A review of the article

“Race, Class, and Disproportionality: Reevaluating the Relationship Between Poverty and Special Education Placement”

by Carla O’Connor and Sonia DeLuca Fernandez in Educational Researcher, Aug/Sep 2006, Vol. 35, No. 6, pp 6-11

presented by

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This article analyzes how the National Research Council (NRC) report (2002)

- Put forth a theory to explain the overrepresentation (‘disproportionality’) of minority students in special education

- O’Connor and Fernandez called this theory the latent “Theory of Compromised Human Development (TCHD)”
“The Latent Theory of Compromised Human Development (TCHD)”

- Minority students are more likely to be poor.
- Being poor heightens exposure to social risks that compromise early development.
- Compromised early development depresses academic achievement.
- Thus minorities are more (‘disproportionally’) likely to need special education.

NRC
TCHD

• Offers an oversimplified conceptualization of “development”.

• Instead of recognizing development as culturally specific, it situates White middle-class children as the unmarked norm.

• Poor minority students enter school with “the risk” for special education placement.
Where Does Disproportionality Occur?

• **Does not occur** in nonjudgmental categories.
  – Deaf, blind, severe mental retardation, etc.

• **It does occur** in judgmental categories for which diagnosis rests on the “art” of professionals.
  - Mildly mentally retarded (MMR)
  - Emotionally disturbed (ED)
  - Learning disabled (LD)
How Disproportionality Occurs

• Students are referred to special education after they have failed to achieve in the general education classroom.

• Minority students are overrepresented in judgmental categories of special education only.
Impact of Poverty

• Poverty is a high-risk environment that shifts the normal curve of achievement to the left.

http://www.lagriffedulion.f2s.com/city.htm
• There is a baseline risk for MMR, LD or ED in the population as a whole.
• Risk associated with low Social Economic Status (SES) increases the incidence due to:
  – Parenting practices
  – Poor health practices
    • Alcohol
    • Smoking
    • Drug use
• Successful child development depends on healthy child-parent relationships.
  – Poor parent-child interactions are “negative” in the areas of
    • Verbal interactions
    • Literacy tasks
    • Disciplinary practices
    • Parenting approaches
  – Evidence that poor children varied from middle-class children
    • Smaller vocabularies
    • Lower IQ
    • Aggressiveness
NRC report concluded that without “supports” for “successful” development, poor children are more likely to require special education.
NRC report

- Contradicted what is known about human development
  - Human development is variable and complex.
  - There are culture-specific standards that should not be applied to another population.
O’Connor/Fernandez questioned normative frames

• Students are diagnosed with:
  - MMR – after chronic and severe achievement problems are found
  - LD – difficulty learning to read, write or calculate when IQ is normal
  - ED – problems with both academics and behavior

• The referent (the majority of students, usually White middle-class) used determines which children are evaluated or diagnosed with learning disorders.
An Analogy

If African American Vernacular English (AAVE) were the standard discourse in U.S. schools, AAVE speakers

– Would be academically competent and literate?

– Would experience more success in school than White middle class students?
Applying the logic of this analogy

– It is not poverty that places children at risk.
– It is the normative culture that places poor children at risk.
  • White middle class developmental expressions are nurtured.
  • Poor minority youth are positioned to produce low achievement.
Authors state that schools

- Systematically marginalize the competencies of the poor
- Fail to build on the capacities that poor enter school
- Have arbitrary standards (White middle-class)
- For minorities are more likely to be under-funded, with
  - Lower teacher quality
  - Less competitive courses
  - Larger class sizes
Critique of O’Connor and Fernandez

• Words “poor” and “minority” were used interchangeably and seemingly randomly.
• AAVE analogy misleading
  – Ogbu reported that when Black dialect was used to teach reading, Black children reading scores did not improve.
• Agree that cultural differences should not “automatically” make a student be suspected of having a disability.
• Best culturally sensitive teaching practices for minorities should be used.
• Authors’ concern with early referral to special education is strikingly similar to Response To Intervention (RTI).
RTI

• Proposes culturally-oriented differences in learning be initially addressed by the classroom teacher (in a culturally sensitive way).
• After extensive efforts and little/no response, then special education testing.
• But many questions remain to be answered:
  – Much time and effort required of classroom teacher
  – ‘Special Ed’ under another name?
  – Any actual demonstration that RTI works?
• Question for the class: What do you think of RTI?
O’Connor and Fernandez have an obvious antipathy toward Special Education

• Why do so many parents fight for their child to get special education services?
• We in special education are trying to help students learn
  – We are good people with good intentions toward students
  – We do not want to be demonized
The Bottom Line

• Given: schools must teach a **minimal basic competence** in reading and arithmetic

• Distinction between **how** students learn and **what** they learn
  – O’Connor and Fernandez may well be correct in their cultural-centered approach to teaching
  – No mention is made of the results of this approach – i.e. do the students actually learn to read and do arithmetic

• Question for class: Will teaching to children’s competencies help them to learn enough to achieve basic competencies?