

# The Role of Reading Instruction in Addressing the Overrepresentation of Minority Children in Special Education in the United States



Adopted by the Board of Directors  
May 2003

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A strong collaborative relationship among classroom teachers, school-district curriculum leaders, Title I literacy specialists, and special education teachers is essential for reducing the reading achievement gap in the United States between African American, Hispanic, and Native American students and their white and Asian/Pacific Islander counterparts. The International Reading Association is particularly concerned that lack of appropriate reading instruction and early reading interventions among low-performing minority children is contributing to the overrepresentation of these children in the high-incidence disability categories of mental retardation (MR), emotional disturbance (ED), and specific learning disability (SLD). Once they are identified and placed in these categories, children may not have access to a comprehensive curriculum that includes reading instruction that is responsive to their individual differences.

Although the problem of overrepresentation of minority children in U.S. special education programs is complex and requires actions taken on many fronts, the Association can contribute to the solution by advocating for effective early reading instruction for all children and collaborative and sustained interventions in reading before children are referred to special education.

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### What evidence do we have of overrepresentation of minority students in special education programs?

The issue of overrepresentation of minority students in special education programs, particularly within some regions and states in the United States, is a concern of special education researchers (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Artiles, Trent, & Palmer, in press; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Losen & Orfield, 2002; Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002) and the object of study by policy groups such as the Office of Civil Rights and the National Center for Education Statistics.

There is evidence that higher proportions of Native American, African American, and Hispanic students are identified as having the high-incidence disabilities when compared with the proportions of white students identified (Parrish, 2002). For example, African American students are 2.88 times as likely as white students to be identified and placed in MR programs, 1.92 times as likely to be identified and placed in ED programs, and 1.32 times as likely to be identified and placed in SLD programs (Parrish, 2002). These odds ratios are statistically significant for all three high-incidence disability categories.

### What is the extent of the reading achievement gap and its relationship to overrepresentation of minority children in special education programs?

National Association of Educational Progress data over the past 30 years document a somewhat fluctuating but persistent reading achievement gap between white students and African American, Hispanic, and Native American students. For example, the average

reading scores of white students are higher than those of black students at ages 9, 13, and 17 (Donahue, Voekl, Campbell, & Mazzeo, 1999). As the Figure (see next page) indicates, the gaps decreased between the early 1970s and the late 1980s. Since then, the gaps have remained relatively stable or have increased.

Recent studies conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (2002) document large gaps in student achievement on school tests as early as kindergarten. For example, 73% of white kindergartners were proficient in letter recognition, but only 59% of African American and 49% of Hispanic kindergartners were proficient. There were similar differences among races for recognition of words' beginning and ending sounds and for print familiarity—skills typically identified as important for success in school (NCES, 2002). Diverse learners are more likely to be referred for additional testing and placement in special education programs because achievement tests typically do not assess literacy skills that they may have acquired outside school, and these skills often differ from the ones these children are expected to have when they enter school. If, indeed, the issue is reading, the more appropriate educational response is to match children's individual learning capabilities and needs with the most appropriate reading instruction within the least restrictive environment, such as the children's classrooms.

### How do early reading difficulties affect special education referral and placement outcomes?

A large body of descriptive and correlational work suggests that reading difficulty may be a factor in special education referral and placement decisions. Data indicate, for example, that 80% of the children referred

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for an SLD are referred because of reading problems (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). This is a substantial number of children because SLDs account for approximately 50% of the children placed in special education (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). Although there are no direct data linking reading difficulties to the MR and ED categories, there is a plausible chain of logic suggesting that early reading difficulty is a factor in special education referrals. Reading difficulty may trigger concerns about learning that result in MR placements. The logic chain for ED placements is even stronger: Early reading difficulty leads to failure, and failure is often a contributing factor in misbehavior that may lead to ED referrals (Losen & Orfield, 2002).

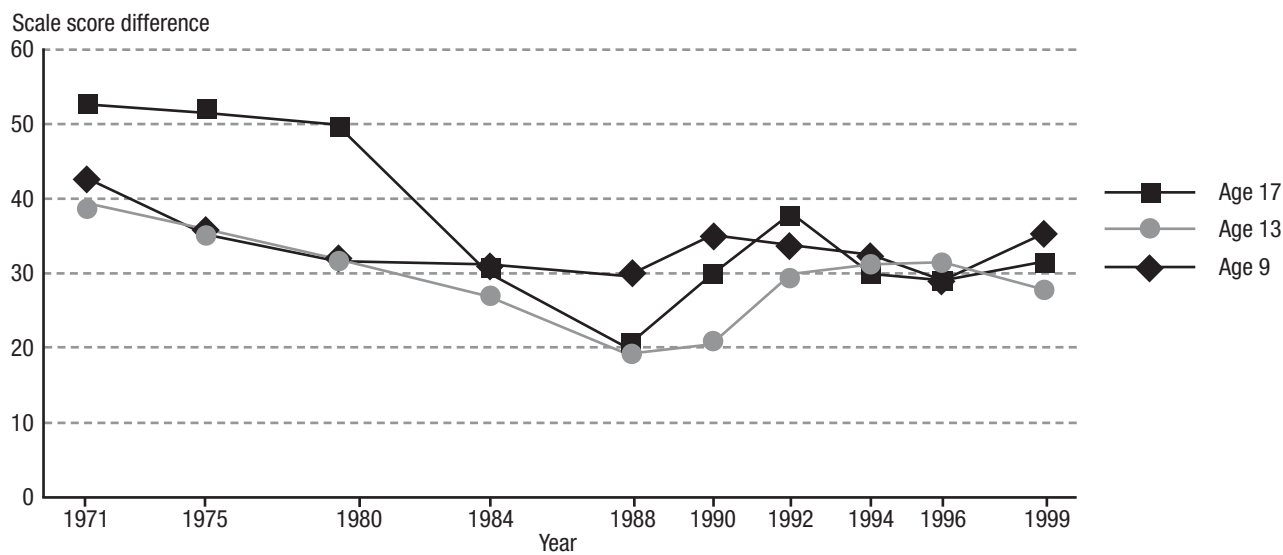
### Contributing to the Reading Achievement Gap

#### Ineffective instruction

The first issue that must be addressed if we are to solve the overrepresentation of minority students in special education is the quality of classroom instruction. Are the referred children "failing," or are the classrooms failing the children? That the overrepresentation of minority children in special education tends to increase as both poverty and the proportion of minority children present in the population increase (Oswald, Coutinho, Best, & Singh, 1999) suggests that poor instruction (i.e., classroom instruction that is not guided by systematic assessment or adapted to meet individual differences) is a plausible explanation for children's low achievement. For example, general achievement for students in high-poverty, predominantly nonwhite schools is comparatively low. The quality of the teaching force assigned to high-poverty schools (for example, having high numbers of inexperienced and noncertified teachers and using paraprofessionals), the relatively limited availability of reading material and other resources, and the physical condition of schools are factors significantly worse in high-poverty, predominantly nonwhite schools. Thus, the lack of high-quality instruction in reading combined with these other factors may be responsible for the reading failure that prompts the referral of so many minority children to special education programs.

Another issue is the belief held by some teachers that poverty creates deficits in children's functioning and preordains them to reading failure. There are, of course, strong correlations among poverty, minority status, and achievement. However, poverty itself does not necessarily result in low learning potential or reading failure, as witnessed by a significant proportion of children and schools who "beat the odds" (Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 1999). Although we do not wish to minimize the potential consequences of poverty for children's learning, an alternative explanation is that teachers in these environments are unfamiliar with children's home cultures, background experiences, and/or language differences, and thus they make judgments about children's competence using inappropriate criteria. It is the Association's position that judgments about all children's literacy competence be made after children have had the opportunity to participate in a high-quality classroom reading program.

**FIGURE**  
**Reading achievement gap: Difference in average reading scale scores of 9-, 13-, and 17-year-old white and black students: 1971-1999**



*Note.* The gap is determined by subtracting the average black score from the average white score at each grade for each year assessed. Source: U.S. Department of Education, NCES. (2000). *NAEP 1999 Trends in Academic Progress: Three Decades of Student Performance* (NCES 2000-469) and National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 1999 Long-Term Trend Assessment, unpublished data produced by the Educational Testing Service.

### Uncoordinated services

Another major factor contributing to low reading achievement is the lack of coordination among the regular education, Title I, and special education programs and teachers (Allington & Walmsley, 1995). At present, services for reading are fragmented and the inability of the school systems to function efficiently contributes to the existence of reading achievement gaps between poor and affluent, and minority and majority children. In 33 U.S. states, the special education funding system pays schools on a per-labeled child basis (Greene & Forster, 2002). There are restrictions on serving those children with funds from other sources, and many special education children cannot receive services from reading specialists funded through Title I or other reading-specific state and local reading programs. Often, the professionals who teach children with high-incidence disabilities do not have as much expertise and education in teaching reading as reading specialists teaching in the same buildings. It is the Association's position that the professional best qualified to deliver reading instruction be determined at the local level.

A revision of special education identification procedures that involves strong collaboration among regular educators, reading specialists, and special educators is essential. Because the reason for many children's referrals to special education is reading difficulty, all professionals who provide reading instruction must work together to ensure both individualized and sound goals that are determined through systematic and continuous evaluation of students' literacy capabilities. Schools must have the flexibility to determine which professionals serve which children. Funding sources and program regulations must not constrain these important decisions. It is the Association's position that placement in the high-incidence disability categories should occur only after classroom teachers, school- or district-based reading professionals, and special educators have collaborated to implement and sustain moderate, classroom-based interventions.

### Starting out behind

As noted earlier, data indicate that an achievement gap is present when children arrive at kindergarten. However, in traditional assessments, language and literacy skills—such as storytelling and dual-language development—that would highlight culturally relevant strengths of minority children are often overlooked (Garcia, 2000; Nieto, 1997). Many children from poor and minority families have not had the same exposure to the school-valued language and literacy skills that white and higher socioeconomic status children have had. The experiences that poor and minority children have had often are unrecognized in school environments. What teachers often read as lack of achievement are the different forms of diverse learners' preliterate experiences (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Neuman & Celano, 2001).

### A Call for Collaboration

Strong collaboration for the delivery of education services involves all the various education professionals serving a school building or district. In a collaborative approach, a child is initially identified because of low achievement. Once he or she has been identified, the first determination is whether the student's low achievement represents a failure to respond to adequate classroom instruction or results from the classroom instruction itself being inadequate. If the classroom instruction currently provided is inadequate (i.e., many of the children are making little progress), the first task, before or alongside any intervention with the child, is to improve classroom instruction.

If the classroom instruction is adequate (i.e., many children are making satisfactory progress), the first level of intervention is to

determine whether the child's achievement improves with modest instructional changes implemented at the classroom level. The classroom teachers, reading specialists, and special education professionals collaborate in planning and implementing the intervention. If the modest intervention does not elevate the student's achievement level, then a second, more intensive level of intervention with a mindful response to systematic and frequent assessment—such as extended learning time (before- and after-school and summer programs) and/or small-group and one-on-one instruction—is conducted by the classroom teacher and/or the reading specialist, who collaborate with special educators to design and implement the modified reading instruction. Such interventions should continue until the child reaches expectations or additional assessments are requested. At this third level of intervention, a decision is made about the child's educational progress and the possibility of a special education placement and an alternative educational plan.

Ensuring collaboration is a major challenge in the United States for school districts, states, and the federal government. Because there are separate funding streams and regulations for regular, special, and compensatory education, and because the U.S. federal government is a major funding provider for special and compensatory education, collaboration cannot be accomplished without strong commitment from the U.S. Department of Education. There are existing models of collaborative programs suggesting that such systems are feasible given the appropriate federal, state, and local collaborations (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Risko & Bromley, 2000).

The implementation of excellent reading instruction must be the first step in the collaboration process. As noted earlier, poor minority children are attending schools that have less-qualified teachers, fewer materials and resources, and no adaptations of curricular goals to accommodate diversity, and that are in poor physical condition. There must be systematic efforts to strengthen teachers' professional development and to provide appropriate materials, resources, and curriculum designs.

Extensive professional development related to culturally responsive and effective reading instruction is essential for the most effective professional collaboration. Often, paraprofessionals, special reading teachers, and special education teachers do not have adequate preparation for teaching reading. There is wide variability among the colleges of education regarding preservice course requirements in the area of reading and even more variability among state teacher certification requirements at the elementary level. Additionally, states pressed by the need to fill teacher vacancies frequently offer waivers of the minimum requirements for certification. In some states, special educators have no more—and sometimes have less—required coursework in reading than elementary classroom teachers. All these professionals must be adequately prepared for reading instruction. Inservice programs to develop their expertise will be very important to the success of collaborative intervention. With effective collaboration, the boundaries between special education, regular education, and compensatory education are blurred. Such collaboration invites all educators to take new roles in classrooms (for example, as team teacher, classroom observer, tutor, and small-group instructor).

Collaboration among professionals is a complex activity requiring conscious effort and commitment. Therefore, it is imperative that significant professional development efforts focus on effective collaboration. Teacher preparation programs must provide preservice teachers with an understanding of both the need for collaboration and the skills related to it. Preservice teachers' field experiences must include opportunities to collaborate with other education professionals in developing and implementing effective reading instruction.

### Addressing the Overrepresentation Issue

Effective collaboration alone may not solve the problem of overrepresentation of minority children in special education. It is possible that even with such collaboration in place, higher proportions of minority children will be identified for special education programs. However, the logic of this position statement suggests that poor initial reading instruction may be leading to inappropriate classification of minority children in the high-incidence disability categories. High-poverty schools have large concentrations of minority children, and these schools often have uncertified personnel delivering reading instruction. Early and intensive intervention is often unavailable. Once children experience difficulty in reading, it is probable that they will not receive the most appropriate instruction they need in a timely fashion.

Strong collaboration focusing first on effective reading instruction, then on modest in-class reading interventions, and finally on more intensive small-group and one-on-one tutoring in reading is a crucial sequence for reducing the overrepresentation of minority children in special education in the United States. If quality instruction combined with timely and appropriately intense reading interventions does not solve the reading problem that is the source of the referral, then it is time to consider alternative programs such as special education. If educators deliver excellent reading instruction to children before considering a special education placement, they will identify more of the children for whom special education is truly appropriate. If children are identified correctly, the proportions of minority children in special education in the United States most likely will reflect the proportions of minority children in the general school population, and the risk of being placed in special education will be similar for children of all racial and ethnic categories.

### Recommendations

#### U.S. Department of Education

- Allow for the commingling of funds that will enable more services to be delivered to all children.
- Support inservice programs in the area of reading to develop the teaching capacity of classroom teachers, special reading teachers, paraprofessionals, and special educators.
- Continue to insist on the disaggregation of data by ethnic and racial background.
- Provide early literacy education through preschools.

#### U.S. state governments

- Create incentives for the implementation of collaborative intervention programs.
- Provide funds for improving regular classroom instruction.
- Support reading specialists.
- Support early literacy education through preschools.

#### School districts

- Create a delivery system that pulls together personnel and funding that ordinarily would be segmented into special, regular, and compensatory education.
- Provide time for extensive and powerful professional development in reading for all professionals and paraprofessionals involved in providing reading instruction.
- Ensure that all schools are adequately maintained and provide appropriate materials and resources.
- Offer early childhood programs that focus on preliterate education.

#### Regular classroom teachers

- Welcome other education professionals into the classroom.
- Participate willingly in improving daily classroom instruction.
- Seek professional development.

#### Title I teachers and reading specialists

- Participate in collaborative programming planning.
- Advocate for the implementation of collaborative intervention programs.
- Provide leadership for other professionals in the area of reading.

#### Special educators

- Become experts in reading instruction and assessment.
- Collaborate with other professionals to develop effective reading interventions.

#### Principals

- Lead the team of educators to facilitate collaboration.
- Be strongly knowledgeable about reading and reading instruction as well as curricula, including collaborative intervention programs.
- Provide reading professionals with adequate time for professional development.
- Implement a strong professional development program in reading.

#### Teacher educators and professional developers

- Learn how to assess students' reading strengths and needs, and plan and deliver effective instruction for all students.
- Ensure that all preservice and inservice teachers both understand the capabilities and the learning needs of all students and have opportunities to collaborate with a range of educational professionals in providing appropriate instruction for all students.
- Provide preservice and inservice teachers with opportunities to learn about and practice culturally appropriate teaching strategies.
- Prepare preservice and inservice teachers to set high expectations for minority students through preservice and ongoing professional development opportunities.

#### Parents

- Be advocates for equitable assessment and placement of children.
- Request and respond to information about trends in special education placement at the local school district and state levels.
- Participate fully in the school's intervention program.
- Become knowledgeable of the programs and services available.
- Inform the school about your efforts at home and your concerns about your child's progress.

### Related Resources From the International Reading Association

#### Books

- García, G.G. (Ed.). (2003). *English learners: Reaching the highest level of English literacy*.
- Opitz, M.F. (1998). *Literacy instruction for culturally and linguistically diverse students: A collection of articles and commentaries*.

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#### Journal Articles

- Grant, R.A. (2003). Barriers to literacy for language-minority learners: An argument for change in the literacy education profession. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 46, 386–394.
- Jiménez, R.T. (2001). "It's a difference that changes us": An alternative view of the language and literacy learning needs of Latina/o students. *The Reading Teacher*, 54, 736–742.

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