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Over-representation of African-American Students in Special Education:

The Role of a Developmental Framework in Shaping Teachers' Interpretations of African-American Students' Behavior

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The authors draw on the findings of gestalt psychology to demonstrate how teachers' views of African American learning styles and behavior can determine whether these will be pathologized or supported by the educational system. The disproportionately large numbers of African American youth incorrectly assigned to special education courses indicate a lack of clarity in disability criteria and indicate also the use of a "deficit model" or perceptual lens through which teachers assign negative meanings to the behavior of African American students. Case examples of language used by teachers in describing randomly selected students illustrate teachers' deficit-based focus on student behavior "problems." Maholmes and Brown argue that an alternate, developmental model offers a new perceptual lens through which teachers focus on six critical "pathways" of human development when assessing any student. These pathways of development are physical, language, social, psychological, ethical and cognitive development.

Introduction

The old woman/young women gestalt representation, referred to in gestalt psychology as "The Wife and Mother-in-Law," pushes one to answer the question "what do you see?" This answer reveals an issue that underlies the problem of over-representation of African-American students in special education classes. Patton argued that disproportionately large numbers of African Americans are being

persistently diagnosed as disabled and placed in special education programs. While, many of these students are misclassified due to lack of consistent and valid criteria for diagnosis, the authors of this paper put forth the argument that the perceptual field through which teachers view African-American students' learning styles and behavior determines whether they will be pathologized or supported.

The meanings and interpretations teachers assign to African-American students' behavioral presentations are often derived from a deficit perspective. This perspective may lead teachers to perceive African-American students as discipline problems, and as incapable of performing to high academic standards. Such myopic vision often results in swift referral of these students for special education programs.

Consequently, special education classes often become the "dumping ground" for so-called problem students, instead of the supportive and nurturing environment required for students who have a genuine need for these services. How are these perceptions formed? It has been well documented that the ecological structure of African-American children's lives is complex requiring them to develop extensive behavior repertoires that must be demonstrated with greater flexibility in anticipation of problematic situations (McAdoo and McAdoo; West; Delpit). However, these repertoires may not be consistent with the social and behavioral norms of the school. Consequently, many students find it difficult to make friends or be socially successful in their academic settings.

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Teachers may assign negative meanings to the students' adaptive behavior and hastily refer them for special services. However, Stevenson's (1998) study of ecological structure and its psychological effects on African-American youth revealed that they require a context that is both supportive and challenging: one that understands the social barriers of racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination and yet holds them accountable for their behavior when it violates social norms and harms other individuals. This view, unfortunately is not always taken and the consequences of inappropriate referrals and placements are detrimental to the personal and academic future of African-American students.

In this paper, the authors contend that a developmental rather than a deficit perspective changes the perceptual lens through which teachers view African-American children. They identify specific developmental pathways that when used as an analytic framework, give rise to alternative meanings and interpretations of African-American students'

learning and behavior. The authors identify areas for targeted research on the critical topic of African-Americans in special education. Finally, they make policy and practice recommendations for reducing the disproportionate number of African-American students referred to special education.

Meanings and Interpretations: Introducing The Concept of the Perceptual Lens

Perception is the process by which one extracts meaningful information from a myriad of raw sensory data (Woolfolk). For example the wife and mother-in-law representation drawn from Gestalt psychology presents two images—an old woman and a young lady. These images are connected to each other such that one part of the image forms the critical aspects of other parts of the image. When one views this representation, only one of the images is seen at a time—either the old woman or the young lady. This happens because the mind selects aspects of the image and assigns meaning based on pre-existing knowledge and experiences. This knowledge and experience shape the lenses through which one views and “perceives” the sensory data. These perceptions are organized, assimilated and stored into mental models or frameworks that one draws upon to assign meaning to what is perceived through the lenses. Thus a viewer, focusing on particular aspects of the image—the collar, the chin or the nose will be certain that the representation is that of a young lady. Another viewer will focus on the same aspects of the image and be certain that the image is that of an old woman.

School children are viewed by teachers in similar ways. The mental models or framework from which educators operate, strongly influence how meaning is assigned to children’s appearance, attitudes and behaviors. Through their perceptual lenses, certain aspects of children come clearly into focus. If a teacher focuses on what she perceives to be a child’s unfavorable characteristics, then that new information will be assimilated into a “deficit” framework. Each time a teacher evaluates and interacts with the child, she does so from a deficit point of view. Consequently, her choices about curriculum, instruction and classroom management are drawn from this perspective.

Therefore, the authors put forth the argument that a deficit perspective allows the teacher to place blame on a student whose appearance, attitude, and behavior may fall outside the parameters of what she typically experiences with children. As a result, the teacher may behave toward the student according to those perceptions and the student may

respond to those behaviors in ways that reinforce the teacher's deficit perspective. This creates a tense and sometimes adversarial relationship between the teacher and the student and often leads to the student being sent out of class for behavioral intervention. This is frequently the case for African-American students, particularly those from low-income backgrounds. In many cases, these children have developed adaptive behaviors that enable them to survive in difficult circumstances. However, these behaviors may be in direct conflict with the expectations of mainstream behaviors in school. Moreover, many children who come from low-income, single-parent homes are least likely to have developed the fundamental academic skills, such as pre-reading and questioning, needed to be successful in school. Overtime, these children lag further behind in school than their peers. As a result, they exhibit behaviors that may mask their inability to read, speak well or think critically. Taken together, these factors may lead a teacher to view an African-American child's behavior through a deficit lens and to regard the child as needing special services.

The Deficit Perspective and the Problem of Over-representation in Special Education.

Recent research studies such as the one conducted by the Harvard University Civil Rights Project have shown that in comparison to their white peers, African-American students are more likely to be identified as needing special education services. This study revealed that nationwide, black students were 2.9 times as likely as white students to be identified as being mentally retarded, 1.9 times as likely to be identified as being emotionally disturbed, and 1.3 times as likely to be labeled as having a specific learning disability. The studies also found that the wealthier the school district the more likely black male students were disproportionately labeled "mentally retarded" (National School Boards Association). In their study of data from the Office for Civil Rights, Coutinho and Oswald) found that African-American students were 1.55 times as likely as non-African-Americans to be identified as emotionally and behaviorally disturbed.

Some researchers (Reschly) have argued that assignment to special education provides students with individual educational programming, smaller student-teacher ratios, and teachers who have special training in working with children who have such difficulties. However, many special education programs have been found to be seriously lacking in quality of instruction and in support to these children. The Harvard Study also indicated that once assigned to special education classes, these students are given less demanding schoolwork, placed in more restrictive

classes and are isolated from their peers (National School Boards Association). African-American males are particularly over-represented both in disciplinary practices and in certain special education categories. In addition, they are more likely to receive their special education in segregated classrooms or buildings (Patton). Despite the promise of special education, Daniel J. Losen, a lawyer with Civil Rights Project said that in many cases special education classes have become dumping ground for low-achieving students (National School Boards Association).

Compared to other disabled students as well as their non-disabled peers, students labeled emotionally and behaviorally disturbed are more likely to miss classes, receive poor grades, be retained at the end of the year, disciplined, suspended and expelled. They also are likely to be placed in more restrictive settings, and leave school prior to graduation as drop-outs or push-outs (United States Department of Education, 1999). Patton (1998) contends that this limited exposure to the core academic curriculum continues the spiral of “lower levels of achievement, decreased likelihood of post-secondary education, and more limited employment” (Patton, 1998, p. 25). The psychological and social effects of the stigma associated with being in these classes and the perceptions that labels such as EBD, SED, MR or LD conjures among school children and faculty can have a life-long impact on these students. Bynoe suggests that this tendency towards labeling and the deficit perspective is due in part to the increase in the nation’s cultural diversity. This is particularly evident in urban areas where there have been marked shifts in the conditions, expectations, and ratios of minority to non-minority school-age children and those who educate them. Ford contends that teachers’ lack of preparedness, negative perceptions of multicultural students and low expectations contribute to low referrals of these children to gifted education programs. On the other hand, these same factors increase the likelihood of children’s referral to disability categories.

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A critical challenge in addressing the problem of over-representation is the lack of clarity around certain disability categories. Though one of the most widely diagnosed disorders among school-aged children, the concept of learning disabilities is continually being questioned by researchers and practitioners alike. Learning disabilities is the largest category in special education (Kavale and Forness). According to the US Department of Education, (cited in Kavale and Forness, 2000), the LD population has increased about 150% since the passage of PL 94-142. This represents a level of over 50% of all students with disabilities and

5% of all students in the United States. With this tremendous growth in the percentages of students with LD, researchers call for more clarity and specificity in the LD definition. McMillan and Reschly argue that since 1978, when PL 94-142 was to be fully implemented, there has been consistent evidence that between 52% and 70% of children identified by the schools as LD do not meet the standards as conceptualized in federal and state definitions of the disability category.

In their examination of variables contributing to the over-representation of minority students, McMillan and Reschly discussed various studies examining the congruence between characteristics of school-identified students and the criteria specified in state education codes. The results of these studies revealed very low levels of adherence by the schools to the state education code criteria in classifying students. A total of sixty-one children referred for pre-referral intervention were ultimately classified as LD by the schools in the study. Fewer than half of the children classified as LD met the diagnostic criteria, while seven students who met the research diagnostic criteria and who had been referred by their regular classroom teachers were not identified as LD. McMillan and Reschly further indicate that comparisons of this “false negative” group with the students the schools did identify as LD revealed several reliable differences on I.Q., problem behaviors, teacher ratings of academic competence and social skills. The false negative group scored higher and were perceived more favorably than the children identified as LD by the school.

...between 52% and 70% of children identified by the schools as LD do not meet the standards

These findings underscore the argument put forth by Kavale and Forness that failure to produce a unified definition has meant that LD lacks two critical scientific elements: understanding – a clear and unobscured sense of LD; and explanation – a rational exposition of the reasons why a particular student is LD. The authors suggest that without understanding and explanation, statements about LD remain conditional.

Similar arguments have been made for the seriously emotionally disturbed category. Patton cites Ysseldyke, Algozzine, and Thurlow, who observed that the arbitrary shifts in diagnostic criteria and frequency rates across states call into question the validity of the SED category. Patton charges that the ambiguity and subjectivity embedded in the mild disabilities categories, and teacher judgments in the referral process, combined with inherent biases of the assessment process contribute to the disproportionate referral and special education placement of African-American students.

Moving from the Deficit Perspective: Lessons from Gestalt Psychology

While much is being done by the mental health community to clarify the disability categories and to strengthen the process of referral, much still needs to be done to help educators refocus their lenses to more positive perceptions of African-American students. Gestalt theorists such as Wertheimer, Kohler, and Koffka are credited for exerting a significant influence on the psychology of perception (Bruce, Green and Georgeson). They had much to say about the way the mind handles information coming in from all the senses. The mind automatically and unconsciously selects what to pay attention to and what to ignore. One way of doing so according to the theorists, is to consider objects in terms of figure/ground relationships. "Figures tend to be complete, coherent and in front of the ground, which is seen as less distinct, is attended to less readily, and is often seen as floating behind the figure" (Bruce et. al 65). Furthermore, "a figure suggests meaning, while a ground seems relatively meaningless" (Bloomer 51). Applying this principle to classroom practice, some teachers, may allow student behaviors to become the figure, taking on more significance, and other aspects of the child to become the ground, taking on less significance.

Referring to the old woman/young girl representation, psychologists agree that one cannot experience simultaneous perception of both views. At any given instant, only one image can be seen. This is explained by the fact that there are limits to the number of things that the brain can pay attention to at any given time. Consequently, seeing different meanings in turn, causes the viewer to experience a feeling of ambiguity. This feeling of ambiguity results because the brain is unable to decide which meaning is preferable (Bloomer). It could be argued that teachers experience a sense of ambiguity or frustration when they are not able to separate the child's presenting symptoms or acting out behaviors from the child as a student.

Gestalt theory puts forth the concept of "subjective contours" which refers to contours or edges that are not physically present, but are seen due to the mind's eagerness to fill in the blank and achieve meaning. Teachers are often eager to have answers and to explain undesirable classroom behaviors. By doing so, it lessens their feelings of ambiguity and frustration and provides a sense of control. Therefore, teachers apply labels to explain why some children behave in ways perceived to be outside of the norm. This process is consistent with way the mind unconsciously operates. That is, "the mind tends to see only what is necessary for meaning. Once it has made closure, it doesn't tend to look

for information. . . .You continue to perceive whole images even when fully half of the visual information is missing” (Bloomer 55).

Therefore, once a teacher, operating from a deficit perspective, has labeled a student and decides that the student belongs in special education, she often does not continue to look for other relevant and pertinent information that if considered, could result in a different decision. Gestalt theorists also assert that the one goal of the mind in selecting and organizing the array of sensory data is to construct meaning and arrive at closure. They suggest that the mind imposes a closure pattern and that preexisting mental models program how the stimulus will be perceived. (Bloomer 61). The author goes on to explain that:

This argument has far-reaching implications for understanding human perception. If it is correct, the human mind does not interpret stimuli with anything like an open-minded approach. Instead, people see things only in relation to categories already established in their minds. Closure does not represent objective knowledge about stimulus, but rather the confirmation of a preexisting idea. It means that on a perceptual level people’s minds are made up before the fact: they have the closure programmed before the stimulus happens! Strong evidence supports this view. . . .our perceptual processes clean up a stimulus in order to classify it more easily or fit it more satisfactorily into an already-established category. Interpreting a new stimulus as a familiar gestalt is easier and more efficient than constructing a new category to account for all the minute details that make the present stimulus different from similar stimuli encountered in the past. . . . These preprogrammed responses can be termed perceptual prejudices. As with other kinds of prejudice, these predispose people to focus on the things that reinforce their preexisting stereotypes and to tune out inconsistencies (62-63).

Examining Teachers’ Mental Models: Case Examples

To get a sense of the mental models teachers draw from in thinking about their students, the authors led approximately 140 teachers in a reflective exercise. These teachers were from several school districts around the country and were participants at a recent leadership academy conducted by the authors. They were asked to partner with another teacher at their table. They were instructed to list the names of as many of their students as they could remember. Then they were asked to share their lists with their partner who randomly selected two names from this list of students. After the selection was made, the lists were returned to the original partner and each was asked to write two sentences to a paragraph about each of the two students. No other parameters were given. The responses were then collected by the author

and were processed and coded for analyses. The authors organized the response in three categories: **1)** responses that reflect a high sense of teacher-student relationship; **2)** responses that contained language that reflects the deficit perspective; **3)** miscellaneous responses that reflect neither of the two categories. The authors coded each response independently and later compared each other's responses to achieve inter-rater reliability. Of the 116 responses collected, presented below are selected examples that reflect the deficit perspective category. Consider the following unedited examples. Pseudonyms are used to protect the students' identity.

Case Number 1:

A second grader. He does not like his teacher or school. Cannot stay focused, a poor reader. He enjoys working on the computer. Is an unclean child.

Case Number 2:

Leroy burned his house down - classified E.D. last year. Father left him this year with his last girl friend - non-custodial - on medication for behavior - child is depressed - thrives on attention getting behaviors.

Case Number 3:

Jamie is a car thief from the city - He has no resources and is at the school determined to change his life around - it has not been easy for him.

Case Number 4:

John is argumentative, horseplay, talkative, sensitive, passive aggression, violent, average intelligence.

Case Number 5:

Joey has been re-entered in our school three times this year. He has aggressive - confrontational behaviors. His mother does not believe it's a problem with Joey but with the schools. He has to be watched and supervised at all times. He threatens and carries through. Because of his behavior, his academic achievement is low. He will be going to summer school.

The analysis revealed a tendency on the part of many of the teachers to use seemingly pejorative language in describing their students. Even when it was clear that the teachers had a genuine concern for their students, their descriptions were laden with negative descriptors that appeared to lack a sense of true knowledge of, and relationships with their students. Despite the fact that no specific instructions were given on how to describe the child, it was striking to see the words and

phrases that some teachers chose to use in their descriptions. Although the teachers were only given approximately ten minutes to complete the task, the descriptions they provided speak volumes about their mental models, impressions, and perceptions about their children.

While some may argue that many of these descriptions are reflective of the realities faced by teachers every day, we contend that those descriptions may come from a place of low expectations and negative perceptions. It is important to be able to describe and name specific behaviors and challenges that children bring to the classroom environment; however, the use of language has the power to negatively impact a child's entire educational experience and ultimately, the choices that they make through adulthood.

Moving Toward the Development Perspective: Creating New Mental Models

The developmental perspective is a way of seeing both the figure and the ground in appropriate balance. It allows a teacher to recognize the challenges that a child brings to the learning environment and to participate actively in helping the child overcome those challenges. This developmental perspective puts the teacher in the middle of the equation of students' learning and stands in marked contrast with the deficit perspective where the teacher is outside the equation. Teachers who see children through developmental lenses understand and accept that if students are going to learn and have a successful school experience, then they must look beyond students' immediate behavioral presentations and develop new mental models for working with these children. Teachers who see children through developmental lenses recognize the possibilities and the potentials that each child brings to the classroom. They do not simply focus on the aspects of the child that may be inconsistent with their expectations for appropriate appearance, attitude, and behavior.

To do this, teachers need to be provided with the tools that will equip them to form new figure/ground relationship so that they may perceive the students with a new awareness. In Gestalt psychology, it is argued that when people form new figure/ground relationships, they perceive themselves and others with a new awareness (Bloomer). One way of doing this is to provide teachers with a holistic perspective through which they can learn to view students and interpret behaviors that seem to fall outside of what they consider to be the norm. The authors use the developmental framework of the School Development Program model developed by James P. Comer in 1968. According to this

framework, children grow and develop along six critical pathways: physical, language, social, psychological, ethical, and cognitive. This framework allows the teacher to view both the figure and the ground and also empowers the teacher to change the deficit pattern of coming to closure too soon. This development framework pushes teachers to seek relevant information before drawing conclusions that could be detrimental or damaging to children. The pathways provide all relevant information about a child - not just the behavioral, cognitive, or social - but a complete picture of the child that is taken from a richer, more meaningful set of data. This enables the teachers to make pedagogical decisions and to devise interventions that are in the best interest of the child. In doing so, teachers are less likely to depend on their own pre-existing prejudices and biases to make decisions that have life-long consequences. Rather, they draw from the objective knowledge provided through the holistic framework. If it happens that a child truly needs special education, it is because the holistic data are compelling enough to lead a teacher toward that decision.

The teacher-student relationship is a strong mediator that activates the use of this developmental framework. As a result, teachers interact with students in ways that illicit positive responses. This allows for the teacher and the student to be on the same page leading toward positive outcomes for both teacher and student. Delpit reinforces this notion of the teacher-student relationship through her challenge to teachers to know their students beyond just the classroom setting:

If we do not have some knowledge of children's lives outside the realms of paper-and-pencil work, and even outside of their classrooms, then we cannot know their strengths. Not knowing students' strengths leads to our "teaching down" to children from communities that are culturally different from that of the teachers in the school. Because teachers do not want to tax what they believe to be these students' lower abilities, they end up teaching less when, in actuality, these students need more of what school has to offer (173).

In keeping with this theme of knowing students, consider the following unedited descriptions of students offered by teachers in the same group about which reference was made earlier. Again, pseudonyms are used to protect the identities of the students.

Case Number 1

Ebony Smith lives with both mom and dad four blocks from school. She has a sister Shanna who will be in kindergarten in one year. Ebony is involved in Girl-Scouts, gems, loves to camp and visits family in Florida. Ebony's father comes in to school to drop her off. It is a bi-racial family. Good reader, harder time with math.

Case Number 2

Fee enjoys soccer, basketball, and sports. Fee got a basketball from Target last week. He enjoys playing at the school park with his cousin (about fifteen). Their family is very close, however they do not enjoy coming into school. Fee's mom and dad have limited English skills. They need to have things translated into Hmong. Good at math, harder time reading. Loves computer, legos and drawing.

Case Number 3

Michael is an eighteen year old young man who has achieved his GED. He has many hopes for the future. He is generous, hardworking, very artistic and thoughtful. He loves race cars. He loves his dog Bengy. He has people that care about him. They are important to him. He loves to read. He is very helpful.

Case Number 4

John is a wonderful fifteen year old who brings joy to me each day. He is brave in his struggles with many painful events in his life. He is often misunderstood. He tries hard to fit in. He has a kind and gentle soul. Sometimes his anger bubbles up in ways he doesn't like. He likes music and is great at computers, especially the net. He means a lot to me.

Teachers that focus on children's development, knowing them by name, where they come from, and what their life is like outside of school develop a relationship with the children such that the students know that they will not slip through the cracks; that someone is always there for them. The teachers extend their roles and responsibilities for caring for students outside the regular classroom setting. The understanding that teachers gain about the personal side of students, about students' lives outside the classroom, is used to enhance academic activities and can improve classroom instruction. Students value honest, authentic communication and interaction from adults, allowing students to see them as real people. Students are more open to learning from teachers who are involved in their lives. The result of this strong ethic of caring by school staff is the creation of an overall school climate that increases student commitment to the school and its members (Comer).

**Implications for Policy, Practice,
and Targeted Research**

The developmental pathways framework calls for changes in the policy and practices that lead to over-representation of African-American students in special education. Teachers need more training in applying the pathways framework in interacting with children so that they can be more preventive than reactive. This training includes

knowledge of how children grow and develop along the six critical pathways and all the stages that define their school years. The training would also allow teachers to consider similarities and differences of children from different cultural and language backgrounds and communities in all decisions concerning these students. Pre-service education must have as a central part of its curriculum strategies for students to gain both the knowledge base and the opportunity to apply such knowledge prior to their placement in schools. Similarly, in-service teachers need ongoing staff development in reflective practices similar to the one described earlier by the authors that challenge the mental models teachers have developed over time and encourage them to reshape their thinking and behavior.

In terms of targeted research, schools that serve children from predominantly African-American culture need to go back and examine their data to determine whether decisions for referral and placement were made based on holistic data or biased judgments. Based on their findings, they need to implement a process to transition misdiagnosed children back into the regular systems. Furthermore, there needs to be a process in place to get the teacher and the returning child back on the same positive page. They need to use the pathways framework to determine if the student was misdiagnosed and use the same framework to establish effective strategies and support to prevent the student from being placed back into an adversarial or unwanted classroom environment. As a follow-up to this practice, schools could compare whether there is a decrease in the number of students being referred for special education services. The authors hypothesize that the use of this model will result in fewer misdiagnoses and fewer placements in special education.

Local, state, and national policies need to strongly encourage schools to use a holistic approach...

Local, state, and national policies need to strongly encourage schools to use a holistic approach to address this issue of over-representation of African-American students in special education classes. The School Development Program (SDP) offers such an approach. The SDP uses a collaborative team of child development specialists who use the developmental framework to examine and respond to individual student behaviors, examine patterns across classrooms, and make global-school wide recommendations that are proactive and preventive. Schools that have used this approach have shown a decrease in the number of referrals to special education and other out-placement services. These outcomes have led to an improved school climate, stronger teacher-student relationships, lower absenteeism and suspension rates, and fewer behavior problems (Noblit, Malloy and Malloy).

The problem of over-representation is serious and has life-long consequences for the African-American student population. If significant numbers of them are referred to special education based on appearances and “out of the norm” behaviors, then few will have a chance to achieve success in school and in life. The model we put forth does not blame or pass judgment on teachers for referring African-American students to special education. However, it challenges them to intentionally examine their mental models. If they find themselves operating from a deficit perspective they may use a more holistic approach to move toward making the kind of decisions that will enable each student to become the best that he/she is capable of becoming. In doing so, both teachers and students will experience a classroom environment that is conducive to teaching, learning, and overall development. This environment gives students more options for success in life, enhances the teachers’ creativity in working with the students, and builds positive teacher-student relationships that foster a sense of hope and a positive outlook toward the future. Neil Postman said that our “children are the messages we will send to a time that we will never see” (Ryan and Cooper 394). Teachers need to ensure that African-American children will be the most positive, uplifting, and life-enriching messages that can ever be sent to the future.

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