



THE EDUCATIONAL  
**Forum**

# Unnecessary and Unjustified: African-American Parental Perceptions of Special Education

by Erika R. Williams

## *Abstract*

*The disproportionate representation of students of color in special education programs has been an issue in the field for decades. However, the literature on the topic tends to ignore the perceptions held by the families of these children. This paper shares the results of a qualitative study which explored the perceptions of one group of African-American parents that challenged their local school system on the placement and quality of services delivered to African-American children in special education.*

Paradigmatic shifts in the theories about special education service delivery have occurred (Patton and Townsend 1999; Voltz 1999; Campbell-Whatley and Comer 2000; Day-Vines 2000; Townsend and Patton 2000). These shifts embrace inclusion models and practices that are more complementary to the notion of culturally relevant teaching than former perspectives that encouraged separate, pull-out service delivery models. Holistic, collaborative, inclusive approaches that have greater tenets of consciousness than the deficit, dichotomous models of yesteryear have gained momentum.

The evolving theories in the field and the actual practices that exist in schools, however, are not necessarily the same, particularly when dealing with African-American students. Research with ethnically diverse parents showed that the efficacy of special education in meeting the needs of their children is lacking (Harry, Allen, and McLaughlin 1995; Harry, Allen, and McLaughlin 1996; Robinson-Zanartu and Majel-Dixon 1996; Harry, Kalyanpur, and Day 1999; Zions et. al. 2003). These studies, however, ignored the perceptions held by the families of African-American children placed in special education programs regarding the legitimacy of the program in their school, consideration of cultural differences, and the long-term effects special education placement has on youth.

### *The Study*

In 1998, a group of African-American citizens from North Carolina made their perspective on disproportionate representation in special education known to the local school board and government. This group of parents appealed to the Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights (OCR) to examine policies, procedures, and practices that they perceived as inappropriate in identifying children for special education services. They requested OCR intervention in specific cases and voluntarily participated in an OCR visit to their community.

A qualitative methodology using case study design was used to examine how four African-American parents from this group perceived school efficacy in the North Carolina community in which they lived. Data sources for the study included documents, audiotaped semi-structured individual interviews, and a group interview. The data were analyzed using coding procedures and pattern matching to identify categories of emerging themes. Four themes with concomitant indicators emerged from micro-level and macro-level analysis of the data.

Harry et al. (1999, 124-25) suggested that professionals should use "a posture of cultural reciprocity" when attempting to build collaborative relationships. The posture of cultural reciprocity requires explicit dialogue with families about the differing cultural values and practices between families and schools. A posture of cultural reciprocity should not be considered a first-aid kit to which schools refer when conflicts arise. Rather, this posture should serve as a framework from which professionals operate. An ethos of cultural reciprocity should inform actions and decisions for mutually valuable, effective home-school collaboration.

This study was guided by the concept of culturally reciprocal relationships. Parental perceptions of efficacy are shaped by their expectations of schools, their interpretation of the school's desire to collaborate, the school's expectations of students and parents, and the degree of divergence or convergence between school and home cultures (Figure 1). The interaction of these variables determines the degree of efficacy parents perceive of their children's schools, as well as the potential to build cultural reciprocity into the home-school relationship.

### *Findings*

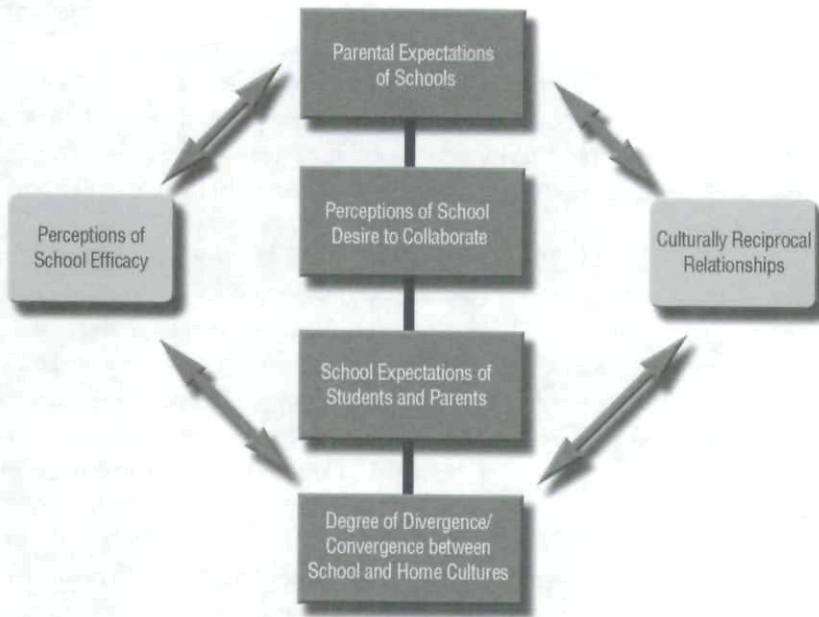
Special education was the central issue in this study. All of the parents involved were participants in the OCR's visit to Wallace County Public Schools (fictitious name) in 1998. Some individuals also had sought intervention from the OCR for specific concerns they had regarding special education practices related to their own child. The collective concerns of these parents about special education's legitimacy, the cultural disconnect in its practices, misuse and abuse of the protocol, and the life chances for African-American children in special education programs were explored.

### *Legitimacy of Special Education*

The study participants drew from personal observations and experiences they had as parents to describe special education and its practices. One study participant said:



Figure 1. Conceptual Framework Diagram



*We see kids who are okay when they come into the school system. What happens? Why all of a sudden do they have a problem with learning? What measuring stick is used to determine their placement? All of a sudden when they hit the school system, there's something wrong.*

In a one-on-one interview, this same participant added:

*Special education is used as a tool to control kids that the teachers do not want to invest additional time in. If you go to any middle school or elementary school at lunch time, go and sit in the office and you will see a trail of kids coming in to get Ritalin®. The child was born, the child was okay. He developed on schedule from zero to five with no behavior problems. He goes to church and participates in Sunday school with no problems. Around the family, everything's okay. As soon as Johnny gets to school, there's something wrong with Johnny, and Johnny needs to be put on Ritalin.*

The group also framed their description of special education within a historical context based on their school experiences and those of other African-American parents. Their perception of the ability of teachers from African-American schools to teach students with differing abilities successfully was used as the primary example of what could be done in lieu of self-contained, separate classes for instruction. One participant's comments reflected the group's thoughts:

*When I was in school, you didn't have a special education designation, but what you did have is a classroom where a teacher may group kids according to their learning level, learning ability, or learning rate, and work with each group of students on the level that those students were on for x number of minutes per class. Ultimately, the goal was to get*

*them into the higher achieving group and they would encourage them to where that actually occurred. You were not looked down on, you were not designated as the dummy, and it really worked. For the life of me, I cannot understand what has brought us to where we are, when many people who are sitting in judgment of students now—especially the older people, the 50 and above—have experienced some of the same things I have, but for whatever reason think the process is broken. . . . You're going to have kids who don't learn at the same rate. Every one of them is intelligent; it's just a matter of getting it at a rate at which they learn.*

In a group interview, the parents reached a consensus:

*Of course there are black children with special needs. Just like there are white children with special needs. All races have children with special needs. The problem is the high number of African-American males with special needs in North Carolina schools. After visiting the schools in this area, there are a number of them who do not rightfully belong there. That's the issue.*

In an article to the local newspaper, another parent, after meeting with a representative from OCR, wrote:

*The representative from OCR, by her accounts, has spent a considerable amount of time reviewing special education law and theory. From her observations, she gave Wallace County a failing mark in its implementation of special education, particularly as it relates to African-American youth. They're not teaching anything in those classes. There's nothing educational. It's like a first-class babysitting service.*

Following the OCR's visit, the school district issued a statement that acknowledged the need to improve resources and training for regular education teachers to help them improve the intervention strategies they used prior to the special education prereferral process.

*The district will continue to evaluate training needs to support system and site goals and to develop and implement training using the most current research, outside consultants, and validated models as appropriate in the following areas: a range of education strategies to use to educate at-risk students within the regular education setting; application of state and district policies and procedures for referral of students for special education evaluation; and the availability of regular education interventions designed to address academic and/or behavioral problems of students. The district will continue to train members of the school-based SST (Student Support Team) with an emphasis on team problem solving to identify a range of classroom instructional strategies that will address the varying needs of at-risk students and reduce the need for referrals to special education.*

### **Cultural Disconnect**

Study participants believed that many African-American students are unfairly relegated to special education classes and categories because teachers do not understand the culture of the students. One participant related:



## Williams

*After a while, black kids want to let the teachers know that they know the answers, so they start shouting out responses. When they do, the teachers say they're disruptive and need to be in self-contained classes. Some of the parents just let the teachers put their kids in a special education class because they don't want constant calls on their jobs. Students get mad because the teacher thinks they're stupid and dumb.*

Another participant specifically said the misidentification of African-American children for special education was one of the most salient issues she had with the system. She contended that psychologists and psychiatrists do not understand the cultural background of the children they are evaluating and, therefore, are responsible for large volumes of children of color filling special education rosters. She explained:

*I think the criteria that Wallace County uses for identifying these students are weak. You have, for lack of better words, 'this lily white girl' from Marton College or Sutter University (a local private school and a public higher education institution), who has never been around black people, coming here with her pad and her pencil, and spending only 45 minutes with a student, and that is her recommendation. If you've ever read one of those reports, it's a form report and all she does is change the child's name. They all read the same, you know.*

This participant's account of a flawed evaluation system stems from her firsthand experience during the evaluation of her son by a school psychologist. She did not support the decision to have him identified as behaviorally and emotionally disabled. She maintained that the behavior the school officials said they observed from her son did not follow his behavior pattern in any other setting including home, preschool, private school, or the Boys and Girls Club. She consented to a psychological evaluation because she thought it would shed light on what was causing the behavior school officials purported to observe.

*I wanted to know if the school psychologist could find out what was going on with him—what made him this sort of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. When I got the report back, I was furious. It was a typical white woman's view of a black man. It said he was depressed, that he could do harm to himself. The recommendation was for BEH—behaviorally and emotionally handicapped.*

Particularly disturbing to this parent was that the psychologist's evaluation did not parallel the social worker's evaluation. The social worker had been working with her son for nearly a year and submitted an evaluation that suggested he could function in a regular education classroom if the appropriate support system was in place.

When attempting to understand the special education system they had in Wallace County, one participant again referred to the absence of knowledge about students' culture. He related:

*My observation has been that many of these students are in special education because of a lack of understanding of their culture. When a kid comes in acting very energetic and seems to be out of control, you throw them in special ed just to get rid of*

*them. That is basically what was happening in this system. When the Office of Civil Rights came down several years ago, there was some admission by the school system that the schools hadn't been doing some things right. The school system said it was going to do more. There may be some minimal improvement, but special education still isn't where it needs to be.*

### **Misuse and Abuse of Protocol**

These parents personally had participated in the special education referral process either as a parent of a child that was screened for a disability or identified as disabled, a parent advocate or liaison with another family, or a foster parent. Therefore, they had personal experiences and observations to support their views.

In discussions with these parents, the topic of protocol misuse surfaced repeatedly. Protocol refers to the procedures mandated by Public Law 94-142 (1975), the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA] (1990), and the Amendments to IDEA (1997). The legal intent of special education laws is to ensure that due process is granted to children and families regarding identification, placement, and services. According to participants, part of special education's illegitimacy comes from what they perceived as manipulative practices that did not support the intent of special education law.

One participant was especially concerned about the manner in which special education decisions and procedures were executed. She detailed why she felt that placements were determined by unilateral decisions.

*The teachers just call the parents and tell them they need to sign forms concerning their children's education. The parents do not really understand the forms and just sign them. They don't realize that they're actually agreeing to place their kids in special ed.*

Special education practices that are not conducted in the manner intended by the law also was of great concern to another participant. She cited examples from her own and others' experiences with Wallace County schools as a validation of her views.

*For example, according to IDEA, the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is supposed to be written by parents, teachers, and administrators who know the child. When parents get to the IEP meeting (in Wallace County), the IEP is already written. They read it to you, turn it toward you, and say sign it.*

Another participant who also was concerned about the legitimacy of special education said:

*All too often, if the student is from the low-income segment of our society, the parent is not involved in the initial drafting of the student's IEP. The IEP goes from a draft to the final stage in one meeting. The process is illegal, immoral, and grossly unethical. All that the school system really is interested in is the parent's signature on the IEP. Once it's there, the system has covered their legal rear. The child's future then starts on a narrow one-way journey to nowhere fast. What I've just described happened to me and my son.*



He further described his experience with an IEP for his son.

*The principal at the elementary school tried to get me to sign a blank IEP for my son—there was nothing on it at all. He had me come in and had this blank IEP for me to sign—had the date on it and everything. Just by having a little common sense I refused. I said I don't want to sign that. Let's reschedule this later. He was a little offended and taken aback, but later I found out that this was a common practice among the schools in Wallace County. It was just common knowledge that parents—especially the low-income parents—were signing blank IEPs and the principals and teachers were filling in whatever they wanted to fill in without the parents' participation. Not only is this appalling, but it is against the law.*

Students who did not fare well on state-mandated end-of-course and end-of-year examinations often were placed in special education programs by teachers who wanted to maintain accountability standards. One participant stated that the pressure teachers feel to have a certain degree of proficiency for each student in the current accountability model creates disabilities where none exist.

*I do believe that there are African-American children with disabilities, as there are in every ethnic group in the country or the world. There are different levels of learning ability within every population. I do not, however, believe that it is as serious or as prevalent as the findings in this school system. When I consider all of the reasons why students are placed in special education, I believe it has occurred as a result of the amount of pressure that is placed on teachers regarding their students' learning. Teachers don't want to jeopardize the school's standing; they don't want to jeopardize their bonuses and other things of notoriety that come about as a result. I think teachers are not as tolerant of young people as they should be and don't recognize that some of these kids are just a step away from being able to learn at the same rate as the other students. They need encouragement and nurturing that they won't get in special classrooms, special programs.*

### **Life Chances for the Identified**

Concern for what the future holds for African-American students who have been identified with special needs was evident in the comments participants made about special education. The ability to be mainstreamed, as well as concerns over job readiness, college preparedness, and graduating with a certificate of completion versus a high school diploma were among their greatest worries.

The participants' concern that the school system was overzealous in placing students in special education programs was addressed in a statement the district issued to the OCR after its 1998 visit.

*By June 30, 1999, the district will ensure that IEP teams at individual schools will review the placement of all African-American students currently classified as EMH [educable mentally handicapped] and BEH [behaviorally and emotionally handicapped] to determine whether they are placed in the least restrictive environment. These students*

*will be placed in the regular education environment unless it is demonstrated that the education of the student in the regular education environment cannot be satisfactorily achieved with the use of supplementary aids and services. This will be accomplished through the annual review of each student's IEP.*

Though the school system committed to reviewing each student's situation, the participants contended that once labeled and put into special education, little chance existed that students would exit the system.

*Students in low socioeconomic conditions (of whom many of their parents are victims of social promotion) are the most vulnerable. The screening process to place these children in containment classes, to label them, and track them toward lives of ignorance, poverty, crime, and dependency are totally unfair and racist throughout the entire process.*

The toll on students placed in special education dominated one participant's assessment of its efficacy.

*I think a lot of kids placed in special education are absolutely destroyed. In that environment, they lose their self-esteem, are told they can't succeed, that they can't do this, that, and the other and, unfortunately, they end up believing that at some point. Therefore, they never quite get over it. I see these kids as being totally destroyed and demeaned and just don't have any hope.*

Another participant used a personal example to illustrate her concern about the life chances of children who are identified for special education. She and her husband offer a scholarship each year, in memory of her son, to a student who has overcome adversity to succeed.

*One scholarship recipient begged his mother to not put him back in those special classes when he went to high school: to give him a chance, to put him in regular classes, to fight for him, and let him try it there. If he did not do well, then they could put him back in those special classes. That kid is doing excellent. B honor roll. The kid is playing football, carrying a regular course load, and doing well. That's a clear sign that that kid shouldn't have been in those special classes from the very beginning. If he continues the way he's been doing, he can get a scholarship to a division I school. If he had not pressed his mother and said please give me this opportunity and if she would have followed the school system's recommendation, that kid would have been in special ed classes. He would have gotten a certificate, not a diploma at the end of high school. That's another issue that they are pushing on black parents: special education students should get a certificate rather than a diploma. You can't even do anything with it. What is the purpose of the certificate?*

One participant's concern about life beyond high school for African-American special education students reflected those held by the other participants.

*I shudder to think of the vast numbers of African-American students who have been promoted out of school without being taught or at least given a decent chance to acquire*



*the necessary skills to have a chance to succeed in life. What I've just described can only result in an increase in crime, illiteracy, poverty, incarceration, and a severe lack of rational thinking or decision making.*

### Discussion

The participants in this study shared strong reservations about special education's legitimacy. Their misgivings were based on concerns about students' culture being viewed as a liability, the lack of commitment to students identified with special needs, and the high numbers of African-American children separated into self-contained special education settings. Other concerns centered on the misuse of special education practices and procedures by schools, as well as what participants viewed as diminished quality of life after high school for those who have been placed in special education.

Special education was seen by the study participants primarily as a vehicle for removing challenging, less desirable students from mainstream classrooms and, therefore, deemed illegitimate. This illegitimacy was nestled in poor identification practices that made exiting special education and returning to the regular education system nearly impossible. The "dead-end road" analogy was used prevalently in describing a special education student's life chances.

Each of the participants was knowledgeable about special education law and process. All four people had been involved with the identification process to some degree, either as a parent, representative, or liaison. In their discussions and writings, they referred accurately to the intent of IDEA and the protocol for IEP meetings. The participants gave examples of the misuse and abuse of special education by faculty and staff members, which they felt contributed to its illegitimacy.

References to how students with differing abilities were taught in the past were used as examples of what schools should do to meet the needs of all learners today. The participants stressed the importance of maintaining high standards and expectations in the education of African-American students and not separating students for instruction. Special education as was practiced in Wallace County was considered antithetical.

### Professionals' Responsibilities

Research by scholars such as Harry (1992b) highlighted the dissonance between service providers and families—particularly African-American parents—regarding communications and participation in the special education pre-referral and identification process. Harry (1992a, 124–25) identified four common explanations for the absence of African-American parents' participation:

- *Rejecting ethos of schools after desegregation.* The trust that African-American parents had in schools prior to desegregation has been diluted. The traditional supportive ties between these parents and the schools that previously served their communities unraveled under the new system.
- *Apathy.* African-American parents do not care about their children's education or simply don't value education.
- *Logistical constraints and stressful life circumstances.* Low-income African-American

parents are overwhelmed with other issues, such as transportation and scheduling, and are unfamiliar with their rights when it comes to special education procedures.

- *Difficulty in communicating.* Parents who disagree with professionals on special education classifications often have a difficult time communicating their opinions.

Harry (1992a) also noted that the professional's role in negating these patterns must be addressed. To encourage greater participation by African-American parents in their children's special education programs, Harry et. al (1995) identified four factors that professionals must recognize:

- the untapped potential of parents as partners in decision making, particularly in the assessment and placement processes;
- the impact of labeling;
- the importance of parental participation; and
- the effect of a "we-they" posture in schools that pits parents as adversaries.

Teachers also should be conscious of the lens they are using to view students. According to Voyles (1998, 15), teachers should "be aware of the differences in cultural communication and behavior and help those students adapt to school culture, become familiar with the learning patterns of different communities and experiences of children of diverse cultures, and build on the prior knowledge students have attained through their culture" before referring students from diverse cultures to special education.

Cartledge, Kea, and Ida (2000) echoed Voyles' work by emphasizing that working with families is the nucleus of culturally competent service. From understanding what constitutes family to acknowledging the various traditions that students' families observe, teachers who practice culturally competent pedagogy create classroom interactions that reflect and respect diversity while creating bridges that enable students to adapt. Cartledge et al. (2000) suggested that service providers become cultural researchers by raising questions about role sharing, coping philosophies, racial identity, and religious consciousness of families.

Most decisions regarding educational programs for students with learning disabilities are made in the pre-referral stage. During this stage, teachers seek the help of a Teacher Assistance Team to address cultural differences that may present roadblocks to effective instruction. Craig et al. (2000, 9) suggested that three common teaching approaches must be abandoned to perform this step effectively.

- *Homogeneity.* Students must be viewed as unique individuals. A stereotypical approach must be relinquished, and the socially stratified environments of classrooms must be ignored.
- *Equality.* The same teaching style and involvement cannot be used with all students, but must be adapted to meet the needs of each student. Atypical learning styles must be valued and rewarded.
- *Limited options.* Service-based practices, such as English as a second language, special education, and bilingual education, must not be considered primary alternatives to the regular curriculum. Rather, the school must identify the resources needed to create a rich curriculum for all students to find success.



Those involved with school leadership also must ensure that ethical, responsible, and culturally compatible practices (i.e., due process, communication, and involvement) are the standard and not the exception. Leaders should focus on three areas:

- *Facilitating an atmosphere of transparency, trust, and partnership with families.* Efficient practices that are open and accommodating are practices that are transparent. Though schools sometimes state that parents are partners, families often get the impression that everything that occurs on the school premises is part of the school's agenda. These families are given overt and covert messages that their input, opinion, or experience is inconsequential to the school and, therefore, to their child's education. Allowing families to share their ideas and vision for their children and their future is the first step. Giving those ideas and interpretations a voice is next. Families of the children served should be involved in significant decision-making processes that inform school policy and practice. Peripheral roles that force families' support of the school's agenda but do not incorporate the families' agenda are not roles of partnership.
- *Recruiting, attracting, and retaining teachers who are academically and culturally competent.* A teacher that is knowledgeable of subject is necessary. However, a teacher that also is knowledgeable of practices and dispositions which validate students' identities is desirable. In a study that examined the satisfaction of urban African-American parents with the delivery of special education, Zions et al. (2003) found that parents perceived a need for greater cultural understanding. The study reported that a common mismatch occurred between the parents' expressed desire to be involved and the teachers' perception of parental desire.

For teachers and African-American parents to work collaboratively, teachers must examine the beliefs they hold about parents and how those beliefs shape their expectations of parents in the educational process. Specifically, teachers should ask themselves, "What do I expect from parents, why do I expect this, and how does this expectation support the child's education?" Honest dialogue in this area can turn into conversation starters for teachers when working with parents. Teachers also should explore the role of parents from the parental perspective. The parents in this study indicated that a parent's definition of responsibility differs from what teachers and schools define as necessary for parents to do in the interest of their children. A tendency toward narrowly defined parental responsibilities in terms of program attendance, classroom visitation, and fund-raising activities may need to be reconsidered. An expanded definition may include activities that are in the best interest of the child's education, but perhaps not visible from the school's lens alone.

- *Recognizing the sociocultural, political, and historical realities that encode every experience the families of the children served encounter.* The learners arriving at schools every day are not isolated bodies that are free or independent of the experiences which take place in their communities and families. Students come to school with a history of events that shape not only their worldview, but the worldview of their families and communities. To improve the educational outcomes of ethnic minority youth, Lee, Spencer, and Harpalani (2003) proposed an integrated model whereby schools and researchers examine the cultural socialization and identity development processes involved with learning. According to Lee et al. (2003,

11), the study of learning must be “developmentally, culturally, and contextually sensitive.” When worldviews of the family and school are not on par, the difference is inevitable. Difference alone should not automatically point to deficiency versus proficiency or right versus wrong.

Culturally competent environments are environments that are adept at using practices, materials, and methods that teach content to students in ways that support them as individuals and as learners. The professionals who work in these settings make achievement and learning the focus. Moreover, they understand that a student’s cultural orientation may shape, if not define, how he or she approaches everything from reading material to performing a task or an activity. All students and their families, regardless of ethnicity and status, deserve a system of education that does not hold their differences against them.

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