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Is a bridge even possible over troubled waters? The field of special education negates the overrepresentation of minority students: a DisCrit analysis

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ABSTRACT

In this article we challenge recent research within the field of special education reports an underrepresentation of all minorities in disability categories. First, we contrast these findings with selections from a large body of diverse and innovative work by scholars of overrepresentation, while recognizing the dearth of use of findings in these studies. Second, we illustrate a field of special education that has been epistemologically divided from its inception, and discuss repercussions of this schism for researching overrepresentation. Third, we call attention to color evasion within the field of special education, and to counter this, invoke Disability Critical Race Studies (DisCrit) to critique and rethink how overrepresentation can be conceptualized and researched. Fourth, we discuss some challenging issues raised by our critique. Suggestions for future research on overrepresentation are shared.

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The overrepresentation of students of color in disability categories and restrictive placements has haunted the field of special education in the USA for half a century (Dunn 1968). Recently, it has re-emerged as a contentious topic, arguably dividing the field deeper than ever. We begin this article by foregrounding two related phenomena in relation to the focus on overrepresentation by the field of special education: (1) significant attention paid to a small number of scholars who claim overrepresentation does not exist, and (2) lack of significant attention paid to a large number of scholars who focus on the origins, manifestation, and suggested resolutions regarding overrepresentation.

The small group of researchers have recently gained national prominence in premiere research journals (Morgan et al. 2015) and high profile mass media (Morgan and Farkas 2015) by claiming an *underrepresentation* of students of color in disability categories and special education placements. In brief, Morgan et al. (2015) examined representation of student subgroups within special education using ‘hazard modeling of multiyear longitudinal data and extensive covariate adjustment for potential child-, family-, and state-level confounds’ (278) and found:

Minority children were consistently less likely than otherwise similar White, English-speaking children to be identified as disabled and so to receive special education services.

From kindergarten entry to the end of middle school, racial- and ethnic-minority children were less likely to be identified as having (a) learning disabilities, (b) speech or language impairments, (c) intellectual disabilities, (d) health impairments, or (e) emotional disturbances. Language-minority children were less likely to be identified as having (a) learning disabilities or (b) speech or language impairments (278).

Their findings led them to conclude, ‘deferral legislation and policies currently designed to reduce minority overrepresentation in special education may be misdirected’ (281).

Morgan et al.’s claims were immediately and forcefully contested. For example, Welner (2015) noted that data on which Morgan et al.’s study was based came from a longitudinal sample of 20,000 students first collected when students were in kindergarten in 1998, and from teacher reports of student’s special education status which may or may not have been accurate, probably causing different estimates than nationally established figures. In addition, Ford and Toldson (2015) raised concern of the limited range of disability categories examined by Morgan et al. as they only looked at five federally established categories of disability instead of all thirteen. Other protests followed suit, pointing out multiple methodological flaws built upon both limited assumptions about identifying, manipulating and representing data, including the difference between researching hypothetical versus real students (Blanchett and Sealey 2016; Collins et al. 2016; Ford and Russo 2016; Harry and Fenton 2016; Skiba et al. 2016). Morgan and colleagues responded by replicating the original study (Morgan et al. 2017) and expanded their claims by stating *all* minority student categories are underrepresented in special education – African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans (Morgan et al. 2018).

In contrast, despite the work of numerous scholars seeking to redress overrepresentation over decades, there has been an ineffectual response by the fields of both special and general education. In fact, there is a degree of consensus among stakeholders that educational research to date has had little or no impact to redress educational inequity (Artiles and Trent 1994; Blanchett, Mumford, and Beachum 2005; Connor 2017a; Skiba et al. 2008). In full transparency, the authors of this article believe that overrepresentation continues to exist, and failure to resolve it speaks to the widely acknowledged limitations of existing government policies and the under-utilization of existing educational research (Artiles 2017; Cavendish, Artiles, and Harry 2014; Kozleski 2015; Tefera and Voulgarides 2016; Voulgarides 2017). As Skiba et al. (2016) note, decades of research findings substantiate the existence of overrepresentation, along with panels convened by the National Academy of Sciences, key and publications such as Losen and Orfield’s *Racial Inequalities in Special Education* (2002), and federal legislation crafted to curb the problem. It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that the claims of Morgan and colleagues have currently served to further trouble the somewhat stagnant waters of researching overrepresentation (Albrecht et al. 2012).

In this article we challenge recent claims by Morgan and colleagues who have gained both prominence and traction within the field of special education. First, we contrast their finding with selections from a large body of diverse and innovative work by scholars of overrepresentation, while recognizing the findings in these studies have not been seriously engaged with by traditional special education scholars. Second, we illustrate a field of special education that has been epistemologically divided from its inception, and discuss repercussions of this schism for researching overrepresentation.

Third, we call attention to color evasion within the field of special education, and to counter this, invoke Disability Critical Race Studies (DisCrit) to critique and rethink how overrepresentation can be conceptualized and researched. Fourth, we discuss some challenging issues raised by our critique and, in closing, offer suggestions for future research.

Recent approaches to overrepresentation

Bearing in mind the recent high profiling Morgan and colleagues' studies, we seek to problematize the very notion of overrepresentation as it is currently conceptualized in traditional special educational research, by a call to rethink it within the legacy of *both* racism and ableism in the United States. We pose the following question for readers to consider: *Is a bridge even possible over the troubled waters of special education?* Despite little change in numbers of the overrepresentation of students of color in special education (e.g., United States Department of Education 2017), a critical mass of scholars has long investigated the phenomenon, many advancing new ways of conceptualizing 'the problem.' Much can be gained from acknowledging their collective work in terms of (1) diversifying research, (2) recognizing positionality and theoretical framing of the researcher, (3) using an intersectional lens, and (4) translating theory into policy, and in turn, into practice. In the following sections we have grouped samples from this research below to honor the work of special educators who have pushed against existing boundaries in their attempts to better understand – and reduce – overrepresentation.

Diversity of research

In terms of cultivating diverse perspectives, Arzubiaga et al. (2008) view research as a form of *cultural practice*, inextricably linked to a drive for investigating issues we, as researchers, care about. In the same vein, Nasir and Hand (2006) value the acknowledgement of race and situated cultural practices *together* through a multi level analysis, drawing from frameworks outside of special education. Rueda and Windmueller (2006) have similarly used multi-level analyses within a local context, particularly with view to better understanding the lives of English Language Learners labeled with Learning Disabilities. Using interdisciplinary methods necessarily complicate our understanding of disproportionality, giving rise to innovative responses, including new units of analysis such as 'geographies of opportunity' maps (Kozleski et al. 2014, 45). Additionally, the work of Trainor and Bal (2014) urge explicit criteria to be used within research standards of professional specialized organizations, holding them accountable for cultural responsiveness, and providing guidance on developing rubrics for culturally responsive research in special education to expand the existing dominant and limited paradigm (Bal and Trainor 2016). In sum, there exists multiple approaches to broadening perspectives in researching overrepresentation that include the recognition of research in general (and specifically on overrepresentation) as a cultural practice, the imperative of acknowledging race, and the need for interdisciplinary work.

Positionality and theoretical framing

Some researchers have rethought a familiar concept to debunk its reification and status of being a for granted ‘given.’ For example, in Ladson-Billings’ (2015) critique of ‘the achievement gap’ between black and white students, she reframes it as ‘the opportunity gap’ (3) borne from historical educational debt for inequities perpetuated. It strikes us that overrepresentation is deeply related to both interpretations of ‘the gap.’ In another example, Ferri and Connor (2006) situated their research within historical accounts of exclusion, segregation, and inequity, while Artiles (2011) also acknowledged these longstanding links between race and disability within the general cultural imagination. Other researchers have considered the relationship among the cultural, historical, and personal, in relation to policies on overrepresentation and their degree of effectiveness (Cavendish, Artiles, and Harry 2014). In brief, by recognizing historical and cultural hierarchies of race and harnessing them to contemporary understandings of race, ability, and the educational structures in which we all exist – from schools to research paradigms – how we fundamentally conceive of overrepresentation can be shifted toward more productive ends.

Intersectionality

An intersectional analysis of race and ability is at the core of Losen and Orfield’s (2002) work that looks ‘across the board’ at all factors contributing to overrepresentation, identifying how these factors interlock, while exploring ways to counter such interlocking. Intersectional approaches have also been used to more accurately understand the lived experiences of students traditionally segregated within school (Erevelles and Minear 2010; Connor 2008) and within the school to prison nexus (Annamma 2017). In response to special education’s general lack of engagement with race, several scholars interested in contemplating race and disability simultaneously developed the theoretical lens of DisCrit with view to complicating simple understandings of disproportionality and a myriad of other issues (Annamma, Connor, and Ferri 2013; Annamma, Ferri and Connor 2018). Artiles (2017) has also identified the day-to-day process for identifying potential disabilities – notice, referral, assessment, diagnosis, placement – as ‘The molding of (in)competence with ephemeral tainted categories,’ a phenomenon that erases considerations of race and social, cultural, and linguistic differences among students. In essence, an intersectional approach is an inclusive approach, recognizing complex patterns of power related to human experiences, and the need to foreground race and dis/ability simultaneously in all research pertaining to overrepresentation.

Theory into research into policy into practice

Several researchers have analyzed ways in which implementation of existing educational policies have likely inadvertently contributed to continued patterns of overrepresentation (Cavendish, Artiles, and Harry 2014; Kozleski 2015; Voulgarides 2017). Other researchers have a long track record of examining practices in schools, engaging the larger educational community in studying how patterns of inequality reproduction occur and what teachers and administrators can do to ameliorate such commonplace

situations (Harry and Klingner 2006; Harry et al. 2007; Kalyanpur and Harry 1999). Jackson, King Thorius, and Kyser (2016) synthesized culturally-relevant practices within district level-policies, and Voulgarides and Tefera (2017) urged educators to constantly reflect upon their role within education policies. Relatedly, the work of Fergus has focused upon both educator beliefs and actions regarding labeling and placement of students (2015), and understanding how dysconscious bias is manifest in individuals, as well as school policies and practices (2017). The voices of students historically marginalized and underrepresented in educational research have also been centered as crucial to any discussions of race and ability (Annamma 2014b, Annamma 2016; Connor 2008; Gonzalez, Hernandez-Saca, and Artiles 2017). In sum, research has shown the impact of educational policy – sometimes detrimental – upon students, teachers, and administrators at ‘the ground level’ where everyday commonplace actions, and their consequences, either reproduce or resist prevailing ways.

A field divided

Let us revisit two disconcerting phenomena identified in the introduction. On one hand, there is a critical mass of scholars in special education who have produced innovative research on overrepresentation that the field has not sufficiently engaged with and utilized. On the other hand, there is a small core of scholars in special education who adhere to one paradigm, executing one type of research, and whose work negating overrepresentation has instantly been heralded and foregrounded. This situation of disparate knowledge claims boldly highlights longstanding profound disagreements within the field of special education. A case in point is Brantlinger’s (1997) critique of the field over twenty years ago, where she deftly identified cases of how leading scholars were either unable or unwilling to recognize prejudices related to their own ideologies and how that seriously impacted privileging certain kinds of research, while rejecting, blocking, or attacking colleagues’ work seeking engagement via a plurality of perspectives. To counter exclusion of their ideas in special education journals, a small group of scholars shared key works in *Challenging Orthodoxy in Special Education: Dissenting Voices* (Gallagher et al. 2003), earnestly seeking to actively engage the field in sustained debates expected of academics. We foreground these instances of non-recognition or under-recognition of innovative scholarship the field has, in a similar manner, been either unable or unwilling to fully engage with scholars of overrepresentation *outside* of the dominant traditionalist paradigm.

In the interest of clarity, yet without wishing to oversimplify a complicated topic, it is useful to briefly consider the notion of traditionalist and progressive paradigms. In the tellingly titled *Bridging the Special Education Divide* (Andrews et al. 2000), fifteen prominent special educators portrayed the field in two broad camps, those identifying as being ‘incrementalist’ or ‘reconceptualist,’ (somewhat synonymous with being traditionalist or progressive) with an appeal to move beyond ‘a stalemate’ (258) in terms of how the field viewed itself and potential reform. Of course there are more than two types of researchers in the field of special education, with many being somewhere on a continuum between these choices, very much depending upon the issue being researched and discussed. However, in essence, deep divisions were reflected in five categories that can be seen summarized in Table 1

Table 1. Comparison between incrementalist and reconceptualist paradigms within the field of special education.

Area	Incrementalist (Traditional)	Reconceptualist (Progressive)
Conceptualizations of Disability	Adhere to the medical model of disability that assumes a deficit exists within the individual and is something to 'fix, cure, accommodate, or endure' (p. 259).	Frame disability as a social construction and, while not denying physiological aspects of impaired bodily functions, view disabilities as they gain meaning in social and cultural contexts, such as schools.
Purpose of Education	Understand the purpose of special education as changing the individual by providing customized interventions to enhance academic performance.	See the value of enhancing individual performance, but focus more on how to change environmental limitations (including teaching methodologies, forms of assessment, and classroom arrangements) that are placed on students with disabilities.
Beliefs About the Outcome of Special Education	Believe special education prepares students to adapt to the post-school world.	Seeks the creation of a caring society, more accepting of human differences without necessarily labeling them, generating forms of stigmatization.
The Current State of Knowledge about Special Education Practice	Maintain the course taken by the field who see their practices as promising.	Claim the knowledge base is limited, inadequate, and exclusionary of many points of view.
Necessary Steps for Improving Special Education	Support traditional positivist research in the form of scientifically proven practices to be used by teachers whose work is viewed as the technical application of interventions and strategies specific to types of educational deficiencies.	Desire substantial change in research and practice calling for both a plurality of research practices that are interdisciplinary and methodologically diverse, in addition to more self-reflective, ethical decision-making responsibilities for teachers.

Summarized from Andrews et al. (2000).

The tone of the article was optimistic and ameliorative in nature, yet arguably what the field of Psychology refers to as a Groupthink, namely the strong desire for consensus within a group that results in an irrational decision based upon non-recognition of critical and/or dissenting viewpoints and isolation from external influences. In brief, despite a surface agreement, traditionalist and progressive paradigms represented by incrementalists and reconceptualists respectively, remained divided. Despite attempts by others to engage across differences (Connor et al., 2011; Gallagher 2006; Gallagher, Connor, and Ferri 2014), the field of special education continued to fiercely adhere to the incrementalist paradigm as the only feasible choice (Kauffman, Anastasiou, and Maag 2018; Kauffman and Sasso 2006). In many ways, this positioning has set the scene for the field's quick dismissal of much research on overrepresentation that is reconceptualist in nature and its swift embrace of Morgan and colleagues' traditional work *negating overrepresentation*. We say this while being mindful of not wishing to portray an uncomplicated dichotomy that defines the entire field of special education. It is, rather, a complex field with researchers placed upon a continuum of beliefs and others who seek to be outside of that continuum altogether. What once appeared to be clear cut lines can shift and morph, partly due to reconceptualists' desire to broaden the framings of physiological differences (Andrews et al. 2000), and traditionalists' acknowledgment of *some* social and contextual factors in defining disability (Anastasiou and Kauffman 2013).

Overrepresentation as an irresolvable issue in the field of special education

We contend that the field of special education has created a problem for itself that, as currently configured, it cannot resolve. This is because, at heart, the ‘problem’ of overrepresentation is epistemological. Overrepresentation is primarily a philosophical concern encompassing the nature, scope, and origin of knowledge, together with methods that obtain specific knowledge, along with knowledge limitations that specific methods inevitably bring. Ultimately, epistemology relates to justifying a *belief* of truth based upon knowledge. Fundamental questions relating to epistemology such as ‘What is knowledge?’, ‘How is it acquired?’, ‘What are conditions for knowledge?’ ‘How is knowledge structured?’, ‘What are knowledge’s limitations?’, ‘How do we conceptualize justification of knowledge?’ and ‘To what degree is justification internal or external to a person’s mind?’ are important to consider for all researchers.

The knowledge base of Special Education has traditionally been rooted in the disciplines of science, medicine, and psychology. And while not exclusively, the overwhelming majority of researchers within academic special education organizations and journals are philosophically rooted in positivism, a system that only recognizes scientific verification through mathematical proof. Positivism does not accept metaphysics, in user-friendlier terms, abstractions such as *being* or *knowing*. Influential scholars in special education have consistently and aggressively sought to defend a scientific-only knowledge base (Kauffman 1999) warning that anything else would create ‘an identity crisis’ (Kauffman, Anastasiou, and Maag 2018, 139) including a possible slide into ‘extremism’ (Kauffman and Badar 2018, 46). It is understandable that we all have beliefs – spoken and unspoken – about what we think is best for our field of special education. However, let us re-consider the basic epistemic questions posed in relation to both *race and disability* by asking the following:

- What is knowledge about disability or/and race?
- How is knowledge about disability or/and race acquired?
- What are conditions for knowledge about disability or/and race?
- How is knowledge about disability or/and race structured? How do disability or/and race take different shapes culturally, geographically, and in embodied ways?
- What are knowledge’s limitations about disability or/and race?
- How do we conceptualize justification of knowledge about disability or/and race?
- To what degree is justification about knowledge of disability or/and race internal or external to a person’s mind?

One can see the many complexities raised, while needing to acknowledge a history of Science’s well-documented cultural complicity in diminishing full human status to both disabled and people of color (Gould 1996). In this article we do not seek to ‘bash’ the field of Science, but rather name it for what it is – a human invention that favors a way of understanding the universe and our place within it. A scientific framework is *one way* of looking at the world. As such, it cannot be the only way when studying children, teachers, schools, and the society in which they exist. If the field of special education will not or cannot acknowledge other ways of conceptualizing disability, there likely remain another fifty years without progress in the issue of overrepresentation. As we

have argued, findings of reconceptualist researchers have had a limited response, and the current regression on the part of traditionalists appears to fortify an immovable position. This state of affairs is deeply troubling.

For example, prominent scholars in the field of special education have openly denigrated the social model of disability (Kauffman and Badar 2018), a model that was developed by people with disabilities who sought to define and represent themselves rather than continue to be so by non-disabled people (Linton 1998). The dismissal of research and literature valuing the lives of disabled people from their own perspectives by those in the field of special education illuminates a singular mindedness akin to intellectual monopoly. This pattern by the field of special education betrays how it has never fully engaged with all questions posed to it by scholars such as Brantlinger (1997, 2004) and Gallagher (1998, 2006). Ignoring questions it has found inconvenient, the field has permitted itself to continue on a path that eschews other ways of thinking and knowing.

Traditionalists in the field now believe systematic bias has been proven non-existent as evidenced in scholarly interchanges at many levels such as (1) a notification sent to first author by traditionalist scholar Hallahan stating of a recent publication on overrepresentation (Connor 2017a), 'You have missed a large body of literature that presents data documenting that students from ethnic minorities are actually underrepresented in special education. I refer to the work of Paul Morgan and Frakas [sic]. A quick googling will take you to their articles' (personal communication, 27 August 2017); (2) a peer-review of the same article offered a one-sentence review stating 'overrepresentation is not a problem anymore,' followed by links to the work of Morgan and colleagues; (3) assertions that the federal government's policy on overrepresentation is 'misdirected' (Morgan et al. 2015, 278); (4) continued publications in the field of Special Education seeking to address *underrepresentation* of students of color despite the topic being 'a contentious political issue' (Anastasiou et al. 2017, 897). These interchanges related to scholarly publication suggest that the field of Special Education now sees itself absolved from issues of overrepresentation. This is logical. After all, philosophical beliefs and research agendas seek to protect theoretical positioning, hence Morgan et al.'s (2015) results assert more students of color should be labeled and served in special education and within separate spaces if deemed 'appropriate' (Kauffman and Hallahan 2008). However, it is concerning how Morgan and colleagues have re-established the debate that all is well in the field of special education, that is, the notion of: we need to keep going in the same direction, to get 'the right' representation, while uncritical of how race and social class impact quality of options, including labels, placements, levels of support, opportunities to learn, and academic outcomes. Most dangerous of all, perhaps, is how Betsey DeVos, current US Secretary of Education, has used Morgan and colleagues' findings to suspend federal support for research on overrepresentation (Youdin 2018).

We can only conclude that special education, as it currently stands, has created a system of traditionalist dominance that has now made diverse and progressive research on overrepresentation challenging at best, impossible at worst. At this point, given the virtually non-existent impact of research on reducing overrepresentation, and special education's denials of its existence, we believe that a serious debate is unavoidable. While we have purposefully chosen not to provide an in-depth critique of Morgan

and his colleagues' work as it has been done elsewhere (Collins et al. 2016; Blanchett and Sealey 2016; Ford and Russo 2016; Harry and Fenton 2016; Skiba et al. 2016), we would like to circle back to the epistemological dilemma that exists. By locating work about race in non-contextual ways, and using only numbers from large extant data sets, Morgan and colleagues' knowledge claims are mathematized and always defended, as if beyond dispute, as 'pure' empirical evidence. Our contention is that researching overrepresentation cannot be solely restricted to positivist claims of empirical evidence as – like all research – the conceptualization of the problem, questions asked, theoretical frames and dispositions of researchers, data collected and analyzed, results discussed, and conclusions drawn are all unavoidably subject to human bias within forms of interpretation at every step in the process (Gillborn, Warmington, and Demack 2017). It seems that because special education overwhelmingly aligns itself with positivism, the field cannot accept the premise of plurality, and therefore cannot engage in approaching overrepresentation – or any other disability related topic for that matter – in multiple and diverse ways. Several critical special educators have noted that purporting to be objective and acultural opens the field to charges of color evasion in its attempt to sidestep interlocking oppressive practices that determine different experiences for everyone in our society (Annamma 2014b; Annamma, Jackson, and Morrison 2017; Artiles 2011, 2017; Miglarini 2018).

Color evasion in special education

While overrepresentation is about race and ability, it is perhaps the *racial* aspect of this phenomenon that causes the most discomfort among people, both in the historical and contemporary sense (Short and Wilton 2016), and researchers are no exception. Race can be a very divisive issue, and while the field of special education has not been exempt from engaging with it, it has never centered it or committed to it in a sustained way. This insufficient engagement is symbolized by the Council for Exceptional Children's specific publication *Multiple Voices for Ethnically Diverse and Exceptional Learners*. While we commend the high level of scholarship in this journal, we wonder why these articles are not an integral part of all special education publications, instead of being in a separate venue that is published only twice a year. Such an arrangement cannot address the lack of racial and cultural competency in the field of special education.

Considerations of Whiteness in special education are virtually non-existent, even – ironically – when talking about overrepresentation of students of color. To reiterate for emphasis, it appears acceptable to talk about 'children of color' for the field of special education, and yet virtually prohibited to talk about Whiteness in the same fora (Artiles 2004; Connor 2017b). And yet there exists a significant body of knowledge on Whiteness and education that can inform our thinking about how we look at, and think about, the concept of overrepresentation (Annamma, 2014a; Bell 2006; Blanchett 2006; Leonardo 2004; Leonardo and Broderick 2011). The non-acknowledgment of, and therefore non-engagement with Whiteness in the field of special education scholarship is sometimes mirrored in the beliefs of departmental faculty who seek to avoid these conversations at all cost asking why do we need to talk about race if we are talking about disabilities in special education? (Connor 2017b). Non-engagement about race, however, allows the structures of racism that continue to pervade US society to remain unquestioned and in place, including within school systems

and academic fields, what Blanchett, Mumford, and Beachum (2005) refer to as ‘benign neglect’ (70) by the education community at large.

If we widen the net further to include race and multiculturalism, during the 1980s and 1990s, much was written about multiculturalism (Banks and Banks 1988; Gay 1994) and affirming student diversity (Ladson-Billings 1994; Nieto 1992). The outgrowth of these frameworks for thinking, more recently the benefits of using culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay 2010) and culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris and Alim 2017), are integral to racial and cultural competency in classrooms (Teel and Obidah 2008). Given the importance of these developments in the field of education, and that the topic of overrepresentation is primarily related to race, the field of special education has not adequately taken up an interdisciplinary approach to integrating these issues (Artiles 2017). In sum, by not engaging with issues of whiteness, ableism, multiculturalism, racial and cultural competency, and eschewing real and sustained engagement with the social model of disability, the knowledge-base of special education as currently configured evades the issues of race other than marking bodies and counting numbers.

Using DisCrit to critique and rethink research on overrepresentation

In this section we use the seven tenets of DisCrit (Annamma, Connor, and Ferri 2013) as a theoretical framework to structure our critique of special education’s response to overrepresentation – in both past and present manifestations, citing examples of research using DisCrit to generally engage in the complexities of race and disability. By doing so we center race and disability to counter special education’s color evasiveness, by first stating some assumptions about traditional research and then articulating counterstatements. Following that we ask pertinent questions related to theory, research, practice, and policy that we hope will be taken up to broaden a much needed dialogue within the educational community. Additionally, DisCrit allows us to demonstrate ways in which theory contributes to the conversation about overrepresentation, valuing the conceptual alongside the empirical. In doing so we unapologetically seek to acknowledge the philosophical and ideological underpinnings of research on overrepresentation, along with some limitations of scientific-only framings.

(1) DisCrit focuses on ways that the forces of racism and ableism circulate interdependently, often in neutralized and invisible ways, to uphold notions of normalcy.

A major assumption in many disciplines is that research is scientific and objective, and must be conducted by those who are academy-trained. In contrast, research can be seen as primarily a cultural practice, conducted by people on/with people, or social structures created by people, including schools (see, for example, Gillborn et al. 2016).

- How might rethinking overrepresentation change elements within the educational research process?
- How can we move beyond interventionism that can be interpreted as reductive in nature?

- How might rethinking overrepresentation research change existing practices at the school and district levels?
- While not advocating for only certain theoretical framings, how can those that afford and illuminate historical understandings such as cultural, historical, and sociocultural approaches be encouraged and valued for their insights?

In brief, conceptualizing specific research with the communities it impacts the most, considering their relationship to the process of researching, would ensure a level of authenticity not possible in methods use by Morgan and colleagues.

- (2) *DisCrit values multidimensional identities and troubles singular notions of identity such as race or dis/ability or class or gender or sexuality, and so on.*

There is an assumption that disability is the central or single defining characteristic driving student and family experiences in schools. However, using the individual as a unit of analysis suggests that culture is attached to a person, versus how researchers and contexts enact their cultural practices.

There is also an assumption that race is a singular construct that can be decontextualized and studied as a covariate or factor. Problematically, research frequently conflates race and culture, oftentimes using them interchangeably and monolithically, thereby allowing a deflection from directly addressing race. There is a need for intersectional analysis to examine the structural and dynamic dimensions of oppression (Collins 2000).

Building upon the previous two assumptions, another is the usefulness of emphasizing research questions that focus on categorizations of difference (see, for example, Banks 2017). Yet, given the lack of research results when utilizing these singular categories, it appears unproductive to center them with their tacit associations of racial hierarchies. Furthermore, these categorizations of difference (i.e., race, ethnicity, language) make fluid markers appear stable, when in situated practice they are hybrid and take on different meanings in different contexts. Importantly, to adopt intersectional methods ‘requires addressing entangled forms of domination by uncovering the links between disparate forms of oppression, both presently and historically. . .to accounting for multiplicity. Most importantly, intersectionality carries with it a political commitment to dismantling injustice,’ (Annamma, Ferri, and Connor, [forthcoming](#)) such as institutional racism.

Another assumption is that the gold standard of the field, highly favored quasi-experimental quantitative designs and randomized control trials, are preferred and predominant methods used in special education research. A result of this is that, generally speaking, information has been one-dimensional as sociocultural processes contributing to overrepresentation research have not been fully examined.

- How can moving beyond single issue frameworks become the expected norm?
- How might interdisciplinary approaches to studying overrepresentation illuminate more complex understandings?
- How can we explore the same question from multiple theoretical positions to gain a richer list of potential solutions?

- How can we become cognizant of, and work against, ways in which existing policies seemingly erase race, oftentimes through untenable metrics?

In sum, if moving beyond single issue frameworks toward intersectionality becomes the norm, it leads us to more accurate understanding of human experiences in systems and structures.

(3) DisCrit emphasizes the social constructions of race and ability and yet recognizes the material and psychological impacts of being labeled as raced or dis/abled, which sets one outside of the western cultural norms.

Historical and institutional racism is assumed to be sufficiently acknowledged as a phenomenon of the past, and contemporary racism can be bracketed or separated from special education practices and research (see, for example, Miglarini 2018). Conversely, it is difficult to quantitatively measure the relationship between individual racism and the historically established institutions where it exists, yet it exists.

- What may be the value of centering race within organizations to address individual and organizational beliefs and responsibilities?
- What can be achieved by aligning historical and contemporary practices to analyze differences and similarities, and the role of stakeholders who do not acknowledge the role of color in replicating inequalities?

In essence, by centering race, rather than deflecting it or downplaying its centrality in society, research in education can speak to ways in which institutional practices, personal and professional beliefs, and a combination of both, can contribute to the maintenance or dismantling of the status quo in terms of racial equality.

(4) DisCrit privileges voices of marginalized populations, traditionally not acknowledged within research.

Researchers often share their findings in limited venues such as conference presentations and academic journals without translating research into practice for local contexts. Unfortunately, little evidence exists of engaging with findings/results at various levels of the community impacted the most, i.e. children of color identified as disabled, their families, and the schools that serve them (see, for example, Dávila 2015).

There exists the assumption that students, families, and teachers can be taught to use the interventions developed through rigorous science, and they (the 'others') will accept this science because it is so rigorous. However, students, families, and teachers often resist, dismiss, or ignore 'scientific based' research findings, as they do not see its relevance to their daily lives or view it solely as a top-down initiative.

It is also problematic that the lived experiences of people in society who are impacted the most by overrepresentation, i.e. children of color and their families, are not prominent in existing quantitative research. Another way of considering this point is that much of the existing research *dehumanizes* the problem when overrepresentation is

reduced solely to mathematic calculations and formulas, deflecting from lived realities of those who have been researched.

- How can more local communities become more invested in changing practices that lead to overrepresentation?
- How can those with the experience of being overrepresented be centered in the dialogue, including using their own words?
- How can researchers and practitioners work together to translate research to local context and practice?

In essence, these approaches strive to challenge the abstract construction of overrepresentation promulgated by Morgan and colleagues based only on large numerical data sets of people the authors have never known, replacing it with more real people contextualized in actual settings.

(5) *DisCrit considers legal and historical aspects of dis/ability and race and how both have been used separately and together to deny the rights of some citizens.*

There is an assumption that race is an individual characteristic that has bearing on learning. If researchers state, “White students are more likely to graduate high school than Black students,” or some similar type claim, they are not being clear about the theoretical explanation for such correlation, the rationale for studying it, or the methods used to study it. This is particularly a problem when race is considered as a singular, non-intersectional construct. In sum, racial hierarchies can be invoked or used in productive ways, but their use requires a theory behind them to be transparent (see, for example, Waitoller and Super 2017).

- How can longstanding zones of racial segregation be challenged to ensure equal access and opportunities to a quality education?
- What can be achieved by considering the responsibility of all people working within educational systems and living in local communities – toward reducing overrepresentation?
- How can teacher and administrator education programs shift from teaching the phenomenon of overrepresentation to focusing on actions to actively address it at the district, school board, and school level?

In sum, research in this direction would connect the dots among all stakeholders in communities, and refocus teacher education to be part of the answer rather than merely providing information about overrepresentation.

(6) *DisCrit recognizes whiteness and ability as property and that gains for people labeled with dis/abilities have largely been made as the result of interest convergence of white, middle-class citizens.*

The very concept of overrepresentation, arguably unconsciously, centers whiteness as the norm. Using default comparisons of 1:1 beginning with white students labeled

disabled and comparing them to students of color unconsciously reinforces both norms and whiteness (see, for example, Broderick and Leonardo 2016).

- How can we encourage researchers to reflect on and state their theoretical understandings of race, their own positionality, and how these guide their interests in this topic?
- How might interest convergence by all affected stakeholders become the common driver of policy?
- How might rethinking educational research on overrepresentation in terms of ‘who benefits’ change policy at federal, state, and local levels?
- How might research be conceptualized as being directly related to changing practices and policies?
- How can policies be developed and implemented in ways that are meaningful, authentic, and effective?
- How can policies ‘touch’ all stakeholders beyond a professional acknowledgement of ‘this has to be done,’ followed by a technical response?

These questions point to the power dynamics and politics of researching race and overrepresentation, and the need for those who conduct research to be transparent in positionality and interest – as it connects to the population being studied.

(7) *DisCrit requires activism and supports all forms of resistance.*

Finally, this article is a form of academic activism, an assertion of countering the mainstream narrative of the field of special education. As such, in the remaining sections, we seek to discuss further some of the issues raised by a DisCrit analysis, note more examples of existing progressive research contributing to a more a more diverse knowledge base, along with suggestions for future directions.

Discussion

The pioneering work of Dunn (1968) and Deno (1970) was acknowledged by Artiles and Trent in their article *Overrepresentation of Minority Students in Special Education: A Continuing Debate* (1994). Twenty-five years after Artiles and Trent’s careful analysis, the field of special education is divided into those who believe that students of color are still overrepresented and those who believe they are now underrepresented. Recently, Artiles (2017) was selected by the American Educational Research Association (AERA) to present its annual Brown Lecture dedicated to the theme of educational (in)equities. The presentation was titled ‘Re-envisioning Equity Research: Disability Identification Disparities as a Case in Point,’ in which he brought to bear career-long observations from his own research and that of others (for example, Harry and Klingner 2006; Losen and Orfield 2002) about how the contemporary field of education has evolved into systems of highly subjective categorizations within our professional discourse and an unwillingness to look at the complexities of race and social class as they intersect with disability. His work urged for an intersectional and culturally cognizant framing of labeling and placement and the subjectivities involved.

Given the history of understanding overrepresentation and the diverse interpretations of researchers, it is clear that the issue will not go away, despite recent attempts to steer the tide in that direction. At the same time, we take this opportunity to further trouble the very notion of overrepresentation as something we have come to reify over five decades. We ask the question – in an ideal world – what would appropriate ‘representation’ be? That students from racially diverse groups (Black, White, Latino, Asian, Native American, Pacific Islander) would have the exact same percent in categories such as learning disability, intellectual disability, emotional/behavioral disability, and so on – as well as in the category of gifted? What would be the assumed ‘accurate representation’ of disability percentages? According to whom? What might be shifts needed in our general society to make representation ‘right’? We ask these difficult questions as everything we do in the field of education unquestioningly reifies and reinforces the concept of overrepresentation, and yet – after over half a century of aiming to reduce it – we do not seem to be able to collectively describe what ‘representation’ is. Right now, it stands as a nebulous concept that can be interpreted in different ways. For example, if, depending on how racial representation is hypothetically quantified and ‘fixed’ by policy makers, and using Black children as the default point instead of White as a point of comparison for all other ‘races’ and ethnicities, might Morgan et al.’s (2015, 2017) recent claims be equally construed as White students are overrepresented in special education categories rather than Black children are underrepresented? What would be the implications of those interpretations for various stakeholders? We raise these issues not to simply confound or negate the idealism that fuels many scholars, ourselves included, but rather to invite us all to see beyond some of our own current boundaries of thought and radically rethink how we understand the intersectional diversity of race, ability, and social classes (among other markers of identity) within our schools.

Our contention throughout this article has been that the field of special education must engage in the consideration of overrepresentation as a social and historical issue, not solely a medical issue as defined within the dominant discourse. While disability labels related to overrepresentation (intellectual disability, learning disability, emotional behavioral disability) used within special education can be seen as convenient organizational groupings and necessary for federal funding, they are highly subjective (Artiles 2017; Karagiannis 2000). That these disabilities can be interpreted, at least in part, as cultural perceptions by others (see, for example, Reid and Valle 2004), versus tangible ‘visible’ conditions (such as sensory and physical disabilities) does not sit well with traditional scholars in the field of special education. Nonetheless, we suggest that special education should consider that in some cases, ‘soft’ disabilities can and do shift, morph, appear, and disappear, depending upon the dynamics of social situations, including how pedagogy is enacted (Dudley-Marling et al. 2001). Special education’s failure to consider these points and the perception of disabilities solely as a fixed medical condition, along with fierce resistance of diverse ways of knowing, has actively contributed to the ongoing racialization of disability in education (Annamma 2017; Artiles et al. 2011; Blanchett 2006; Leonardo and Broderick 2011). Furthermore, it is clear that issues of historical and contemporary racism *cannot* be unacknowledged, neutralized, or

sidestepped – as they largely are in the work of Morgan et al. (2015, 2017) and other traditionalists in the field of special education.

Given the complexities involved in considering overrepresentation, we assert that disability identification should *equally* be considered through a social, cultural, and historical lens. If we are to address overrepresentation, as previously mentioned, it cannot be solely mathematized using large, anonymous data sets of disability labels that assume abstractions of real people (Gillborn, Warmington, and Demack 2017). Research on overrepresentation should also be located within the community it impacts the most, with people who see and know things that researchers need to see and know. Take for example, Valle's (2016) research with mothers of students with disabilities and the insights of Zena, a research participant who is an African American mother of a child with a disability and who is also a special education teacher:

The politics of disability very closely tie to the politics of race and gender... it's pretty obvious that there is a really big problem with special needs classes if the majority of the students are Black and Brown, the majority of the parents are Black and Brown, the majority of the teachers are White, the majority of the occupational therapists, physical therapists, speech therapists, and administrators are White, and the majority of the people in the city are Black and Brown – there's *obviously* a problem there (255).

As a mother of a child with a disability, a teacher, an African American, a member of the community, Zena is highly informed about the daily practices of schooling, and ways in which these factors influence the professionals within the school. She also necessarily humanizes the 'problem' of overrepresentation in ways that Morgan and colleagues cannot.

Some suggestions for future research

We return to the hypothetical question posed earlier in this chapter: *Is a bridge even possible over the troubled waters of special education?* If we are frank, it does not seem to be right now. We are deeply concerned by the field's uncritical willingness to embrace the findings of Morgan and his colleagues that contradict fifty years of research suggesting otherwise (Hallahan, personal communication). Invoking 'empirical evidence' from studies that many scholars question as the only justification, without acknowledging that all research is interpretation, is the same as saying 'case closed.' Such a form of intellectual absolutism is dangerous for many of the reasons we have raised under the tenets of DisCrit.

In our desire to reframe educational research on overrepresentation, we seek to encourage multiple, interdisciplinary fields such as education (in general), sociology, Disability Studies, and special education, to expand ways researchers connect to theory, policy, and practice. In the spirit of 'talking back' to the field of special education's current claim that more children of color should be categorized as disabled (with unproblematic assumptions they this would benefit all equally), we suggest the following ideas related to research, theory, practice, and policy in relation to overrepresentation.

Research

- Research can be action and/or community based. The lived reality of students at the intersection of race and ability can be discussed at the community level, allowing the focus to be on actions toward change.
- Researchers can recognize demographic characteristics are as important as disability, and that single descriptor research (such as disability) obfuscates issues of race and gender.
- Research can include a plurality of methodologies and methods, including multi-layered, multi-level, and intersectional, with an emphasis on lived experiences of participants.
- Research can be interdisciplinary with other fields of study, e.g. sociology, history, educational policy.
- Research can be comprised of units of analysis that illuminate new understandings of disproportionality, e.g. situated practice, Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), opportunity mapping, student voice, etc.
- Research can be explicit in the theoretical grounding of the researcher.

Theory

- Researchers can be mindful of the questions: Who are we doing research on overrepresentation for? Who benefits from this research?
- Researchers can be cognizant of, and acknowledge their disposition, sharing information that answer questions such as: Why is this work important to me? How does it relate to my beliefs about racial equality? Educational equality? How have my life experiences shaped who I am in considering this phenomenon? Why am I personally invested in researching it? What is my goal?
- Research can consider the individual in relation to systems and structures. How might both realms be represented in research, and connections made explicit between them?
- Research can reject ‘this is just the way it is’ mentality, and acknowledge historical racism (often understood as *dysconscious racism*), and the imperative of such work.

Practice

- Research results or findings can be shared with the groups that have been researched. Consider what might be gained by sharing the results/findings with various communities studied or sub-groups within those communities?
- Researchers can consider what has been lost in the limited conceptualizations and publications of research to date. For example, what are community concerns and actions in relation to the phenomenon of overrepresentation? What are perspectives of students and parents?
- Researchers can bear in mind what are the practical, and realistic suggestions that can be shared with teachers, administrators, psychologists, and parents in schools, regions, and in states where overrepresentation continues to exist?

Policy

- Policymakers can conceptualize the effectiveness of policy as re-envisioned from ‘top down’ to engage with all stakeholders, particularly those in most affected communities. How can they help policy makers develop these arrangements?
- Policymakers can recognize that statistics may frame a story, but it cannot tell it with any depth or nuance. In what ways can policy include examples of the actual people it refers to in numbers?
- Policymakers can advocate for representation of community members being researched to be at the table with them when developing policies. What are some ways in which ‘gatekeepers’ of power can share that responsibility with historically underrepresented groups?
- Policymakers can extend current criteria of what deserves to be funded, including community-specific based research that features intersectional understandings of students and families.

Conclusion

A DisCrit perspective of special education’s historical and contemporary response to overrepresentation has provided the opportunity for a larger critique of the field. As it has not resolved overrepresentation, special education now seeks to make it disappear. By negating overrepresentation, the field actually reveals its own moral limitations in favor of political concerns. By this we mean it selectively picks research results/findings to bolster its existing epistemological foundations. However, if special education is to survive with a sense of legitimacy and integrity, acknowledged by a body of scholars both within, and outside, of its own field, there cannot be a monopoly imposed upon knowledge about overrepresentation – or any disability-related issues for that matter. Finally, research on overrepresentation cannot be assumed to only be in the domain of special education as current limitations of the field are starkly revealed in the desire to sweep it under the carpet. We invite scholars to further utilize DisCrit and other theoretical models that acknowledge the imperative of researching disability and race at the intersections.

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