Race, Statistics, and EBD

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The author’s interest in race and emotional or behavioral disorder (EBD) stems from his experience as an instructor at the Western Youth Institute, a North Carolina prison for youths, where he instructed young adults in a multi-racial classroom. This paper discusses race, statistics, and EBD. The author argues that statistics concerning race and EBD are misleading, because they do not fully convey the situations they claim to describe and, therefore, lead to misinterpretation and misapplication. Three studies are evaluated, two which analyze situations in which races are associated with EBD, and one which offers a solution by presenting a model for providing assistance where it is needed most.

Statistics!

The news media presents Americans with race statistics continuously. These bytes of information are presumptuously charged with meaning. Often, they are used to denigrate or imply culpability. And very often, statistics are presented to compare the lives of minority Americans with European Americans.

In education, racial statistics are commonplace. This is especially true in special education, where many hold that evaluation and assessment bias results in minorities being overrepresented in special education. Although assessment bias may be a cause of minority overrepresentation, other causes may exist. The National Research Council, for example, concluded that evaluation and assessment bias is only one of six factors leading to the overrepresentation of minorities in special education (Turnbull, Turnbull, & Wehmeyer, 2007).

Typically, minority statistics are compared to those of European Americans who, presumably, are at the appropriate level of education. The assumption is that the European Americans somehow set the standard for the minorities. No one bemoans the
score gap between European Americans and Asian Americans in mathematics! The typical comparison of minority and European American statistics occurs simply because European Americans still represent the majority. The comparative statistics are often used to imply an unfair distribution of resources. Although this may be true in many cases, there is not always a strong correlation between financial resources and test scores.

This author believes that the inappropriate use of comparative racial statistics is detrimental to our society. The statistics are generally meaningless, because they are not causal in nature; they show correlations only. Causes are often assumed or implied by those who do not properly interpret the statistics. Furthermore, comparative racial statistics can produce racial tensions without providing any positive solutions for educational needs.

African Americans and EBD:

Achilles, McLaughlin, and Croninger (2007)

A typical misuse of statistics can occur when observing the disproportionate level of African American students diagnosed with Emotional/Behavioral Disorder (EBD). In 2001, African Americans constituted ~20% of all students in special education, but ~27% of all students with EBD (Bullock & Gable, 2006). Likewise, the percentage of African American special education students with EBD is higher than in any other racial category (Turnbull, et al., 2007).

Improper interpretations of this statistic can be varied. It may be concluded that African American children are either disproportionately represented in EBD special
education due to evaluation and assessment bias, or that EBD is peculiarly an African American problem. These interpretations may very well be false.

Research conducted by Achilles, McLaughlin, and Croninger (2007) analyzed the statistics of African American and European American students with EBD, giving particular attention to the High Level of Exclusion (HLE) from classroom the students experienced as a result of their disability. What Achilles, McLaughlin, and Croninger found was that when they controlled for family SES and structure, “African American ethnicity failed to maintain significance within the EBD group.” They conclude: “Thus, African American students in the EBD group were no more likely than Caucasian students to be suspended or expelled, once these factors were taken into account” (p. 41). According to this research, race is not a variable in EBD-related exclusion.

Although the research presented by Achilles, McLaughlin, and Croninger only represents one study, it provides a poignant example about how comparative race statistics are misinterpreted and misleading.

For statistics to be properly interpreted, they must present a reasonable amount of information. To use statistics to state that African Americans are overrepresented in EBD is misleading, because it leaves out other valuable information. A study conducted by Cohen and Usher (1994), for example, found that while African Americans were overrepresented in school districts where they constituted a minority, they were also underrepresented in school districts where they constituted the majority. This additional information is helpful in the formulation of more realistic hypotheses concerning racial overrepresentation. A good hypothesis might begin with the question, “Why are African
Americans overrepresented where they constitute a minority and underrepresented where they constitute a majority.”

They answer may indeed be cultural. According to Willis (2004) and Ratleff (1989), African Americans favor group participation and have a more collective nature than other Americans. Perhaps “outside cultural pressure” generates emotional stress in some students. Admittedly, the hypothesis is weak standing alone, but at least it represents an attempt to understand the causal nature of the phenomenon.

Indigenous Australians and EBD:

Robert Conway (2006)

Other cultural groups also experience stress when they constitute a minority within a general population. This is no less true with the indigenous Australian population in the public school system of the smallest continent. In Australia, it is against the law to categorize students by race, except for general census purposes, so no statistics exist by which to compare the percentage of indigenous Australians diagnosed with EBD to that of the general population. Australian education has no racial statistics.

Nevertheless, it is common knowledge that indigenous Australians represent a large percentage of students diagnosed with EBD. Many indigenous Australian students have complained that their cultural values were not respected by their teachers (Russell, 1999). A worrisomely large percentage of indigenous Australian children do not attend school at all (Conway, 2006). It is no wonder, then, that among the indigenous students who do, a large percentage of them would be diagnosed with EBD: Within the public school system, they feel isolated and alienated.
But these feelings are not the only causes of the high proportion of indigenous Australian students diagnosed with EBD. Conway (2006) studied the statistics provided by Australia’s National Health and Wellbeing Survey to identify the correlations and causes of behavioral orders, including conduct disorders. Again family SES and structure showed its head. Among family structural problems, Conway identified:

(a) [U]nstable relationships with parents or caregivers; (b) death of a parent; (c) inadequate parenting skills; (d) family discord, violence, separation, or family breakdown; and (e) parents with serious mental health, alcohol, or drug problems that affected parenting. (Conway, 2006, p. 17)

This analysis performed by Conway agrees with the research of Achilles, McLaughlin, and Croninger (2007) in demonstrating that the causes of EBD are found in the home life, namely in socioeconomic stress and family instability, and are not inherently racial in origin.

Conway (2006) offers for instruction an Australian model in dealing with EBD. In this model, behavior specialists train general educators to be better prepared to deal with students with EBD. Students with EBD are kept in the general classroom for most of the week, but are pulled out on a regular basis (a) to provide the general educators and other students with moments of relief, and (b) to keep the EBD students connected to their home school.

**Teach the Parents:**

Pollio, et al. (2005)
Vanee Williams, an African American graduate student at McKendree University, presented a strong argument in the Summer of 2007 for the need to include parents in education. She began by presenting data comparing two public schools: Millstadt Consolidated, a predominantly middle class school, and Elizabeth Morris, a predominantly lower class school. According to the data, the lower class school received more funds per student and had more highly educated teachers than the middle class school; nevertheless, the lower class school still performed lower academically than the middle class school. Williams concluded that parental involvement is the most important factor in a child’s education, and she has made it her mission to draw low-income parents into the educational process.

Pollio, et al., (2005) argue that family-level interventions are especially important for the parenting of children with EBD. Parents of children with EBD suffer from the stress related to their children’s disorder and may experience depression. Furthermore, it is common for these parents to avoid the stigmatism their children’s disorder carries with it by not seeking assistance in a public forum.

Pollio’s team at Washington University designed and tested a program to provide assistance to parents whose children are diagnosed with serious emotional or behavioral disorders (SED/BD). Families with children with SED/BD were invited to meet on a regular basis within a local public school setting. Professional social workers gave instructional lectures, after which the families divided into two discussion groups. The schedule allowed time for special activities, and announcements concerning the forthcoming meeting were given before the session adjourned.
Parents responded very positively to the program. They expressed relief in being able to speak with professionals concerning their children and were grateful to learn about available resources.

The model designed by the Washington University team is not unique; many educators are aiming at the parents to enhance the education of the children. The emotional support provided by parents is a singularly invaluable asset in the emotional well-being of the child, providing the child with a healthy self-concept, which in turn enables the child to function properly in any context.

**Conclusion**

Statistics, like all knowledge, is beneficial when it is used properly. Vanee Williams is case-in-point. After examining the statistics of two local schools, this educator devoted herself to promoting parental participation in education.

Often, though, comparative racial statistics are presented in a fashion that is too simple to amply describe the situation they represent. As the research of Achilles, McLaughlin, and Croninger (2007) demonstrates, once family SES and structure is accounted for, African American ethnicity drops completely out of the EBD-related exclusion equation. This research suggests that statistically pairing EBD-related exclusion with family SES and structure is inherently more meaningful than connecting EBD-related exclusion with race.

In Australia, racial statistics in education are illegal. Perhaps this position is extreme. Careful use of racial statistics may be preferable to no use at all.
Most importantly, statistics should be used to help us define and pinpoint the causes of detrimental conditions like EBD, so that these conditions can be prevented and remedied. The author believes, like Vanee Williams, the best way to help children with EBD is to help their parents.
References


