



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

by Carla O'Connor and Sonia DeLuca Fernandez

This article analyzes how a recent National Research Council report (2002) defined the impact of poverty in explaining the overrepresentation of minority students in special education. Echoing the perspective of mainstream special education literature, the report offered a latent theory of compromised development which indicated that minority students are more likely to be poor and that “being” poor heightens their exposure to risk factors that compromise human development and increase the need for special services. We elucidate how this theory oversimplifies the concept of “development” and consequently under-analyzes how the culture and organization of schools situates minority youths as academically and behaviorally deficient and places them at risk for special education placement.

In explaining the overrepresentation of minority students in special education, a recent report from the National Research Council (NRC, 2002) emphasized the impact of poverty. In doing so, the report offered a theory that elucidated the social processes by which poverty was said to impair children’s development. Consistent with mainstream literature in special education, the report maintained that minority students are more likely to be poor and that “being” poor heightens exposure to social risks that compromise early development and increase the need for special services. In this article we argue that this theory, which we call the Theory of Compromised Human Development (TCHD), offers an oversimplified conceptualization of “development” and consequently misspecifies that which places minority students at heightened “risk” for special education placement.

We show that TCHD conceives of development in universalistic terms. Instead of recognizing expressions of development as culturally specific, it situates middle-class (White) children as the unmarked norm against which the development of “other” children is evaluated. In under-analyzing how this referent is articulated in the culture and organization of schools and how it increases the likelihood that minority children will be evaluated as academically and behaviorally deficient and in need of special services, TCHD fails to recognize the extent to which schools socially construct disabilities (see McDermott, Goldman, & Varenne’s “The Cultural Work of Learning Disabilities,” in this issue of *Educational Researcher*, pp. 12–17). TCHD’s emphasis on poverty further marginalizes the salience with which race structures educational

opportunities and influences disproportionality. Given these conceptual inadequacies, TCHD situates “the risk” for special education placement as something with which poor minority children enter schools. As such, disabilities inhere in the child, and the school is merely one site at which special education needs are diagnosed. In contrast, we hold that schools determine *who* is more likely to be designated as disabled.

In developing our argument, we draw on the findings of the NRC report (2002) because it represents a high-profile endorsement of TCHD. We, however, situate the report’s findings within the field of special education. Our discussion begins by delineating how TCHD emerged as an explanation for disproportionality. We subsequently analyze how TCHD fails to adequately address the institutional processes by which schools compromise the educational outcomes of minority youth to place them at risk for special education placement.

Where and Why Does Disproportionality Occur?

Disproportionality plagues judgmental but not nonjudgmental categories of special education. Nonjudgmental categories define disabilities whose diagnoses require limited inference on the part of professionals. These categories capture children who are deaf and blind and who suffer from orthopedic impairments, severe mental retardation, or other pronounced cognitive or physiological statuses that have garnered the attention of medical professionals, who have usually linked the disability to an identifiable organic cause (NRC, 2002).

Judgmental categories capture subtle disabilities for which there is usually no known organic cause and for which diagnosis rests on the “art” of professional judgment. These categories include children who are mildly mentally retarded (MMR), emotionally disturbed (ED), or learning disabled (LD). Although children in the nonjudgmental categories usually start school with a disability determination, children “who are referred to the judgmental categories . . . rarely come to school with a disability determination. They are referred to special education only after they have failed to achieve in the general education classroom” (NRC, 2002, p. 209). In contrast to the proportionate representation of nonjudgmental categories across racial groups, researchers have consistently documented the overrepresentation of minority students in judgmental categories of special education (Hosp & Reschly, 2004).

To what do researchers attribute the higher incidence with which minority students find themselves labeled with disabilities that are said to impair their school learning? Although researchers have begun exploring risk factors associated with the organization

and practices of schools (e.g., bias, district size, minority enrollment; see Oswald, Coutinho, Best, & Singh, 1999; Serwatka, Deering, & Grant, 1995), they continue to emphasize the impact of poverty.

Conceptualizing the Impact of Poverty

In articulating the relationship between poverty and disproportionality, researchers conceive of poverty as constituting a high-risk environment that shifts to the left the normal curve of achievement. According to the NRC report, if we plot achievement as “a normal distribution, with the main population representing a hypothetical circumstance of a general population in which students differ in achievement because they themselves differ and because their environments differ within an average or low risk range,” students with special needs represent some portion of low-achieving students whose academic performance situates them within the left tail of this “normal distribution” (NRC, 2002, p. 96). High-risk environments, such as living in poverty, shift the entire curve of achievement to the left, so that there is an increase in “the number of children with special needs at the lower end *and* [a] decrease [in] the number of high achievers who may be identified as gifted at the upper end” (p. 97).

But how does poverty shift back the curve of achievement and increase the need for special services? In an effort to explain, some special education scholars bridged their work with research in neuropsychology, epidemiology, and human development and advanced an etiological interpretation of how low SES affected special education placement. According to Blair and Scott (2002), etiological occurrences of a disorder are

those for which low SES is understood to increase the probability that learning problems will in fact lead to [special education placement]. The etiological interpretation suggests that there exists some baseline risk for [MMR, LD, or ED] in the population as a whole and that the risk associated with low SES serves to increase the likelihood that the disorder will in fact occur. (p. 20)

Privileging etiology, researchers demonstrated that SES correlated indirectly with achievement through its relationship with variables that signaled “social” (e.g., parenting practices) or “biological” (e.g., prenatal exposure to alcohol) influences on development. Hence considerable research on disproportionality relied on frameworks that advanced (often implicitly) the latent TCHD theory (see, e.g., Blair & Scott, 2002; Fujiura & Yamaki, 2000; Park, Turnbull, & Turnbull, 2002; Wagner, 1995; Yeargin-Allsopp, Drews, Decouffe, & Murphy, 1995). We summarize the theory as follows:

1. Minorities are more likely to be poor.
2. “Being” poor increases exposure to risk factors that compromise early development.
3. Compromised early development impinges on school preparedness and suppresses academic achievement, heightening the need for special education.
4. Thus minorities are more likely to warrant special education.

Nowhere was TCHD more evident than in the 2002 NRC report, which provided a massive integration of research that illuminated disproportionality. Although TCHD was featured primarily in one chapter of the report, the presumptions of TCHD permeated the contributors’ efforts to document elsewhere in the report how institutional forces (e.g., teacher biases, school culture) contributed to disproportionality.

Our analysis of TCHD centers on how the NRC report analyzed social as opposed to biological factors. In comparison to social factors, which are conceived in human interaction and are unlikely to be defined organically, biological factors are often linked to environmental hazards (e.g., lead exposure) or suggest organic influences (e.g., prenatal exposure to alcohol; NRC, 2002). Given the proportionate rates with which organically founded disabilities are otherwise distributed across racial groups, the evaluation of factors for which there is no suggestion of an organic cause is especially warranted in any reevaluation of the discourse on disproportionality.

Complicating Development

In analyzing the impact of poverty, the NRC report discussed how poverty affects access to resources that influence child development (e.g., access to books or “quality” child care), but concluded that these resource differentials influence only the “effectiveness of the [developmental] process” (NRC, 2002). The “reciprocal interactions between the child and parent” are *the* “engines that actually drive the [developmental] outcome” (p. 122).

The report maintained that the “weight of successful development in the early years falls most heavily on the child’s relationships with primary adult caregivers” (NRC, 2002, p. 121). The report then described the households of the poor as “less than optimal” and the parent–child interactions embedded therein as “negative.” To elucidate what was intended by these verbatim descriptors, the report recounted studies that documented relationships between SES and how parents interacted with their children on a number of dimensions, including verbal interactions, literacy tasks, disciplinary practices, and parenting approaches (e.g., Garrett, Ng’andu, & Ferron, 1994; Hoff-Ginsberg & Tardiff, 1995).

The report offered these studies as evidence that the poor depart from the middle class on the stated dimensions and that these departures depress poor children’s development (as evidenced by smaller vocabularies, lower IQ, aggressiveness, etc.). The report concluded that without sufficient social “supports” for “successful” development, poor children were more likely to require special education. In evaluating poor people’s parenting practices as negative relative to those of the middle class, the report conveyed that the middle class (typically constructed as “White” in the United States; Ladson-Billings, 2004) provided an appropriate standard with which to assess the development of “other” children. In establishing this referent, the report contradicted what is known about human development.

Despite evidence that major developmental milestones (e.g., walking, sitting up) are achieved by most infants throughout the world (Coll, 1990), human development is variable, contingent, and complex. The rate, “content and context of developmental expressions differ between cultures, subcultures, and ethnic groups” (p. 270; see also Rogoff, 2003). In addition, “there are certain kinds of culture-specific standards or ideals for development that should not be applied or generalized to other populations”; and “within a particular interpretive community or cultural context those very same ideals can serve perfectly well as developmental standards for children and adults trying to . . . self-construct the rational basis of their own traditions” (Shweder, 1999, pp. 143–144). More recently, Arzubiaga, Ceja, and Artiles (2000) demonstrated how the parenting practices and developmental goals of a particular

cultural community arise in response to the demands of the sociopolitical context in which the community finds itself and the resources that it can bring to bear under the circumstances. These findings indicate that differences in (the goals for) development also represent agentic and sociocultural adaptations to context-specific constraints and opportunities. In light of the aforementioned, a single referent cannot provide a credible standard by which to assess the wide variety of developmental expressions that are contingent on the character and demands of a given context. The conundrum for the field of special education is that the definitional characteristics of judgmental categories depend on normative frames.

Questioning Normative Frames

Students are diagnosed with MMR “only after chronic and severe achievement problems are found” (NRC, 2002, p. 253). The LD label captures children who have “difficulty learning to read, write, or calculate” when their “intellectual functioning” is “otherwise adequate” (p. 244). Children are designated as ED when they demonstrate both academic and behavioral problems (Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey, 1995).

According to these definitional characteristics, a child cannot be assessed as having “difficulty” reading, writing, or calculating, nor can her achievement problems be defined as “chronic” or “severe” in the absence of a comparison between her and some set of children who do not demonstrate similar difficulties. In the case of ED, normative referents are relevant for understanding which levels of performance and which behaviors are constituted as “problems.” Ultimately, the selected referent determines the likelihood with which children will be evaluated for or diagnosed with learning impairments. Those who perform markedly differently from the referent will be labeled impaired and in need of special services. When these definitional characteristics are applied in the context of U.S. schools, the consequences for poor and minority youth are apparent.

In the United States, middle-class Whites provide the referent against which other children are evaluated, while U.S. schools privilege the cultural repertoire of the White middle class and are otherwise structured to advantage Whites (Lee, 2003). In this context, poor and minority youth are destined to “demonstrate” more academic and behavioral problems, which increase their likelihood of being referred for special education. On being referred for evaluation, students are likely to be found eligible for special services (Artiles & Trent, 1994). Hosp and Reschly (2004) explained that “referral is such a strong predictor of special education eligibility” that “if there were mean differences in achievement between groups, . . . differential rates of identification for special education would be expected to occur” (p. 187).

Rather than interpret achievement differences as if they were founded in “real” group differences in the ability to succeed in school, we will elaborate on how schools create mean differences in achievement and increase the likelihood that minority students will be referred for evaluation and designated as disabled. Similarly, we will show that the behaviors of these students are also more negatively evaluated in school and also increase these populations’ experience with special education referral and placement. Before elaborating on these processes, we elucidate how the NRC has otherwise opted to conceptualize the role of schools.

(Re)Evaluating the Role of Schools

The NRC report explained that the “notion that early biological and environmental experience [including poverty and its impact on parent–child interactions] is a critical contributor to the disproportionate representation of minority children in special . . . education is entirely compatible with the notion that schools exert an important, sizeable, independent influence on achievement and on special education placement of minority students” (NRC, 2002, p. 167). In expounding on the nature of this compatibility, the report, however, relegated schools to *mediating* the expression of the deficit traits that poor children bring with them into school as a consequence of the “risks” associated with their SES. This stance is evident in the following excerpt:

Our focus in this chapter is, of necessity, on early harms and risk factors [associated with poverty] that impair normal development, as well as [school or community] interventions that can diminish the impact of those risk factors. (p. 196)

The same stance is evident in an excerpt from Griffin and Case (1997), in which the authors comment on an example of how low-SES children in the RightStart program outstripped the performance of low-SES and middle-class children who did not participate in RightStart:

In providing this example our intention is to point out a clear case in which a disadvantaged student population may require an instructional response in general education to prevent disparities in early developmental experiences from being expressed in later years as an apparent learning disability. (p. 190)

These excerpts convey that poor children, as a consequence of “early harms” or “risk factors” associated with their SES, develop a higher incidence of impairments that are manifest as latent traits for disability. These traits may, however, remain dormant when there is appropriate intervention. Interventions, then, “diminish the impact” of poverty-induced traits or prevent the traits from “being expressed” as a learning disability.

The logic of these excerpts and their accordance with TCHD provide a distorted conceptualization of risk. Risk is first articulated as a statistical proxy for the heightened likelihood of some undesirable outcome (in this case the correlation between poverty and special education placement). It subsequently morphs into an internalized trait (as a consequence of how poverty presumably produces deficient developmental expressions) that makes poor children subject to harm in school in the absence of intervention.

There is no accordant consideration that these same developmental expressions would signal competencies (and not deficits) if they were situated within an evaluative context that established challenges to which they were suited. Thus, for example, if African American Vernacular English (AAVE) became the standard discourse in U.S. schools and provided the rules by which all children’s literacy skills were assessed, proficient speakers of AAVE (who are likely to be Black and of lower SES) would find themselves recharacterized as academically competent and highly literate and would experience success in school relative to the White middle class, who do not demonstrate proficiency in this language. If we apply the logic of this hypothetical scenario to how schools actually operate, we must conclude that it is not poverty that is articulated through developmental expressions that place poor children at risk in school. It is the normative

culture of school that places poor children at risk by privileging the developmental expressions more likely to be nurtured among White middle-class children. In the process, the developmental expressions that are more likely to be nurtured among poor minority youth are marginalized and are positioned to produce low achievement.

Researchers have previously substantiated how the culture of schools disadvantage poor, working-class, and minority populations relative to their White and middle-class peers (e.g., Apple, 1996; Anyon, 1981; Delpit, 1995). They elucidate how culture and power shape schooling processes and how social inequality is reproduced through school-related practices. Although the NRC report makes reference to the work of early forebears (e.g., Heath, 1982) and prominent advocates (e.g., Bourdieu, 1977) of this position, power is excluded from the report's interpretations of those works. The works are reduced to illustrations of how poor children are disadvantaged in school, "not from a lack of preparation but instead from *different* preparation" (NRC, 2002, p. 184; emphasis in original). Citing M. Minow, Artiles (1998) explained:

[D]ifference is a comparative term (i.e., different from whom?). Minority students have been historically seen as different, although the reference points used to make the comparisons have rarely been articulated explicitly (Minow 1990). Heath (1995) stated that White culture represents the norm against which comparisons are made in our society and that minority people have been traditionally defined for what they are not (i.e., not-White) rather than for what they are. (p. 33)

Without examining "what" (poor) minority students "are," we lose sight of how schools systematically marginalize the developmental expressions and competencies of these children. Schools thereby fail in practical and pedagogical terms to build on the capacities with which the children enter school (Ball, 1996; Lee, 1993). Thus the underachievement of minority students is not a function of deficient parenting practices but is rooted in the "arbitrary" standards of schools that are represented as if they were rational and culturally neutral (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

Minority underachievement is further amplified in an educational system that is otherwise riddled by inequities in the opportunity to learn. Minority youth disproportionately attend underfunded, under-resourced schools that are plagued by low teacher quality and less competitive courses (Kain & Singleton, 1996; Kozol, 2005; Oakes, 1994). When the same students attend predominantly White schools, they are reseggregated into basic and remedial courses, where their achievement suffers under low standards and poor instruction (Oakes, 2005; Wells, 1995). These inequities prevent minority students from performing competitively on standard indexes of achievement.

Minority students also find themselves disadvantaged in school as a consequence of how meaning is made of their bodies and behaviors (O'Connor, 2001). In analyzing disciplinary referrals, Skiba (2001) found that in comparison to Whites, Black students are referred for more subjective and less serious offenses. Skiba explained that "even the most serious of the reasons for office referrals among Black students, threat, is dependent on perception of threat by the staff making the referral" (p. 181). His findings are amplified in light of evidence that some White teachers even demonstrate fear of Black male kindergartners (Lewis, 2003). Ferguson (2000), moreover, demonstrated that whereas teachers

attributed the misbehavior of White boys to "boys being boys" and sought to edify them, they pathologized the misbehavior of Black boys and sought to punish them. Finally, Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson, and Bridgest (2003) showed that teachers perceived as more aggressive those students who demonstrated movement styles associated with Black culture (i.e., "strolling" rather than walking in a "standard" fashion).

When teachers judge as more aggressive those students who move in ways that are associated with Black "style," which other styles (and by implication which other people) are imagined as safe? Similarly, when the same behavior is differently evaluated on Black and White bodies, Blackness is relegated to deviance and Whiteness is normalized. The consequences for disproportionality are apparent in light of the fact that externalizing behaviors (e.g., aggression), as opposed to internalizing behaviors (e.g., anxiety), are usually what lead to the labeling of children as ED (Walker et al., 1995). The selection of a White middle-class referent, again, seems destined to produce disproportionality.

The aforementioned inequities elucidate how class *and* race structure educational inequalities and bear on disproportionality. The NRC report, nevertheless, treats race as if it were only a proxy for social class. Research in special education, however, provides evidence to the contrary. Hosp and Reschly (2004) and Oswald et al. (1999) found that after controlling for indexes of social class, race/ethnicity significantly influenced (sometimes more powerfully) the likelihood that a student would be classified as disabled. More recently, Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Simmons, Feggins-Azziz, and Chung (2005) underscored the futility of using race as a proxy for class and determined not only that poverty has differential effects across disability categories for explaining disproportionality, but that in "those cases where poverty makes any contribution to explaining disproportionality, its effect is primarily to magnify already existing racial disparities" (p. 141). Finally, scholars have shown how race shapes organizational and political processes that affect special education placement (e.g., Eitle, 2002; Meier, Stewart, & England, 1989).

Reconceptualizing Disproportionality

Although the NRC report provides TCHD with a high-profile stage, the theory is articulated elsewhere in the field of special education and carries currency. TCHD is, however, flawed. As we have discussed herein, TCHD under-analyzes how the culture and organization of schools constrain the achievement of minority students and pathologizes their bodies and behaviors such that they are more likely to be referred for and subsequently placed in special education.

The NRC report departs from other articulations of TCHD in its delineation of some of the educational inequities discussed in this article. For example, the report documents teacher bias and elaborates on how inequitable school funding compromises the ability of poor districts to manipulate and acquire educational resources (i.e., reduce class size and attract qualified teachers) that are likely to "reduce the number of minority students with academic and behavioral problems and increase the number who excel" (NRC, 2002, p. 209). Contrary to our analysis, however, the report conveys that these inequities contribute to the "incidences" of disability—in which case disproportionality represents the higher rate at which within-individual deficits are found

among poor youth who are disproportionately minority. In contrast, we argue that the same inequities increase the “documentation” of disability—in which case disproportionality is an artifact of how schools structure inequality.

In light of the evidence discussed herein, it is schools and not poverty that place minority students at heightened risk for special education placement. One of the authors of this article has previously argued that there is nothing about poverty in and of itself that places poor children at academic risk; it is a matter of how structures of opportunity and constraint come to bear on the educational chances of the poor to either expand or constrain their likelihood of achieving competitive educational outcomes (O’Connor, 2002). Disproportionality, then, is the structured probability with which minority youth are more likely to be “documented” as disabled.

REFERENCES

- Anyon, J. (1981). Social class and school knowledge. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 11(1), 3–41.
- Apple, M. W. (1996). *Cultural politics and education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Artiles, A. J. (1998). The dilemma of difference: Enriching disproportionality discourse with theory and context. *Journal of Special Education*, 31, 32–36.
- Artiles, A. J., & Trent, S. C. (1994). Overrepresentation of minority students in special education: A continuing debate. *Journal of Special Education*, 27, 410–437.
- Arzubiaga, A., Ceja, M., & Artiles A. (2000). Transcending deficit thinking about Latinos’ parenting styles: Toward an ecocultural view of family life. In C. Tejada, C. Martinez, Z. Leonardo (Eds.), *Charting new terrains of Chicana(o)/Latina(o) education* (pp. 93–106). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Ball, A. F. (1996). Expository writing patterns of African American students. *English Journal*, 85(1), 27–36.
- Blair, C., & Scott, K. G. (2002). Proportion of LD placements associated with low socioeconomic status: Evidence for gradient. *Journal of Special Education*, 36, 14–22.
- Bourdieu, P. (1977). Cultural reproduction and social reproduction. In K. Karabel & A. H. Halsey (Eds.), *Power and ideology in education* (pp. 487–511). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J. (1977). *Reproduction in education, society, and culture*. London: Sage.
- Coll, C. T. G. (1990). Developmental outcome of minority infants: A process-oriented look into our beginnings. *Child Development*, 61, 270–289.
- Delpit, L. (1995). *Other people’s children: Cultural conflict in the classroom*. New York: New Press.
- Eitle, T. M. (2002). Special education and racial segregation: Understanding the variation in the representation of Black students in Educable Mentally Handicapped Programs. *Sociological Quarterly*, 43, 575–605.
- Ferguson, A. A. (2000). *Bad boys: Public schools in the making of Black masculinity*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Fujiura, G. T., & Yamaki, K. (2000). Trends in the demography of childhood poverty and disability. *Exceptional Children*, 66, 187–199.
- Garrett, P., Ng’andu, N., & Ferron, J. (1994). Poverty experiences of young children and the equality of their home environments. *Child Development*, 65, 331–345.
- Griffin, S., & Case, R. (1997). Rethinking the primary school math curriculum: An approach based on cognitive science. *Issues in Education*, 1(3), 1–49.
- Heath, S. B. (1982). *Ways with words: Language, life, and work in communities and classrooms*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Hoff-Ginsberg, E., & Tardiff, T. (1995). Socioeconomic status and parenting. In M. H. Bornstein (Ed.), *Handbook of parenting* (Vol. 4, pp. 161–187). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Hosp, J. L., & Reschly, D. J. (2004). Disproportionate representation of minority students in special education: Academic, demographic and economic predictors. *Exceptional Children*, 70, 185–199.
- Kain, J. F., & Singleton, K. (1996, May/June). Equality of educational opportunity revisited. *New England Economic Review*, 87–114.
- Kozol, J. (2005). *The shame of the nation: The restoration of apartheid schooling in America*. New York: Crown Publishers.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2004). Just what is critical race theory and what’s it doing in a nice field like education? In G. Ladson-Billings & D. Gillborn (Eds.), *The Routledge/Falmer reader in multicultural education* (pp. 49–67). New York: Routledge/Falmer.
- Lee, C. D. (1993). *Signifying as a scaffold for literary interpretation: The pedagogical implications of an African American discourse genre*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Lee, C. D. (2003). Why we need to re-think race and ethnicity in educational research. *Educational Researcher*, 32(5), 3–5.
- Lewis, A. E. (2003). *Race in the schoolyard: Negotiating the color line in classrooms and communities*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Meier, K., Stewart, J., Jr., & England, R. E. (1989). *Race, class, and education: The politics of second-generation discrimination*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Minow, M. (1990). *Making all the difference: Inclusion, exclusion, and American law*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- National Research Council. (2002). *Minority students in special and gifted education* (Committee on Minority Representation in Special Education, M. S. Donovan & C. T. Cross, Eds., Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education). Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Neal, L. V., McCray, A. D., Webb-Johnson, G., & Bridgest, S. T. (2003). The effects of African American movement styles on teachers’ perceptions and reactions. *Journal of Special Education*, 37, 49–57.
- Oakes, J. (1994). More than misapplied technology: A normative and political response to Hallinan on tracking. *Sociology of Education*, 67(2), 84–89.
- Oakes, J. (2005). *Keeping track: How schools structure inequality*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- O’Connor, C. (2001). Making sense of the complexity of social identity in relation to achievement: A sociological challenge in the new millennium [Extra issue]. *Sociology of Education*, 159–168.
- O’Connor, C. (2002). Black women beating the odds from one generation to the next: How the changing dynamics of constraint and opportunity affect the process of educational resilience. *American Educational Research Journal*, 39, 855–903.
- Oswald, D. P., Coutinho, M. J., Best, A. M., & Singh, N. N. (1999). Ethnic representation in special education: The influence of school-related, economic, and demographic variables. *Journal of Special Education*, 32, 194–206.
- Park, J., Turnbull, A. P., & Turnbull, H. R., III (2002). Impacts of poverty on quality of life in families of children with disabilities. *Exceptional Children*, 68, 151–170.
- Rogoff, B. (2003). *The cultural nature of human development*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Serwatka, T. S., Deering, S., & Grant, P. (1995). Disproportionate representation of African Americans in emotionally handicapped classes. *Journal of Black Studies*, 25, 492–506.
- Shweder, R. A. (1999). Culture and development in our poststructural age. In A. S. Masten (Vol. Ed.), *Cultural processes in child development: Minnesota Symposia on Child Psychology* (Vol. 29, pp. 137–148). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

- Skiba, R. J. (2001). When is disproportionality discrimination? The overrepresentation of Black students in school suspension. In W. Ayers, B. Dohrn, & R. Ayers (Eds.), *Zero tolerance: Resisting the drive for punishment in schools* (pp. 165–176). New York: New Press.
- Skiba, R. J., Poloni-Staudinger, L., Simmons, A. B., Feggins-Azziz, L. R., & Chung, C. G. (2005). Unproven links: Can poverty explain ethnic disproportionality in special education? *Journal of Special Education, 39*, 130–144.
- Wagner, M. (1995). *The contributions of poverty and ethnic background to the participation of secondary school students in special education*. Menlo Park, CA: SRI International.
- Walker, H. M., Colvin, G., & Ramsey, E. (1995). *Antisocial behavior in school: Strategies and best practices*. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Wells, A. S. (1995). Reexamining social science research on school desegregation: Long- versus short-term effects. *Teachers College Record, 96*, 694–718.
- Yeargin-Allsopp, M. Y., Drews, D. C., Decoufle, P., & Murphy, C. C. (1995). Mild mental retardation in Black and White children in metropolitan Atlanta: A case study control. *American Journal of Public Health, 85*, 324–328.

AUTHORS

CARLA O'CONNOR is an Associate Professor of Education at the University of Michigan, School of Education, 4001 SEB Box 1259, Ann Arbor, MI 48109; coconnor@umich.edu. Her research interests focus on the racial identity, academic experience, and educational resilience of African American students.

SONIA DELUCA FERNANDEZ is a doctoral candidate at the University of Michigan, Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education, 610 E. University Avenue, 2117 SEB, Ann Arbor, MI 48109; sddeluca@umich.edu. Her research interests focus on social justice in higher education, with particular attention to race and the ways in which identity mediates socialization in academe.

Manuscript received June 8, 2005

Revisions received March 12 and May 30, 2006

Accepted June 5, 2006