

# The Underrepresentation Of Females in Special Education - And Why it Matters

*This literature review examines peer-reviewed journal articles to discuss the implications of females in special education in special education classroom settings. The articles used span from 1974-2022 to look at past and present disparities in special education placements. Through the literature review, the researcher found the underrepresentation of females in special education programs is due to differences in behavior, camouflaging of the disability, and teacher biases. The authors offer suggestions for improving the educational opportunities for female students with special needs.*

**Keywords:** *underrepresentation, special education, females, behavior, disabilities, minorities*

**This literature review looks at many different factors and biases** that come into play when teachers refer a student to special education services. Before looking at gender disparities in special education, it is important to give a rough overview and background of special education. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act allows all students with disabilities access to Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). When students are referred for special education services, they must have a disability, and the disability must affect a student's academics in order to receive special education services (Walker al., 2022).

One framework teachers use for special education referral is Response to Intervention (RtI). RtI has three tiers with six to eight weeks in between each tier. Time in between allows for teachers to provide interventions and observe how interventions are affecting a student. RtI can be used for academic and behavioral issues at any point in schooling. All students start in Tier 1 whether they have a disability or not. Tier 1 is high-quality and individualized instruction, and about 10-20% of students will not respond well in this Tier according to Walker and Barry (2022). The students who do not respond well to Tier 1 move to Tier 2. Tier 2 has intensive interventions and students can get individualized help for academics and behavior. About 5-10% of students will not respond well to Tier 2 and move to Tier 3. In Tier 3, teachers use more targeted, intense, and behavioralized instruction. If students do not respond well to Tier 3, they are then referred to get tested for special education (Walker al., 2022). Getting referred for special education services can take time, but referrals should be based on not only behavior but academic need.

Once the student is in a special education program, they must have an Individualized Education Program or Plan (IEP). A student's IEP outlines goals and accommodations and/or modifications the student with a disability needs as they go through school. An IEP is a roadmap for an individual with a disabilities' education (Walker al., 2022). However, even with laws in place for special education and many steps required before being placed in special education,

students can be misdiagnosed as having a disability or placed in special education services because of behavior, teacher biases, or lower academic scores which will be discussed later in this literature review. This literature review will focus on the underrepresentation of females in special education programs, why males are more likely to be overrepresented, and possibilities on why gender disproportionality is a trend in the United States.

### **The Causes of Underrepresentation of Females in Special Education**

There are many reasons why girls are often not diagnosed or are diagnosed at an older age with a disability. Most of the time, girls are not diagnosed as having a disability until middle school, high school, or beyond school-age years. Some possibilities include hiding their disabilities, being quieter than boys, and having different behaviors than boys (Halsall al. 2021). Girls may use camouflaging strategies to conceal their autistic behavior in order to avoid bullying or humiliation (Halsall al. 2021). Hiding their disability can cause girls to not be diagnosed until later in life because teachers do not notice the girls' disabilities during class time. Similarly, girls with Emotional Disturbance Disorder may hide their depression and anxiety or they may have less visible issues than boys (Rice al., 2008).

Behavior plays a big role in referrals to special education for both genders. In the classroom, girls are overshadowed by louder, disruptive boys. Having an academic need should be one of the key reasons students are referred to special education programs, but most of the time, students are referred because of their behavior (Arms al. 2008). Teachers tend to refer students to special education that are bothersome in the classroom, and since girls are generally quieter than boys, they are not the ones referred (Anderson, 1997; Wehmeyer al., 2001; Arms et al., 2008). In a study looking at Attention Deficit Disorder/Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADD/ADHD), males were looked at for problems with grades and schoolwork, but girls were looked at for depressive disorders to be referred to a special education program (Graetz al. 2006). Just from behavior, both genders are looked at differently for special education referrals. Most of the time, girls identified in early childhood education, have a more severe or lower functioning disability than males (Severance et al., 2017). Because of this, if a girl has a higher-functioning disability, she must also exhibit disruptive behavior to be considered for special education programs.

Teachers tend to focus on the child in their classroom who is causing disruption rather than a quiet student. Boys can be loud and need attention, this can cause girls to feel frustrated and have their academics hindered when outnumbered by boys (Arms et al., 2008). Since girls are usually outnumbered in special education classrooms, this can be a problem for them academically. If girls are ignored during discussions, they are less likely to participate in the next discussion. Lack of participation can be a sign of a disability in females, though it can also be cause by shyness.

Teachers may not have resources to help support and address the unique needs of their students (Rice et al., 2008). Because of this, teachers can be unprepared to teach a child with a disability in their classroom. If girls are ignored, they can feel unsupported, and this can lead to them going to therapy for internalized behaviors (Oswald et al., 2003). If girls are not getting the support they need in school, they are forced to find support elsewhere. The underrepresentation of girls in special education can put them at risk for lack of appropriate social, motor, and academic skills. Girls with disabilities may not have same-sex peers to help develop relationships (Manwaring, 2008). If female students with disabilities are outnumbered by boys, they may

suffer academically, linguistically, or socially causing them to fall further behind their male counterparts.

### **The Implications of Academic Outcome Differences Between Boys and Girls**

The academic experience of females and males in school is often completely different. Generally, boys are held to higher academic standards, while girls are held to lower achievement standards (Severance et al., 2017). According to Severance et al. (2017), girls may participate less in class, leading teachers to believe they do not know the information as well as their male counterparts. Within some classrooms, behavior is prioritized over academics, therefore, causing boys to be prioritized over girls (Severance et al., 2017). Reading difficulty is also looked at by teachers when referring students for special education. However, some teachers may refer all students who are low readers which mainly consist of males, causing more boys to be referred instead of females (Wehmeyer et al., 2001).

Females usually have higher rates of academic performance and school completion; however, after high school, females usually have lower-paying jobs and lower rates of employment (Coutinho et al., 2005). This is possibly because females usually are not diagnosed with a disability until after elementary school or even after college. Although females score higher grades than males, they tend to score lower on standardized tests, take fewer advanced courses, and drop out of STEM classes before their male peers (Hanson et al., 2000). If females are not given the same amount of support as boys throughout their education, they will start performing lower than males in higher grade levels.

Lack of identification of a disability in early schooling can affect females beyond school-age years. For example, girls with an undiagnosed disability are more likely to drop out of school, become pregnant as teenagers, and be affected by poverty (Arms et al., 2008). If girls with disabilities cannot find the support they need within the school, it is hard for them to have high academic success. Females may not feel seen or cared for in the school system causing them to feel like the school system failed them. Without higher education, female students with disabilities can struggle to find a higher-paying job or see a more successful future.

### **The Future Prospects of Females with Disabilities**

About one-third of women with disabilities get a job where they earn minimum wage or more while more than half of males with disabilities can earn minimum wage or more (Hogansen et al., 2008). This may be because female students do not get enough focus and support while they are in school. Many women with disabilities experience more job instability than their male counterparts (Hogansen et al., 2008). Women can feel less successful than their male counterparts if they are not able to keep a job for longer than or equal to their male counterparts. Females with and without disabilities have higher career aspirations, but socioeconomic status and lack of access and opportunities limit females on their career options (Hanson et al., 2000). If female students with and without a disability are not given equal opportunities with their male counterparts, they are unable to reach the same level of success. Females in general, tend to go into lower-paying jobs than their male counterparts. This may be because their mentor or role model had the same job (Hogansen et al., 2008). Females with disabilities need someone to encourage them throughout school and into jobs. Some parents may not be confident that their children will be able to support themselves once they are out of the

special education program at their school (Hogansen et al., 2008). As teachers and parents lower their expectations, students can feel limited in what they can do on their own. Girls who get the support and education they need can gain more opportunities to improve their vocational opportunities (Zeng et al., 2014). As girls increase their skills, they are able to be more successful as they transition out of the special education classroom into employment.

### **Improving Education Services for Females with Disabilities**

In this section, the authors suggest ways that the educational prospects of female students might be improved. We believe that implementing different processes and developing different attitudes toward girls with disabilities could brighten the prospects of these students. To have a gender-equitable education, both boys and girls should be provided a non-discriminatory education under IDEA (Coutinho et al., 2005). Biases and discrimination should not exist when referring students to special education programs, but they do exist whether the bias is known by the teacher or not. Bias awareness training is recommended for all educators. All students, no matter what gender, should not feel discriminated against and should find support; however, when teachers have a predetermined idea of a child, it can be hard for teachers to reflect on themselves, their biases, and their treatment of each student (Anderson, 1997).

Schools and school districts need more support for special education programs. Some principals do not know enough about special education and some districts do not have enough funds for implementation (Sun et al., 2020). If there are not enough funds to have special education opportunities, children with disabilities cannot get the education they need. Having more training to help teachers identify signs of disability and help with classroom management, may help to identify whether a student has a disability or an unwanted behavior.

Lack of research on how females express a disability can lead to gender disproportionality in special education as well (Oswald et al., 2003). The strive for equality between genders is becoming more prevalent; therefore, research on disabled females should be becoming more prevalent as well. As research on females with a disability increases, teachers will become more informed on female signs of disabilities and will be able to refer females to special education services more frequently.

School special education programs should work with parents to get the best support for students with disabilities. Parents should feel like they have something to offer and contribute in a meaningful way (Hart, 2011). Parents as well as teachers should support children through schooling and special education. If a child knows they have support at home as well as school, they will more likely have greater success throughout their lives from school to a career.

### **Further Research**

In reviewing the literature on the underrepresentation of females in special education, there is research lacking on socioeconomic status, language, and females that have not been identified as having a disability until later in life. Given the lack of research on the underrepresentation of females in special education, the researcher recommends surveying teachers to look at biases and how a teacher refers students to special education programs. The researcher also recommends looking at the socioeconomic status and language of the female students to see how education is impacted.

### **Conclusion**

Though there is little research on the underrepresentation of females in special education, there is enough to show the gender discrepancy across many factors. To understand why females are underrepresented in special education settings, general education settings must be observed as well. Overall, the main reason for girls not being referred for special education services is because of the behavior of their male counterparts, which causes teachers to overlook their female students. Some teachers base their referral of students to special education on behavioral issues because of class disruption. Teachers should refer students to special education by looking at how the student is doing academically and how the behavior relates to academic performance. When looking at gender disproportionality one must look at teacher biases, lack of research regarding female special education, and factors outside of school. Special education should be equally attainable and have positive outcomes for both genders.

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