

Children, Youth & Family Consortium

CYFC Monthly

CYFC Monthly — January 2015

When Race and Disability Intersect

Editor's Note: The CYFC Community-engaged Scholars Program is a four-year, multi-disciplinary, cohort-based program offering a learning community and funding for community-engaged research. It is intended to build scholars' capacity for community-engaged scholarship, benefit communities, contribute to our knowledge about educational and health disparities, and catalyze institutional support for CES. *CYFC Monthly* will feature one of the 2014-2017 scholars periodically throughout the year. In this issue, we feature Amanda L. Sullivan of the University's Department of Educational Psychology.

I am a school psychologist by training, having entered the field intent on working in urban schools. School psychologists use their expertise in learning, behavior, and mental health to help students and the educators who serve them. Quite early in my doctoral training, while completing fieldwork in the very schools where I hoped to later practice, I was troubled by disparities and insufficiencies in the treatment of children with learning problems who are members of racial and ethnic minority groups. This led me to wonder, as many others have, *Why are so many minority children in special education?*

For much of history, students with disabilities were excluded from public education.¹ Some children were deemed too disruptive, others "uneducable." For some families, special classrooms or schools for students with special needs were available, but for many others, this meant taking on the expense of private education, keeping their children at home, or institutionalizing them. This exclusion ended in 1975 when Congress passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, now called the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, requiring states to provide free, appropriate public education to all students with disabilities regardless of the severity of their needs or their capabilities.

This legislation was a major civil rights advancement for individuals with disabilities and a hard won coup for grassroots organizations that had long advocated for the rights and needs of these students and their families. Unfortunately, this victory was not without its pitfalls. Increasing funding and professional effort went toward training special education teachers and creating special education programs that were often conducted in separate classrooms or schools. It quickly became apparent that minority children were disproportionately placed in these programs, causing some to wonder if special education was being used to circumvent desegregation.²

This concern was fueled by evidence that minority children tended to be identified in what were considered the "judgmental" categories of mild learning, behavioral, and cognitive disabilities — those that required subjective professional judgments rather than medical diagnoses. At the same time, there was little evidence of disparities in the more severe or physically based disabilities, such as hearing or vision impairments.

Thus, many questioned whether some students were incorrectly identified as disabled when no true disabilities existed because educators failed to appreciate cultural differences, misunderstood minority children's learning needs, or provided inappropriate instruction and behavior management to these children.

Furthermore, special education is often regarded as a “double-edged sword” because, on one hand, it can provide services and resources that certain students need to access appropriate education, while on the other hand, providing these services can stigmatize these children.³ Some services and resources for disabled minority children also have been shown to be ineffective.

For all these reasons, I have spent the past nine years studying patterns and predictors of special education disparities for students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, as well as the effects of services and their relationship to outcomes, such as suspension or expulsion and high school graduation).

Much of the early research on special education disparities focused on black students in the South, but in my own work, I considered educational disproportionality for students from a variety of racial and linguistic groups across the nation and disability categories. My research tells me that disparities are much more complex than previously thought and that disproportionality is not limited to the mild disabilities.

For instance, many states show racial disparities in the identification and treatment of autism, and disparities are largely the opposite of those observed in the mild categories, with white and Asian students the most likely to receive services.⁴ Autism services differ from other special education services in that autism does not carry the stigma of, for example, intellectual or emotional disabilities, and autism services have been shown to be highly effective. Therefore, if educators fail to identify minority students who need autism services, these students will miss the help they need to reduce autism’s negative effects.

My Community-Engaged Scholars Program project aims to improve our understanding of the nature of disparities in autism identification and treatment in schools by (a) identifying child, family, and school factors related to identification of students with autism; and (b) examining how these are related to educator and family’ knowledge and biases — such as bias against racial and ethnic minorities — that affect decision-making. My goal is to identify potential levers for change by isolating malleable factors to target in professional development for educators and other professionals, as well as policy to enhance diagnosis and treatment planning. In the end, my hope is to improve how schools serve students with autism, so that all children, regardless of their cultural background, receive the services they need to succeed.

References

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2. Dunn, L. M. (1968). Special education for the mildly retarded: Is much of it justifiable? *Exceptional Children*, 35, 5-22.
3. Sullivan, A. L. (2012). Understanding and addressing inequities in special education. In D. Shriberg, S. Y. Song, A. H. Miranda, & K. M. Radcliff (Eds.), *School psychology and social justice: Conceptual foundations and tools for practice* (pp. 73-90). New York, NY: Routledge.
4. Sullivan, A. L. (2013). School-based autism identification: Prevalence, racial disparities, and systemic correlates. *School Psychology Review*, 42, 298-316.

About the Author: Amanda L. Sullivan is a licensed psychologist and certified school psychologist, with a Ph.D. in educational psychology from Arizona State University. She is an Associate Professor in the Department of Educational Psychology in the University’s College of Education and Human Development, where she also serves as Director of the School Psychology Program. Contact her at asulliva@umn.edu.

Consortium News

CYFC Welcomes New Research Assistant

I am excited to return to the University of Minnesota as both a graduate student in the School of Social Work and a graduate research assistant within the Children, Youth, & Family Consortium. I previously studied Early Childhood Education Foundations and Child Psychology as an undergraduate student at the U of M. Since then I have spent a great deal of time working with young children and students within the Minneapolis Public Schools District as both a Special Education Assistant and an Associate Educator. I am very passionate about being an active and dedicated advocate for both students and families and am thrilled to be a part of the Bruce Vento Project!

[Nora H. Fox](#)

Graduate Research Assistant

University & Community Announcements

Building Positive Outcomes for Youth and Families

Evergreen Youth and Family Services

Dates: March 19-20, 2015

Cost: \$121.59-\$219.62

Location: Bemidji, MN

Join other professionals serving youth, parents, and caregivers for this conference focused on improving outcomes for children, youth, and families in high-risk situations including poverty, abuse or neglect, foster care, mental health issues, or alcohol and drug use. Learn best practices and new research in fields related to children, youth, and family services while improving your understanding of different perspectives, cultural practices, and values. Learn more and register [here](#).

Healthy Generations, Incarceration and Public Health

Center for Leadership Education in Maternal and Child Public Health

This issue features local and national experts and covers a wide range of topics such as the health of incarcerated individuals, legislation in the US and Minnesota, health care for pregnant incarcerated women, prison nurseries, pregnancy and parenting support for women in prison, conducting research in prison settings, working with incarcerated individuals, mandatory pregnancy testing of incarcerated women, and much more.

The issue also includes local and national events and conferences, and web resources, including video and other information from the October 2014 "Interdisciplinary Institute on the Reproductive Health of Incarcerated Women in Minnesota", which features Incarceration and Public Health authors. Access the publication [here](#).

Healthy Parenting in the 21st Century: Unique Challenges of Fathers

Minnesota Fathers and Family Network

Dates: February 2-3, 2015

Cost: \$50-\$150

Location: St. Cloud, MN

Fathers play a critical role in healthy parenting that can come with challenges that are unique to fathers. They are facing a shift in expectations across cultures and socio-economic levels as well as changes in family makeup. Join other professionals for this conference focusing on those challenges. Keynote

presentations will be accompanied by panel presentations and workshops where experts will offer practical advice on how to best support fathers. Register for the conference [here](#).

One Message, Many Voices: Inter-Disciplinary Partnerships for Resilience Communication

Journal: *Procedia Economics and Finance*

When a record-setting flood threatened a Midwestern metropolitan area in 2009, citizen involvement in emergency mitigation averted disaster. In the wake of this event, government and non-government disaster response agencies joined forces to enhance community capacity for resilience to face flood threats. A simple, clear, and consistent message based on resilience theory was spread through multiple communication channels by partner agencies. Preliminary research data support use of the message and applicability of the recommended resilience strategies across the disaster cycle. The authors, including Extension Educators Ellie McCann and Sara Croymans, describe development of the message and keys to the success of inter-disciplinary partnerships in resilience communication. Access the article [here](#).

Trauma-Informed Care in Early Childhood

Minnesota Association for Children's Mental Health

Date: January 27, 2015

Cost: \$79

Location: Andover, MN

Learn about the different types of trauma and their impact on the developing child, including effects on infant and early-childhood brain development. Tracy Schreifels, MS, LMFT, will discuss ways to interpret behaviors through the lens of trauma to help caregivers understand the function of the behaviors. Learn more about this conference and register at the [MACMH website](#).

How to Provide Support for Adoptive Parents and Their Children

MomEnough

St. Paul author Elisabeth O'Toole joins Marti Erickson, Ph.D. and her daughter, Erin Erickson, as they explore the uncertainties and questions surrounding the often cumbersome process of adoption. O'Toole, mother of three adopted children, has written a book filled with practical advice for family, friends, and others who want to support adoptive parents and their children. Listen to the podcast at the [MomEnough website](#).

How to Provide Support for Adoptive Parents and Their Children

University of Minnesota Institute of Child Development

Date: February 5, 2015

Cost: Free but donations welcome

Location: Minneapolis, MN

Attend this conference to hear leading experts from the University of Minnesota's Institute of Child Development (ICD) present research on executive function and the achievement gap. Speakers will include Harry Boyte, Senior Fellow at the U of M Humphrey School of Public Affairs and Senior Scholar in Public Work Philosophy at Augsburg College, Minneapolis, who will introduce the concept of "civic science." A series of talks will address executive function, how biology and experience contribute to executive function skills, what can be done to improve executive function skills, and the role executive function skills play in learning mathematics. The conference also will feature small group discussions facilitated by ICD faculty and students. Visit the ICD website for [more information and to register](#).

Job Opportunities

Licensed School Based Therapist — Northeast Youth & Family Services

[Licensed Mental Health Service Provider — Avenues for Homeless Youth](#)

Minnesota Executive Director — Playworks [no longer active]

[Multiple Openings — Headway](#)

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