the problem. "Early detection implies recognition of a child's problem before it becomes a matter for referral" (Serna & Forness, 1998, p.49). The idea here was that for many students who may eventually be placed in MMR programs, the possibility exists that this particular outcome could be avoided with early detection. This detection could be initiated by instituting school wide screening processes that employed an assessment instrument designed for such a purpose. After detection,

the target group would be prepared for prevention. Serna & Forness (1998) wrote that the "...first stages are universal interventions (e.g., parent training...)...and may be implemented for all children in a variety of settings (e.g., day-care, preschool, or school environments)" (p.49). The idea of early detection by assessment as proposed by Serna & Forness (1990), failed to take into account much of the difficulty that comes with assessment, formal and informal. As this review of literature has described, the assessment of a student can be a means for controversy in and of itself, and assessing children of preschool age can make the matter even more difficult. Some of the early intervention suggested here has actually taken place in the form of preschool programs created by districts, states and federal agencies. The Headstart Program was such an intervention designed for qualifying students to become better prepared to enter school upon reaching Kindergarten age.

The recruitment of more African American teachers was another often proposed solution to this problem. "Projections are that no more than 5% percent of public school teachers will be from underrepresented

racial/ethnic groups by the end of the decade" (Russo & Talbert-Johnson, 1997, p.19). Reasons for this projection ranged from increased opportunities in other fields for African Americans, to a decrease in higher education rates for minorities in general. Whatever reason may have been cited, it was argued that the lack of African American teachers in public schools exacerbated an already troubling issue, for, "...African American teachers are better able to bridge the gap often found between students from low socioeconomic status families and middle-class teachers..." (Russo & Talbert-Johnson, 1997, p.19).

Jones and Menchetti (2001) took this idea a step further when they suggested that it was not enough to simply recruit and maintain African American teachers. They proposed the need to, "Create programs, opportunities, and incentives to increase the number of African American male teachers" (Jones & Menchetti, 2001, p.629). Male teachers, according to Jones and Menchetti, were role models for young African American men who make up such a large percentage of the students in programs for the mild mentally retarded. Jones & Menchetti (2001) further suggested that recruitment of African American

males should begin when they are in the eighth grade, and that incentives such as scholarships be used as enticement to enter the field of education.

A recurring assertion in the literature was that the process of referral, subsequent assessment, and eventual placement in MMR programs for African American students, was tarnished by the fact that much of the population of teachers in our country was ill-equipped to deal with the diversity of culture in their classrooms. "The challenge for today's teachers is to provide quality, challenging instruction in classrooms that are culturally and academically diverse" (Serna & Forness, 1998, p.49). It stood to reason then, that if the gap between the cultures of teachers and African American students could be bridged, the need for such high placement numbers could be reduced. However, Artiles & Trent (1994) wrote that, "...we find only a limited number of attempts to address issues of cultural diversity and special education in the mainstream research literature" (p.426). In California today, basic teacher credentialing programs now have components embedded within them that require coursework classes designed to meet this need. It appears that at least some of what has been suggested

here is being implemented and that the possibility exists that as a society, we are, "...developing conceptual frameworks that would enable us to elucidate the complex interactions among culture, learning, disability, and instructional outcomes" (Artiles & Trent, 1994, p.424). Despite this, some researchers continue to point out lack of cultural awareness as a weakness in credentialing programs. Russo & Talbert (1997) wrote that, "...most teacher preparation programs--including those in special education--still function within a framework that is exclusively Eurocentric...[and]...few teachers are equipped to deal with different cultures, languages, lifestyles, and values in their classrooms" (p.18). The issue of teacher preparation was taken a step further when the Council for Exceptional Children (2001) suggested that teachers should also be licensed to deal with specific areas within special education itself, such as mild mental retardation.

Of the literature reviewed for this project, the most radical suggestion came from Jones and Menchetti (2001). Proposed was the creation of a, "'Black male classroom' that caters to the education of Black boys only" (Jones & Menchetti, 2001, p.629). What was being



suggested was not only the segregation of African American students, but to further segregate on the basis of gender as well. The purpose of such a classroom would be to, "...provide a nonthreatening, nonjudgmental, and culturally friendly learning environment for Black males" (Jones & Menchetti, 2001, p.631). Included in such a setting would be African American male teachers, self-esteem building curriculum, reduced class sizes, and monthly parent meetings. Jones and Menchetti were willing to venture outside of traditional suggestion and propose ideas that will likely never become realized. However, this researcher found it refreshing to read proposals not often discussed within the traditional paradigms.

Based on the literature, the preponderance of evidence is that researchers agree that something should be done about the number of African American students being represented in programs for students with mild mental retardation. There appears to be no argument to suggest otherwise. Most agreed that some method of system adjustment should take place at the level of teacher training. Primarily, the suggestions were to change training methods so that teachers can be prepared

to become culturally aware and responsive to needs of a diverse population of students. Early intervention strategy was another often-suggested tactic to deal with this issue. It was possible to conclude that the researchers in this field are of the opinion that the burden of change lies on the system of education. This researcher noted that there was surprisingly little written about the role of the family in the research presented. When this area was explored, it concerned itself mainly with the need to develop African American parent advocacy groups such as the National Association for the Education of African American Children with Learning Disabilities, to ensure that the rights of these students were being recognized.

## CHAPTER THREE

### DATA COLLECTION

The data collected for the second major component of this project gathered for the school year ending June 2003. The process of collecting data has changed dramatically over the past few years. Statistical information is available on internet web sites, and the data is a matter of public record. The primary source of data collection for this project was conducted on the web site for the California Department of Education (CDE). A link on the CDE website leads to a location entitled Data Quest. Data Quest is run by the CDE and stores data for the state, county, district, and individual schools. This researcher was able to tailor a search using the site to obtain the information desired. The information sought was as follows:

1. Total student population for Riverside County schools
2. Total population of African American students in Riverside County schools.
3. Total number of students being served in the Riverside County as MMR.

4. Percentage of students being served as MMR who are African American.

5. The information in 1-4 broken down into the twenty two individual districts in Riverside County.

With the information, this researcher was able to compare the percentage of African American students being served in the total student population with their numbers as a percentage of the students with mild mental retardation. The data would be able to be presented in the form of Riverside County as a whole, and also in terms of individual districts. Additionally, the data could be disaggregated so that districts with similar population characteristics could be grouped for study.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

As discussed previously, the numerical data gathered was looked at in terms of its whole, and its categorized components. It was the goal of this researcher to discover if the data collected from local area districts was consistent with what was being reported in the literature. The project was concerned first with the data of the county as a whole.

Table 1. Riverside County Districts

Districts	Schools	Students	Af-Am Students	% Af-Am Students
22	401	345,349	27,714	8.0%

As can be seen in Table 1, there was a total of 22 school districts consisting of 401 individual schools used for this study. The enrolled population of these districts totaled 345,349 students which included 27,714 who were considered African American. This put the African American population for Riverside County Schools at 8.0%, which is slightly below the state percentage of 8.3%.

Table 2. Percentage Comparison for Riverside County

Districts	Students	Af-Am Students	Pct.	Change
	with MMR	with MMR		
22	1,712	217	12.7%	+57.9%

As can be seen in Table 2, the twenty two districts had a combined total of 1,712 students being served as Mild Mentally Retarded. Of these students, 217 of them are African American putting their percentage of representation in this category at 12.7%. When compared to their representation in the county as a whole, this denotes an overrepresentation in the category of Mild Mentally Retarded of 57.9%.

From a purely statistical viewpoint, these numbers suggest that the data presented for Riverside County, California is consistent with what was being reported in the literature. Additionally, the data suggests that Riverside County has representation of African Americans in programs for the Mild Mentally Retarded at a nearly identical rate of California as a whole. The most recent available data shows that African American students in California make up 12.1% of the MMR population (CDE,

2003). This is only a slightly lower percentage than Riverside County's 12.7%. Based on the information collected, this researcher concluded that Riverside County was unremarkable when it came to this issue. In fact, it was concluded that Riverside County was a perfect example of the accuracy of the data presented in the literature. With this in mind, the County data was disaggregated further with the intention of discovering whether differences could be revealed within district subgroups that were categorized on the basis of population and percentage enrollments of African American students.

As discussed, the data on Riverside County schools was broken into categories with the intention of determining whether districts with similar enrollment characteristics could be shown to support the data presented in the literature. The first characteristic that was used to subdivide individual districts was based on population. This researcher wished to determine if districts with greater student populations tended to over represent African American students as MMR to a larger degree than districts with smaller populations. A district was determined to be "large" if it had a student

population of over fifteen thousand. It followed that the districts with student populations under fifteen thousand were considered "small." The number fifteen thousand was adopted for the reason that it categorized an equal amount of districts as "large" and "small."

When districts had been categorized by size, they were further divided to separate those districts with higher and lower than expected African American populations in total student enrollment. The number used to determine "higher" or "lower" was the state average of 8.3% (CDE, 2003). That is to say, if a district had a higher percentage of African American students in its general population than the state average of 8.3%, it was considered to have "high" enrollment of African American students. It followed that the districts with lower than average numbers of African American students than the state average were considered to have "low" enrollment of African American students.

Thus, the districts were divided into the following four groups: 1) Large districts with high enrollments of African American students; 2) Large districts with low enrollments of African American students; 3) Small districts with high enrollments of African American



students; and 4) Small districts with low enrollments of African American students.

Table 3. Large Districts, High Populations of African American Students

Group One	Population	% Af-Am		
		Students	Students with MMR	Change
Moreno Valley	34,176	23.1%	28.0%	+21.5%
Riverside	40,888	9.8%	11.8%	+20.7%
Total	75,064	15.8%	20.8%	+31.2%

The first subgroup that was explored was Group One Districts consisting of large districts with high percentages of African American students. As can be seen in Table 3, Group One districts, consisting of only Moreno Valley and Riverside Unified, had a combined population of 75,064 students of which 15.8% were African American. When compared to their total percentage of African American students represented in the category of Mild Mentally Retarded (20.8%), an overrepresentation of 31.2% is discovered. This is similar to the data for the

entire county in that there is an overrepresentation that exists which is consistent with the information reported in the literature.

Table 4. Large Districts, Low Populations of African American Students

Group Two	Population	% Af-Am Students	% Af-Am	
			Students with MMR	% Change
Alvord	19,122	5.9%	3.4%	-41.9%
Corona-Norco	41,977	6.0%	5.8%	-3.5%
Desert Sands	25,180	2.1%	1.0%	-51.0%
Hemet	18,931	4.6%	9.8%	+114.3%
Jurupa	20,469	4.7%	9.9%	+112.0%
Lake Elsinore	18,933	4.8%	5.9%	+22.8%
Murrieta Valley	15,434	5.9%	10.3%	+74.5%
Palm Springs	22,067	5.1%	8.9%	+73.9%
Temecula	21,988	4.9%	7.1%	+45.6%
Total	204,111	4.9%	6.7%	+35.3%

The Group Two districts consisted of those with large enrollments and low numbers of African Americans in the general student population. Unlike the Group One

districts, there are examples within Group Two suggesting that not all individual districts necessarily suffer from the overrepresentation suggested in the literature. Specifically, Alvord, Corona-Norco, and Desert Sands have African American students represented in MMR programs at a lower rate than would be expected. These numbers are rendered insignificant when placed within the whole of Group Two however. Looking at the total numbers for this group, the reader can clearly see that while African Americans make up only 4.9% of the general student population, they make up 6.7% of the MMR population, an overrepresentation of 35.3%. Like Group One, this group shows statistically similar characteristics to the numbers presented in the literature.

Table 5. Small Districts, High Populations of African American Students

Group	Population	% Af-Am Students	% Af-Am	
			Students with MMR	% Change
Banning	4,655	11.4%	20.8%	+83.3%
Palo Verde	3,686	10.9%	6.5%	-40.5%
Perris Elem.	4,969	15.2%	0%	-100%
Perris Union	6,976	11.2%	21.1%	+88.8%
Val Verde	12,405	20.8%	24.2%	+16.3%
Total	32,691	15.4%	19.0%	+23.1%

Group Three consisted of smaller districts that had low enrollment of African American students. This group was similar to Group Two in that there were instances of individual districts that did not fit the pattern of overrepresentation. Specifically, Palo Verde District, while recording enrollment of 10.9% of its students as African American, had only 6.5% of its MMR population as African American. A more interesting case is that of the Perris Elementary School District. The enrollment of

African American students in this district was recorded at 15.2%, but the number of MMR students that are African American stands at 0%. Therefore, of the 753 African American students in this district, there was not a single recorded example of one that was being served as mild mentally retarded. A closer look at this district reveals that the African American student population is not the only subgroup going unrepresented as MMR. In fact, according to the data, only 1 person in the entire district is being served in this category. This makes the data a bit suspect for this particular group and it is an issue that will be taken up in a later portion of this project.

Looking at Group Three as a whole, it was apparent that a familiar pattern would develop. These districts recorded 15.4% of their combined population as African American, but 19% of their MMR population as African American. This overrepresentation of 23.1%, while not as severe as Group One or Group Two, indicated that the same problem existed.

Table 6. Small Districts, Low Populations of African American Students

Group Two	Population	% Af-Am		
		% Af-Am Students	with MMR	% Change
Beaumont	4,356	3.4%	0%	-100%
Meniffee Union	5,407	2.9%	5.7%	+96.8%
Romoland	1,690	1.9%	0%	-100%
San Jacinto	6,682	5.1%	8.0%	+56.3%
Coachella	13,867	0.3%	0%	-100%
Nuview	1,481	2.1%	0%	-100%
Total	33,483	2.2%	4.9%	+119.5%

The districts that made up Group Four consisted of those that had lower enrollment totals and also had lower that expected numbers of African American students in the general population. The data in Table 6 revealed that while 2.2% of the total student population of these combined districts was African American, 4.9% of the students classified as MMR were African American. This

was more than double what would be expected if all racial subgroups were represented equally.

A closer look at the individual districts reveals similar oddities as those shown in the Group Three data of Table 5. Coachella Valley for instance has only 0.3% of its total population as African American and none being served as MMR. Three other districts, Beaumont, Romoland, and Nuview, showed no African American students being served as MMR. However, the data showed that these districts had an unusually low number of students being served as MMR to begin with, 12, 7, and 0 respectively.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSION

#### Limitations of Design

This researcher acknowledges that there exist limitations on the overall design of this project. While the intention was to provide accurate and clear information, it is important to note how this could be compromised.

The first possible limitation exists in how data was collected, not only by this researcher, but by the California Department of Education from which it was ultimately gathered. This project concerned itself with the representation of African American students being served in programs for individuals with mild mental retardation. However, some districts include all levels of mental retardation in their categorization, and do not always distinguish between mild mental retardation and the more severe forms of this disability. This can skew data even when one considers that the number of students who suffer from moderate, server, or profound retardation is quite small. Another limitation is the fact that some students may have multiple eligibilities for special



education. By law, a student eligible for special education services at any level can have only one category of eligibility. Thus a student with autism or a physical handicap who is also mentally retarded may not reflect the latter.

Districts make special education placement decisions based on their opinions and interpretation of data. While there are certainly criteria for these decisions, the fact remains that in the end, it is human opinion that will make decisions on the interpretation of data. Additionally, some districts may have internal reasons for wishing to keep particular numbers at a certain level. Take for example, the case of the Perris Elementary School District. This district totaled approximately five thousand students but recorded only one as being mentally retarded. Most districts of similar size had populations of students with mental retardation in the range of 12 to 35. These inconsistencies are not limited to district levels. The numbers of students being served as MMR can be vary widely from state to state as well (MacMillan & Reschly, 1998). All of this can limit the validity of collected data.

Limitations can exist in the interpretation of the data as well. From the beginning, it was the intention of this researcher to compare the data of Riverside County school districts with the information presented in the literature to determine if the issue concerning African American representation in programs for the mildly mentally retarded was still to be considered problematic. However, there were not preset guidelines as to what would be considered "significant." That is to ask, what level of overrepresentation would need to exist in Riverside County, California before the issues put forth in the literature could be said to be continuing, and would this actually constitute a problem if it did? The data from Riverside County revealed that while 8% of its student population is African American, 12.7% of its MMR population is African American. As these statistics are a close match for state and national numbers, they can be considered to be as equally troubling. There may be researchers, however, who do not consider such numbers relevant, and indeed, some of their work was discussed in the Review of Literature section.

## Additional Comments

Brady, Manni, & Winikur (1983) noted that it had been 20 years since Doll (1962) had first commented on the fact that the population of students with mental retardation is made up of those from sub-cultural and economically marginal backgrounds. They would devote significant space in that article describing the need to make changes in the way these students are served in order to rectify the situation. At the time of this writing, an additional 20 years has passed and as a society, we continue to struggle with the issue. The fact that African American representation in programs for students with mild mental retardation is still a topic of high interest leads this researcher to conclude that there has been limited success in finding solutions to the matter. This not to suggest that there is a lack of concern in the field however. The endurance of the problem is a testimony to how difficult an issue it truly is.

When the literature was reviewed, some of the issues explored for this project found consensus among the researchers. Primarily, the statistical data presented was relatively consistent. That is to say, there is

little doubt from a numerical standpoint that African Americans are overrepresented in programs for students with mild mental retardation. The degree of overrepresentation varies from state to state and according to the data collected by this researcher, the numbers vary from district to district as well. Further, the literature generally agreed that the percentage of African Americans has been steadily reduced in the MMR category over the past 25 years. This was found to be consistent with the data collected from Riverside County districts as this information was similar to what was being reported in the most recent statistical surveys. There was little doubt that the same degree of African American overrepresentation in MMR programs existed in Riverside County, California as did in the rest of the country. Additionally, there was no evidence to suggest that districts with shared characteristics of population and/or percentages of African American students had any increased or decreased likelihood for such overrepresentation.

The literature became less clear when the causes of overrepresentation were explored. The research appears evenly split over the validity of the assessment

instruments used to place African Americans in special education programs. Some scholars cited racial or cultural bias that placed African Americans at a disadvantage when being assessed. The state of California found in 1979, in the Larry P. v. Riles case, that the use of the assessment tools was an act of outright discrimination. Even this court ruling, however, did not receive support on nationwide scale as a similar court in Illinois found that no such discrimination existed. There was more agreement relative to other causes of overrepresentation, such as the failure of schools to use alternative measures of assessment in conjunction with more traditional measures. Further, most researchers agreed that school systems and teachers are ill-equipped to deal with the cultural diversity that exists in growing proportions within the nation's classrooms. As the data for Riverside County is similar to that presented in the literature, this researcher concluded that the same weaknesses exist there as well.

The issue of solutions was explored at great length by many of the researchers. Their suggestions ranged from better preparation techniques for teachers, to

outright segregation of African American males in the classroom. This researcher noted during the course of the literature review, that while the problem of African American overrepresentation is specific and quantifiable, remedies appeared general and vague. To suggest that districts simply "improve" the manner in which they prepare teachers for cultural diversity carries with it an entire agenda for change that was not expanded on sufficiently. The researchers calling for change did not offer much in the way of explanation as to how the changes might take place, or what the repercussions may be for overhauling the current system of credentialing.

It is apparent that while collecting data is a means by which a researcher can identify inconsistencies and problems of overrepresentation, it is only half of the task at hand. Research must also present answers to the problems it identifies. It will be the charge of the current generation of scholars to do less in the way of identifying problems, and more in the way of proposing solutions having a chance to be implemented successfully. If this does not occur, we risk the possibility of yet another 20 years passing with no progress on the matter.

## Recommendations for Future Research

The project presented here begs that further research be conducted. Educational research is designed to shed light on particular areas of study and allow for improvement in opportunities for the students who would ultimately be the benefactors. The following are suggestions for such research.

Studies should be conducted on the operations of districts that have proportionately low numbers of African American students in programs for the mildly mentally retarded. Studies should also be conducted on districts that have low numbers of students in these programs in general. This researcher suggests that some districts may have internal reasons for wishing to keep such numbers low, but it is certainly possible that they may approach the problem in a way that has shown itself successful. Should this be the case, the general teaching population would be best served with that knowledge readily available.

It was generally agreed that while the overrepresentation problem continued to exist, it exists to a lesser degree than in years past. Studies should be

conducted as to reasons for such circumstances. Some of the literature referred to a "shift" in population from MMR to Learning Disabled, and that little had actually been done short of renaming the problem. This issue should be thoroughly studied.

Studies need to be conducted to determine if educational opportunities have been improved for African American students over the past three decades. Legislation has altered the way in which special education services can be offered to this population, but it must be determined if this has actually resulted in any benefit to African Americans attending school in our country. If research and legislation are to be of any benefit, improved opportunity must be measurable.

Researchers also need to study the paths of successful students who are African American or come from backgrounds that are economically and historically disadvantaged. By doing this, a framework can be developed and models can be built for use by future students hailing from less advantageous beginnings.



## REFERENCES

- Agbenyaga, S., & Jiggets, J. (1999) Minority children and their over-representation in special education. *Education, 119*(4), 619-633
- Argulewicz, E. (1983) Effects of ethnic membership, socioeconomic status, and home language on ld, emr, and eh placements. *Learning Disability Quarterly, 6*, 195-200.
- Artiles, A., & Trent, S. (1994) Overrepresentation of minority students in special education: A continuing debate. *Journal of Special Education, 27*(4), 410-435.
- Brady, P., Manni, J., & Winikur, D. (1983) Implications of ethnic disproportion in programs for the educable mentally retarded. *Journal of Special Education, 17*(3), 295-302.
- California Department of Education, (2000). Ethnic representation in special education. Retrieved on October 15<sup>th</sup>, 2003, from <http://www.cde.ca.gov/spbranch/sed/datarpts/index.htm>

Children First (2001) *Discussion of teachers*

*recommendation of special education services.*

retrieved November 21<sup>st</sup>, 2002, from

[http://www.childrenfirstamerica.](http://www.childrenfirstamerica.org/dailynews/01dec/1211014.html)

[Org/dailynews/01dec/1211014.html](http://www.childrenfirstamerica.org/dailynews/01dec/1211014.html)

Chin, P.C., & Hughes, S. (1987). Representation of

minority students in special education classes.

*Remedial and Special Education, 8(4), 41-46.*

Council for Exceptional Children (2001). *Licensing of*

*special education teachers.* Retrieved on October

11<sup>th</sup>, 2003, from

<http://www.cec.sped.org/bk/cectoday/april>

[\\_2001/cectoday04\\_2001\\_13.html](http://www.cec.sped.org/bk/cectoday/april)

Council for Exceptional Children (2002) *Mental health*

*education to enhance healthy development.* Retrieved

October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2003, from [http://www.smhp.psych.ucla](http://www.smhp.psych.ucla.edu/prog2.htm#repre)

[.edu/prog2.htm#repre](http://www.smhp.psych.ucla.edu/prog2.htm#repre)

Doll, E. (1962) Historical survey of research and

management of mental retardation in the United

States. In E.P. Trapp & P. Hinelstein (Eds.),

*Readings on the Exceptional Child* New York: Appleton-

Century-Crofts, 1962.

- Jones, L., & Menchetti, B. (2001) Identification of variables contributing to definitions of mild and moderate mental retardation in Florida. *Journal of Black Studies, 31*(5), 619-634.
- Kids Health (n.d.) *Pregnancy and nutritional issues*. Retrieved November 9<sup>th</sup>, 2003, from [http://www.kidshealth.org/parent/pregnacny\\_newborn/pregnacny/preg\\_health.html](http://www.kidshealth.org/parent/pregnacny_newborn/pregnacny/preg_health.html)
- Lambert, N. M. (1981) Psychological evidence in *Larry P. v. Wilson Riles: an evaluation by a witness for the defense. American Psychologist, 9*, 937-952.
- Larry P. v. Riles, 793 F.2<sup>nd</sup> 969 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1986).*
- MacMillan, D.L., Hendrick, I.G., & Watkins, A.V. (1988) Impact of Diana, Larry P., and P.L. 94-142 on minority students. *Exceptional Children, 54*(5), 426-432.
- MacMillan, D.L., & Reschly, D.J. (1998) Overrepresentation of minority students: the case for greater specificity or reconsideration of the variables examined. *Journal of Special Education, 32*(1), 15-30.

McDaniel, K. (2002) Who needs special education?

Addressing the issue of disproportionate representation. *The Special Edge*, 15(2), 3-4.

McLeskey, J., Waldron, N.L., & Wornhoff, S.A. (1990)

Factors influencing the identification of black and white students with learning disabilities. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 23 (6), 362-366.

Naflieri, J.A., & Rojahn, J. (2001) Intellectual

classification of black and white children in special education programs using the WISC-III and the cognitive assessment system. *American Journal on Mental Retardation*, 106(4), 359-367.

National Association for the Education of African

American Children with Learning Disabilities (n.d.) *Parent handbook*. Retrieved November 12<sup>th</sup>, 2003, from <http://www.charityadvantage.com/aaclcd/articlesandpublications.asp>

National Association of State Directors of Special

Education (n.d.). Retrieved on November 9<sup>th</sup>, 2003, from [http://www.nasdse.org/national\\_early\\_childhood\\_techn.htm](http://www.nasdse.org/national_early_childhood_techn.htm)

Oswald, D.P., Coutinho, M.J., Best, A.M., & Singh, N.N.

(1999) Ethnic representation in special education: the influence of school-related economic and demographic variables. *Journal of Special Education*, 32(4), 194-206.

Patton, J.M. (1998) The disproportionate representation of African Americans in special education: Looking behind the curtain for understanding and solutions. *Journal of Special Education*, 32(1), 25-31.

Reschly, D.J. (1981) Psychological testing in educational classification and placement. *American Psychologist*, 36(10), 1094-1102.

Reschly, D.J. (1988) Assessment issues, placement litigation, and the future of mild mental retardation classification and programming. *Education and Training in Mental Retardation*, 23(4), 285-301.

Reschly, D.J., & Ward, S.M. (1991) Use of adaptive measures and overrepresentation of black students in programs for students with mild mental retardation. *American Journal on Mental Retardation*, 96(3), 257-268.

- Russo, C.J., & Talbert-Johnson, C. (1997) The overrepresentation of african American children in special education: The resegregation of educational programming? *Education & Urban Society*, 29(2), 136-146.
- Sandoval, J. (1979) The wisc-r and internal evidence of test bias with minority groups. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 47(5), 919-927.
- Sandoval, J., & Mille, M.P.W. (1980) Accuracy of judgments of wisc-r item difficulty for minority groups. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 48(2), 249-253.
- Serna, L.A., & Forness, S.R. (1998) Intervention versus affirmation: Proposed solutions to the problem of disproportionate minority representation in special education. *Journal of Special Education*, 32(1), 48-55.
- Testimony of the Honorable Chaka Fattah (2001, October 4) *Before the committee on education and the workforce*. Retrieved October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2003, from [http://edworkforce.house.gov/hearings/107<sup>th</sup>/fc/idea10401/fattah.htm](http://edworkforce.house.gov/hearings/107th/fc/idea10401/fattah.htm)

- The Arc (2002) *Members of minority groups and mental retardation*. Retrieved November 25<sup>th</sup>, 2002, from <http://www.thearc.org/faqs/minority.html>
- United States Department of Education. (n.d.) *Profiles of students with disabilities as identified in Nels:88*. Retrieved November 9<sup>th</sup>, 2002, from [http://nces.ed.gov/pubs\\_97/97254.html](http://nces.ed.gov/pubs_97/97254.html)
- Vanderbilt University Alliance Project (July 1999). *The racial/ethnic composition of students with disabilities*. Retrieved October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2002 from <http://www.alliance2k.org/products/4010.pdf>
- Wagner, C. & Burnette, J. (2000) *Five strategies to reduce overrepresentation of Culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education* (Report No. EDO-EC-00-5) Arlington, VA: Clearinghouse On Disabilities and Gifted Education. (ERIC Publications 071)
- Williams, R.L. (1970) Black pride, academic relevance, and individual achievement. *Counseling Psychology*, 2(1), 18-22.
- Williams, R.L. (1971) Abuse and misuse in testing black children. *Counseling Psychology*, 2(3), 62-73.

- Wright, P., & Cruz, R.S. (1983) Ethnic composition of special education programs in California. *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 6, 387-394.
- Yeargin-Allsopp, M., Drews, C.D., Decouflé, P., & Murphy, C.C. (1995) Mild mental retardation in black and white children in metropolitan atlanta: A case-control study. *American Journal of Public Health*, 85(3), 324-328.
- Zhang, D., & Katsiyannis, A. (2002) Minority representation in special education. *Remedial and Special Education*, 23(3), 180-188.