**Equity Centered Trauma-Sensitive Interventions to Prevent Disproportionate Identification and Overrepresentation of Marginalized Populations in Special Education**

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In 1975, Congress passed the Education for All Handicapped Children (EAHCA), now the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004), to increase equity in education, but in fact, the law may be "misaligned with the Brown v. Board of Education (1954) decision" (Morgan, 2020, p. 77). Despite legislation outlawing racial segregation in schools, the EAHCA gave schools the discretion to continue segregation, despite the intentions behind IDEA and further litigation (Bryant et al., 2020; Delahunty & Chiu, 2020; *Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District,* 2017; Fege & Jackson, 2023; Morgan, 2020; Nario-Redmond, 2020; Rodriguez & Murawski, 2022). Cultural and racial ignorance and bias and the lack of knowledge regarding the impacts of poverty and multilayered trauma on learning lead to misidentification and the overrepresentation of marginalized populations in special education. The federal government, states, and districts must address these serious issues (Bryant et al., 2020; Cavendish et al., 2020; Delahunty & Chiu, 2020; Hardy, 2023; Morgan, 2020; Rodriguez & Murawski, 2022).

**Definition and Measurement of Disproportionality and Overrepresentation**

Disproportionality, which is a plausible cause of overrepresentation of students from marginalized groups receiving special education services, is defined by the use of risk ratios, or how likely a member of a group is to be identified as needing special education services relative to other groups (Bryant et al., 2020; Delahunty & Chiu, 2020; Rodriguez & Murawski, 2022). The composition index, commonly used by states, compares the ratio of students from a specific demographic background who qualified for special education services with the ratio of students with the same demographic background in the total school population (Morgan, 2020; Rodriguez & Murawski, 2022). This process "reflects not only differential probability of identification, but also broad sociohistorical issues of equity and social stratification by race, language, class, and ability” (Bal et al., 2014, p. 3).

Although disagreement as to the etiology of disproportionality persists, most experts in the field have come to a consensus that the incorrect identification of students for special education can cause overrepresentation (Brown et al., 2019; Bryant et al., 2020; Cavendish et al., 2020; Delahunty & Chiu, 2020; Gargiulo & Bouck, 2021; Morgan, 2020; Rodriguez & Murawski, 2022). Disproportionate percentages of students of color are also placed in segregated classrooms for more of their school day (Brown et al., 2019; Bryant et al., 2020; Delahunty & Chiu, 2020; Gargiulo & Bouck, 2021; Jung et al., 2019; Kauffman & Anastasiou, 2019; Morgan, 2020).

In 2016, over seventeen thousand school districts nationwide were over two standard deviations above the national median in overidentifying students from diverse racial and ethnic groups for special education services in high-incidence disability categories and relegating them to segregated settings for the majority of the day (Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2016). Two standard deviations indicate a substantially higher statistical requirement for the determination of disproportionality and overrepresentation than the existence of the issues require. Tables 1 and 2 contain statistics that confirm the overrepresentation of students from marginalized populations receiving special education services and attending economically disadvantaged schools.

**Gaps in the Literature**

The main gaps in the literature on overrepresentation include a lack of confirmation and consensus regarding how and why overrepresentation occurs (Bryant et al., 2020; Cavendish et al., 2020; Connor et al., 2019; Gargiulo & Bouck, 2021; Morgan, 2020; Rodriguez & Murawski, 2022). In addition, disagreement among scholars continues regarding the most effective and viable solutions for the prevention of disproportionate identification, overrepresentation, and more restrictive placements (Brown et al., 2019; Bryant et al., 2020; Cavendish et al., 2020; Connor et al., 2019; Gargiulo & Bouck, 2021; Morgan, 2020; Rodriguez & Murawski, 2022).

**Table 1**

*Comparison of Total Students and those Receiving Special Education Services by Ethnicity and Race*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **2020-2021**  | **W** | **B** | **H** | **A** | **PI** | **AI/****AN** | **BR/****MR** | **Total****% of students** |
| **Total enrollment in Public Schools** | 46% | 15% | 28% | 5% | <1% | <1% | 5% | 100% |
| **Receiving Special Education Services** | 15% | 17% | 14% | 8% | 12% | 19% | 15% | ~15% of Student Population |
| **High Incidence Disabilities** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | 63% of students receiving services |

*Note.* W=White; B=Black; H=Hispanic; A=Asian; PI=Pacifica Islander; AI/AN = American Indian/Alaskan Native; BR/MR = Biracial or Multi-Racial. High Incidence Disabilities are SLD, SLI, ID, EBD (Bryant et al., 2020). Statistics for the percentage of students identified with high-incidence disabilities and the student population, and students receiving special education services by race and ethnicity were obtained from the National Center for Education Statistics (2022).

**Table 2**

*Students Receiving Special Education Services by D*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **2017-2019**  | **W** | **B** | **H** | **A** | **PI** | **AI/****AN** | **Total****% of students** |
| **Student Population by Race and Ethnicity Attending Schools comprised of 75% POC** | 6% | 59%  | 60% | 40% | 54% | 40% | 32% of Total U.S. Student Population |
| **Students Attending High Poverty Schools by Race** | <9% | 60% |  |  |  |  |  |

*Note*. POC = People of Color (Preferred term rather than BIPOC; see Plaid & MacDonald-Dennis, 2021). Data for students attending schools with 75% students of color in 2019 were obtained from the National Center for Education Statistics (2022). Data for students attending high-poverty schools in 2017 were obtained from the Children’s Defense Fund (2021).

Domains too often ignored in education and special education are the existing and most recent literature from other disciplines having significant ramifications for educational practice. In particular, findings indicate the substantial impact of multilayered trauma on a child's neurobiological development, functioning, learning, and behavior. Research fails to address how multilayered trauma impacts the disproportionate identification of and overrepresentation in special education of children from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds and families living in poverty (Alexander, 2019; Ashworth & Humphrey, 2020; Assari, 2020; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007; Cantor et al., 2017; Hardy, 2023; Hernández-Saca & Cannon, 2019; Kauffman & Anastasiou, 2019; Kosekí, 2017; Thumfart et al., 2022; Venet, 2021).

**Outcomes for Students from Marginalized Populations and with Disabilities**

Statistics delineating the outcomes for students with intersections of race or ethnicity and poverty, including disability, do not currently exist. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the poor outcomes for students in these separate groups compared to their non-disabled, white peers from economically secure families and communities are compounded when these demographic and condition categories are multilayered (Ashworth & Humphrey, 2020; Craig, 2017). Tables 3 and 4 contain statistics that quantify educational outcomes for students from marginalized populations and students with disabilities.

**Table 3**

*Academic Proficiency of Students by Ethnicity and Race*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **2022** | **W** | **B** | **H** | **A/PI** | **AI/AN** | **BR/MR** |
| **At or Above Reading Proficient** | 38% | 16% | 21% | 55% | 18% | 35% |
| **At or Above Math Proficiency** | 35% | 9% | 14% | 56% | 13% | 28% |

*Note.* Data obtained from USA Facts (2023).

Black adolescents were 2.4 times more likely to be arrested than white teenagers in 2018. In the same year, Black teenagers represent 15% of the total adolescent population, but 52% of the teenagers prosecuted in adult criminal courts were Black. In addition, Black adolescents were nine times more likely, and Hispanic youth were 40% more likely to receive adult prison sentences than white teenagers in 2018 (Children’s Defense Fund, 2021).The conclusions drawn from these statistics indicate that the outcomes are discouraging for students from racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds, those who live in economically disadvantaged homes and communities or alternative settings, and students with disabilities.

**Table 4**

*High School Graduation and Dropout Rates*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **2017-2018** | **W** | **B** | **H** | **AI/ AN** | **ED** | **SWD** | **LEP** | **INST** |
| **Failed to Graduate** | 11% | 19% | 21% | 26% |  |  |  |  |
| **ACGR** | 89% | 78% | 80% | 72% | 78% | 67% | 66% |  |
| **Status Dropout Rate** | 4.3% | 6.5% | 8.2% | 10.1% |  | 12.1% |  | 32.4% |

*Note.* W=White; B=Black; H=Hispanic; AI/AN=American Indian/Alaskan Native; ED=Economically Disadvantaged; SWD=Students with Disabilities; LEP=Limited English Proficiency; INST=Institutionalized Student Population. Data for students who failed to graduate in 2018 (Children’s Defense Fund, 2021). The National ACGR = Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate, public high school students graduated on time with regular diplomas and 2017 Status Dropout Rates: 16–24-year-olds not enrolled in school, no diploma or alternative credential (McFarland et al., 2020).

**Barriers to Solving the Problem of Disproportionality and Overrepresentation**

**Theoretical**

Scholars have differing views on whether receiving special education services is helpful or harmful in its current incarnation (Bryant et al., 2020; Gargiulo & Bouck, 2021; Jung et al., 2019; Kauffman & Anastasiou, 2019).In addition, policymakers pay too much attention to a small number of scholars who claim overrepresentation is not a problem while not giving enough attention to the statistics and substantial work by researchers whose findings support that disproportionality and overrepresentation are significant problems (Bryant et al., 2020; Cavendish et al., 2020; Connor et al., 2020; Gargiulo & Bouck, 2021; Kauffman & Anastasiou, 2019; Morgan, 2020; Rodriguez & Murawski, 2022). There remains a lack of consensus among scholars regarding the causes of overrepresentation, leading to a divide in recommendations for solutions (Brown et al., 2019; Bryant et al., 2020; Cavendish et al., 2020; Connor et al., 2019; Gargiulo & Bouck, 2021; Kauffman & Anastasiou, 2019; Morgan, 2020; Rodriguez & Murawski, 2022). Finally, the ever-widening research-to-practice gap has led to little change over the decades of overrepresentation (Cavendish et al., 2020; Gargiulo & Bouck, 2021).

**In Practice**

The most significant barrier to solving the problem of overrepresentation is inadequate and irrelevant administrator and teacher education, training, and support in effective, evidence-based educational pedagogies and practices and special education law (Brown et al., 2019; Bryant et al., 2020; Connor et al., 2019; Gargiulo & Bouck, 2021; Jung et al., 2019; Kauffman & Anastasiou, 2019; Morgan, 2020). This state of affairs leads to ableism and a lack of clarity regarding socially constructed categories leading to the erroneous quantification of the identification process (Brown et al., 2019; Bryant et al., 2020; Delahunty & Chiu, 2020; Gargiulo & Bouck, 2021; Jung et al., 2021; Kauffman & Anastasiou, 2019; Nario-Redmond, 2020; Rodriguez & Murawski, 2022).

In addition, the danger of one-size-fits-all pedagogies and a lack of interventions to eradicate educator bias that leads to misinterpretation of culturally based behaviors and denial that disproportionate identification or overrepresentation are issues are significant obstacles to preventing and repairing overrepresentation (Brown et al., 2019; Bryant et al., 2020; Delahunty & Chiu, 2020; Gargiulo & Bouck, 2021; Jung et al., 2019; Kauffman & Anastasiou, 2019; Morgan, 2020). Educational staff frequently fail to competently evaluate the impact of contextual risk factors like poverty, sociopolitical and historical oppression, and multilayered trauma when designing interventions in general education or evaluating students for special education services. With limited access to resources for training and supporting general education teachers, misidentification for special education becomes the method of choice for coping with challenging students (Assari, 2020; Brown et al., 2019; Bryant et al., 2020; Delahunty & Chiu, 2020; Gargiulo & Bouck, 2021; Jung et al., 2019; Kauffman & Anastasiou, 2019; Kosekí, 2017; Morgan, 2020).

Many educators also fail to understand the damage done by labeling students in such a way that stigmatizes them and limits their potential (Alexander, 2019; Hernández-Saca & Cannon, 2019; Izard, 2016; Kosekí, 2017; Morgan, 2020; Nario-Redmond, 2020; Venet, 2021). Due to a lack of appropriate training and support, educators utilize ineffective practices for building curriculum, instructional methodology, mastery assessments, and disciplinary procedures that harm many students. Traditional instructional and disciplinary practices are generally not equity-centered or responsive to the needs of multicultural students or those coping with trauma (Brown et al., 2019; Bryant et al., 2020; Chardin & Novak, 2021; Connor et al., 2019; Delahunty & Chiu, 2020; Gargiulo & Bouck, 2021; Jung et al., 2019; Kauffman & Anastasiou, 2019; Morgan, 2020). Presently, educators are not prepared or adequately supported to teach in conditions where the prevalence of behavior and learning challenges is rising and the etiology of these challenges is multilayered trauma, not that of a disability (Agorastos et al., 2019; Assari, 2020; Bryant et al., 2020; Cantor et al., 2019; Cathomas et al., 2019; Hardy, 2023; Immordino-Yang et al., 2019; Izard, 2016; Kauffman & Anastasiou, 2019; Kosekí, 2017; Levine & Kline, 2007; Luthar, 1991; Masten & Reed, 2002; Thumfart et al., 2021; van der Kolk, 2014; Werner, 1993)

**The Intersectional Solution: Equity-Centered Trauma-Sensitive Methodologies**

Implementing equity-centered trauma-sensitive pedagogies school-wide and in individual classrooms, while providing school staff with sufficient and efficacious education, training, and support will decrease, if not eliminate, the problem of overrepresentation (Alexander, 2019; Chardin & Novak, 2021; Craig, 2017; Jennings, 2019; Milner et al., 2019; O’Drobinak & Kelley, 2021; Venet, 2021). To accomplish this task, intersectionality among pedagogies is necessary, especially social justice and equity-centered methodologies, the ideals of special education, and trauma-sensitive approaches (Bryant et al., 2021; Cavendish et al., 2020; Connor et al., 2019; Gargiulo & Bouck, 2021; Jung et al., 2019; Lesley, 2023)

Schools and educators must reconceptualize the landscape of special education as a function of general education, bringing intersectionality of equity and disability to meet the needs of individual students (Bryant et al., 2020; Cavendish et al., 2020; Jung et al., 2019; Kauffman & Anastasiou, 2019). Educators must respect the ideals and intentions behind the IDEA (2004) legislation rather than merely ensure they meet the minimal procedural and substantive standards. Raising standards to meet the intentions of the legislation would go far toward eliminating bias and ensuring the thoroughness of the evaluation process (Kauffman & Anastasiou, 2019)

Educators can use findings from the research behind the intentions of IDEA (2004) and its amendments and recent special education litigation to build programs that successfully engage students who are challenging to reach and teach. Founding these programs requires equal consideration of contextual factors that impact academic achievement and builds programmatic rigor for all students. The instructional methodology must focus on the unique needs of all students and not rely on the one-size-fits-all approach (Bryant et al., 2020; Chardin & Novak, 2021; Craig, 2017; Markowitz & Bouffard, 2020; Miller et al., 2022; O’Drobinak & Kelley, 2021; Venet, 2021).

**Gaps in the Literature**

There is a preponderance of grey literature that makes recommendations forequity-centered trauma-sensitive methodologies based on previous grey literature which cites old studies. Through investigation, it is clear that there is a dearth of research that:

1. Outlines the best education, training, and support methods for schools, administrators, and educators.
2. Establishes the necessary steps to ensure effective implementation with fidelity and sustainability of the practices while evaluating longitudinal outcomes.
3. Determines the best methods for training and supporting educators in collecting and analyzing data efficiently to continually improve their practice.
4. Postulates methods for training and supporting educators in modifying practices in conjunction with their data analysis while maintaining fidelity to the essential elements that enable them to meet very different schools’, communities’, teachers’, and students’ needs.

**Methodology**

The studies included in the analysis were primary sources, both quantitative and qualitative in design, including any intervention or program implementations and their results, meta-analyses of relevant literature, analyses of existing data sources relevant to the problem of overrepresentation or equity-centered trauma-sensitive pedagogy and methodologies. All studies were published in scholarly, peer-reviewed journals. The author excluded secondary sources, studies from before 2018 unless they represented seminal literature, sources published in periodicals or journals without peer review, and sources not relevant to educational practice (Bloomberg, 2023; Faryadi, 2018; Galvan, 1999; Hart, 1998).

The methodology for the organization was thematic in design. The organization of the themes focuses on commonalities among recommendations and implications of the studies for future research and practice. The author evaluated each study separately for its validity, reliability, and credibility to determine flaws in design and analysis that may have contributed to findings that cannot be replicated or confirmed. In addition, the author examined the significance of the research findings and the claims made by the authors based on those findings. Finally, the author examined the plausibility of the authors’ determination of the implications of their findings and in which future directions research should proceed (Bloomberg, 2023; Dissertation Center, 2022; Faryadi, 2018; Galvan, 1999; Hart, 1998; The Writing Center, n.d.).

**Literature Review: Disproportionality and Overrepresentation**

***Seminal Article***

In 1968, Dunn published an article describing the disproportionality of students from minority groups and economically disadvantaged families placed in special classes because they caused trouble for general education teachers by being slow learners, having challenging behaviors, or both. These educators and their administrators may have believed they did what was best for the students. Dunn (1968) acknowledged that special educators accepted this state of affairs and used psychologists’ testing to label the students and place them in segregated classes.

According the Dunn (1968), in his Hobson vs. Hanson (1967) decision, Judge Wright demanded that the District of Columbia abolish tracks because they discriminated against racially diverse and economically disadvantaged students and violated the 5th Amendment of the Constitution. Dunn (1968) stated that special classes are a form of homogenous grouping and tracking, going against the ruling made in that case. To support this claim, he described the events following Judge Wright's decision. General education teachers complained when pupils from tracking programs in the District of Columbia returned to regular classes. Hence, the school adopted separate special education classes that could not be labeled tracking.

Dunn’s (1968) proposals, based on research from the 1940s through the early 1960s, for completely altering the function and role of special education and special educators in schools to eliminate the problem of misidentification, disproportionate identification, and overrepresentation are virtually identical to the action researchers’ proposals of today, 55 years later. Notwithstanding, our current special education practices and procedures still mirror those of the 1960s, when researchers spoke of being on the cusp of "The American Revolution of Education" (Dunn, 1968, p. 10).

***Current Literature***

Six themes emerged from the literature regarding the implications of the current studies regarding further research into overrepresentation. The authors agreed that comprehensive and consistent descriptions of participants' characteristics and contextual factors that may impact their data, and providing complete details regarding the study's contextual factors, are necessary to establish the validity and reliability of any future findings. In addition, for any consistency and cohesiveness in findings, all researchers must adopt these habits to ensure the rigor of their studies and the possibility of the application of their results (Bal et al., 2014; Chow et al., 2022; Cooc, 2017; Dever et al., 2016).

Researchers observed bias in staff perceptions based on race, ethnicity, culture, poverty, behavior, learning challenges, and disability affect how students when making referrals to special education and in the identification process, which can lead to overrepresentation (Bal et al., 2014; Chow et al., 2022; Cooc, 2017; Dever et al., 2016). The consensus was that disproportionality and overrepresentation have systemic causes and that these causes must e acknowledged, recognized, and included in any studies on these topics as multiple systems are involved, and it is not a one-dimensional problem (Bal et al., 2014; Chow et al., 2022; Cooc, 2017; Dever et al., 2016). Researchers must investigate and evaluate methods for staff education, training, support, and coaching, as well as administrator leadership, education, training, and methods for supporting their staff to effect any systemic change in the referral, identification, and placement processes for children perceived as difficult to teach (Bal et al., 2014; Chow et al., 2022; Cooc, 2017; Dever et al., 2016).

Two authors emphasized that a thorough investigation of the characteristics and contexts of at-risk or identified children at preschool ages may assist in developing effective interventions that can prevent the development of more severe challenges later in school (Bal et al., 2014; Chow et al., 2022). Integration of quantitative and qualitative methods in research on disproportionality and overrepresentation must continue due to the complexity of the problem and the need for data that examines all possible etiologies. Only with comprehensive data can researchers form solutions that address all aspects of the issue (Bal et al., 2014; Chow et al., 2022; Dever et al., 2016).

Cooc (2017) decided to eliminate factors directly related to disproportionate identification and overrepresentation in her data analysis to obtain findings confirming her preconceived beliefs that the overrepresentation of marginalized populations in special education is not an issue, despite statistics demonstrating its existence. Cooc’s (2017) results illustrated in Model 1, in which she is not “controlling for” any factors show the facts that statistics confirm (Cooc, 2017, p. 7; See Figure 1). When Cooc (2017) “adjusts” the data analysis, the disparities disappear, resulting in findings that justify her personal belief that overrepresentation is a myth (Morgan et al., 2020, p. 261).

**Figure 1**

*A comparison of estimates odds ratios of teacher perception of student disability by racial group (relative to White students) and covariates added sequentially to logistic regression models.*



*Note.* IEP = individualized education program. Source: (Cooc, 2017, p. 18).

**Literature Review: Equity-centered Trauma-Sensitive Methodologies**

 Six themes emerged from the literature on equitable and trauma-sensitive methodologies. Administrators need to take active roles in leadership and support to make changes at the organizational and structural level in addition to creating a positive culture and climate in the school for any program or intervention to succeed and for sustainability (Bal et al., 2014; Legette et al., 2021; MacLochlainn et al., 2022; O’Toole & Dobutowitsch, 2023; Phillippi et al., 2022). Collaboration with all stakeholders, including students, families, teachers, school support staff, community members, community organization partners, building administrators, and district administrators, must occur to implement any program or intervention successfully. The sustainability of such a program depends on continued collaboration among these groups (Bal et al., 2014; Legette et al., 2021; MacLochlainn et al., 2022; O’Toole & Dobutowitsch, 2023; Phillippi et al., 2022).

 Solidarity gained from teachers and students in a bottom-up approach is necessary for any program's success, as a top-down policy change alone will not result in the effective implementation or sustainability of an intervention or program (Bal et al., 2014; Legette et al., 2021; MacLochlainn et al., 2022; O’Toole & Dobutowitsch, 2023). As seen in programs lacking academic rigor and high academic expectations, these elements need to be part of any successful program accompanied by the appropriate targeted scaffolding and supports (Bal et al., 2014; Legette et al., 2021; MacLochlainn et al., 2022; Phillippi et al., 2022). To successfully implement equity-centered trauma-sensitive methodologies, acknowledgment and recognition of the systemic barriers to change and taking action to alter the organizational structures that perpetuate those systemic barriers become necessary components to the implementation and sustainability of these methodologies (Bal et al., 2014; Legette et al., 2021; MacLochlainn et al., 2022; O’Toole & Dobutowitsch, 2023). It is crucial to address systemic barriers that lead to students dropping out, getting expelled from comprehensive schools, and ending in ineffectual alternative education settings, or worse, will preserve the status quo. A lack of action will continue to fail the same children the educational system has failed for over half a century (Dunn, 1968; Phillippi et al., 2022).

 The theme discussed in the greatest detail by the majority of studies was the need for effective and relevant education, training, coaching, and support for staff and the administrations of schools who need to implement equity centered trauma sensitive methodologies to better meet the needs of all their students (Bal et al., 2014; Legette et al., 2021; MacLochlainn et al., 2022; O’Toole & Dobutowitsch, 2023). Elements for teacher preparation and ongoing professional development included: (a) knowledge regarding the impacts of trauma on brain development, functioning, learning, and behavior, (b) understanding the etiology of behaviors, particularly those related to trauma responses and triggers, and how best cope with them, and (c) how to recognize what part of the brain a student is operating in and how to bring them into the region of the brain that allows learning to happen. In addition, studies recommended building multicultural, equitable, and inclusive perspectives by examining and uncovering biases, beliefs, and assumptions regarding students from diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, economically disadvantaged homes and communities, and students with disabilities. Educators must learn the extent of the impact of their beliefs on students’ academic performance, behavior, and outcomes and how those beliefs can lead to self-fulfilling prophecies in students when they start to buy in to the negative beliefs of a teacher (Bal et al., 2014; Legette et al., 2021; MacLochlainn et al., 2022; O’Toole & Dobutowitsch, 2023).

Educators can learn to create a classroom environment that is safe and inclusive from the students’ perspectives. Teachers must recognize and interrupt negative classroom dynamics, including microaggressions among peers and from teacher to student. Changing classroom management practices to restorative practices involves building trusting relationships with all students, regardless of backgrounds, behaviors, or learning challenges. An essential element to change is the shift from a static belief system to a growth mindset about educators' ability to evolve their practices and develop self-efficacy and their students' ability to grow and learn. An educator who learns how to build resilience in themselves can also assist students in building resilience (Bal et al., 2014; Legette et al., 2021; MacLochlainn et al., 2022; O’Toole & Dobutowitsch, 2023; Phillippi et al., 2022).

Teachers must use ongoing reflective, evaluative, and collaborative work with colleagues to continually improve their social-emotional skills and instructional practices and to support each other. In developing their social-emotional skills and awareness, educators empower themselves to embed their teaching practice with these practices. Providing the preparation and training for educators to build skills, develop tools, and provide access to the necessary resources and support to address inequities in the educational system is the responsibility of good administrations and strong teacher preparation programs (Bal et al., 2014; Legette et al., 2021; MacLochlainn et al., 2022; O’Toole & Dobutowitsch, 2023).

Schools and their staffs must understand the impact of macrosystemic, sociopolitical, and historical oppression, discrimination, and societal bias on school staff beliefs and students. Understanding the interaction of systemic trauma with community and familial trauma will facilitate the choice of the most effective methodologies for each unique school and its students. Schools need to comprehend that if a student is not learning, the problem is with the program, intervention, or method, not the student. All people in service professions, particularly those working with individuals exposed to trauma, must develop a strong, consistent self-care practice to prevent compassion fatigue, burnout, and secondary traumatic stress. Preparation, professional development, and ongoing support and training that cover these elements provide the recipe for successful implementation and sustainability of equity-centered trauma-sensitive methodologies (Bal et al., 2014; Legette et al., 2021; MacLochlainn et al., 2022; O’Toole & Dobutowitsch, 2023).

**Conclusion**

Statistics clearly show that disproportionality and overrepresentation are ongoing issues in education. Seminal literature clarifies that it has been an issue for over half a century (Children's Defense Fund, 2021; Dunn, 1968; National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). However, outcomes for three of the four studies examining overrepresentation were severely limited in their significance and value because the research lacked valid and reliable methodologies for sample selection and data collection, substantially decreasing the credibility of the analysis process (Bal et al., 2014; Cooc, 2017; Dever et al., 2016). In at least one case, blatant skewing of data previously collected by another source during the study’s analysis phase to gain desirable results made any results invalid and unreliable (Cooc, 2017). In the same study, the assumptions that supported controlling for specific factors in the analysis were in blatant violation of IDEA (2004) legislation outlining methods for identification that can decrease disproportionality and overrepresentation of marginalized populations in special education (Cooc, 2017). In all three studies with insufficient rigor and quality to obtain valid and credible results, the authors’ lack of knowledge regarding relevant research in the educational field and other related disciplines indicated a failure to conduct a thorough literature review before beginning their research. This lack of thoroughness negatively impacted their studies' validity and credibility.

One study exhibited the required rigor and quality in design and methodology, leading to valid and reliable results. However, the research design was a meta-analysis, rather than experimental and did not evaluate the problem of overrepresentation independently (Chow et al., 2022). However, the analysis process was well-designed, the critique of the studies was thorough, and this author judged the findings as valid and credible. The recommendations for further research and practice and the implications were directly related to the study findings, unlike the other studies whose authors stated implications and made recommendations not supported by their findings but based on past studies and previous knowledge and beliefs.

Chow et al. (2022) recommended that research into preschool children at risk for being identified for special education would increase the knowledge base to develop more effective and skillfully targeted interventions fitting the individual child's specific needs while considering all contextual factors. Chow et al. (2022) also stated that examining the interaction of factors that impact the identification of students is an essential aspect of preventing overrepresentation. In addition, future researchers must evaluate the impact of the sampling methods and sample composition on study findings to ensure validity. The authors asserted that researchers could only establish the efficacy of interventions and programs if researchers provided thorough details of the characteristics and the relevant contextual factors of the sample population and the study site (Chow et al., 2022).

***Negative Case Analysis***

Paul L. Morgan and his colleagues are the authors of the only studies that find that overrepresentation does not exist, specifically in southern states (Connor et al., 2019; p. 723; Farkas et al., 2020; Morgan et al., 2020). Careful analysis of Morgan et al.’s (2020) latest study discovered significant flaws in that the data was “adjusted” and distorted, as was the process of analysis itself to gain the desired findings that overrepresentation was not an issue in southern states (Morgan et al., 2020, p. 261). Moreover, Morgan et al. (2020) claimed that the contextual factors involved in identifying students under high-incidence disability categories were the factors that needed adjustment in their analysis.

However, IDEA legislation lists explicitly several of the factors "adjusted" in this study for “Model 2” as exclusionary criteria in the evaluation process for identifying students for special education (Assistance to States for the Education of Children with Disabilities, 2004; Morgan et al., 2020, p. 261). Morgan et al. (2020) repeatedly state that their findings are consistent with previous findings and use these findings from previous studies to justify their choices for data and analysis modifications. Irrespective of the weakness of the evidence, the research with which findings are consistent are limited to those with Morgan as an author, all listed in the references (Morgan et al., 2017; Morgan et al., 2019; Morgan et al., 2012; Morgan et al., 2017; Morgan et al., 2015; Morgan et al., 2018; Morgan et al., 2016; Morgan et al., 2014), and include two studies in which Morgan is listed second (Farkas et al., 2016) and third (Hibel et al., 2010) in the authorship.

***Equity Centered Trauma-Sensitive Methodologies***

Each study design and methodology had strengths and weaknesses, and the validity, reliability, and credibility of these studies all had weaknesses. However, despite lacking rigor in the sampling and data collection procedures that led to a degree of compromise of most of the findings, some valuable information can be gleaned from the studies. Bal et al. (2014) concluded that disproportionality was not a special education problem but a more significant cultural, societal, and educational systemic issue requiring adaptive and complex transformation of the educational landscape. Specifically, special education and its staff must shift their roles to become whole school supports and experts in areas of instruction accessibility, multiple methods of demonstrating content mastery, effective intervention implementation, and the use of student data to improve all aspects of teaching. These practices will likely improve student outcomes (Bal et al., 2014). However, without outcome measurements for their study, Bal et al. (2014) do not have findings that support these recommendations. The recommendations from all the studies examined are valid. Other researchers produced findings supporting these recommendations, but only because older research, better-designed research, and research from disciplines outside the educational field have confirmed them.

O’Toole et al. (2023) had substantial weaknesses in their sampling method and final sample population that likely skewed the data significantly. Though they employed validated scales for one portion of their data collection, they depended solely upon self-report measures for the comparison data used in the analysis, which also happened in other studies. Poor sampling practices and overdependence on self-report measures, which researchers failed to triangulate, as was evident in all the studies examined, make any findings difficult to accept as valid, reliable, or credible. Even when redeeming qualities of studies exist, like validated data analysis procedures, the design and methodology flaws that occur prior to those processes still lead to suspect findings (Bal et al., 2014; Legette et al., 2021; MacLochlainn et al., 2022; O’Toole & Dobutowitsch, 2023; Phillippi et al., 2022). Authors in all but one of the studies stated conclusions that matched related previous studies’ findings but were, at best, indirectly and loosely supported by their own study’s findings and, at worst, not found in their findings at all (Bal et al., 2014; Legette et al., 2021; MacLochlainn et al., 2022; O’Toole & Dobutowitsch, 2023). The danger of conducting research that lacks rigor and quality to such an extent is that those who have the power to institute change may dismiss valid methodologies and components of effective programs due to poor study design and flaws in methodology rather than actual proof of the null hypothesis.

***Negative Case Analysis***

Goldin et al. (2022) found that educators were "weaponizing" trauma-informed practice by falling into “White saviorism” and failing to acknowledge and recognize the enormous impact of systemic racism in our society and the systemic structures of inequality in our schools based on racial, ethnic, and economically disadvantaged demographics (p. 7). Special education has become a holding tank for students who do not fit in the small, narrowly defined box in which educators believe students should fit. Goldin and his colleagues (2022) analyzed tweets from educators in an online Twitter forum labeled “EduTwitter.” Tweets from the beginning of school closures due to COVID, March 13, 2020, to the end of most schools' academic year, June 10, 2020. In their analysis and coding, three themes emerged: (a) "White saviorism," (b) disruption of "White saviorism" attitudes, and (c) disruption of White saviorism attitudes through describing or supporting a systemic method of trauma-informed practices (Goldin et al., 2022, p. 7).

Expressions of "White saviorism" included the assumption that a school is a safe place for all students, blaming students and their communities for trauma and the systemic injustices they must withstand, defining children and their communities using deficit and pathology frameworks, boasting about educators' powers to save students, and using trauma to justify offering less than rigorous academic instruction and content (Goldin et al., 2022, p. 7). These belief systems have been observed in schools and educator behaviors across the United States for decades (De Lapp, 2023; Dunn, 1968). Educators can disrupt the norms and status quo and the weaponization of trauma-informed practice. Furthermore, educators can advocate for and make implementation possible for equity-centered trauma-sensitive methodologies by marrying together all the pedagogies relevant to all students' needs (De Lapp, 2023; Goldin et al., 2022).

 While the study itself had several limitations and the data collection method necessarily limited the sample’s representativeness, Goldin et al. (2022) offer hope that the individual belief systems of educators allow inequity and discrimination in U.S. school systems to perpetuate themselves can change. Altering the framework of trauma-informed practice to intersect with other equally significant pedagogies, like those that address systemic racism in society, mirrored in our school system, will meet the needs of all students (De Lapp, 2023; Goldin et al., 2022). Nevertheless, educators must buy into these altered visions of their roles as facilitators and guides, not saviors.

Educators must take responsibility for their impact on students, but no one can save another (Goldin et al., 2022). The choice always remains with the individual regarding how and by what means they will grow and learn. Students do not need saving; they need relevant knowledge, skills, tools, and resources to grow, learn, and decide who they want to be and how they want to show up in the world (De Lapp, 2023). Educators do not have the right to save anyone, and it is an impossibility. Goldin et al. (2022) state that any changes in how educators view students and their role in the teaching and learning process must be inclusive, reflective, and a result of personal introspection and growth for each educator. Without educators' reflection and growth, policy changes regarding systemic shifts will not change practices for those educators whose beliefs lead them to believe in other solutions (Goldin et al., 2022).

***Review of the Gaps in*** ***Existing Literature***

Scholars lack consensus regarding overrepresentation and disagree on how it happens and, therefore, disagree on viable, practical solutions. In addition, scholars fail to apply applicable findings from research outside the educational domain identifying factors that are probable causes of disproportionate identification, a highly likely contributor to overrepresentation.

The existing literature lacks research that intersects the ideals behind special education legislation, trauma-sensitive practices, equity-centered approaches, whole-child pedagogies, social justice practices, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) in addition to considering all the contextual factors that impact students’ learning and functioning. Furthermore, once viable effective intersectional methodologies are determined, scholars must conduct studies that examine the shared knowledge and skills necessary to adopt the intersecting methods, how to build that knowledge and those skills into teacher preparation programs and district trainings, and investigate the best methods for implementing the combined methodologies in schools.

***Insights from findings for further study***

Scholars must engage in research designed to improve the type, design, and implementation of equity-centered trauma-sensitive approaches by addressing these two questions.

1. What are the effective elements of equity-centered trauma-sensitive interventions, methodologies, and practices proposed and attempted thus far?
2. In what direction does research need to go in order to:
	1. create equity-centered trauma-sensitive methodologies and pedagogies that utilize these elements
	2. determine additional critical elements to make the approaches more effective overall, leading to higher rates of positive outcomes
	3. determine the elements of methodologies that make implementation more viable for educators
	4. create an equity-centered trauma-sensitive pedagogy for education that integrates all the essential elements required to make the intervention optimally effective and viable to implement

Identifying students, especially from families living in poverty, living in alternative settings, or from populations traditionally marginalized by society under a disability category and using traditional special education instructional and intervention methods when the etiology of the difficulties lies elsewhere leads to unacceptable and poor outcomes (Alexander, 2019; Brown et al., 2019; Craig, 2017; Hardy, 2023; Hernández-Saca & Cannon, 2019; Miller et al., 2022; O’Drobinak & Kelley, 2021; Venet, 2021). "Systemic change required to produce substantive transformation is often met with resistance from the professionals who must enact the changes" (Bal et al., 2014, p. 10). Altering staff perceptions and providing sufficient and appropriate education, training, and support for program implementation is imperative to the success of equity-centered trauma-sensitive methodologies and the ability to sustain significant changes in the teaching and learning process (Bal et al., 2014).

Top-down policies that demand change without adequate education, training, and support for all school staff will fail to produce improved outcomes, decrease teacher well-being, and produce poor outcomes for the students who need educator guidance the most. Without a bottom-up approach that gives voice to those who must implement any adopted methodologies and students who will participate, policy changes to technical and procedural practices will fail due to a lack of educator and student agreement and solidarity (De Lapp, 2022; Goldin et al., 2022; Sullivan & Osher, 2019). Solving overrepresentation by implementing collaborative equity-centered trauma-sensitive pedagogies and altering the narrative for the teaching and learning process in education will significantly alter the landscape of special education.

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