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addressing the disproportionate representation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education through culturally responsive educational systems

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Abstract

In this article, we present a conceptual framework for addressing the disproportionate representation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education. The cornerstone of our approach to addressing disproportionate representation is through the creation of culturally responsive educational systems. Our goal is to assist practitioners, researchers, and policy makers in coalescing around culturally responsive, evidence-based interventions and strategic improvements in practice and policy to improve students' educational opportunities in general education and reduce inappropriate referrals to and placement in special education. We envision this work as cutting across three interrelated domains: policies, practices, and people. Policies include those guidelines enacted at federal, state, district, and school levels that influence funding, resource allocation, accountability, and other key aspects of schooling. We use the notion of practice in two ways, in the instrumental sense of daily practices that all cultural beings engage in to navigate and survive their worlds, and also in a technical sense to describe the procedures and strategies devised for the purpose of maximizing students' learning outcomes. People include all those in the broad educational system: administrators, teacher educators, teachers, community members, families, and the children whose opportunities we wish to improve.

Keywords

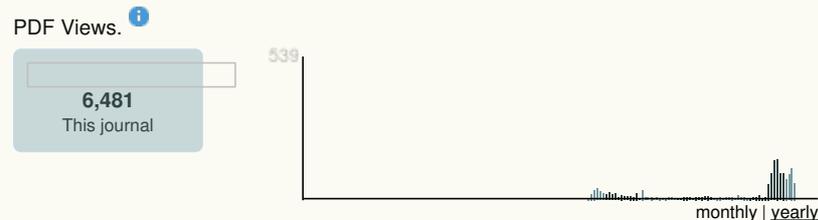
special education; disproportionate representation; culturally responsive education; cultural diversity; linguistic diversity.

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discussion

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The overrepresentation of culturally and linguistically diverse children in special education and the quality of their educational experiences have been regarded as among the most significant issues faced by the U.S. public school system in the past 30 years. The Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) entitles all individuals with disabilities to a free appropriate public education (FAPE) and mandates nondiscriminatory assessment, identification, and placement of children with disabilities. Children are not to be identified as disabled because of poor achievement due to environmental factors. Keywords: special education; disproportionate representation; culturally responsive education; cultural diversity; linguistic diversity. 2. The disproportionate representation of ethnically and linguistically diverse students in high incidence special education programs (mental retardation, learning disabilities, and emotional disturbance) has been a concern for over three decades (Artiles, Trent, & Palmer, 2004; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Dunn, 1968). An indicator of disproportionate representation by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). Donovan and Cross used White students' risk ratios as the denominators in calculating risk, as do we here. Why is disproportionate representation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education services problematic? If every child is provided opportunity and services that are perceived as positive and effective on the basis of his or her needs, disproportionality is not a problem in and of itself (although it could be a reflection of broader social problems). Therein lies the heart of the concern. Disproportionate representation of minority students in special education: Academic, economic, and demographic predictors. *Exceptional Children*, 70, 185–200. Examining educational equity: Revisiting the disproportionate representation of minority students in special education. *Exceptional Children*, 72, 425–441.