Approximately 25 years ago, Lloyd Dunn (1968) and Evelyn Deno (1970) provided us with analyses regarding the problems and pitfalls of special education. One of the primary areas of focus was the overrepresentation of minority and low-income students in programs for students with mild mental retardation. Unfortunately, this problem continues to hover over us today and has extended to other special education categories. Based on our analysis of the problem then and now, we extend the recommendations provided by advocates, educators, researchers, and policymakers.

In 1968 Lloyd Dunn called our attention to the disproportionate numbers of minority students placed in segregated classrooms for students with educable mental retardation. Just 2 years later, Evelyn Deno (1970) called our attention to what she considered to be a preoccupation with, and use of, a pathological model to place and serve students in special education programs. Both authors presented an analysis of the problems in special education and outlined agendas for change.

The contributions made by these child advocates helped to shape special education as we know it today. Their analysis of problems and recommendations contributed to the emergence of litigation, the enactment of legislation, and the creation of current organizational structures and service delivery models in the field. However, even though 25 years have passed, many of the problems stipulated by Dunn and Deno still plague the field today. Arguments about overrepresentation of minority and poor students and the overreliance on the medical model still remain as critical issues to be resolved. Furthermore, these issues have continued to surface as a source of conflict among special educators, advocacy groups, and policymakers.

We believe that the arguments presented by these authors were relevant 25 years ago and continue to be relevant in 1993. However, in light of the changes that have occurred in this country since 1968, we need to reexamine the overrepresentation issue from a broader perspective in order to better understand how and why it has stubbornly persisted. Perhaps first and foremost, we need to ask the question, is overrepresentation a problem? We argue that it is, and we maintain...
that the fact that disproportionate numbers of minority students are placed in special education classrooms questions the efficacy of our professional practices and challenges the basic notion of honoring the diversity that we as a field presumably embrace.

Hence, the purpose of this article is to review critically the overrepresentation problem from a historical perspective (i.e., since the publication of Dunn’s and Deno’s seminal articles). Furthermore, although we believe that the beginnings of the problem of overrepresentation are rooted in socioeconomic, sociocultural, and sociopolitical forces that can be traced back many years before the publication of these articles (MacMillan & Hendrick, 1993), we will limit our analysis to this period because of the focus of the present special issue. Because of our research interests, we will focus our analysis on Latino and African American students. Further, we will refer to these two minority groups throughout the article as if there were no intragroup variance. We acknowledge, however, the considerable diversity found within each of these groups. We are also aware that many of the arguments used in the overrepresentation debate are applicable to other (but not all) minority groups.

We first illustrate how the problem of overrepresentation has continued to exist since 1968 despite constant calls for reform. Next, we discuss the rhetoric and research presented by Dunn (1968) and Deno (1970) as they identified problems in special education and proposed solutions. Third, we analyze the overrepresentation problem from a broader perspective. Finally, we call for a reform agenda that, we believe, will contribute to a more comprehensive plan for addressing this very complex problem.

THE PROBLEM: THEN AND NOW

Dunn was fully aware of educators’ preoccupation with the normative model even before special classes were created. He indicated that before the appearance of special programs, “socioeconomically deprived” students were simply denied access to the educational system. He maintained that, throughout time, the “socioeconomically deprived” student has been identified as the child that came “from poverty, broken and inadequate homes, and low status ethnic groups” (p. 5). However, due to the passage of compulsory education legislation, he argued, “the schools and these children ‘were forced into a reluctant mutual recognition of each other’” (p. 5). As a result, special education was created and this group of children was consistently segregated in programs for students with mental retardation (MR).

According to Dunn’s “best judgment,” an overwhelming majority (i.e., 60% to 80%) of students served in programs for students with MR came from “low status backgrounds” (e.g., Latino, African American, Native American groups; broken, disorganized, and inadequate homes). This public indictment surfaced at a time when there was great concern for the plight of disadvantaged citizens. The Civil Rights movement, the War on Poverty initiative, and the Coleman report are some of the major events that made Dunn’s allegation timely and relevant.

In the last 25 years, however, several aspects have changed the external appearance and the complexity of the overrepresentation issue in special education. The
creation of Chapter 1 programs, the sharp deterioration of the quality of life among minority groups, the emergence of the learning disability category, the widespread use of academic tracking models in school systems, the passage of P.L. 94-142, and the immigration wave from Southeast Asia and Latin America—along with the creation of bilingual education programs—are instances of major influences in this area.

At the forefront of significant events that have shaped the overrepresentation issue are (a) the claim that the so-called subjective, high-prevalence, or mildly handicapping conditions—mild mental retardation, learning disabilities, and serious emotional disturbances—are basically indistinguishable and (b) the sharp changes in the prevalence of learning disabilities (i.e., increasing rates) and mild mental retardation (i.e., decreasing rates). Because of these changes, Dunn’s original claim that too many minority students were placed in classes for individuals with mild mental retardation has extended to other special education categories. For example, this trend was confirmed by data collected in Ohio by the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) during the 1974–1978 period. Although the number of black students enrolled in classes for persons with mild mental retardation tended to decline, more black students were placed in classes for individuals with learning disabilities. Nonetheless, “Blacks were still overrepresented in EMR classes” (Smith, 1983, p. 211). Further, the OCR report concluded:

there are significant racial and ethnic differences in special education enrollment patterns based on national elementary and secondary school surveys for 1976 and 1977 and the preliminary unedited 1978–79 school survey. Black participation in classes for the EMR was 3.4 times greater than that of whites in 1976–77 and was 3.5 times greater in 1978–79. (Smith, 1983, pp. 208–209)

Similarly, the OCR study detected cases of students with limited English proficiency who were placed in special education programs without proper assessment procedures. In addition, the OCR scrutinized 148 school districts between 1975 and 1979 because of the disproportionate enrollment of minority students in special education. This agency found that

many of the students assigned to educable mentally retarded (EMR) classes had never received an examination to detect visual or auditory problems. In some cases, assignment was based in part on outdated IQ scores. Also, many students were assigned to EMR classes even though their IQ test scores were above the EMR range. (cited in Smith, 1983)

During the early 1980s overrepresentation continued. Wright and Santa Cruz (1983), for instance, examined the ethnic composition of special education programs in California. They found an overrepresentation of Latino students in programs for individuals with mental retardation, speech and language impairments, and learning disabilities in about one-fourth of the special education local planning agencies (SELPAs). Although African Americans were overrep-
resented in one-fourth of the SELPAs in programs for individuals with speech and language impairments and mental retardation, they were overrepresented in almost 66% of the SELPAs in programs for students with learning disabilities.

In 1989 Meier, Stewart, and England published the results of a large-scale study conducted in 174 U.S. school districts to assess the sociopolitical forces that impinge upon educational equity for black students. The authors examined the effects of social class and race on educational opportunities. All school districts in the study had at least 15,000 students and at least 1% of the enrollment was African American. Meier et al. (1989) discovered, among other things, that "the sorting practices of schools are associated with racial disproportions" (p. 5). In addition, these researchers discovered that the chances that African-Americans would be placed in classes for students with mild mental retardation were three times greater than those of whites.

An analogous pattern was detected in placement of black students in classes for individuals with moderate mental retardation and in the application of disciplinary sanctions (e.g., suspensions or punishment). Conversely, these investigators found an opposite trend when placement data for gifted programs were examined (i.e., "a white student was 3.2 times more likely to be assigned to a gifted class than is a black student," p. 5). Meier et al. (1989) called this consistent pattern of practices second-generation educational discrimination.

If we continue an examination of the literature published in the present decade, we find the same pattern. The Department of Education, for instance, concluded that the proportion of minority youth in special education programs was larger than their representation in the general school population (U.S. Department of Education, 1992). The report indicates that, while the student population in general education was 70% white, 12% African-American, and 13% Latino, the population of exceptional individuals served during the 1987 school year was 65% white, 24% African-American, and 8% Latino. Based on these data, the authors concluded,

Black youth are more highly represented in every disability category... It is possible that black youth were more likely than their white counterparts to have experienced poor prenatal, perinatal, or postnatal health care and early childhood nutrition which may have resulted in actual disabilities... In general, there is a low disproportion of Hispanic youth among all disabilities combined and several specific disabilities. Low disproportion is particularly evident for the disabilities of SLD, MR, and SED. (p. 15)

In summary, minority students have been consistently overrepresented in special education programs since Dunn's article was published in 1968. Unfortunately, reports on and interpretations of the overrepresentation data do not always converge. For instance, the overrepresentation figures for certain minority groups often vary depending on the author or agency reporting or interpreting the data. In fact, this lack of agreement will be evident in some of the figures reported
throughout this paper. There are, therefore, certain precautions that researchers and practitioners ought to bear in mind when looking at this issue.

**Precautions Regarding the Analysis of the Overrepresentation Data**

Reschly (1987) has warned us about potential misinterpretations of the overrepresentation data. He has suggested that a clear distinction ought to be made between: 1) the percentage of minority students in the total school population, 2) the percentage of special education students that are minority, and 3) the percentage of minority students in special education programs" (p. 29).

A legal case in which such distinctions were made is germane. Looking at the data used in the *Larry P.* case, Reschly (1987) has contended that black students represented 10% of the student population in California. Also, black students constituted 25% of the students placed in classes for individuals with mild mental retardation. A common mistake advocates and researchers make, Reschly has argued, is that they conclude that 25% of black students were placed in classes for persons with mild mental retardation. Reschly has maintained that when the three distinctions he has proposed are made, one would find that only about 1% of black students were placed in classes for pupils with mild mental retardation that year.

Moreover, it has been noted that the overrepresentation problem is idiosyncratic to the programs for students with mental retardation. Reschly (1987) has affirmed when representation data are aggregated for all special education categories, the overrepresentation issue tends to vanish. However, there still is considerable controversy about Reschly's point, and, we would argue, other factors affect the overrepresentation figures. For instance, the proportion of minority students in the general student population is an important consideration. In this vein, Harry (1992a) has called to our attention the positive correlation that exists between the proportion of minority students in the school population and the overrepresentation issue. That is, the larger the minority student population in the school district, the greater the representation of minority students in special education classes.

In addition, the size of the educational program is related to the disproportionate placement of children of color. The bigger the educational program, the larger the disproportion of minority students (Heller, Holtzman, & Messick, 1982). Commenting on this particular report, Harry (1992a) has contended that this correlation poses a "chicken-and-egg-dilemma: While large numbers of minority children may lead to a perceived need for more special education programs, it may also be that the greater availability of programs encourages increased placement of minority children" (p. 66).

Finally, variability in the overrepresentation data has been found as a function of the specific disabling condition and the ethnic group under scrutiny. For example, "Asian Pacific students are generally underrepresented in disability categories and overrepresented in gifted and talented (G&T) programs. . . . White students
are consistently overrepresented in G&T and specific learning disability (SLD) categories" (Harry, 1992a, p. 64). In contrast, although we have witnessed in recent years a steady decline in the overall enrollment in programs for students with mental retardation and a sharp increase in the enrollment in programs for individuals with learning disabilities, black students still tend to be overrepresented in classrooms for students with mild mental retardation while there is a disproportionate number of Latinos in programs for students with learning disabilities and speech and language impairments (Finn, 1982; Harry, 1992a).

This brings into the equation the issue of language background as a determining factor in placement decisions. It has been reported, for instance, that a disproportionate number of Latino students are labeled as having a learning disability due to their limited English proficiency (Ortiz & Polyzoi, 1986). On the other hand, differences in uses of the English language—for example, vernacular variations of English among blacks—also might explain their overrepresentation in programs for language impairment (Harry, 1992a). Figueroa (1989) has reported that this situation is further complicated by the absence of an adequate technology and knowledge base in the assessment and testing of language-minority students.

In sum, the overrepresentation of minority students in special education programs requires a careful analysis that transcends merely contrasting ethnic group enrollment data in general versus special education programs. It seems that when scrutinizing the overrepresentation data, we should consider—in addition to Reschly's cautions—(a) the proportion of the minority population in a given region, (b) the size of the educational program, (c) the type of special education program, and (d) the specific ethnic group.

A word of caution is warranted. Our recommendation to desegregate populations, regions, size of programs, and service options should not be interpreted as an attempt to diminish the importance or gravity of the overrepresentation issue. We believe that the current changes occurring in the educational system and in the sociodemographic sphere of this society demand that we be precise in our analyses. We could reach erroneous conclusions about the overrepresentation problem and its implications if we looked only at changes in figures without taking into account contextual factors.

For instance, we find today increasing numbers of students with limited English proficiency (e.g., Latinos) enrolled in bilingual education programs or in programs for students with speech and language impairments, whereas before they were placed in programs for students with mild mental retardation or learning disabilities. This variability in placement practices is due, in part, to the expanded gamut of services now available to students. However, this change in placement patterns might attenuate the magnitude of the overrepresentation data, thus making it appear as if the problem had been solved. Indeed, the increasing complexity of the service delivery system now available to students with special needs might mask the dimensions of the overrepresentation problem. It is crucial, therefore, that we bear in mind the aforementioned considerations when examining the contemporary data.
FORCES SHAPING THE EVOLUTION OF THE PROBLEM

The Analysis in 1968 and 1970: A Systemic Problem

Dunn and Deno entwined their discussions about a change in special education around systemic issues. Interestingly, several of their arguments continue to be bitterly debated today. For example, arguments about overrepresentation of minority students, efficacy studies, labeling effects, and overreliance on the medical model are debated ardentely in the current reform debate in special education—particularly in the controversy about the Regular Education Initiative (REI). However, we contend that, in their analyses, Dunn and Deno failed to address factors that explain the overrepresentation problem from a more comprehensive perspective. To illustrate this assertion, we next discuss the major arguments presented by Dunn and Deno.

The Labeling Process

Dunn argued that the IQ score attained on an intelligence test determined the fate of many children who experienced learning and behavior problems in school. He also believed that excessive numbers of minority students were referred and placed in classrooms for students with mental retardation because of the nebulous and subjective nature of the constructs used to develop these tests, to wit:

The purpose has been to find out what is wrong with the child in order to label him and thus make him eligible for special education services. In large measure this has resulted in digging the educational graves of many racially and/or economically disadvantaged children by using a WISC or Binet IQ score to justify the label “mentally retarded.” (p. 9)

From a similar standpoint, Deno spoke of the need to rethink the dependency on the medical model because “the emphasis on ‘defect’ residing in the child tends to focus attention away from the external variables which educators might be in a position to do something about” (p. 232). We agree with Dunn and Deno that less emphasis on the medical model and more on the quality of instruction would have helped to redirect and strengthen special education service delivery. Unfortunately, in 25 years, this shift in thinking has not occurred.

Another criticism raised by Dunn was related to the deleterious effects that labels have on children (e.g., on teachers’ attitudes and expectancies and on pupils’ self-esteem and social status). This is a very timely issue, especially if we consider that some REI advocates have proposed the abolition of labels in the special education field. Although this proposal might be appealing to many educators in the field, we know that the abolition of labels has complicated the functioning of and the decision-making processes in special education systems in other developed nations (Feniak, 1988). Moreover, we believe that labeling children is unavoidable if we want to secure specialized, intensive educational interventions to address the special needs of students with disabilities (Kauffman & Hallahan, 1993).
Homogeneous Grouping

Although Dunn was concerned with the overuse of the medical model, he used the very same model to substantiate the need to restructure assessment procedures and to dismantle programs for students with mild mental retardation. For example, he used results from normative data to verify that minority and poor children achieved at higher levels when they attended schools with children from “white middle class homes.” He also stated that “racial integration appeared to deter school progress very little for Caucasian and more academically able students” (p. 7). This analysis is problematic in at least two ways. First of all, improved performance was linked to placement, not to resources available or to quality or type of services provided. In this vein, the Coleman Report (Coleman et al., 1966) indicated,

Nationally, Negro pupils have fewer of some of the facilities that seem most related to academic achievement. They have less access to physics, chemistry, and language laboratories; there are fewer books per pupil in their libraries; their textbooks are less often in sufficient supply. To the extent that physical facilities are important to learning, such items appear to be more relevant than some others, such as cafeterias, in which minority groups are at an advantage. (pp. 11–12)

Hence, it could be speculated that improved performance of minority children in integrated settings was more due to the improved facilities and enhanced learning opportunities than to contact with white middle class children. Second, Dunn paid little attention to factors that affected African-American children adversely during the desegregation process. Indeed, the performance of black students was, to a great extent, affected because their schools were dismantled, their principals were demoted, and their teachers were fired or reassigned to work on staffs that were mostly white. Also, the links that existed between white children’s homes, schools, and communities remained intact after desegregation. This was not the case for many black children (Bell, 1987). The inequities that existed prior to desegregation, along with the lack of preparedness on the part of white teachers and administrators to accept and teach black children, contributed to the establishment of special education classrooms that would enroll disproportionate numbers of black students. Today, information about the effects of the discontinuity among black children, their communities, and the educational system, along with information about the positive aspects of black schools before desegregation, inform us that consideration of these factors would have resulted in more relevant and far-reaching recommendations on the part of Dunn and Deno (e.g., see Edwards, in press; Foster, 1993; Sidle-Walker, 1993).

Efficacy Studies

Dunn cited the lack of efficacy of special classes for students with mild mental retardation and serious emotional disturbances as another justification to abolish self-contained classrooms and to develop more efficient programs for students
with mild handicapping conditions. However, a major problem with the efficacy studies tradition is that it employs physical setting as the crucial unit of analysis and disregards important variables that might confound outcome measures (e.g., differences in interactions between and differential effects of settings and instructional methods on students) (Hallahan, Keller, McKenzie, Lloyd, & Bryan, 1988). Today, we know that the empirical evidence available on the effectiveness of special education is, at best, inconclusive. Meta-analyses of the effects of special education programs have offered conflicting results (e.g., Carlberg & Kavale, 1980; Wang & Baker, 1985–1986). Moreover, methodological flaws in the efficacy studies weaken the support for the efficacy argument espoused by Dunn (e.g., lack of random assignment of students to treatment conditions) (Hallahan et al., 1988; Lloyd, Crowley, Kohler, & Strain, 1988; see also Hallahan & Kauffman, this issue).

**Improvements in General Education**

Dunn claimed that the general education system had experienced significant improvements and that the presence of self-contained classrooms was thus no longer justified. Deno, however, did not share Dunn’s optimism about the quality of services in general education. She argued not only that were students with disabilities served inappropriately in general education, but also that general education was not doing a very good job with students who were not “mentally or physically handicapped.” Instead of declaring that general education was performing its functions and responsibilities adequately, Deno proclaimed that it was special education that had the potential to bring about much-needed reforms in education for children with and without disabilities.

In either case, both authors failed to view innovation in education from an historical perspective. They operated during a time period when advocates and policymakers were concerned about educational equity for disadvantaged and minority children. However, these initiatives were directed toward schools so as not to tamper with status quo political and economic structures. Cuban (1990) argued that one reason why policymakers and others in positions of power deal with issues in this way is because

> the sources of those ills are deeply rooted in the structures of the society and, if the major problems of poverty, racism, drug addictions, and environmental destruction were addressed directly, grave upheavals in economic, social, and political institutions would occur. If schools work on these tasks, slow improvement in the next generation might happen without untoward dislocations. (p. 8)

Hence, even though there appeared to be a new momentum in general education, problems related to racism, segregation, and long-held beliefs about disadvantaged and racially different children resulted in dubious benefits for students whose rights the policies were designed to protect in the first place.

Moreover, Dunn and Deno did not consider that even though federal and state policymakers had incited many educational mandates and reforms, American
schools had not changed a great deal in organizational structure since the mid-
States have a high degree of autonomy in choosing how they will implement policy
because they function largely in isolation and their actions are "mostly hidden
behind classroom doors" (p. 488). Hence, Dunn and Deno failed to realize that
even though surface level reforms were implemented, little was done to restructure
the organization of schools and to facilitate the emergence of below-the-surface
reforms. As Welch (1989) stated:

A review of the literature reveals many components that contribute to change processes associated
with educational reform. These include: (1) actively involving teachers in collaborative planning and
implementation of the change process; (2) providing adequate resources and materials; (3) providing
ongoing technical assistance and support; (4) providing time to practice, develop, and master new
skills; (5) being flexible in adapting and modifying the change process strategies; and (6) providing
role clarification and job analysis. A historical frame of reference suggests that the mainstreaming
movement of the 1970s was impeded because these components were not in evidence as part of the
change brought about by Public Law 94-142, (pp. 539-540)

The Analysis in 1993: A Multivariate Problem

We contend that multiple variables must be considered as we continue to grapple
with the problem of overrepresentation in the 1990s. The influence of five aspects
will be discussed in this section. These aspects are: litigation cases, debate about
systemic issues, demographic and socioeconomic changes, the construction of
minority students' school failure, and the fallacy of the cultural diversity–disability
analogy. Although our discussion does not represent an exhaustive analysis of
the overrepresentation problem, we aspire to delineate the multivariate nature
of the issue.

Litigation. Litigation has played a key role in the evolution of the special edu-
cation field. For instance, litigation has contributed—directly or indirectly—to
the recognition of students' rights to education, to the passage of legislation for
individuals with disabilities, and to their protection against biased placement. In
the context of this article, we are concerned with the latter type of legislation cases
only.

Not surprisingly, a number of placement bias cases were disputed after the
publication of Dunn's paper. The majority of these cases were related to the
classification of students as mildly handicapped and also involved placement
in self-contained classrooms (Reschly, 1987). Interestingly enough, cases dis-
puted before the passage of P.L. 94-142 dealt mostly with poor professional
practices (e.g., assessment procedures). The cases (e.g., Diana, 1970; Guadalupe,
1972) disputed the placement of minority students from Latino and Native
American groups on the grounds of inadequate assessment practices (Reschly,
1987). The defendants (i.e., school districts and state departments of education)
agreed to implement a number of reforms in their systems without disputing the cases in court.

After 1975, however, litigation cases focused on two different aspects, namely, the nature of mild mental retardation and the fairness of intelligence tests to African-American students. The conclusions reached in these cases have been contradictory (e.g., Larry P., 1979; Marshall, 1984). The different emphasis in litigation cases before and after the passage of P.L. 94-142 in 1975 might reflect the prevalent concerns in the field at different points in time. Prior to 1975, special educators aspired to legitimize their labor as members of a professional field, and thus we saw cases on poor professional practices. After 1975, the field was more concerned with the refinement of its conceptual base and with equity issues, and thus we find cases on the mental retardation construct and on the fairness of testing practices.

Aside from the conclusions reached, these cases have had a significant (direct or indirect) impact on the field. For example, considerable effort and money have been invested in the reclassification and reevaluation of students, changes have been made in the definition of mild mental retardation—including the notion of social competence—and alternative programmatic options have been created (e.g., transition programs) (Reschly, 1987). For thorough review of the evolution and role of legislation cases in the overrepresentation debate, see Reschly, Kicklighter, and McKee (1988a, 1988b, 1988c).

Finally, litigation cases are of primary importance in the overrepresentation debate because of their underlying assumptions about the mild mental retardation construct and about the programs for this population. These assumptions, in turn, have a direct bearing on the second area of our discussion, which is related to systemic issues.

**Debate About Systemic Issues.** As a result of litigation cases, important changes have been mandated and basic aspects have been questioned or challenged in the special education system. These aspects include (a) the controversy regarding the definition of basic constructs (e.g., mental retardation, intelligence) and (b) the existence of biased systemic procedures—in particular, faulty referral and assessment practices. We argue that each of these factors is linked to the overrepresentation problem.

**Definition of basic constructs.** The controversy over the definition of mental retardation and intelligence is far from resolved (Michaelson, 1993; Weinberg, 1989). Although the diagnosis of mental retardation ought to be based on the consideration of both intelligence level and adaptive behavior, we still find an over-reliance on IQ scores. As a result, the IQ cutoff point that defines mental retardation has been changed in the past, which in turn has raised numerous criticisms (e.g., the arbitrariness involved in changing the boundaries of “normality”).

On the other hand, the elusive nature of the construct of intelligence—and thus its assessment—has been also bitterly criticized (Helms, 1992; Weinberg, 1989). It is argued, for instance, that intelligence tests are merely a device to assess an
individual's level of acculturation to the dominant culture, or that we should use multiple indicators to assess intelligence across ethnic groups because certain individual differences (e.g., communication, reasoning, and cognitive and learning styles) are greatly shaped by culture (Miller-Jones, 1989). Consequently, it has been suggested that excessive numbers of minority students are referred and placed in classrooms for individuals with mental retardation because of the nebulous and subjective nature of the aforementioned constructs and the scarcity of culturally sensitive means to assess them. Nevertheless, the rapid advances in the fields of cognitive psychology and neuropsychology might revolutionize in the near future the means we use to assess the construct of intelligence (Matarazzo, 1992).

*Faulty referral and assessment procedures.* The preponderance of biased referral and assessment procedures with minority students has also been cited in the literature (Cummins, 1986a; Hilliard, 1990; Tomlinson, Acker, Conter, & Lindborg, 1977). A relationship between student ethnicity/socioeconomic status (SES), teacher expectations/treatment, and pupil achievement level has been documented (Brophy & Good, 1986; Irvine, 1991). In fact, it has been reported that teacher prejudices, racial bias, expectations, and differential treatment influence referral decisions of minority students (Harry, 1992a). Unfortunately, the chances that a child has to be placed in special education are increased significantly once the referral process is initiated. In this vein, researchers have contended that “both regular and special educators operate under incentive systems associated with the referral process” (Walker, Reavis, Rhode, & Jenson, 1985, p. 706). Likewise, it has been reported that factors such as gender, appearance, and SES can be the basis for eligibility decisions (Ysseldyke, Algozzine, Ridley, & Graden, 1982).

The validity and reliability of diagnostic systems have also been criticized (Anderson, 1988). It is argued that assessment procedures with low reliability and validity will increase the likelihood of identifying false positives. In addition, researchers have stressed the need to use assessment practices with a broader scope because “different causes often may result in similar symptom pictures in a given category (yielding an identical diagnosis)” (Hersen, 1988, p. 107). Cultural differences offer a relevant example. For instance, we know that the definition and perception of deviant behavior might differ according to the culture in which it is observed (Weisz et al., 1988), or that teachers might perceive student behaviors differently depending on the pupil's ethnicity (Carlson & Stephens, 1986).

Further, the prevalent norm-referenced referral and assessment practices used with minority students have been criticized on the grounds that they are based on a “deficit view” of children’s disorders (i.e., within-child variables), disregarding potential interactions with contextual and sociocultural variables (Cummins, 1986b). For example, problems associated with and recommendations for the assessment of linguistic-minority students have been addressed recurrently in the literature (Fraad & Hallman, 1983). Sugai (1988) has contended that “a failure to consider predisposing, precipitating, and contributing factors and failure to change school contributions to deviancy can be dramatic for the culturally different student” (p. 5).
These conceptual and procedural flaws and problems call for a reform of the current referral and assessment systems in special education. Such change would be congruent with similar ongoing discussions in other areas of assessment and testing (e.g., cognitive ability) (Helms, 1992) and in related fields (e.g., psychology and community mental health) (Betancourt & Lopez, 1993; Rogler, Cortes, & Malgady, 1991).

**Correlates of Ethnicity: Socioeconomic Status and Educational Performance Variables**

The overrepresentation of children of color has been also explained, in part, by the dramatic changes in the socioeconomic and demographic face of the nation. For instance, the gap between rich and poor people has widened and the once middle class family has become increasingly poorer during the 1980s. Children, in particular, suffered from this deterioration in the quality of life (Strawn, 1992). A few more examples will suffice to illustrate this erosion in the quality of life of children (Hodgkinson, 1991):

Since 1987, one-fourth of all preschool children in the U.S. have been in poverty. Every year, about 350,000 children are born to mothers who were addicted to cocaine during pregnancy. . . . Today, 15 million children are being reared by single mothers, whose family income averages about $11,400 in 1988 dollars (within $1,000 of the poverty line). . . . One-fourth of pregnant mothers receive no physical care of any sort during the crucial first trimester of pregnancy. About 20% of handicapped children would not be impaired had their mothers had one physical exam during the first trimester, which could have detected potential problems. . . . On a given night, between 50,000 and 200,000 children have no home. (In 1988, 40% of shelter users were families with children). (p. 10)

We have also witnessed a decline in the growth of the white population and a rapid expansion of ethnically diverse groups. Minority groups are the youngest and fastest growing segment of the population (Hodgkinson, 1991). A rather robust correlation has been established between ethnicity, geographic distribution, and socioeconomic status—that is, minority groups consistently tend to populate the inner cities and to be poorer (Natriello, Pallas, & McDill, 1990; Wilson, 1987).

Further, a correlation between ethnicity, school failure, and placement in special education programs has been reported consistently in the literature. Minority students often demonstrate poor educational performance and thus are placed in special education programs. This intricate interaction of variables has not yet been explained satisfactorily. We speculate, though, that stereotypes about the abilities of children of color are maintained by this correlation, and to some extent perpetuate the placement of disproportionate numbers of minority students in special education classes.

To complicate things further, the intricate interactions that occur within this mosaic of variables perpetuate the production of a "new morbidity" that includes "a wide array of contemporary psychosocial problems such as adolescent preg-
nancy, suicide, violence, psychiatric symptoms, chronic health disorders, substance abuse, and mild mental retardation” (Baumeister, Kupstas, & Klindworth, 1990, p. 2). A large proportion of minority students suffers from this new morbidity, which, in turn, has enormous educational implications. Despite the emergence of the popular at-risk model of prediction and preventive interventions, many educators still believe that the large number of minority individuals affected by the new morbidity justifies and explains their “inherent need” for special education services. What these individuals fail to consider, however, is the interaction of these predisposing factors (i.e., the new morbidity) with crucial educational influences.

The Construction of School Failure

Our previous discussion of predisposing factors does not explain exhaustively the struggle of minority students to perform adequately in the classroom setting. Three theories have been widely used to explain why or how minority students fail in school endeavors. The first one posits that minority students are inherently inferior and that educational outcomes are the result of such innate deficits (Jensen, 1969). The second theory alludes to the dissonance between home and school cultures as an explanation of minority children's school failure, asserting that the home culture shapes the behavior, learning, and cognitive styles of children. In turn, the school culture is oblivious to these cultural differences. Thus, it is the mismatch between school practices and home culture that produces problems for culturally and linguistically different children (Vogt, Jordan, & Tharp, 1987).

A more radical position maintains that the school failure of minority students must be explained, in part, by values rooted in the dominant American culture. Competition and evaluation are institutionalized in schools to reflect the stratification of the larger society (McDermott, 1987). The social world of the classroom is mutually constructed and constantly negotiated during the school day, and political differentials are an integral part of these negotiations. Examples of these transactions are the determination of status in the classroom, the degrading connotations attached to the use of other languages and dialects, and the establishment of communicative code differences to reaffirm group membership and cultural identity. The resulting dissonance in communicative processes (e.g., perceptions, assumptions, gestures, turn-taking procedures) contributes to the development of communication gaps and misunderstandings. In this regard, McDermott's views are pertinent:

These children are immersed in the politics of everyday life, they are working hard at constructing their identities and at gaining status in the classroom. If the teacher frequently devalues or ignores these children's cultural backgrounds, they will often reject the teacher's messages as worthless. As a consequence, such children lose interest in learning, become inattentive, and a self-perpetuating cycle begins to emerge. Reciprocally, if the behaviors of the child are not consistent with the expectations and standards espoused by the teacher and the dominant culture as a whole, the child may be seen as behaviorally and/or academically deficient. (Frem & Artiles, in press)
But the construction of school failure is also determined by factors in the larger educational context. For instance, there has been a gradual but inexorable reduction in the allocation of resources for education in this country, and the inequalities in the distribution of resources across school systems are simply savage (Kozol, 1991). In addition, the dominance of the normative paradigm in educational measurement, with its overemphasis on excellence, has inevitably affected minority students’ performance in school settings. It is rather obvious that an overburdened educational system with scarce material resources and limited tools to address cultural differences has failed the segment of the student population that does not fit its uniform mold.

Consequently, it is not surprising to find that “almost 75% of mild mental retardation is linked to various SES-related environmental contingencies” (Baumeister et al., 1990, p. 2), that mild handicapping conditions (e.g., mild mental retardation and learning disabilities) are associated with socioeconomic indicators (Gelb & Mizokawa, 1986), and that “there are fewer Hispanics in preschool education; there are fewer keeping up with their age groups; there are more dropping out and dropping out earlier; there are fewer completing high school; there are fewer enrolled in college, with more dropping out of college” (President’s Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, 1992, p. xv). Nor is it news to learn that African-American students are more likely to be identified as having mild mental retardation than their white counterparts (Meier et al., 1989), or that, nationally, the dropout rate for African-American youth is almost 28% and approaching 50% in some areas (National Black Child Development Institute, Inc., 1986). Tracking research has also confirmed many of these realities in the present educational system (Oakes, 1992). In fact, the devastating effects of the self-perpetuating cycle of disadvantage for minority students (with and without disabilities) become acutely evident later on in their educational paths. For instance, there have been several reports on the calamitous situation of Latino students in secondary and higher education (Anaya, Solorzano, & Dey, 1992; Newman, 1992).

**Cultural Diversity and Disability: A False Analogy**

Underlying the dispute about the overrepresentation problem one finds two different notions that have been implicitly equated: disability and cultural difference. Both constructs are directly related to the fundamental notion of “difference,” and both are socially constructed; however, they have distinct conceptual roots.

The notion of disability is concerned with atypical functioning or educational performance due to biological, psychological, and/or social factors. The level of functioning for individuals with disabilities falls in the lower portion of the normal distribution curve. The notion of disability exists because we have established parameters to judge when a person functions anatomically, physiologically, intellectually, and/or psychosocially within the limits of what is considered typical. On
the other hand, cultural diversity is not defined—at least theoretically—by a standard parameter of functioning. Although it is also concerned with the idea of difference, it is not—unlike the disability construct—inherently linked to the notion of deviance. In the educational context, cultural diversity is generally associated with more ethereal or socially constructed notions, such as ethnicity, race, gender, language, and social class. Values, cultural identity, and shared history are also elements included in this notion (Banks & Banks, 1989).

Nevertheless, due to the multiple factors discussed in previous sections, we have been socialized to equate these two notions almost unconsciously. Just as we instinctively associate things like sleep with bed, food with table, Spanish language with Mexico, AIDS with homosexuality, many individuals also link axiomatically cultural diversity with disability. Rationally, we know that we should not make these associations a priori. On the other hand, we also know how difficult it is to be aware of these implicit assumptions, or how trying it is to be cognizant of their impact on our perceptions, judgments, and reactions. In fact, even members of minority groups often hold the very same preconceptions.

Consequently, we wonder how these cultural assumptions, values, implicit theories, and expectations affect the beliefs, decisions, and behaviors of teachers, psychologists, counselors, principals, employers, policemen and women, and all individuals who deal with culturally diverse people in educational, occupational, social, and personal contexts. We might also ask, how do we construct situations and organize contexts to confirm our entrenched assumptions about the cultural diversity—disability analogy? Is it possible to deconstruct the pervasive, damaging power of this fallacious analogy?

When we find answers to some of these questions, we might be able to start addressing a second set of questions that have a direct bearing on educational endeavors. For instance, what does the persistence of the overrepresentation debate in the educational reform discourse tell us about our knowledge base, practices, and policies? How can we discern what portion of the variance in cases with learning difficulties is accounted for by a disabling condition and by the incompatibilities between the pupil’s cultural background and the educational system? How can we discern which students of color need special education and which do not? As with other special education categories, will we construct and validate a new category for culturally diverse students because we do not know how to deal with them in the general education system?

After 25 years, we reiterate Dunn and Deno’s thesis that there is a systemic problem underlying the overrepresentation issue. In part, this systemic problem is rooted in the disability—cultural diversity analogy. However, as we discussed before, several factors outside of the special education field also impinge upon this problem. Underlying all the factors that we included in our contemporary analysis of this problem, we found the lack of understanding (or of inclusion) of the multivariate interactions associated with cultural diversity and disability. Hence, we would like to transcend the original argument posited by Dunn and Deno (i.e., system restructuring and improvement) to suggest that—coupled with such a systemic change—we must conceptualize and implement a comprehensive reform agenda.
WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT THE OVERREPRESENTATION PROBLEM?

Myriad solutions have been suggested in the past to solve the problem of overrepresentation. Before we offer our suggestions, we will summarize the solutions advanced 25 years ago.

Solutions Advanced in 1968

Dunn proposed changes in two broad areas of the special education system, namely, in systemic procedures (e.g., diagnosis, placement, and instruction) and in curricula. Dunn suggested that a clinical approach be used and that every attempt be made to educate slow learners—especially the ethnically or economically disadvantaged—in the mainstream. Dunn also acknowledged the need to improve the quality of personnel preparation programs and of the inservice teaching force in order to implement his suggestions. Through a process of interdisciplinary collaboration, special educators would accomplish this task in at least eight curricular domains, namely, (a) environmental modifications; (b) motor development; (c) sensory and perceptual training; (d) academic, cognitive, and language development; (e) speech and communication training; (f) personality development; (g) social interaction training; and (h) vocational training.

Solutions Advanced in 1993

We contend that the overrepresentation problem exerts considerable pressure on both the general and the special education systems. On the one hand, a significant portion of the general education clientele are from different backgrounds, and, unfortunately, many are not succeeding in the system. In an attempt to address the needs of this diverse population, we have labeled and placed many of them in classes for students with mild disabilities. On the other hand, this problem forces the special education system to deal with two distinct types of differences that are not necessarily part of the same continuum or dimension. Further, the distinction between to have something that makes you different (e.g., a disabling condition) or to be different (e.g., to be culturally different) brings into the equation moral and ethical issues germane to the reform of identification, assessment, and intervention practices.

We conclude that the overrepresentation problem ought to be examined from a multivariate perspective and that the problems exhibited by culturally different children ought to be explained beyond the traditional within-child deficit view. As evidenced in our review of the literature, factors external to the culturally diverse child also contribute to their school difficulties. We need to develop an encompassing reform agenda that will include actions in various domains: (a) concept refinement, (b) a culturally sensitive research agenda, (c) systemic reform, (d) personnel preparation reform, and (e) advocacy and policy making.
Concept Refinement. We are only starting to map out how the ethno-cultural and social–psychological characteristics of students with disabilities interact with their learning characteristics (see Brantlinger & Guskin, 1987). Hence, we need to continue refining and operationalizing the different definitions of mild handicapping conditions to assist special educators in the implementation of differential diagnoses. The advancement in this area has been uneven within the special education field. For instance, laudable efforts and progress are observed with regard to the definition of behavioral disorders (Forness & Knitzer, 1991), whereas considerable controversy still pervades the definition of mental retardation (Michaelson, 1993).

Further, we find only a limited number of attempts to address issues of cultural diversity and special education in the mainstream research literature (e.g., Exceptional Children, vols. 56 and 59; Learning Disability Quarterly, vol. 6). More attention to concept refinement and its dissemination are desperately needed in this area to start developing conceptual frameworks that would enable us to elucidate the complex interactions among culture, learning, disability, and instructional outcomes.

Developing a Sound, Culturally Sensitive Research Agenda. A comprehensive research agenda that uses sound quantitative and qualitative methodologies is needed. This research agenda should emphasize the interplay between the ecological and cultural facets of children’s development and learning processes. By doing this, we will refine the existing knowledge base on the universals and group specifics of child development, on the influence of context and human diversity on learning and instruction, and on the influence of socioeconomic and cultural factors on schooling (Rogoff & Morelli, 1989; Tharp, 1989). From this perspective, children’s learning processes are seen as grounded in a constructivist perspective, as socially based, and as context specific. Thus, school success and failure become a shared responsibility of teachers, pupils, administrators, families, and others involved in the educational process. Consequently, the implicit theory of schools will not be that “educational quality comes through uniformity” (Cuban, 1989, p. 782). Such a framework will enable us to define an encompassing research agenda that would be based on the following pivotal principles:

1. Individuals live in systems. Children develop and live in systems where the whole is more than the sum of its parts. The elements in the whole system are interdependent. Changes in one piece of a system will have an impact on the rest of the system.
2. Individuals act and think in contexts. Communication, interactions, thought processes, learning, and other processes are embedded in contexts. Children construct and derive meaning in context-specific situations.
3. Behaviors and thoughts are mediated. Individuals’ actions and thoughts are mediated by beliefs, values, and perceptions that have been learned or acquired through cultural transmission or social learning.
4. Events are simultaneous and immediate. A multitude of events occur simultaneously in a given situation. Individuals process actively the immediacy
and simultaneity of events and focus their attention on particular aspects of the situation. While immersed in a situation, however, a teacher and a pupil not only deal with the immediate events (e.g., specific classroom and activity context, verbal communication, expectations), but they also bring their own cultural backgrounds. In this sense, issues of classroom milieu, school, educational system, home, and community life are being played out simultaneously in a given situation.

5. **Meanings and interactions are constructed and shaped by individuals.** Individuals shape each other’s responses during interactions, and their unique characteristics and idiosyncrasies mutually construct the nature and quality of interactions and the meanings attached to them. The research agenda we advocate has to be grounded in at least the preceding principles and ought to focus on several crucial ecological domains: (a) community (e.g., values, relations with home and school); (b) home (e.g., values, communication, and interactive patterns); (c) educational system (e.g., conceptual issues, policies, procedural issues, and personnel preparation issues); (d) school (e.g., curricula, policies, and relations with home); and (e) classroom (e.g., teacher and pupils, processes, and outcomes).

This research agenda aims to capture, for instance, the subtle transactions that occur between culture, learning, and social interactions during classroom instruction. An instance of such work is a pilot study that the senior author is currently conducting on the impact that certain mediating variables have on student outcomes (Artiles, in preparation). Mediating variables are being assessed in teachers (e.g., beliefs, decision-making processes) and in high- and low-achieving minority students (e.g., beliefs, perceptions of teacher’s decision making, use of self-regulating learning strategies, and motivation). Quantitative and qualitative analyses will assess the impact that the interactions between these teacher, pupil, and instructional variables have on student outcomes (see also Rueda & Moll, in press).

Similarly, two major benefits will be derived from the implementation of this research agenda. First, the responses we find through these inquiries will inform our practices and will improve the quality of services offered to children in the educational system. Second, by questioning a monocultural view of knowledge, learning, and schooling, we will encourage the inclusion of the voices of minority scholars, which in turn might disagree with traditional notions embraced in this field. Thus, the inclusion of minority views will stimulate an enriching intellectual conversation.

**System Improvement and Restructuring**

The special education system needs to be improved and restructured. We believe that (a) prevention, (b) functional assessment, (c) culturally sensitive instruction based on critical reflection, and (d) the redefinition of school–home–community relations are important means to launch this type of reform.

**Prevention.** Prevention is a viable, cost-effective intervention in the special education field. Preventive endeavors offer us alternative solutions to the current
reform debate in the field (Pianta, 1990). For instance, we possess the scientific knowledge and experience to prevent some forms of mental retardation (Ramey & Campbell, 1984), learning disabilities (Horn & Packard, 1985), and emotional or behavioral disorders (Elias & Branden, 1988). However, the importance of this area of intervention has been overlooked (Artiles, 1992).

A preventive model based on ecological and interactional frameworks might prove useful in implementing academic and social interventions in schools, homes, and communities. The notion of children’s resilience should be at the center of this preventive model to emphasize its proactive and positive focus (Rutter, 1987). Conceptual frameworks such as those proposed by Baumeister and associates (1990) and Lloyd, Kauffman, and Kupersmidt (1990) ought to be empirically tested and refined as a first step toward delineating an encompassing ecological model grounded on a preventive paradigm.

**Functional Assessment.** A functional assessment approach is congruent with the preventive model. In this model, the role of context is considered critical to explaining a student’s academic success or failure. The instructional context, according to this model, interacts with the individual’s traits and with environmental influences to produce a given instructional outcome (Mahadey, Algozzine, & Ysseldyke, 1984). The most important components of the functional assessment model are prerelief interventions, direct observation, and curriculum-based measurement. We have discussed elsewhere the use of this approach with culturally diverse students in special education (Trent & Artiles, in press).

**Culturally Sensitive Instruction Based on Critical Reflection.** Lessen, Dudzinski, Karsh, and Van Aker (1989) determined that during the 10-year period from 1979 to 1989, little of the research published in special education professional journals was devoted to instruction. We agree with Deno that “developmental capital” must be devoted to this area. Further, we contend that educators must be trained to use a variety of instructional models that have improved the academic performance of at-risk groups. With such knowledge and skills, “teachers will be equipped to reflect critically about their practice, make more informed pedagogical and instructional decisions and—through systematic manipulation and integration of different approaches—develop new models of instruction” (Trent, 1993, p. 28). Likewise, advances in instructional technology should assist teachers to develop more attractive and stimulating instructional practices with their students.

**Redefinition of Home–School–Community Relations.** The community of educational researchers ought to lead the efforts to redefine the link between schools, homes, and communities through the implementation of a community–multidisciplinary approach. Different service providers (e.g., schools, mental health, public health, social service agencies) could coordinate efforts with families and communities to render specialized services in an equitable manner. All parties involved in this effort, however, must first assess their level of cross-cultural competency (both at the organizational and individual levels) to offer meaningful assistance to minor-
ity families. Finally, federal, state, and local government entities should offer incentives to the agencies working within this comprehensive model.

At the same time, a reexamination of the existing knowledge base to plan, implement, and evaluate efforts in this area is a crucial step. We contend that there is a “need to make distinctions between what we know, what we do not know, and what we need to know. We need to learn from research that has already been conducted to identify discontinuities between school and home cultures, study the results of such projects alongside existing theoretical conceptions about how children from different cultures learn and behave, and finally use this information to develop and extend our knowledge base” and this new research agenda (Trent & Artiles, in press).

Finally, educators ought to pay closer attention to recent research literature on minority parents’ involvement in the educational process and on their beliefs, values, and expectations (Delgado-Gaitán, 1992; Harry, 1992b). This knowledge base will also assist educators in redefining home-school-community relations in a more culturally sensitive fashion.

Reform in Professional Preparation Programs

Reforms in the service delivery system and in the research agenda ought to include a redefinition and reorganization of professional preparation programs. This change is supported by factors such as the discontinuity that exists between the student population and the teaching force (e.g., an increasingly diverse school population vis à vis a predominantly white teaching force) (Grant & Secada, 1990). To address this issue, multicultural education components are starting to be infused in preservice and inservice teacher education programs so that teachers can use a culturally sensitive or a culturally responsive pedagogy when teaching their pupils. In fact, the use of effective teaching practices with diverse learners has been proposed and reviewed elsewhere (Garcia, 1990; Villegas, 1991). Unfortunately, there is little evidence documenting the impact of such efforts, and substantial reforms have been proposed to revamp multicultural education components in teacher preparation programs (Obiakor, 1993).

We contend that more studies should be conducted to document the impact of these training programs and that efforts in this realm should transcend the mere infusion of content knowledge about diversity. We believe that these programs should also include (a) an emphasis on teacher decision-making and problem-solving processes in order to avoid the adoption of a prescriptive/stereotypical model of instruction and (b) a process-oriented component so that teachers can deal with issues of diversity at the personal level (e.g., reflect about individual values, perceptions, stereotypes, and expectations of diverse learners). Likewise, these arguments are applicable to teacher educators and faculty in special education programs in higher education. Ultimately, preservice and inservice teacher education programs should equip teachers to empower their students so that they become critical thinkers and function successfully in society (Delpit, 1988; Macedo, 1993). Ideally, both educators and students should aspire to develop cross-cultural competency to function comfortably in multicultural settings.
In addition, greater emphasis should be placed on the recruitment of minority individuals to pursue careers in teaching and educational research (Grant, 1992; Trent, 1992). It is expected that the inclusion of a multicultural component and of more minority educators will benefit the educational system in at least three ways: (a) it will increase the number of minority role models for all pupils and professionals in education, (b) it will expose all pupils to a curriculum that offers diverse perspectives (i.e., it will broaden pupils' world views), and (c) it will allow minority educators to offer their unique input to practitioners, educational reformers, and policymakers.

Likewise, more minority researchers are desperately needed in special education. The inclusion of minority voices in the research discourse, however, should not be seen as an obstacle to reach conceptual consensus. In this vein, William Raspberry stressed the need to distinguish between problems and enemies. We need to keep in mind that "problems persist after enemies are vanquished, and diverting energy into battles with real or imagined enemies often prevents or delays solutions" (cited in Kauffman, 1993, p. 6). Hence, we should see the collaboration between researchers of different colors as a means to augment our creativity when analyzing problems and designing research studies. After all, researchers and practitioners in the special education field—regardless of their ethnic background—pursue the same basic goal, namely, the well-being of children with special needs.

Advocacy and Policy-Making

Advocacy and policy-making are fundamental areas of action in our comprehensive reform agenda. Access to and dissemination of knowledge are fundamental means to advocate and develop policy on behalf of minority students. Further, the knowledge derived from the aforementioned research agenda should be disseminated and infused into the curricula of various educational institutions (e.g., teacher preparation programs, education, sociology, anthropology, psychology, and other departments in universities). This infusion of knowledge, in turn, will aid practitioners and researchers in the design and implementation of multidisciplinary efforts. Moreover, the dissemination of knowledge will help to demystify the stereotypes and overgeneralizations that are made about people of color as individuals with deficits. We contend that it is time to propose and test different hypotheses to understand the construction of failure among minority individuals and to challenge traditional notions in this arena.

Sophisticated record-keeping systems and regional and national data bases need to be established to document continuously the overrepresentation problem. Likewise, a systematic model to assess and to interpret the overrepresentation data has to be devised. The creation of these systems and data bases will help clarify seemingly conflicting figures or reports by taking into consideration factors such as geographical region, type of disabling conditions, age levels, service options, and so forth. Similarly, efforts to implement reforms (e.g., detracking endeavors) ought to be monitored systematically to allow policymakers and educational planners to make informed decisions. In addition, policymakers and state administrators ought to be pressed to increase the specificity and clarity of policies aimed
to empower and serve families—especially those families that have been traditionally underserved (Arcia, Serling, & Gallagher, 1992).

CONCLUDING STATEMENTS

Twenty-five years ago, Dunn stipulated that “we must face the reality—we are asked to take children others cannot teach, and a large percentage of these are from ethnically and/or economically disadvantaged backgrounds” (Dunn, 1968, p. 20). Now, in 1993, we find ourselves still grappling with the issue of overrepresentation and the problem of serving, equitably and effectively, children whose problems, in some cases, are more complex and stressful than the problems of the children described by Dunn.

After all these years we find ourselves asking the same basic questions. Is overrepresentation a problem? If so, is it contingent to particular circumstances, groups, labels, or programs? By asserting that it is a problem, are we implying that placement in special education programs is not desirable? Should we establish placement quotas by ethnic groups to solve this problem? By establishing quotas, will we deny services to minority students who actually need specialized services? How can we circumvent such undesirable consequences?

We know, as Heller et al. (1982, p. 18) put it, that “disproportion is a problem (1) if children are invalidly placed in programs for mentally retarded students; (2) if they are unduly exposed to the likelihood of such placement by virtue of having received poor-quality regular instruction; and (3) if the quality and academic relevance of the special instruction programs block students’ educational progress, including decreasing the likelihood of their return to the regular classroom” (see also Lambert, 1981; Mercer, 1973). Perhaps a major deterrent is that we fail to examine problems in their sociohistorical and political contexts. For instance, instead of examining the issues and problems in special education from a historical perspective, we have continued to overemphasize a pathological ethos that has caused us to define efficacy based on setting versus quality of services. From a social perspective, we have continued to develop educational structures without examining and considering how the belief systems, biases, prejudices, and socioeconomic inequities that have existed for centuries in the American society would be played out and perpetuated in our nation’s schools—microcosms of the larger society.

Consequently, we have failed to develop comprehensive historical and sociohistorical analyses of special education issues that would foster the creation of improved policies and practices for historically neglected and underserved groups. In taking this stance, we do not mean to argue that special education has made no significant strides over the last 25 years. However, we do assert that it is time to extend our analyses of the problems and pitfalls of special education to encompass sociohistorical/political perspectives, including the issues and proposed reform agenda that we have outlined in this article.

We believe that this more comprehensive focus will pave the way for thorough reforms in special and general education. Otherwise, we contend, many of the
problems that we have encountered in the field will remain as unsurmountable hurdles, and 25 years from now we will find that we have not moved beyond the point where we stand today.

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