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Racial Disproportionality in Special Ed Largely Explained by Correlates of Race Rather than Racially Biased Categorizations

The Houston Independent School District's (HISD) overrepresentation of black students and underrepresentation of Hispanic students in special education (Office of Special Education Services 2014) has been assumed to be due to racially biased categorization processes. However, previous research typically relied on bivariate statistics, or statistics which only consider two student characteristics at a time, obscuring many factors that might explain racial disproportionality. Using longitudinal student level data on all third graders in HISD in 2009-10, 2010-11, and 2011-12, we used regression and decomposition techniques to consider how students' multiple qualities (race, gender, economic status, educational performance, linguistic minority status) in kindergarten simultaneously shaped their likelihood of categorization with a disability by third grade.

We found that (1) the overrepresentation of black third graders in special education is largely due to their lower average kindergarten test scores relative to whites, (2) Hispanics are underrepresented in special education because linguistic minority status lowers their likelihood of disability categorization, despite lower average educational performance and economic status relative to white and black students, and (3) in exceptions potentially indicative of racial bias, black third graders were more likely to be categorized with Intellectual Disabilities (a more stigmatizing category) than similarly achieving and resourced white students, and white third graders were more likely to be categorized with Autism and Speech Impairments (less stigmatizing categories) than similarly achieving and resourced black students.

Research Questions

1. Which special education categories within HISD appear to be more subjective and potentially more susceptible to racial disproportionality?
2. To what extent is racial disproportionality among third graders attributable to structural correlates of race – that is, to racial differences in economic status, linguistic minority status, and educational performance three years prior?

Key Findings

For most categories of disability, black over-identification and Hispanic under-identification do not appear to be attributable to racially biased practices in HISD. Rather, black over-identification is driven by achievement gaps which develop in early childhood and persist throughout schooling years. For Hispanic students, under-identification is attributable to the lower likelihood of linguistic minorities to be categorized with a disability. However, findings varied by category of disability. First, racial disproportionality in HISD is more pronounced in more subjective disability categories: Learning Disability, Speech Impairment, Intellectual Disability, Other Health Impairment, Autism, and Emotional Disturbance. Second, the structural correlates of race – those that explained disproportionality for most disability categories – do not explain black over-identification with Intellectual Disabilities or white over-identification with Autism and Speech Impairment.

Suggestions

The overrepresentation of black students in special education might be more effectively addressed through programming aimed at racial disparities in early educational performance levels rather than by altering disability categorization processes.

Race and class disparities in other health conditions are increasingly targeted by physician training in structural determinants of health rather than by culturally sensitive diagnostic methods (Metzl and Hansen 2014). Similarly, race and class disparities in special education may be addressed more effectively by focusing on the structural determinants of these disparities.

This study's findings also support policies aimed at improving the objectiveness of categorizations, consistent with suggestions from Martinez and Wong (2013). *Disability identification processes should be modified to better distinguish between low achievement that is socially rooted (e.g., poverty) and low achievement that is neurologically rooted (e.g., disability).* Improving categorization processes might also improve Hispanic under-identification, as their lower categorization rates appear to be largely attributable to linguistic minorities' lower likelihoods of categorization. A linguistic minority status may signal a clear source for lower average levels of achievement, or their disabilities may be mistakenly identified as a need for English proficiency services. However, if linguistic programming services are more efficacious than special education services, then increasing Hispanic students' representation in special education

would not benefit them. More research is necessary to determine the best services for these students.

In addition to continuing the focus on improving categorization processes, *special education practitioners should foster awareness on the remaining gaps in scientific knowledge on more subjective disability categories*. In this way, teachers, parents, and students might incorporate useful insights from disability categorizations while not feeling the category seals youths' destinies or captures their complexity.

In exceptions to the larger patterns, black third graders remained more likely than similarly achieving and resourced white or Hispanic students to be categorized with an Intellectual Disability, and the over-categorization of white third graders with Autism and Speech Impairments was not explained by the factors measured in this study. Poverty is medically linked to cognitive differences, and it may be black students' socioeconomic disadvantages are not sufficiently captured by the measures in this study. Alternatively, these may represent instances of racial bias, with black students more likely to be categorized with a stigmatizing category and white students more likely to be categorized with less stigmatizing categories.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates the importance of incorporating a focus on the structural inequities outside of schools that shape education and health outcomes, as well as potentially subjective and biased

categorization processes. Until more objective and consistent diagnostic models are developed for the disabilities identified in this study as subjective, educators should use great caution and transparency when categorizing students and modifying their education programs on the basis of such categories. Second, contextualizing schools in the surrounding society reinforces the importance of equalizing resources across diverse families, and generally improving the ability of schools to educate diverse youth regardless of whether they are categorized with disability.

References

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