

# The Next Generation of Disproportionality Research

## Toward a Comparative Model in the Study of Equity in Ability Differences

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Minority student disproportionate representation in special education has been debated and (increasingly) studied in the United States for the past 40 years. The purpose of this article is to place this problem in the larger arena of equity studies related to *difference* in educational practice and propose a comparative model to study it. A first step in the creation of a comparative interdisciplinary paradigm is the publication of this special series. The authors theorize the disproportionality problem and critique U.S. research on the topic before introducing the articles included in this issue, which cover six nations on four continents. The authors conclude with a discussion of key themes to include in the next generation of comparative interdisciplinary research on disproportionality.

**Keywords:** *disproportionate representation; minority students; equity in special education*

The disproportionate representation of minority students in special education has been discussed in the United States for four decades. It encompasses over- and underrepresentation in the so-called high-incidence (or subjective) disability categories (i.e., learning disabilities, mild mental retardation, and emotional disturbance) and gifted and talented education programs (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Johnson, 1969; for a review, see Artiles, Trent, & Palmer, 2004). The disproportionate placement of minority students in the low-incidence disability categories has not been considered a major problem (Donovan & Cross, 2002). Male low-income African American and Native American students are the most affected groups at the national level (Donovan & Cross, 2002); recent studies suggest that English language learners are overrepresented in districts that serve large populations of English language learners (Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, & Higuera, 2005). This problem is so significant that the National Research Council has produced two reports on the topic in a 20-year period (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Heller, Holtzman, & Messick, 1982).

Researchers, practitioners, and policy makers continue to debate this problem, and critical questions remain unanswered. For instance, how do we explain

the existence and persistence of this predicament? How have researchers approached the study of this problem, and what are some key gaps in this knowledge base? Does the problem exist in the United States only? The goal of this article is to offer brief responses to these questions to set the context for this special issue, namely, the comparative study of minority disproportionality in special education. For this purpose, we theorize in the next section the problem of disproportionate representation as related to equity concerns in educational systems' responses to *difference*. We also make the case for the comparative study of this complex predicament. Next, we outline the main research approaches used to study this problem and identify important gaps in this literature. Before we

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conclude, we describe the articles included in this special issue. The last section of the article is devoted to a discussion of the future generation of comparative interdisciplinary research.

### **Grappling With the Paradoxes of Educational Equity and Ability Differences: The Case of Minority Students in U.S. Special Education**

Educational equity in the United States has aimed historically to enhance access and participation for students considered *different*. For instance, programs were created to address the educational needs of students who have different ability levels or whose proficiency in English is limited (i.e., special education and bilingual education, respectively). Minow (1990) argued that systems' treatment of difference is questionable because it tends to create seemingly irresolvable paradoxes or dilemmas. Do we treat all students the same, or do we make special accommodations for certain groups? Do we educate all groups of students considered different in the same program, or do we create separate programs for some of them?

Special education in the United States is an interesting case in point, because it was created in response to some of these dilemmas of difference. The creation of special education was a landmark achievement in the attention of students considered different on the basis of ability. Special education legislation entitled these students to free and appropriate public education, individualized educational programs, due process, and education in the least restrictive environment. Interestingly, an increasingly louder debate has emerged in the past 40 years in the United States about the disproportionate representation of ethnic minority and poor students in special education. Federal law now requires that states report placement data along racial and socioeconomic lines to monitor this problem. Remedial actions are required of states and districts when disproportionality is documented. But why is placement in programs that purportedly address equity issues for students with different ability levels considered a problem when it involves other groups of different students, namely, ethnic minorities and poor students?

A first step in answering this question is to acknowledge that traditional approaches to address difference are problematic because the dilemmas they create are grounded in assumptions that are neither visible

nor analyzed. According to Minow (1990), difference has been historically associated with deviance or stigma. An additional assumption suggests that to avoid being different, one must be the same; that is, sameness means equality. Artiles (1998) argued that the disproportionate representation of minority students in special education is problematic in part because the assumptions about difference that underlie this debate reify long-standing oppressive perceptions and practices that affect these students. For instance, Minow explained that difference is always a comparative construct: different from what or whom? The disproportionality debate assumes that difference is an intrinsic, not a comparative, notion. Minority students have endured a significant share of deficit discourse not only in the scientific community (Valencia, 1997) but also in the media and other spheres of life. In light of equivocal evidence on referral, assessment, placement rates, and the restrictiveness of placement, some scholars have raised questions about misidentification and misplacement. Good (1997), for instance, asked, "How do we account for higher levels of [mental illness] misdiagnosis among members of ethnic minorities in the United States?" (p. 230). The evidence to address this issue is only beginning to accumulate (Harry & Klingner, 2006; Losen & Orfield, 2002; Skiba et al., 2006).

Another assumption that constructs dilemmas of difference is that the person naming a difference does not have a cultural perspective. In fact, the perspective of such a person is typically invisible. For example, many examiners write reports about children's performance on cognitive tests that focus solely on the test scores. The examiners' assumptions about how a child's second language might mediate performance are not reported. Similarly, how a history of racial tensions in a community might shape the interactions between White examiners and Latino or African American children during the testing are not considered or addressed in the assessment results (see Artiles, 1998, for additional discussion of these and other assumptions). Finally, concerns about this problem have been raised because of the problematic outcomes of the special education system (e.g., achievement level, dropout rate, postschool economic and occupational attainment, access to college). Thus, ethnic minority students, who already face significant challenges in opportunity to learn because of structural inequalities (e.g., school and teacher quality, and funding; see Note 1), are placed in disproportionate numbers in educational programs that produce

long-term outcomes that will limit further their educational and personal futures.

To conclude, it seems that the debate about the placement of minority students in special education is far more complex than a disability prevalence quandary. We have argued elsewhere that this problem must be examined in the sociohistorical context in which minority students live and are educated in the United States (Artiles, 2003). Indeed, we believe that it is shortsighted and highly problematic merely to mathematize complex social problems (Tate, Ladson-Billings, & Grant, 1996). The challenge is to shed light on the implications of the layering of difference in the lives of certain groups and the societal responses to address their educational needs. The issue is not that special education is bad for minority (and majority) students. Rather, the challenges are greater: How are differences accounted for in systems of educational support for an increasingly diverse student population? Considering that minority students receive different services than their majority peers with the same disability diagnoses (e.g., less related services, more restrictive placements), how can educational support systems for students with ability differences avoid applying differential consequences to subgroups of students who presumably share the same ability difference? Fortunately, this debate has created a space to work on improving special education theory, research, and practice.

Given the analysis outlined above, therefore, we must ask, how are the assumptions, processes, and practices that address equity and difference in special education configured in cultural contexts outside of the United States? What can be learned from those experiences about dilemmas of difference, educational equity struggles, and the place and meaning of special education in stratified societies? These are the driving questions behind the design of this collection of manuscripts. Before we outline the articles included in this issue, we contextualize the focus of this series through a brief critique of U.S. scholarship on this topic.

### **Minority Students in Special Education: Dimensions and Limits of U.S. Research**

U.S. research on this problem has been concerned with explanations that stress either technical views or sociohistorical and ideological perspectives (Artiles

et al., 2004). Technical analyses focus on the examination of the problem as related solely to individual or professional factors. For instance, studies document placement patterns in special education for various ethnic or socioeconomic student groups. Child factors (e.g., ethnicity, child deficits due to poverty, language background, performance on various developmental measures) or professional or educational variables (e.g., teacher beliefs or biases, technical flaws in measurement tools or procedures, the availability of alternative support systems) are examined to determine whether they affect students' chances to be placed in special education programs.

Racial minority status and poverty are correlated. This association has been identified by some researchers in this strand of work as the reason why these students are overidentified for special education services. It is argued that poverty causes significant developmental deficits that require special education services. Unfortunately, this perspective is limited in the conceptualization of human development, the attention to key considerations (e.g., developmental timing and the duration of poverty), and the role of protective factors and resiliency (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network, 2005; O'Connor & Fernandez, 2006). Deleire and Kalil (2002), for instance, found in their national longitudinal sample that the developmental outcomes of low-income African American middle school students who lived in multigenerational families were akin to or better than the outcomes of their counterparts living in two-parent households. Research also suggests that "poverty makes a weak and inconsistent contribution to the prediction of disproportionality across a number of disability categories" (Skiba et al., 2005, p. 130).

A prevalent assumption in studies that subscribe to a technical view of the problem is that disability placement decisions are the result of factors within the realm of individual traits, school processes, or educational systems. The notion of culture is rarely used in this line of inquiry, and when used, it tends to be defined in static and categorical ways. For instance, culture is equated with race or ethnicity or defined as a subjective construct (e.g., beliefs, values). Culture indexed in schools' or communities' everyday practices is not considered.

Another strand of scholarship about disproportionality assumes this problem is a symptom of larger inequalities in a racially stratified society. This work assumes educational systems and schools are built on

societal ideologies that advantage White, middle-class individuals and penalize others who do not conform to the cultural capital of this dominant group. Some scholars argue that special education has been used to perpetuate the marginalization of students from minority racial and socioeconomic groups because disability labels usually promoted segregation or limited access to general education peers and curricula (Fierros & Conroy, 2002; Patton, 1998). The construct of culture is sometimes used explicitly in this strand of work. It is often defined as a bounded, static, and monolithic entity, as in “school cultures” or the “culture of the African American community,” or “White, middle-class culture.”

A third generation of scholarship is beginning to emerge in which technical and ideological forces are integrated with a more dynamic, situated, and instrumental view of culture to understand the complexity of this historical predicament (Artiles, 2003; Harry & Klingner, 2006). This emerging work is committed to address equity questions related to ability differences informed by the themes outlined in the final section of the article.

Notwithstanding the research limitations outlined in this section, it is encouraging to see the increasing attention given to this problem in the United States. We are hopeful that future studies will expand the breadth of explanations explored and enhance the theoretical sophistication of study designs and evidence interpretation. As we explained above, disproportionality has been treated in the literature as if it is a U.S. problem. A central goal of this series is to explore whether the larger equity issues that underlie this problem are observed in other cultural contexts beyond U.S. borders. If our theoretical analysis of the problem concerned with equity related to difference holds, we should expect various permutations of this predicament in other societies. Obviously, such experiences would be immersed in local cultural and sociohistorical contingencies. Thus, we set out to compile articles from four continents that examine equity issues in special education related to minority groups. We argue that a comparative approach has important potential advantages. For instance, comparative analyses can be used by national systems not just to learn from one another but to “reflect on why things are the way they are in their own system” (Artiles & Dyson, 2005, p. 59). We expect that a comparative perspective on this problem will assist us in avoiding ethnocentric perspectives on difference (Barton & Tomlinson, 1984; Mitchell, 2005). A comparative framework should

also rely on historical analyses of both past trends and prospective longitudinal patterns. Hence, we expect that a comparative model in the study of ability differences will help us understand the sociohistorical and cultural underpinnings of special education by examining the contexts that shape a society’s changing treatments of minority students and students with disabilities.

We describe in the next section the articles included in this special series. Some engage in explicit comparative analyses, whereas others describe conditions within given countries. Aside from this obvious difference, we invite readers to understand the unique local conditions of each country but also to draw inferences, raise comparative questions and hypotheses, and ponder how these cases add to our understanding of culture-based explanations of equity in special education. After we briefly describe these articles, we conclude with a discussion about themes that should permeate the next generation of comparative interdisciplinary research.

### **Minority Groups in Special Education on Four Continents**

The studies in this special issue present analyses of how differences are created on the basis of ethnicity, gender, economic, and social class and disabilities in the educational systems of six nations on four continents. An important contribution of these analyses is that they link school processes and outcomes related to differences with larger sociohistorical, cultural, and ideological national contexts. The authors help us see similarities and differences in terms of the educational treatments and representation of minority students in special education programs. In addition, these articles illustrate that minority children’s and their families’ differences are not static or simple. We hope that these studies will help readers develop a more comprehensive understanding of the historical legacy of special education disproportionality in the United States.

In the first article, Harry, Arnaiz, Klingner, and Sturges note interesting similarities and differences in societal perceptions and treatments of two groups of minority students in Spain (i.e., Gitano and Moroccan students) and the United States (i.e., African American and Hispanic students). The researchers synthesized three of their own studies to understand the relationships between professional beliefs and assumptions about

the “cultural” characteristics of minority students and families and minority students’ academic achievement. Through their observations and interviews related to referral and placement processes for African American and Hispanic students, the authors found that social biases specifically against African American, low-income families and disruptions in the placement processes affected minority children’s academic achievement. In Spain, Harry and her colleagues identified several tensions in professional views of cultural diversity and their response to cultural and linguistic differences. Even though Spanish education laws emphasize student diversity in culture, language, and abilities and promote inclusion for all students, professionals interpreted cultural and linguistic diversity as a threat to Gitano and Moroccan students’ assimilation to mainstream Spanish culture. In addition, many Spanish educators indicated their color-blind perspectives—“minority students are just like others”—which, as Minow (1990) indicated, associate sameness with equality. The authors found that Spanish educators failed to move beyond taking the inclusion of minority students as an issue of physical placement. After Harry et al. reviewed the findings about professionals’ perceptions and practices, and the academic outcomes of minority students, they pointed out that the analysis of how minority status is historically constructed in a given society can shed light on the production of low academic achievement of those groups. On the basis of their findings, Harry and her colleagues concluded that explaining academic gaps between minority and majority children solely with poverty and cultural mismatch theories is a simplistic option. They also conclude that placing deficits in minority children and their families prevent us from seeing social and economic inequalities, racism, and the U.S. and Spanish education systems’ resistance to include minority children’s “funds of knowledge” (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005).

In another comparative analysis, Kozleski, Engelbrecht, Hess, Swart, Eloff, Oswald, Molina, and Jain report a cross-case study in the United States and South Africa, where there are long-lasting legacies of racial discrimination and social inequalities. They explored the relationships between special education service providers and minority families of children with disabilities. The authors were interested in how race, cultures, perspectives, and the assumed roles of families and school professionals interacted. As the researchers attempted to listen and privilege family voices, their discussion of sociocultural factors and

policy analyses enabled them to place the voices of families in the cultural-historical contexts of these two countries’ educational systems. The authors found that implicit rules and national special education policies affected parents’ perspectives and experiences in their children’s special education placements. They pointed out that rules and procedures related to placements were not clearly explained and discussed with families in the United States. These issues and the privileged views of professionals on what, how, and where their children could learn disempowered the U.S. families. However, in both countries, the researchers recorded that parents were active agents in their children’s special education placements and practices. The participants of these studies actively sought out ways to advocate for their children’s rights and support their educational and social development. For minority parents who were not usually welcomed and supported by the professionals, becoming their children’s advocates took longer. Professionals who developed strong personal connections and effective communications with parents played an important role in supporting parents’ participation in the education of their children.

The following three articles provide policy analyses of general and special education systems in England, Germany, and India. In the late 1970s, England moved away from a categorical approach to provide special education services for children. In the English special education system, without being placed in specific disability categories, children can get special education support on the basis of assessments of their learning characteristics, educational accommodations, and additional supports. Using current national data and newly emerging literature on disproportionate identification of minority students for “special educational needs,” Dyson and Gallannaugh argue that disproportionality exists in the English special education system for socially and economically marginalized children. The authors stated that Bangladeshi, Pakistani, and Black Caribbean families in England have negative economic and health indicators compared with White British, Indian, and Chinese families. There is also a significant academic achievement gap between children of the former and the latter groups. Children from Traveler families with Irish or Roma heritage and Black Caribbean children are overrepresented in various levels of special educational needs support (i.e., school action, school action plus, and statements with subjective categories). National data showed that family income, race, gender, and ages of the students

interacted to influence this overrepresentation pattern. Dyson and Gallannaugh proposed that social and educational inequalities found in England are as important as school-level practices and professionals' perspectives in shaping the overrepresentation of minority children.

In their analysis of the German general and special education systems, Werning, Löser, and Urban linked the overrepresentation of minority students in special education schools to the long-lasting practice of the homogeneous group placement of students in Germany. In secondary schools, children are chosen to attend different schools, where there are different levels of educational opportunities and support. The authors indicated that in general education, students from low-income families and children of immigrants are underrepresented in advanced secondary schools. In addition, these groups of students are overrepresented in special schools. These placement patterns stigmatize these minority children and block their access to high-quality educational opportunities. The authors argued that the German education system, with its exclusionary practices of homogeneous grouping, contributes to socioeconomic isolation and discrimination for low-income and immigrant children. When this exclusionary system is combined with existing social biases and prejudice against minority students and lack of culturally responsive educational programs, its effects can be devastating in the lives of these minority students.

Kalyanpur's article focuses on the social, economic, and cultural factors preventing children with disabilities, girls, and children in low economic and social classes to access basic educational services. The author summarized evidence related to social and economic indicators for these groups. Kalyanpur also analyzed national, statewide, and international educational policies and programs. By shedding light on a different form of disproportionate representation of minority children in India, Kalyanpur illustrates our argument that disproportionality is an issue of equity and a symptom shaped in part by larger social and systemic problems in a given society.

To conclude, this special issue includes perspectives from four economically developed nations (England, Germany, Spain, and the United States), where the bulk of the special education literature is produced, as well as two developing nations (India and South Africa), where about two thirds of the 150 million individuals with disabilities around the globe live (Fletcher & Artiles, 2005). We hope that the analyses and discussions in the featured articles will shed light on how

education systems address the strengths and needs of minority students in various countries in the age of globalization.

### **Toward a Comparative Interdisciplinary Research Program: Notes on Theory and Methods**

We conclude this article with a preliminary discussion about three themes that should inform future comparative interdisciplinary research. Because the inclusive education movement is gaining global proportions, we allude to future research in special education (because this term is still widely used in many nations) as well as inclusive education programs.

### **Comparative Analyses: From Local Experience to Regularities in Equity Research on Ability Differences**

The next generation of research on equity for ability differences should be grounded in a comparative paradigm (Arnone, 1999). This means that, consistent with scientific activity, equity-oriented studies in special and inclusive education aim to generate knowledge in systematic ways and contribute to theory development. Because this research will be conducted in localities in which norms, values, practices, and historical trajectories are culturally based, a comparative paradigm ought to conduct situated analyses. That is, researchers need to document processes and outcomes in such fashion that help understand local experiences from the vantage point of indigenous participants. At the same time, however, a comparative framework aspires to chart regularities in evidence generated across local contexts.

Artiles and Dyson (2005) proposed that comparative analyses entail the dimensions of participants, culture, history, and outcomes. Equity-minded research in special and inclusive education would need to include clear descriptions of the groups affected (*participants*) by equity concerns in a given educational system. Who is affected by the target equity situation? Who benefits? What markers or indices are used to define these groups? What other sociodemographic factors describe these groups? What other groups are directly involved in or affected by the target equity issue (e.g., teachers, school psychologists, parents)? An advantage of a *historical* emphasis is that it allows researchers to conduct analyses at multiple temporal

levels. This requires, therefore, considerable effort by researchers to pursue *coordinated* programs of research. Studies can be conducted, for example, on equity issues that affect entire groups or communities over time (i.e., the cultural-historical level). The traditional work done in the United States on placement patterns for ethnic minority students over time is an example of this analytic focus. But equity studies can also follow developmental pathways or educational trajectories for significantly smaller samples (e.g., case studies) of individuals in the target group of participants. The case studies that Harry and Klingner (2006) produced in their 3-year ethnographic project illustrate this strategy. Last, researchers may choose to do in-depth examinations of recurrent events or activities that involve the target participants. The use of moment-to-moment analysis covers a shorter time scale, but it renders a rich micro-analysis of social and cultural processes. Exemplars of this line of inquiry include Mehan's (1993) and Varenne and McDermott's (1999) studies.

Equity situations, struggles, or questions are typically linked to outcomes. These outcomes are generally related to the consequences of the equity concerns (e.g., the placement proportions of various groups in disability categories) or the measures used to track the impact of efforts to get rid of the problem (e.g., learning indicators or opportunity to learn indices). The next generation of comparative research will have to document the outcomes of inequitable conditions as defined by local actors. Last, the *cultural* dimension has a central importance in Artiles and Dyson's (2005) comparative model. As implied by the brief overview of the other dimensions of this model, culture is defined in this work beyond categorical variables. Because of the centrality of culture, we outline such a view in the next section.

### **Beyond Culture as Attribute: Identity and Practice in Cultural Worlds**

To build a sound knowledge base, comparative research must situate findings in their cultural contexts and histories. For this purpose, the model of culture that informs such research is dynamic, instrumental, and historically situated. In this view, culture is located in people's *subjectivities* (e.g., beliefs, values, or knowledge) as well as in their everyday *practices* (Cole, 1996). Practices are defined as "actions that are repeated, shared with others in a social group, and invested with normative expectations and with

meanings or significances that go beyond the immediate goals of the action" (Miller & Goodnow, 1995, p. 7). An implication of this perspective is that research on equity related to ability differences must focus not only in the *cultures in schools* but also the *school cultures* (Gallego, Cole, & Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition, 2001). In other words, researchers should transcend the traditional exclusive focus on the various groups represented in schools (e.g., linguistic, socioeconomic, ethnic) and document the ways these students' cultural practices intersect with school cultural practices to construct and maintain inequitable conditions. Moreover, this perspective on culture suggests that researchers' work is also culturally mediated, and thus research teams must build procedures and safeguards to monitor the potential implications of the cultural practice of research (Arzubiaga, Artiles, King, & Haris-Murri, in press).

Traditionally, most educational research has equated culture with people's traits (e.g., race; Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003). The cultural model we propose transcends this simplistic view and stresses that students participate in multiple cultural communities, thus illustrating the instrumental nature of culture. Pollock's (2004) study showed, for example, how student race gains and loses currency depending on the sociocultural activities in which educators and youngsters participate. This pattern is shaped in part by the fact that students do not always occupy clearly defined social positions; in a way, they move in liminal (betwixt) spaces throughout the school day.

Children and youth contribute to reproduce cultural traditions by abiding to cultural norms, expectations, rituals, and so on (Erickson, 2001). But individuals also challenge traditions and change cultural practices. Thus, we assume that minority students in schools are engaged in the creation of their identities as they preserve their cultural heritage and at the same time are innovative creators of new versions of such cultural traditions. This is why culture is also said to embody an *instrumental* dimension that helps individuals fulfill goals and cope with unexpected developments in social situations (Erickson, 2001). This is important because it helps explain why not all members of a cultural group act exactly the same way or possess the same cultural information. Cultures also possess an *interpretive* dimension that enables people to interpret and make sense of everyday experiences, because cultures endow them with frames of reference (e.g., social and knowledge categories, functional emotional

repertoires) to navigate and filter the information obtained in everyday events.

As suggested by the preceding discussion, culture is a complex construct that has been neglected in special education and the social sciences (Artiles, 2003). This is a critical omission, considering the disproportionality problem addressed in this special issue. However, research that focuses explicitly on cultural practices and processes can offer important insights in the study of equity related to difference. Manson (1997), for instance, lamented the lack of attention to ethnographic research in the National Institute of Mental Health's research portfolio. Through the integration of "ethnographic, diagnostic, and epidemiologic techniques to study mental health problems among American Indian and Alaska Natives" (p. 249), Manson offered important lessons in the generation of culturally responsive knowledge in a pluralistic society.

Equity-minded research in special and inclusive education needs to account for students' and educators' active production of cultures as a way to transcend deterministic structural models (e.g., schools' rules marginalize minority students; teachers' biases cause minority student school failure). The cultural model we advance compels researchers to document how educators, students, and families resolve in everyday events the tensions between reproducing or innovating practices. Studies using a situated angle are needed to examine how educators' and students' interpret the goals and intentionalities of other people involved in school and classroom events that are regulated by particular norms and rules. In other words, it will be important to examine how educators and students orchestrate the regulative, interpretive, and instrumental dimensions of culture during the school day. This is a consequential challenge, because it is through educators' and students' participation in academic activities (e.g., lessons, project presentations, discussion of readings) and in events in which they cope with conflicts or demands related to discipline, or in interactions with school personnel and peers in various contexts (e.g., playground, cafeteria, classrooms, assessment settings) that institutional decisions and actions about ability differences are created. As McDermott (1999) explained in his discussion of cultural categories and dichotomies such as gender, the "cultural question is not what do boys and girls do, but when are the categories male and female made relevant, in what circumstances, by virtue of what work?" (p. 163).

### **Globalization and Postcolonial Legacies: Minding Power and the Dialectics of the Local Versus Global**

We argued above that the equity issues raised by the disproportionate representation of minority students are not unique to the United States. We also proposed to pursue a comparative research program that will render important insights about this problem. A comparative model of research cannot ignore the influence of globalization and postcolonial legacies in the study of equity related to ability differences. First, globalization has influenced drastically how daily life, business, politics, social movements, and, of course, educational programs take place and are interpreted (Inda & Rosaldo, 2008). A key feature of globalization is the compression of time and space due in part to the advent of sophisticated (and relatively inexpensive) communication technologies (Suárez-Orozco, 2001). The result is that local incidents taking place on the other side of the Earth are accessible to us virtually within minutes of their original occurrence. Furthermore, the proliferation of increasingly affordable mass transportation means has made it easier for people to move across large distances in relatively short periods of time. Globalization has also enabled the creation of markets in large geographical regions, and ultimately worldwide, that propelled the emergence of information and knowledge economies. And globalization has been characterized by massive flows of people, mostly from the developing to the developed world (Suárez-Orozco, 2001). These people tend to seek better economic opportunities for themselves and their families (who do not always accompany them), though they stay connected to their countries of origin through the aforementioned means of transportation and communication. An important consequence of these globalization trends can be summed up in one word: *interdependency*. Indeed, events, crisis, or changes once thought of to be local occurrences increasingly have global repercussions (e.g., a stock market crisis in Asia, comments to the media by a high-ranking federal employee about an upcoming economic recession in the United States, the endorsement of inclusive education in developed nations).

Globalization affects educational systems in a number of important ways. For instance, some of the main educational reforms in the United States, Western Europe, and Latin America are driven by economic goals. One example is the current changes of the curriculum and pedagogy to better prepare the



future citizens of a global society in which proficiency in technology literacies and command of information and knowledge practices are expected. How do these reforms shape educational systems' priorities to serve students with ability differences, or how do these policy changes shape definitions of such differences? What are the equity consequences of these trends? Economic globalization trends have improved macro-economic indicators in many developing countries, whereas investment in social programs (including education) has declined. The Latin American region is a prime example. Arnove and Torres (1999) reported the poverty level of this region remained stagnant during the 1990s, and indicators of educational equity such as school completion, grade repetition, and access to school reflected unsettling trends. Are minority groups differentially affected by these trends? Do special education and inclusive education programs face new equity challenges as a result of these societal, economic, and educational changes? Studies suggest that the aforementioned economic and global trends are affecting urban low-income high school students' educational experiences. Bettis (1996) documented how these students "exist in a liminal state, one without a defined status or future in the world of work, since their parents' supposedly secure industrial jobs were no longer available to them" (p. 106). A comparative research agenda would help deepen our understanding of these trends and how they affect equity issues related to differences.

Another key consequence of globalization is that U.S. majority and minority students attend school with members of many newcomer groups of students. These newcomers defy stereotypes as many of them maintain close contacts with their home countries through regular visits and communication. These newcomers cross cultural borders in schools to adapt, resist, or participate in alternative ways in schools. Their cultures cannot be essentialized, because they become hybrids of the practices of their native countries and the other cultures with which they come in contact everyday (e.g., the mainstream culture of schools, the cultural practices of U.S. minority groups). How do intergroup relations contribute to the development of minority and immigrant children's identities in ways that defy school systems' categorical logic? How meaningful are the ethnic categories we use to track disproportionality given these global trends? What is the impact of transnational networks and communities in school processes and outcomes such as school achievement, absenteeism, or the discontinuities between traditional

school curricular models of cultural diversity vis-à-vis students' identities?

Globalization's focus on the dialectics of local events and global trends also help researchers understand the distribution of *power* in human affairs, including educational processes and outcomes. As we know, cultural resources are differentially distributed in communities. Not everybody has the same access to high-value or high-prestige knowledge and networks. Individuals in higher locations in the constellation of social positions have the power to define who is and is not different. That is why we rely on Gibson's (1991) definition of "minority" to describe groups that occupy a

subordinate position in a multiethnic society, suffering from the disabilities of prejudice and discrimination, and maintaining a separate group identity. Even though individual members of the group may improve their social status, the group itself remains in a subordinate position in terms of its power to shape the dominant value system of the society or to share fully in its rewards. (p. 358)

For instance, the role of power is observed in school psychologists' work who have the technical knowledge and institutional endorsements to influence special education eligibility decisions (Harry & Klingner, 2006; Mehan, 1993). Unfortunately, an artifact of power is that individuals exercising positions of power do not have to make visible their subjective perspectives and the implicit reference points they use to compare others. Attention to the role of power enables researchers to ask questions such as these:

Is there silence about certain issues, groups, or practices? What are the ideological underpinnings of inclusion goals and means [and the equity dilemmas faced by an educational system]? What does it mean to be included [or excluded] for various groups in the target community? When do certain types of difference count, under what conditions, and in what ways and for what reasons? (adapted from Artiles & Dyson, 2005, p. 50)

A postcolonial perspective enhances the analysis of globalization with its attendant focus on power. Postcolonial theory can help researchers question binary distinctions (e.g., majority vs. minority, law abiding vs. delinquent) to show that they are consistently value-laden, "with the first term often implicitly assumed to have an ethical or conceptual, normative or indeed logical priority over the second" (Quayson &

Goldberg, 2002, p. xii). The critique of binary distinctions aims to show how they are “designed to subserve a larger if concealed project of power and hegemony” (p. xii). Contemporary social and educational policy is certainly committed to many binary distinctions that are rarely examined as value-laden. Smith, Miller-Khan, Heinecke, and Jarvis (2004) advanced the “theory of political spectacle” (p. 11) to describe how educational policies are formed and the ways in which values are distributed in such policies, mainly backstage. The use of this perspective enables us to raise questions about the hypercriminalization of African American and Latino male youth or the school-to-prison pipeline for minority students (Rios, 2007); many Latino immigrant youngsters end up in developing nations, because many of them are deported. How does special or inclusive education contribute to shape and maintain this situation? With the advent of global flows of immigrants to developed nations, what are the trajectories of those students in their host nations? Are they assigned positions in certain binary distinctions?

A comparative analysis of equity related to difference that draws from interdisciplinary culture theory and pays attention to globalization and postcolonial circumstances promises to advance the improvement of educational opportunities for students in pluralistic societies. A significant advantage of the model we propose is that “a cultural analysis of education must confront the internal colonialism that has researchers examining the mind as the site of school failure instead of examining the activities of everyone in America keeping school failure an ever-present possibility for all” (McDermott, 1999, p. 166).

## Note

1. It has been argued that minority students might be placed in disproportionate numbers in special education because their achievement level in general education is significantly lower than that of their White counterparts. This argument oversimplifies the problem and ignores the research evidence on the aforementioned structural inequalities that characterize the educational experiences of minority students. More important, this simplistic standpoint fails to ask whether the documented achievement gaps might have been produced by these structural inequalities rather than by student deficits, or ignores the questions raised about the tools used to assess achievement.

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