Public Abstract

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The purpose of this study was to closely examine overrepresentation of African Americans, males, and low socioeconomic students in special education. Many national and regional studies have attempted to study this issue, but have failed to effectively control for confounding variables. National and regional databases do not contain student-level data making it difficult to effectively measure the interactions between race, gender, and socioeconomic status. This study followed a quantitative design, focusing on a single school district in Missouri. The study was a secondary analysis of data collected by a single school district. This district was identified by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education as being overrepresented in special education with African American students. Student-level data was analyzed to examine the effects of race, gender, and socioeconomic on the levels of overrepresentation among demographic subgroups. The three demographic variables were paired up and those various subgroups were analyzed for levels of overrepresentation. The use of professional judgment in the diagnosis of learning disability was also examined as professionalism and unbiased evaluations are paramount to reducing overrepresentation. Results of the data analyses revealed that low socioeconomic status is the primary predictive factor for overrepresentation. African Americans in the district under study were only overrepresented in special education when they were also male in a low socioeconomic status. Low socioeconomic status students were overrepresented in special education in every demographic pairing. Males were overrepresented in special education unless they were not low socioeconomic status. Results of the analysis of the use professional judgment revealed mixed results with gender being the only significant contributor to the use of professional judgment in identifying a learning disability.