# Academic And Cultural Bias In The Classroom: A Qualitative Examination of the Overrepresentation of African American Students in Special Education

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# ACADEMIC AND CULTURAL BIAS IN THE CLASSROOM: A QUALITATIVE EXAMINATION OF THE OVERREPRESENTATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

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## ABSTRACT

Almost forty percent of African American students are in special education programs, though they constitute only 17% of the general education population (Kunjufu, 2005). A conclusive explanation has yet to be reached as to why this disproportion exists, but multiple suggestions have been made. The ideas that will be presented in this literature review focus on factors such as race, teacher perception and preparation, cultural differences, biases in norm-referenced testing and culturally unresponsive curricula. The purpose of this research review is to gain an understanding of why these issues continue to occur, and what professionals can do to rectify this phenomenon.

## INTRODUCTION

Children come into the educational spotlight once they are born, when professionals who attend their births have reason to believe that they present symptoms warranting special services. For example, the phenotypical baby born with Down's syndrome is easily recognized, no matter the baby's race. Thus, the purpose of early intervention and early childhood special education programs is to provide services to children who are suspected of being at risk for developmental delays and disabilities. Arguably, this notion enjoys sound educational footing. As children participate in early intervention services, they are provided experiences that

are fundamental to their overall development (Farkas, Hillemeir, Maczuga & Morgan, 2012, p. 339), yet the underlying premise is that with professional services delivered as soon as possible, these children  will achieve success in the general education system as it exists. According to research done by Farkas et al. (2012), their chances of obtaining a high school diploma and acquiring health insurance are increased; additionally, the possibility of their engaging in substance abuse or developing depressive disorders in comparison to their peers who do not receive special services is mitigated (Farkas et al., p. 339). Although early intervention and early childhood special education programs are known to be effective in equalizing educational and societal opportunities for children with both high and low incidence disabilities (Farkas et al., p. 339), there are major concerns regarding the disproportionate representation of African American children in special education. Many plausible explanations have been suggested as causes of this disparity. One argument considers Critical Race Theory (CRT).

The origins of CRT lie in jurisprudence, particularly in the scholarship of Anita Hill, Lani Guinier and Patricia Williams. Each argues from the perspective that the American legal system is steeped in both race and gender inequalities; therefore, any system (such as education) that relies on laws (as does education) will have implications for members of non-dominant cultures. While such ramifications exist in any system in which a racial power differential exists, according to CRT, it should be assumed that racism is both common and deeply engrained in US society. In her seminal text, "Just what is critical race theory and what's it doing in a nice field like education?," Gloria Ladson-Billings (1998) specifically examines racism in relation to education. Other scholars have followed her line of reasoning. For example, Eitle (2002) proposes that special education may be an expensive and modern form of segregation within the school system (p. 576). While a strong proposition, she questions the assumption that education creates equal opportunity for everyone.

Another suspected cause of the overrepresentation of African American children in special education is related to the cultural differences that exist between European American culture

and the culture of the African diaspora. Related to this idea, yet equally important is the notion of culturally unresponsive curricula, and educators' lacking adequate knowledge to effectively teach African American children (Blanchett, 2006). Currently, public school instruction is geared towards students who think analytically, discouraging the thoughts of Black children who identify with other ways of exhibiting intelligence (Kunjufu, 2002).

Even in this century, in spite of evidence to the contrary, Delpit (2012) stresses the prevalence of the continuing myth that Black children do not excel in school because they are innately less capable of learning, and are therefore deemed "inferior"(p. 1). Research suggests that educators, no matter their race (Ferguson, 2003) may unconsciously hold this stereotype, which may determine the level of proficiency expected of children, and influences whether they should or should not be referred to special education programs (Blanchett, 2006). In addition, biases are also evident in assessment instruments (Arnold, Lassman, 2003), specifically the Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals-4 (CLEF-4), an important tool used to diagnose language disorders.

Thus, multiple variables are associated with the overrepresentation of African American children in special education; some are racial in tone, others result from teacher bias, and some are the result of cultural incongruities evident in assessment instruments. The purpose of this review of literature is, therefore, to explore these ideas and suggest possible remedies to better serve children in the most appropriate educational setting.

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## Critical Race Theory

In its political approach, Critical Race Theory (CRT) proposes that race plays a significant role in the structural foundation on which the United States of America exists. It theorizes that America is a country with roots so deeply embedded in acts of racism, that although racism is thought to be diminished, it has become implicit and, in fact, the very nature of the society in which we live (Ladson-Billings, 1998). This ideology has been reinforced through earlier theories that suggest that African

Americans are inferior due to their genetic and biological make up (Tate IV, 1997). The purported inferiority of African Americans has been theorized in one of many deficit models (Simpkins, 2002), all of which state that there is a deficiency in their developmental, as well as cognitive and linguistic skills (p.16). Simpkins (2002) argues that with the collection of quantitative data from racially biased I.Q. tests, the intelligence of African Americans has been framed to legitimize deficiency (p. 16). Lewis Terman, who is considered the "father" of intelligence tests (Simpkins, 2002, p. 16), believed that due to their "inferiority," African American children would never have the ability to be productive and capable citizens (Simpkins, 2002, p. 18). In spite of the erroneous nature of Terman's conclusions, as well as subsequent publications by Herrnstein and Murray (1994), notions of the genetic inferiority of children of African descent persist.

Such theories, known as *deficit models*, presume that Black children are deficient in intelligence, and therefore disadvantaged; thus the concept of race continues to play a significant role in approaches to education. Ladson-Billings (1998) states, "if we look at the way that public education is currently configured, it is possible to see the ways that Critical Race Theory can be a powerful explanatory tool for the sustained inequity that people of color experience" (p. 18). Therefore, Critical Race Theory lays an important foundation for understanding racial disparities, including the overrepresentation of African American children in special education programs.

Race should, therefore, be considered an influential component in the inappropriate placement of African Americans in special education programs. In efforts to expound on this argument, research conducted by Tamela Eitle (2002) focused on possible racial segregation and the variance of representation among Black students across school districts. According to her analysis, as the population of students placed in special education increases, so follows specific educational funding. The recent expansion of both engenders concern that because research supports the isolation of African American students in special education programs, they are separated from students from the dominant culture. These programs may be used as an expensive way of continuing racial segregation in desegregated schools (Eitle, 2002, p. 576). The

problem has the potential to arise because in most cases public education funding is controlled locally, with only some influence from the state government, thus giving school districts the ability to implement programs as they choose (p. 578). Wanda J. Blanchett (2006) describes the various subsystems of the public education system that have been "influenced" by racial factors (p. 25).

Blanchett's analysis offers, as an example, one school system that provides general education for students who are pre-dominantly white and considered "normal" (p. 25). The educators hired in this scheme are selected because of their high educational achievements, and often have earned at least a Master's degree. In this system, students' achievement is heavily influenced by exposure to programs that would allow their advancement in the pursuit of higher education, which may include opportunities to study aboard, college preparatory courses, and experience foreign language emersion (2006).

Blanchett (2006) also recognizes that a second subsystem provides general education for students who are predominantly African American and members of other non-dominant cultures, yet are also labeled as "normal" (p. 25). Students in this system are often subjected to poverty-stricken ecologies, with educators who are less qualified, and lack exposure to programs that pro-mote higher education (p. 25). Martin Haberman (2003) agrees with this analysis, noting that even when members of non-domi-nant cultures attain power within an urban school system, the sta-tus quo for African American students is maintained.

A third subsystem provides special education for children who are predominantly white and seen as "disabled" (Blanchett, 2006, p. 25). Blanchett's (2006) position is that their need for sup-port varies among the students, as some demand more intervention than others. These schools promote inclusion in the classroom, and are often accompanied by the support of other profession-als, such as speech-language pathologists, school psychologists, and occupational therapists who can assist the students in full in-clusion in the general education setting (Blanchett, 2006, p. 25). Because of the abundance of resources provided, students in this type of special education are likely to graduate and move forward in their academic careers (Blanchett, 2006, p. 25).

Lastly, systemic differences are seen in localities where the special education student population is predominantly African American (Blanchett, 2006, p. 25). In these locations, students are labeled as "disabled" and are often placed in special education programs that are potentially detrimental to their academic success (Blanchett, 2006, p. 25). The problem with this system is that placement in restricted environments, and segregated from their peers in general education classrooms (p. 25), such children do not gain the skills needed to interact within a normal setting. Unfortunately for this particular group of students, their teachers are likely to be under-qualified, and the students are less likely to graduate from high school with a diploma; they often "receive certificates that show attendance or completion of special education programs" (p. 25).

The obvious injustices discusssed in Blanchett's 2006 study place African American students at an academic disadvantage. For African Americans, inequality is additionally exhibited through the lack of resources in urban and rural school districts. Furthermore, Black students in special education programs are likely to be placed in the "most restrictive environments" (Kunjufu, 2005, p. 22). Kunjufu (2005) provides statistics showing the discrepancy in placement (p. 22); Table 1., below, illustrates the percentage of students placed in specific special education settings. According to these statistics, it is more likely that African American students will be placed in a separate classroom, removed from inclusion with their peers, while it is more likely that white students will be placed in an inclusive environment (Kunjufu, 2005, p. 22). Research has shown that some Caucasian teachers over-refer students to special education when they are not members of the majority background (Kunjufu, 2005, p. 23).

**Table 1. Percentages of Students in Inclusion v. Resource Rooms, by Race\***

|  | Black (%) | Hispanic (%) | White (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Inclusive** | 37 | 42 | 55 |
| **Resource Room** | 30 | 30 | 29 |

*Note: Author Jawanza Kunjufu describes the racial disparities found in the different special education settings, and particularly points out African American children being disproportionately placed in substantially separate classrooms.

Potential problems, including court-ordered desegregation in various school districts, have been an additional contributing factor in the overrepresentation of African Americans in special education programs (Eitle, 2002). This evidence shows that black students are more likely to be isolated in special education, particularly in the educable mentally handicapped programs, in school districts that were mandated to implement desegregation (Eitle, 2002, p. 582). In spite of the passage of time since racial integration was mandated in public schools, some white parents continue to find issues with their children receiving the same education in the same classrooms as children of color. Unfortunately, they believe that if their child is taught in the same classrooms as members of underrepresented groups, their education will be "watered-down" (Blanchett, 2006, p. 27).

## Teacher Perception, Preparation, and the Influence on Special Education Placement

In an approach that is more reflective of the day-to-day experiences in a classroom, the disproportion of African American children in special education is partly influenced by cultural differences between the teachers and their students. In the future, the majority of teachers in the American school system are forecast to be white American women, a population that already constitutes 83% of the nation's teaching staff (Kunjufu, 2002, p. 17). Given the cultural differences that exist among racial groups, African American children's intelligence is often ignored or misrepresented (Delpit, 2012).

Cultural differences are particularly apparent in the pragmatic use of language. Children may be over-referred for special education based on general education teachers' misinterpretation of their pragmatics. In addition, underachievement is chronic among African American children, particularly those who are raised in the contexts of poverty. The complexities of underachievement are often misinterpreted as disabilities, when the children's difficulties are caused by other factors (Chamberlain, 2005). Overrepresentation in special education is prominent in students who are considered *culturally and linguistically diverse*

(CLD) due to a "violation of norms relevant to individuals with different backgrounds that can create cultural clash" in relation to white values (Chamberlain, 2005, p. 196).

Essentially, a teacher's expectations may not be reflective of the beliefs and educational needs of CLD students. Though unintentional, the problems that persist from this "clash" yield negative perceptions that affect education and social interactions, which in turn, influence the views and expectations of both teachers and students (Chamberlain, 2005, p. 196). In addition, Howard (2006) believes that Caucasian teachers are unaware of the differences between the lives that African American students experience at home and the hidden curriculum of school, which results in a cultural disconnect (as cited in Delpit, 1996, 2002).

Cultural differences are also often exemplified in other aspects of language and the expression of cognitive functioning. For example, controversy continues to surround the use of African American English (AAE) in the classroom. This variety of the English language is considered nonstandard, as it differs from the Standard English used by those who are considered "most educated" (Ford, Obiakor, Patton, 1995, p. 94). AAE is often stigmatized in society, though linguists consider ethnic dialects, particularly AAE, equivalent in function to Standard English (Ford, Obiakor, Patton, 1995, p. 94). In spite of this professional position, African American speech is still thought of as "inappropriate" in educational settings (Ford, Obiakor, Patton, 1995, p. 94). Because schools prefer the use of Standard English, teachers have prejudiced attitudes about the cognitive proficiency of their Black students. According to Ford, et al. (1995) teachers confuse a deficiency in school vocabulary with a dearth of overall language proficiency, characterizing incomplete thoughts or sentences as grammatical errors, and describing the mispronunciations of words as a result of "inadequate" use of the articulators (tongue, teeth, and lips), thus considering students to have speech sound disorders (p. 98) and to be eligible for special education services.

One's use of language is commonly seen as reflective of intelligence. The historical roots of teachers' beliefs regarding students' intelligence lie in the research of the genetic epistemologist

Jean Piaget; he emphasizes the influence of biology, general social interactions, equilibration, and social factors that are particular to European cultural groups as important for developing cognitive functions (Hale-Benson, 1986, p. 24). The significant variance of the latter two components implies differences in the performances within subcultural groups (Hale-Benson, 1986, p. 25). Hale-Benson (1986) argues that the shaping of cognition is heavily influenced by one's ethnic background, practices, and socialization patterns (p. 26). Thus, African American children exhibit certain cognitive patterns that may not be found in other ethnic groups, yet in no way are indices of their intelligence.

According to Ford et al. (1995), from birth, Black children are shaped to be oriented toward feelings and people, rather than objects and objectification (p. 101). At an early age, they are consistently held by caregivers, and develop a rhythm that accustoms them to being engaged in activities that occur in shortened periods of time, with little emphasis placed on parent-child verbal interactions (Ford, Obiakor, Patton, 1995). These child-rearing practices often influence a higher rate of physical maturity and movement in Black children when compared to their White peers (Ford, Obiakor, Patton, 1995), yet this physical maturity is rarely considered in the context of schooling.

Although Piaget's focus was on the ways that logical thought develops in childhood, the cognitive skills are utilized in the process of encoding and decoding information is distinguished between two learning styles, *analytic* and *relational* (Hale-Benson, 1986). The *analytic* style of learning requires the ability to think sequentially, breaking down information into small parts (part to whole learning) and using logic for understanding, whereas, the *relational* style reflects the ability to think of information as an overall structure (whole to part learning) in order to understand the parts (Kunjufu, 2005, p. 74). African American children, along with other members of non-dominant cultural groups, are more likely characterized as relational in their way of learning. This difference in approach to learning creates a problem due to the educational system's adoption of an analytic-cognitive style of curriculum (Ford, Obiakor, Patton, 2005, p. 101). Thus, children

who are not analytic thinkers are susceptible to poor academic achievement (Hale-Benson, 1986, p. 31). Anthropologist Rosalie Cohen (1969) suggests that children who have "high relational skills and high information will have low academic achievement, a high I.Q., and behavior problems, whereas children who have high relational skills and low information are often low academic achievers who obtain a low I.Q. score, and are likely to withdraw or drop-out of school" (p. 837). Relational thinkers are often discouraged in the classroom, and will likely be placed in special education (Kunjufu, 2005, p. 74).

Additionally, differences in language and cognitive styles lead to negative perceptions of children of African descent that are often due to the ill-preparedness of teachers. As stated above, 83% of teachers are white American women (Kunjufu, 2002, p. 17). This statistic is highly relevant to the success of African American children and raises questions about their knowledge of the history and ways of being of their students. In other words, colleges of education do not prepare teachers to understand and respond to the impact of environments on learning. Many white teachers are not exposed to the cultural differences of African American children, and other non-dominant groups, either in their own school experiences or in their personal lives; this lack of exposure to other cultures limits their thinking (Kunjufu, 2002, p. 18). Teacher preparation programs are not producing potential educators who have knowledge of Black children's norms, values and understanding of the role of education in their lives, nor their dialect or learning styles (Kunjufu, 2002, p. 18). Teachers may hold negative perceptions of Black students that include beliefs that they cannot perform at the academic level of white students (Ogbu, 2003, p. 124). If teachers have these stereotypes, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy; expectations of their students' abilities are lowered (Delpit, 2012, p. 6), affecting what they believe a child can learn, and whether the child should be referred to special education (Blanchett, 2006).

## Biases in Norm-Referenced Tests

Discrepancies in the placement of African Americans in special education are also related to cultural biases present throughout a comprehensive assessment process, especially in

norm-referenced tests (NRTs) (Chamberlin, 2005). According to Chamberlain (2005) in order for norm-referenced tests to be considered appropriate, the tests must undergo research for validity, reliability, and norms that are representative of all demographics of our nation's population (p. 198). The purpose of an NRT is to determine a student's average range in comparison to his/her peers, and can aid in the identification of disabilities (Chamberlain, 2005). One would assume that after extensive research, biases would not present as an issue, but several problems can be found within NRTs, based on validity and other factors, though they may have high face values (Chamberlain, 2005).

In support of this thesis, a study by Steven P. Chamberlain (2005) demonstrates the various levels at which biases can be found in norm-referenced tests (p. 198). Content validity is one area that is negatively affected when test items are "insensitive" to the backgrounds and values of certain cultural groups (p. 198). It must be taken into consideration that not all children are presented with the same exposure or experiences that could potentially affect their test scores (Lang, Kamhi, 2003). Similarly, construct validity can present problems if what the test is predicted to measure is not clearly defined, as in I.Q. tests (Chamberlain, 2005, p. 198). While conducting research, Chamberlain (2005) found that going beyond issues of validity, another bias toward African American children is the idea that "norm-referenced tests rely on the "melting-pot" theory of the typical U.S. student" (p. 198). This "melting pot" theory was created by Israel Zangwill, who believed that through the assimilation process in America, immigrants would be stripped of their identity and adapt the beliefs and principles of the dominant culture (Howard, 2006, p. 56). This presumes that although the norm group selected for a particular assessment is representative of all populations, it may be difficult to accurately capture the cultural and linguistic dissimilarities within larger cultural groups and variances within different localities (Chamberlain, 2005).

Research by Kamhi and Lang (2003) also expounds on the idea of potential linguistic biases in norm-referenced tests. The issue concerns "the language or dialect used by the examiner, the language or dialect used by the child, and the language or

dialect that is expected in the child's response." (Kamhi & Lang, 2003, p. 45). Children are overrepresented in the category of language disorders when examiners identify a dialectal difference as an error (Kamhi & Lang, 2003). To further illustrate this explanation, potential biases against African Americans who speak AAE were found in one norm-referenced test, the Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals-4 (CELF-4) (Ellsworth & Fuse, 2008). A study conducted by Janice Ellsworth and Akiko Fuse (2005) implied that bias is often present within the subtests of the CELF-4, which examine the proper use of semantics, syntax, and morphemes. Ellsworth and Fuse (2005) concluded that test results would likely represent the child's language environment rather than the presence of a language disorder (2005). It is imperative to understand that language is heavily influenced by one's culture, and the impact it has on proper diagnosis is significant if the examiner is unaware of potential dialectical differences.

## A  Lack of Culturally Responsive Curriculum

African American students are also disproportionately placed in special education programs due to the lack of culturally responsive curricula implemented in schools. Unfortunately, in Black school districts, there is a greater chance that students will receive "watered-down curricula" (Blanchett, 2006, p. 26), which is, of course, significant to inappropriate placement. Critical Race Theory expounds on the idea that schools adopt a pedagogy that is used to maintain white supremacy, through what is called *master scripting* (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 18). *Master scripting* implies that education will reduce or eliminate the history of African Americans if it stands as a threat to the dominant culture (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 18). An education that is designed to be less rigorous and neglectful in teaching culturally sensitive content only sets students up for academic failure, and increases their chances of being placed in special education (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 26). Surprisingly, the topic of implementing culturally responsive curricula in schools is frowned upon by some educators because of "cultural insensitivity, cultural ignorance, and teachers' resistance" (Thompson, 2004, p. 191).

Undoubtedly, a culturally responsive curriculum would benefit all cultures, but some teachers are afraid of such a diverse pedagogy. Resistance is attributed to the lack of comfort discussing certain topics, fear, and failure to see value in nontraditional education (Thompson, 2004, p. 192). Gail Thompson (2004) provides an interesting example that supports the supposition that teachers may be fearful of curricular materials that focus on the realities of other cultures (p. 197). Thompson's book *Through Ebony Eyes* (2004) illustrates a vivid picture of a white teacher who was enrolled in one of her graduate courses, and could not tolerate learning about the realities that African Americans face on a daily basis (p. 197). After reading Wright's *Black Boy* and *The Circuit: Stories from the Life of a Migrant Child*, the teacher became upset and expressed her frustrations in class by weeping and shouting, "Why do we have to talk about all of this stuff? It's starting to make me racist!" (Thompson, 2004, p. 197). Her reaction illustrates that teachers may feel uncomfortable with implementing cultural differences into education because of their own insecurities.

Along with the lack of authenticity in cultural curricula, education taught to African American students is often "void of emphasis on critical thinking, reasoning, and logic" (Blanchett, 2006, p. 26). Critical Race Theory is relative to daily instruction in the classroom. Often, as children struggle with generic instruction, they are considered deficient in their abilities (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Some teachers are not adequately prepared to instruct African American children, and when "strategies or skills fail to achieve desired results, the students, not the techniques, are found to be lacking" (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 19). This is reflective of what is called *social dominance*, which is applicable to the education of minority students. Howard (2006) argues that white teachers often have an "assumption of rightness" (p. 119). This notion illustrates an aforementioned idea that African American children are underachieving in school for reasons other than the structure of the school system (Howard, 2006, p. 119). For teachers, it is more convenient to believe that low achievement is a result of poor intelligence or cultural environment than it would be to criticize the structure of the school system (Howard, 2006).

## Resolving the Issue of Overrepresentation in Special Education

The discrepancies involved in the placement of African American children in special education can be found in all facets of the education system, but close attention needs to be placed on how professionals and educators are working to rectify the persisting issues for the betterment of minority children. Educators must realize that they represent the core of changes that need to be made, so that negative perceptions of minority students can be altered. Howard (2006) agrees that the resolution of inequalities in the school system begins with educators understanding the effects that perceptions have on student success. It begins with coming to terms with racial differences. With a growing population of white teachers it is imperative to know that race plays a significant role in education, and contrary to what most believe, it should not be ignored (Howard, 2006). Adopting a "color-blind" curriculum, or teaching without taking racial differences into consideration, may create a faulty relationship between an educator and his or her students, reinforcing stereotypes and affecting education tremendously (Howard, 2006, p. 122).

To enhance the learning of all children, teachers must accommodate new perspectives, challenge their own biases and create classrooms that will benefit all cultures and various types of learners (Howard, 2006). In addition to acquiring new ways of thinking and implementing changes in the classroom, Howard (2006) also emphasizes the importance of viewing teaching as a "calling" (p. 125). Today, more than ever, children need teachers who are willing to invest in education based on passion and not solely on pay and location. Teachers should not be afraid of the challenges faced in impoverished or diverse school districts; the main concern is making sure education is effective, as well as equal, for all students (Howard, 2006). African American children, especially those from impoverished communities and low socioeconomic status, are in dire need of teachers who are willing to push them to their full potential, making sure to give their best performance, even if it is seen to be "challenging" (Delpit, 2012, p. 72).

According to Kunjufu (2005), different types of teaching fall on a continuum, ranging from teachers who do not believe

anything can be done to help minority students, to those who believe all students are capable of learning, and will do everything in their power to make sure effective learning is taking place (p. 39). Emphasis is placed on the importance of teachers who view themselves as "coaches" (Kunjufu, 2002, p. 45). These teachers not only understand the need for a multicultural pedagogy, but also work to develop relationships with each of their students (Kunjufu, 2002). As a well-informed educator, the priority then becomes making sure that students are engaged in learning (Kunjufu, 2002).

Furthermore, results received on assessments are too often determinants of whether or not a child will be placed in a special education classroom. Therefore, Thompson (2004) suggests that a Programmatic Education Plan (PEP) is the best way to accurately identify whether African American children meet the qualifications for an eligibility label (p. 13). This plan includes a collaborative effort from all levels of the socio-ecological system, and each level gives meaningful input that helps develop the PEP (Thompson, 2004, p. 13). Specifically, for the assessment of speech and language disorders for black children who speak African American English, individuals involved in the development of the PEP are a great resource when a speech-language pathologist chooses not to rely heavily on the use of norm-referenced tests (Thompson, 2004). Gathering information from those in the socio-ecological system who are capable of offering an accurate description of the child's strengths and weaknesses will provide speech-language pathologists with enough evidence for the potential need of therapy, with little reliance on standardized scores (Thompson, 2004). This eliminates potential biases that are found in tests normed on the White, male, middle class population that speaks Standard American English (Thompson, 2004, p. 112).

Along with well-versed teachers, the adoption of a culturally relevant pedagogy is important for the academic success of African American students. To begin, it is imperative that African American children are accurately taught their Black history; this means that learning should go beyond the text books (Kunjufu, 2002, p. 82). Instilling high self-esteem and increasing achievement coincides with teachings of history that relate to positive

facts about African Americans. For example, the first doctor was an African named Imhotep; (Kunjufu, 2002, p. 82), "a black man is the reason the North Pole was discovered, and a half-black man was a co-founder of Georgetown University" (Thompson, 2004, p. 190). Equally, it is also important to implement resources from the environment to better teach different subjects (Kunjufu, 2002, p. 82). Kunjufu (2002) argues that teachers should use materials that are most likely to engage students in learning, such as creating lessons that use "lyrics, cultural videos, TV shows, magazines, and local and national newspapers" (p. 83). If a student is able to relate academic material back to everyday experiences and his or her culture, information is likely to be understood, which will in turn increase academic achievement levels. In summation, a culturally relevant pedagogy focuses on not only making sure that students are effectively learning, but that they also understand the values of multiple cultures (Thompson, 2004).

## CONCLUSION

African American children are faced with many challenges in the education system that lead professionals and educators to presume that they are deficient in some ways and should be placed in a special education setting. The child is not the primary cause of displacement; responsibility is placed on teachers and assessors to take into consideration their personal biases, biases found in testing, and to make sure that the curriculum is representative of all cultures and ways of learning. Although displacement in special education is prevalent, educators are finding ways to make sure that the issues are being resolved. Books and even specific lesson plans have been published targeting better teachers preparation and curricula. Change does not happen overnight, but with research we can only hope that the disproportion of African Americans in special education will desist.

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