

More minorities labeled 'learning disabled' because of social inequities, study finds

21 August 2018, by Cristina Rojas

A new Portland State University study suggests that the disproportionate placement of racial minorities into special education for learning disabilities is largely because of social inequities outside of schools rather than racially biased educators.

Some attribute the overplacement to educators being racist, but when researchers use statistical techniques to compare youth with similar academic achievement levels and socioeconomic status, [racial minorities](#) are actually less likely to be labeled as having a learning disability than white children.

Some researchers suggest this means that more racial minorities need to be placed in [special-education](#) classes, but Dara Shifrer, a sociology professor in PSU's College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and author of a study published July 27 in *The Sociological Quarterly*, interprets the findings differently.

Shifrer says the problem lies in the fact that a student's socioeconomic status is a strong predictor of academic achievement, which is often used to diagnose learning disabilities. Blacks and Hispanics are more likely to be poor and begin school at a disadvantage compared to their white peers, but classifying the low achievement of minority and poor students as a disability fails to address the social causes behind the [achievement gap](#), according to the study.

"It's not that we need to put more racial minorities in special [education](#)," Shifrer said. "It's that we need to pay attention to all the inequality in our society that makes kids have different levels of preparation when they start [school](#) and that makes it difficult for teachers to decide why one kid is struggling to learn while another is not."

The study says racial disproportionality is problematic because not only is it unclear whether

special education improves students' outcomes, but disability labels can stigmatize students for life and limit their learning opportunities.

The study criticizes the way learning disabilities are diagnosed. Most youth who are diagnosed with learning disabilities have normal or above-average intelligence but for unexplained reasons are underachievers. But because there's a lack of physical or biological indicators for LDs, classifications are often subjective and inconsistent across districts and states.

Some youth who are labeled as "learning disabled" may in fact have real neurological or biological distinctions, but for others, their learning and behavior problems may stem from differences in the resources available to their families.

"The way learning disabilities are diagnosed is basically based on [academic achievement](#)," Shifrer said. "But education performance is a measure of a lot of things—partly your brain, but it's also the things you're experiencing in your home, in your neighborhood, in your schools."

Shifrer suggests that rather than addressing the social issue of inequality with disability labels and special education, more needs to be invested in early childhood programming so schools can provide additional health, emotional and academic supports to the children who need them most.

She also says that educators and policymakers need to be clearer about what they know and don't know about learning [disabilities](#). Doing so would allow teachers, parents and students to incorporate useful insights from the classification without feeling like it seals a child's destiny or captures their complexity.

"If we keep taxing teachers with figuring out who's learning disabled and who's not when there's not even a clear definition of what learning disabled

means, the problem's not going to go away," Shifrer said.

More information: Dara Shifrer, Clarifying the Social Roots of the Disproportionate Classification of Racial Minorities and Males with Learning Disabilities, *The Sociological Quarterly* (2018). DOI: [10.1080/00380253.2018.1479198](https://doi.org/10.1080/00380253.2018.1479198)

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