

“Why Are So Many Minority Students In Special Education? Understanding Race & Disability in Schools” by Beth Harry and Janette Klingner, Teachers College Press, New York, London, 2006

Reviewed by Karen Schulte, Senior Associate, Ray.Taylor and Associates

“From our point of view, the variability in patterns of disability designation over time and place simply underscores the main argument of this book – that the (disability) categories do not necessarily reflect real disabilities within children. Rather their differential usage supports the perspective that the categories are reliant on definition and interpretation, which are influenced by social and political agendas of various states, groups, and individuals.” (Pages 5-6)

Harry and Klingner’s book describes a three-year study exploring issues of inequity and overrepresentation in special education. The study was conducted in 12 elementary schools in a large, urban school district. The authors define overrepresentation of culturally and linguistically diverse students as a problem *if* the conditions that led to special education placement *or* the services provided once special education placement occurred were inappropriate or inadequate. Much of their research leads one to believe that both of these situations are indeed problematic.

They identify three primary areas of inequity:

- Quality opportunities to learn prior to referral to special education (large class sizes, lack of resources, poor teacher quality)
- Decision-making processes leading to special education placement (pre-referral processes, assessment procedures and Individual Educational Planning Team practices)
- Quality of special education services provided (student caseload sizes, quality of individualized instruction, teacher quality)

Overall, Harry and Klingner found that these inequities were more likely to impact minority students. They document and describe inequities in general education on many systemic and individual levels, ranging from institutional bias in teacher placement to cultural dissonance within schools to the quality of instruction provided in classrooms. In special education, they describe inequities found in the definition of the high incidence disability areas (learning disabilities, cognitive impairments and emotional impairments), the pre-referral system, the instruments used for assessment and the interpretation of assessment results, and the nature of special education services and delivery models.

The authors include rich case studies of individual children and schools to illustrate their points. In a nonjudgmental manner, they provide facts and examples from “real life” situations to build their case. Lastly, they offer a series of recommendations on the federal, state, district, school and classroom levels to provide suggested directions for improvement.

After reading, discussion questions might include:

- What does our district’s / school’s data tell us about overrepresentation in special education?
- In view of this data, what are some factors that may contribute to this situation?
- Is there a sound and meaningful pre-referral process in place?
- Is the quality of educational opportunities provided taken into account when considering a special education referral?
- How do our assumptions and beliefs impact our perception of parents’ and families’ roles and responsibilities?
- How do our assumptions and beliefs impact our interpretation of the definition of various disability categories?
- How much do bias and individual belief systems impact the equity of our assessment procedures?
- Do our special education programs support the achievement of student outcomes?
- Do we have systems in place to monitor the effectiveness of our special education procedures and programs?

This book should be on every administrator’s and special education staff member’s reading list!