



SCHOOLS AND FAMILIES WORKING TOGETHER Reducing Minority Student Disproportionality in Special Education

Bobby, a six-year-old African American boy, had several endearing qualities. He was quick to smile, very verbal, and loyal to his friends. However, for his teachers, Bobby was a handful. His attention span was short and he was gradually falling behind academically. In addition, he had a quick temper and often could not control his behavior. One day, he bit an aide who told him to wait in line for a drink of water. Another time, Bobby became upset at another student and began overturning desks and throwing papers across the classroom. His school, lacking the capacity to identify underlying reasons or provide effective interventions for Bobby's behavior or academic difficulties, repeatedly passed him from classroom to classroom and school to school. After a few failed attempts to meet with Bobby's mother, Bobby was placed in a special classroom made up of several boys identified as having emotional and behavioral challenges.

The disproportionate and often inappropriate movement of culturally and linguistically diverse students from general to special education has long been an issue of significant concern. Bobby's story exemplifies this problem. By the time he finished kindergarten and first grade, Bobby had an unacceptable beginning to his educational career: six teachers in his first two years of school. What might have been done to better meet Bobby's social, emotional, and academic needs is the focus of this paper.

The research literature has for over 30 years documented the extent of minority student disproportionality in special education, citing broad inadequacies across a variety of educational fronts, including insufficient school, community, and family alignment; poor teacher preparation and support; a lack of early problem identification and effective intervention; and little attention to culturally competent instruction (Coutinho, Oswald, & Best, 2002; Harry, 1992; Kozol, 1992; National Research Council, 2002).

Overrepresentation in such disability classifications as emotional disturbance, mental retardation, and learning disabled is a particular concern for specific minority groups, including African

Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans. In addition, underreferral and placement of minority students for special and gifted education services, when warranted, is also an area of growing concern (Cummins, 1989; Ford, 1998). Minority disproportionality in special education is a significant problem largely due to its lasting negative impact, including

- the stigma and lowered expectations often associated with disability identification;
- deficit views frequently attached to families of minority special education students;
- higher levels of segregated classroom and alternative school placements; and
- poor academic outcomes and high rates of suspension, expulsion, and dropping out.

After exiting the special education system, many minority students move on to exposure to the criminal justice system and to unemployment at rates significantly higher than their White counterparts (Osher, Woodruff, & Sims, 2002; Oswald & Coutinho, 2002) Students such as Bobby, often from low income communities and challenging family backgrounds, are additionally handicapped by school settings with poor instructional quality, low expectations, lack of attention to culturally competent practices, and a lack of access to scientifically based practices and interventions for instruction and behavioral support. The following discussion provides an



overview of suggested strategies for addressing minority disproportionality, including family involvement, support for effective instruction, and culturally competent practices in the classroom.

The Role of Family Involvement

One of the most difficult and unresolved problems in educational practice is the challenge of how to proactively involve culturally and economically diverse students and their families in the educational process. Limitations in aligning the typically mainstream/middleclass school culture to that of culturally and economically diverse students and their families are a frequent road-block to establishing a positive homeschool relationship. This cultural disconnect contributes significantly to poor student behavior and academic outcomes. Cultural differences often lead to decreased levels of family comfort with the school and to negative judgments by teachers and other school staff. These negative judgments can lead directly to negative teaching behavior. Increased attention, awareness, and understanding by school staff of the cultural and environmental contexts in which minority students function can help to facilitate greater connection by students and their families to the school and improved teacher capacity for instructing and managing the behavior of diverse groups of students. Suggested methods for increasing family involvement include

- recruiting parent liaisons to help establish an ongoing parent communication system;
- reporting student *accomplishments* to parents in addition to problems;
- including parents in activity planning, policy, and school improvement committees;
- recruiting school staff that reflect the diversity of the student population; and
- ensuring that school staff are welcoming, accessible, and respectful of the diversity of the student population.

Effective Interventions

A welcoming, culturally competent school setting is only the initial step in effectively addressing minority student disproportionality. The failure by schools to provide students showing early academic or behavioral challenges with effective interventions is directly related to eventual teacher referrals for special education placement. A comprehensive plan for providing academic and behavioral support and, when necessary, appropriate interventions should work across three levels:

schoolwide support for all students, *early interventions* for students found to be at risk, and *targeted interventions* for students with intensive academic or behavioral needs.

Children's early school experiences are critical in helping to shape their selfconcept, personal efficacy, and motivation for learning. Therefore, it is important to create schoolwide learning and social environments that are supportive of children's total development, and that are responsive to their needs as individuals (Dwyer & Osher, 2000). One component of effective schoolwide support is the use of instructional strategies that have been demonstrated to work with diverse student populations. These strategies should be known to have positive benefits for children in developing both their academic and critical thinking skills. Examples of such strategies include *Success for All* (Slavin, et al., 1996) and *ClassWide Peer Tutoring* (Greenberg, Kusche, Cook, & Quamma, 1995).

Another important component is instruction in social skills to increase appropriate behaviors and create a schoolwide climate that is caring and supportive for all. For example, a curriculum utilized in East Baltimore (Woodruff et al., 1999) taught anger control, empathy, and appropriate ways to seek and receive help. When these social skills were taught to small groups of children by clinicians and trained teachers, teachers observed students' significant behavioral improvement in the classroom, and parents of participating students also reported improvements in their children's behavior at home.

While schoolwide supports can establish an environment that helps to prevent and respond to identified academic and behavior challenges, this support will not always be sufficient to address the difficulties of students with greater levels of risk. By identifying early signs of academic or behavioral challenges, schools can begin to address problems before they become more pronounced. These efforts should build on the schoolwide foundation of support. For example, in the East Baltimore Social Skills Pro gram, teachers received training to identify and assist students who exhibited early signs of aggressive behavior, thereby helping to prevent these children from developing more chronic and intractable patterns of antisocial behavior (Woodruff et al., 1999).

Students with severe learning or behavioral problems are frequently removed from the mainstream school environment through suspension, expulsion, and placement into segregated classes and alternative schools, where they end up spending even more time in environments marked by minimal academic expectations and punitive behavior management philosophies. Segregated placements can be reduced by providing individualized interventions and supports that build on student strengths and proactively address needs. In many

cases these supports can be provided in mainstream classrooms. For example, student support centers, individualized learning, and behavioral services for students can utilize the skills of both regular and special educators; individualized services can also be provided in the mainstream classroom. In Westerly, Rhode Island, public schools established planning centers where students received individual counseling and assistance with homework, resolved conflicts, or had a quiet place to relax (Dodge, Keenan, & Lattanzi, 2002).

Conclusions

Without a greater school understanding of students, families, and their diverse cultures, and a coordinated implementation of support at the schoolwide, classroom, and individual student levels, both negative misconceptions and ineffective teaching will continue to contribute to disproportionate minority special education identification and negative school outcomes. Regardless of educational context—schoolwide, classroom or individual students in need—all students should be engaged in culturally responsive, studentcentered opportunities to learn, marked by high expectations and tailored to their individual needs. Schools must work to implement effective, evidencebased programs and interventions to increase family involvement and to provide positive social and academic experiences for all students.

All stakeholders in the success of our children—administrators, teachers, support staff, family members, and support agencies—have to be involved in creating an environment that is nurturing and supportive of positive student behavior, learning, and achievement. Everyone has a role to play in developing schools that are effective. Children need to be connected to structures that nurture the belief that they can be successful in mainstream society and let them know that they are supported in achieving their goals. Beyond looking at schools as a problem, the approach needed is a coordinated, proactive one—focusing on preventive, ongoing supports and behavioral and academic interventions that utilize the family, the child, and the school as critical sources of strength. Highquality teaching and learning results from a strong network of school supports, strong leadership, a clear focus, a positive climate, high expectations, and the participation and respect of everyone.

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