

Critical Issues and Research Methods

Beth Harry
Professor Emerita
University of Miami, Florida
August 10, 2021

Key Issues in Special Education Research

- **Inequities in special education policy and practice**
 - **Parent advocacy/participation:**
 - technocratic/bureaucratic/variable/inequitable implementation of the parent participation mandate (Harry & Ocasio-Stoutenburg, 2020; Ong-Dean, 2009; Pearson & Meadan, 2018; Voulgarides, 2018)
 - narrow view of parent advocacy: school-based advocacy/community issues (Ocasio-Stoutenburg, 2021)
 - disability hierarchies: shifting and drifting (Ong-Dean, 2009; Morrier & Hess, 2012; Travers et al., 2014)
 - **Disproportionality of students of color in placement:**
 - racialization of disability (Artiles, 2017)
 - race, culture, context in the identification and placement process (Harry, Klinger, 2014)

Key Concepts

- **Symbolic interaction:** even objects of an “obdurate” nature are assigned differential meanings based on the ways that human beings interact with them (Blumer, 1969)
 - e.g. Social construction of race and disability; visible physical features are assigned meanings and values that have been agreed upon by the society
- **Systemic bias:** beliefs, policies, practices that are built into systems of service
- **Intersectionality:** interwoven identity markers can complicate the meanings assigned to identity; intersecting stigmatized markers result in intensified oppression/exclusion

Implications for Research

Parent advocacy/participation

Disproportionality

Symbolic Interactionist Perspective: A Relativist Epistemology

- Socially constructed concept requires a “relativist epistemology” by which “neither data nor the subsequent analyses are neutral,” and which must emphasize “multiple realities, the researcher and research participants’ respective positions and subjectivities, and situated knowledge, and sees data as inherently partial and problematic” (Charmaz et al., 2018, p. 417)
- It is not enough to know the quantifiable/measurable features
- Qualitative understandings of social processes are essential: How, why, through what media, to what end, based on what assumptions? What contradictions?

Intersectionality: Social Constructions with Material Realities

- Relinquish search for a sole driver or discrete drivers (e.g., racism, SES)
- Ask how instances of ableism, classism, gender etc., may work in tandem with racism. Annamma & Handy (2021), “race and disability are mutually constitutive social constructions with **material realities**” (p. 42)
- Researchers must note the material realities; seek the connections between them and the (often unstated) social constructions that drive decisions

Intersectionality: Example of Material Realities

Race, disability, SES, language

- How do historical prejudices about Black males intersect with disability, physical size, appearance of socio-economic status, language (Dumas & Nelson, 2016)
- How do these affect decisions about assessment, placement, services?
- Material realities based on individual professionals' perspectives: e.g., "Mothering while Black" - a son who exists at the intersection of ableism, racism, and sexism" (Hannon, p. 40):

Systemic Bias: Visible/Invisible

- Systemic bias can be visible in the system through funding patterns
 - Historical segregation policies in housing- long term effects on real estate
 - Education funding e.g., local property taxes providing 50% of school funding
- But can also be embedded in the psychological system of the society
 - Development of scientific method assumed to be neutral/value-free
 - Historical pseudo-science of eugenics constructed concepts of race, humanness and ability
 - Historical interweaving of concept of “race” with intelligence; deficit-driven perspectives
 - Construction of intelligence as measurable, context-free; operationalized as a test score

Visible Systemic Bias: Example of Material Realities

- Material realities: inequitable schooling/funding leading to inappropriate decisions about assessment/placement (Harry/Klingner, 2014)
- Interactions of individual advocacy with system barriers
 - School in a low-income Haitian/Latino neighborhood: IEP planning between mother (Marie) and teacher slated the child for the gifted program but the program was cancelled because funding was an “add-on” not integral to the school district; (Ocasio-Stoutenburg & Harry, 2021)

Invisible/Subtle Systemic Bias: Example of Material Realities

- Down Syndrome pre-natal testing: Constructing the value of a life
- Who gets the testing? With what goal in mind? Based on what assumptions about the value of a life with Down syndrome? What assumptions about parents' wishes?
- Mother narratives by Lalvani (2011) highlighted the “othering” of mothers whose children’s lives were devalued, and portrayed as bringing “tragedy” and “burden” to the families and to society.
- Lalvani (2011): “Why is a prenatal diagnosis always followed immediately by presenting the options for terminating?” (p. 147)

Complications of Studying Multiple Realities: A Well-known Example

Disproportionality: Opportunity?

- Special ed placement provides needed, specialized services
- provides individualization
- provides increased funding

Disproportionality: Bias/exclusion?

- Special ed placement stigmatizes
- excludes students from mainstream opportunities
- provides stripped down curricula
- adds to multiple oppressions experienced by already stigmatized groups

In concluding, I offer a less well-known
example of the complications that arise
in researching social processes

Complications of Studying Multiple Realities: A Novel Example –DS Pre-natal Testing

Devaluing a child's life

- Assumption that child's life is not valuable
- Parents pressured to accept this perspective: terminate
- Does this represent bias against the child and even the parent?

Providing an opportunity

- Ocasio-Stoutenburg (2020): low income African American mothers' DS diagnosed at 2 months and at 1 year
- Mid-upper income White Hispanic mothers diagnosed in pregnancy
- Does this represent bias in the presentation of “opportunity”?

Conclusion

- Target social processes that contribute to equity and inequity in special education
- Become informed on established research methods that can grapple with invisible, even un-measureable multiple realities
- Embrace, rather than avoid those methods