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# The Nonwhite Speech Language Impaired Student Population: The "Cycle-of-Silence" and the "Possessive Investment in Whiteness"

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**The Nonwhite Speech Language Impaired Student Population: The “Cycle-of-Silence”  
and the “Possessive Investment in Whiteness”<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

Overall we feel strongly that one of the myriad goals of research is to positively effect change in the lives and educational experiences of all SLI students, keeping in mind that many who suffer and are silenced are students of color. This research is highly important given that research indicates that language impairment (such as SLI) is linked with youth suicide. This paper, noticing the underrepresentation of SLI research in multicultural texts, analyzes Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) data procured from the Data Accountability Center (DAC) (2011). Testing for racial differences amongst SLI students, it was found that Whites (ages 6-21) are more likely to stutter than Blacks or Asians.

## **The Nonwhite Speech Language Impaired Student Population: The “Cycle-of-Silence” and the “Possessive Investment in Whiteness”**

“In a new environment, without the comfort of people who knew me well, I slipped back into my pattern of silence to avoid the shame of stammering and stuttering.” -Byron Pitts, 2009, p. 99

Multicultural Education textbooks frequently center on issues of race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and/or cultural diversity. Rarely, if ever, do readers of these texts have the opportunity to read research conducted on students who suffer from speech and language impairment. William Heward (2009) defines speech and language impairment (SLI) as a communication disorder such as stuttering, impaired articulation, language impairment, or a voice impairment that adversely affects a child’s educational performance. The underrepresentation of SLI research in multicultural texts is evident. James Banks and Cherry Banks’ (2003) highly referenced edited volume dedicates no pages to SLI issues. Other high-impact literature that inadequately covers SLI student issues is abundant (e.g., see Banks & Banks, 2005; Gollnick & Chinn, 2009; National Research Council, 2002).

The Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary (2006) defines silence as “absence of mention.” We contend that in addition to “an absence of mention” there is a “silence” or “lack of voice” in the research of SLI students and also in what multicultural education textbooks present. “Lack of voice” is caused by many things; misperceptions about people who experience speech or language impairments are one of them.<sup>1</sup> Misperceptions have the ability to cause the non SLI population to underestimate speech and language disabilities and to not take them seriously. In this chapter, using data from the Data Accountability Center (DAC)—and a critical race theoretical framework—we analyze the distributions of students who are speech or language impaired by race. We focus on the race of students who are speech or language impaired because

critical race theory (CRT) is most interested in issues of racial inequity. We believe that the invisibility of SLI students of color<sup>ii</sup> is an educational inequity. We introduce and discuss what we are calling the concept of a “cycle-of-silence,” and hope that our chapter motivates readers—be they SLI or not SLI—to further investigate the silencing of SLI students in multicultural texts that many times are devoid of SLI research.

The Byron Pitts epigraph above illustrates what we are labeling the SLI “cycle-of-silence.” In his autobiography, Pitts (2009) recounts the pain and anguish he suffered because he stuttered. He acknowledges, “I slipped back into my pattern of silence to avoid the shame of stammering and stuttering” (p. 99). Pitts’ experience as a person with a speech or language impairment caused him to become silent in order to avoid personal trauma. Silencing himself was a strategy that he frequently employed in order to avoid the traumatic experiences that accompanied stuttered-speech. Pitts mentions, “I rarely spoke in my classes because I didn’t have the confidence to express myself” (p. 100). Although self-silencing is completely normal and common for people who are speech or language impaired, it is also dangerous for numerous reasons.<sup>2</sup>

For example, there have been documented cases of students who had speech or language impairments who took their own lives (*Lexington Herald-Leader*, 2008). Children who stutter are at greater risk of victimization and being bullied (Langevin, Bortnick, Hammer, & Wiebe, 1998). By becoming silent, SLI students in effect become invisible to the wider society that is fluency dominant. Mainstream culture is fluency dominant. As Ann Swan (1993) states, “Society values verbal communication and expects members to speak with ease and fluency. Being a

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<sup>2</sup> We would like to state explicitly that we are not blaming the victim(s), but merely stating how sometimes SLI students become silent due to stress and in order to protect themselves from being perceived by others as disfluent.

stutterer [or person who is SLI] puts one at a distinct social and economic disadvantage” (p. 139).

*Stuttering Stanley* is a stereotypical term for speech and language impaired individuals. The Urban Online Dictionary (2011) defines a *Stuttering Stanley* as follows: “When a dumb, idiotic person can’t speak correctly.” Many times students who stutter internalize their disfluency and feel “dumb.” Some individuals (both young and old), take drastic measures, including committing suicide. Stephen Patton, a 13-year-old boy, took his own life with a 9 millimeter handgun because he was bullied due to his stuttering; Stephen was only in eighth grade (*Lexington Herald-Leader*, 2008). Dominic Barker, a 26-year-old man, took his own life because he had a stutter (BBC News, 2006). Steven Vickerman, a 6-foot, 200-pound man who was known to stutter committed suicide by hanging himself (Adely, 2008). Vickerman’s suicide challenges the widespread notion that strong people can guard themselves against bullies. Did the stuttering in each of these cases—Barker and Vickermann—lead to suicide, or was there any underlying issue (such as traumatic childhood experience) that led both to the stuttering and suicidal thoughts? This we do not know, but even more alarming, in what has been dubbed the “Ottawa Massacre,” Pierre Lebrun, “a tall, lanky 40-year-old bachelor with a stutter, [showed] up at his former workplace with a Remington 760 .30-06 rifle—a slightly modified version of the weapon that James Earl Ray used to kill civil rights crusader Martin Luther King in 1968—and his pockets stuffed with ammunition” (Branswell, 1999, para 2). Lebrun’s mother believes that harassment, due to Lebrun’s stutter/speech impediment, caused him to kill four people and himself.

We argue that this pattern of shame avoidance (self-silencing), coupled with the mainstream’s fluency-dominated culture, contributes to a second form of silencing of SLI

student populations. Behaving as if everyone can fluently speak serves to “silence” those who do not, thus rendering SLI students invisible. It is important to note that this second form of silencing is caused not by the student silencing him/herself per se; rather, it is society and schools that help impose the silence.

For example, in many classrooms—be they at the K-12 or college level—students are required to participate in verbal self-introductions in the beginning of each academic year. Normally each student introduces him/herself (i.e. saying his/her name and something fun he/she did during break). This traditional way of beginning a semester or school year is an example of how instructors and teachers assume that every student has the ability to fluently express oneself. These moments are petrifying for SLI students who many times find school uninviting. In order to avoid such experiences, SLI students may become self-silencing in order to avoid public ridicule and teasing, or even choose to drop out of school (Zhang, Katsiyannis, Barrett, & Wilson, 2007). Research suggests that children who find school uninviting are more likely to become academically disengaged (Alexander, Entwistle, & Horsey, 1997; Anderman, 2003). Studies contend that truancy has a direct impact on dropout rates, delinquency, and poor adult outcomes (Zhang, Katsiyannis, Barrett, & Wilson, 2007).

According to the National Institute of Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (2008), roughly three million Americans stutter. However, we are still unaware of how nonwhite SLI students are doing when compared to their white counterparts since much of the extant research on SLI student populations does not racially disaggregate or compare race qua race. According to Yairi & Seery (2011), “[I]t is not surprising that a belief has prevailed that stuttering occurs more frequently in African American children than in European American children” (p. 40), although they note that this thinking—that African Americans stutter more

than whites—has recently begun to change. A possible explanation for the common belief that African Americans are more likely to be stutterers is due to media portrayals, feeding the impression that this is a racial reality. For instance, we found several examples of African American men whose own depictions perpetuated this false belief. Insidiously, these comical portrayals in movies<sup>iii</sup> and by comedians<sup>iv</sup> cause SLI people of color to never be heard. They “suffer in silence,” feeling hopeless, constantly reminded that they are not welcome in a fluency dominant culture.

Given that SLI affects people of all ages and races, but occurs most often in children between the ages of 2 and 5 as they are developing their language skills (Dalton & Hardcastle, 1977), it becomes increasingly important for research to study racial group differences. This chapter will shed light on the differences that exist in the SLI student racial groups in 2008. Since approximately 1 per cent or less of adults stutter in the U.S. (NIDCD, 2010), this chapter will be useful for examining whether SLI students (aged 6-21) *are* or *are not* evenly distributed among races.

Interestingly, when we contacted the National Stuttering Association (2010) requesting racial data on SLI students, we were told that data that racially disaggregated student(s) who suffered from SLI (or stuttered) did not exist. Fortunately the NSA (2010) was misinformed and data *does* exist (e.g., see DAC, 2011). We believe that our chapter can serve as a beginning point—a “conversation starter” if you will—for such SLI awareness-raising. The issues and the investigation that we present here are highly original and noticeably absent in multicultural education texts (e.g., see Banks & Banks, 2003; National Research Council, 2002). Using critical race theory (Asch, 2001; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Delgado, 1995; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Hartlep, 2010; Taylor, Gillborn & Ladson-Billings, 2009; among others) as a lens for our study,



we examine why there continues to be a lack of SLI research presented in multicultural texts, especially research that racially contextualizes SLI “silence” within racial and/or cultural minorities.

By drawing on critical race theory, we are able to explain the silencing of people of color. This is followed by our statistical analysis of DAC data to show the distributions of students who are speech or language impaired by race. We discuss the results of our analysis and suggest that additional SLI student advocacy is needed to raise awareness, by making visible to the wider society those students who suffer from speech or language impairments.

### **Assessing the “Lack of Voice” and Silencing of SLI Students of Color**

#### ***The King’s Speech: An Example of The Possessive Investment in Whiteness***

George Lipsitz’s (1998) theory of “the possessive investment in whiteness” can be thought of as white Americans’ investment in whiteness, which provides them with resources, power, and opportunity. Lipsitz (1998) says that “[a]ll communities of color suffer from the possessive investment in whiteness, but not in the same way” (p. 184). No movie most readily illustrates his theory better than *The King’s Speech* (2011). *The King’s Speech* tells the story of how stuttering impacted Britain’s King George VI (actor, Colin Firth) from the age of 5 into his adulthood. As an adult, King George felt compelled to overcome his stuttering. He received several forms of therapy, remedies, and advice from multiple SLI experts. Alas, King George’s stutter was never entirely cured *per se*. But unsurprisingly, white privilege is evident throughout the King’s quest for fluency. In fact, unlike SLI individuals who belong to resource deprived African American, Native American, Asian American, and other minority groups, King George VI was endowed with institutional resources, power, and opportunities that afforded him a

community of “safety nets” and support systems. People of color who are also SLI lack, for the most part, lack advocacy and support systems.

*The King’s Speech* is representative of what Lipsitz (1997) calls a “romantic narrative.” Many times, Lipsitz (1997) says, “the motivations behind romanticism are not necessarily racist” (p. 43); however, romantic myths play an important role in the possessive investment in whiteness since they “perpetuate rather than mitigate the alienations and injustices that [they seek] to address and redress” (p. 43). While many SLI associations have publicly praised the film for documenting an SLI issue—stuttering—many have not thoroughly examined or critiqued the film for what it truly is. The biopic film gives attention to a white man (a wealthy King) who stutters, as opposed to a person of color who stutters. It is important to consider cultural experiences when seeking to understand people who stutter (Cooper & Cooper, 1998; Leith, 1986; Robinson & Crowe, 1998; Shames, 1989). Shames (1989) indicates that little research has examined cultural issues of people who stutter of historically disadvantaged racial and ethnic groups, and according to Daniels, Hagstrom, and Gabel (2007), research needs to be conducted on “how the interaction of race and communication affects the ways in which people who stutter of historically disadvantaged race-ethnic groups” (p. 201) perceive themselves and their SLI status.

The King’s story, as captured in the movie—overcoming of his speech language impairment, a stutter—is a romantic narrative through and through. Romantic narrative films obscure and/or omit “the social circumstances and the cultural strategies” that surround people with speech and language impairments (Lipsitz, 1997, p. 44). Not only does the film document a romantic narrative, *The King’s Speech* reinforces and reifies the widespread misperceptions mentioned earlier in this chapter (Preston, 2011).

According to George Lipsitz (1998), Hollywood creates and invests in whiteness. This means that Hollywood commodifies King George's struggle and successful triumph over stuttering in order to invest in whiteness. This investment and the product (a movie) serve to protect white people's "possessive investment in whiteness" because speech and language impairment remains being represented as a white issue of importance or concern. However, the movie does not illustrate that there are people of color who are speech or language impaired. As Lipsitz (1998, p. 112) comments, "Once these images have been circulated and recirculated, they are extremely difficult to displace." For this reason, *The King's Speech* serves as a mechanism that whitewashes SLI, and presents it as an exclusively white problem, one that, with enough hard work and determination, can be overcome.

Linked to the possessive investment in whiteness are associations and governmental agencies that are equally complicit as Hollywood in investing in whiteness. In fact, Lipsitz (1998) discusses how public policies create a possessive investment in whiteness. We argue that this investment also marginalizes people of color who suffer with SLI. In contrast, we contend that whites who benefit from SLI associations receive professional therapeutic assistance, advocates, and even support groups. People of color who are SLI may attempt to receive their own homemade remedies or advice—such as the idea that getting hit in the face with a wet cloth will cure stuttering—from untrained local community and/or family members. According to research, this lack of support primarily results in social stigma, labeling, rejection, exclusion, and discrimination by the non-stigmatized (fluent) population (Boyle, Blood, & Blood, 2009). A cursory examination of associations' web sites dedicated to speech and language impairment issues (e.g. see, [www.asha.org](http://www.asha.org); [www.nsastutter.org](http://www.nsastutter.org); [www.nidcd.nih.gov](http://www.nidcd.nih.gov); [www.westutter.org](http://www.westutter.org)) reveals that the majority contain an overwhelming number of pictures of white individuals, and

relatively few pictures of people of color.<sup>v</sup> *Stuttering: For Kids, By Kids* (2006), a DVD produced by the Stuttering Foundation of America embodies this trend of one-sided coverage. Of the over 15 kids who stuttered and that were interviewed during this 12-minute film, only two were nonwhite: one black girl and one Hispanic boy (Scott & Guitar, 2006).

Given that these web sites and films, in addressing SLI, choose to focus on whites and marginalize nonwhites, they illustrate precisely what Lipsitz (1998) refers to “[a]s the unmarked category against which difference is constructed” (p. 2). Whiteness is invisible to most people (Bonilla-Silva, 2010), and has been referred to as “the water fish swim in”, providing an analogy for white peoples’ inability to acknowledge they are privileged because they do not see or feel it (Howard, 1999).<sup>vi</sup>

### ***Critical Race Theory and the Contexts of Silencing SLI Students of Color***

Critical race theory (CRT) has built a reputation as being a fruitful framework for dispelling racial inequities in education and educational research. By using a critical race theoretical framework to support our arguments, we believe we can demonstrate that SLI students of color are “silenced” in numerous ways. One salient way is by demonstrating that they are almost never present in edited multicultural readers, volumes, and textbooks. Another more tacit way that SLI students of color are excluded is by the “whitewashing” of their struggles, meaning the minimization of their struggles as SLI persons. This minimization is primarily hidden through the offering of a plethora of costly therapeutic pathology, while not providing advocacy groups to support people of color who suffer with SLI.

CRT has the ability to point out hidden racisms in our society since there can be “racism without racists” (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). It also can competitively challenge a-historical and a-contextual accounts made by society—which are fluency-dominant and fluency-normative—as

well as demonstrate how Lipsitz's (1998) conceptualization of "possessive investment in whiteness" can be used to show that SLI students of color are rendered invisible and/or silenced.

As we have already mentioned, we believe that there are two contexts for the silence of SLI students of color. First, there is the context in which SLI students of color "choose" to be silent based upon their feelings of embarrassment, humiliation, or desire to blend in. The first context is what we propose as being the SLI "cycle-of-silence." The second context relates to the idea that there is no real advocacy to raise awareness for SLI students of color; thus, society silences SLI students. We believe that this lack of advocacy causes SLI students to silence themselves, simultaneously rendering SLI students of color invisible. Van Riper (1982) provides a lucid account of the self-silencing of SLI students: "A black stutterer said, 'Whenever I stutter, you become whiter and I blacker. Whenever I stutter to a white man, I shame my whole race. If I could only get race off [of] my back, I could handle my mouth'" (p. 231).

## **Method**

### ***Data Source***

In order to estimate potential racial differences among students (aged 6-21) identified as SLI, we analyzed Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) data procured, in 2011, from the Data Accountability Center (DAC). The DAC provides public access to data about children and youth with disabilities served under IDEA Part B and Part C. DAC was funded in October 2007 by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) and the U.S. Department of Education to provide information and technological assistance to improve the quality of all state-reported data required by the IDEA. Two main strengths of these data are that (1) they are the most current available and (2) they are disaggregated by five race/ethnicity categories and by states.

We sought to test whether or not there is a difference in the distribution of SLI students by race in the data analyzed using a chi-squared test of independence. The data consisted of a national sample consisting of  $N= 6,762,677$  students aged 6-21 who were served under IDEA Part B. Students were classified by race (American Indian, Asian or Pacific Islander, Black, Hispanic, and White) and whether or not they had a speech and language impairment (yes/no).

### **Results**

The “% within SLI” percentage refers to the percentage of students calculated by dividing students’ SLI status (yes/no) by the total number of SLI students. The “% within race” refers to the percentage of students calculated by dividing students’ SLI status (yes/no) by the total number of that racial group. Last, the “% of total” refers to the percentage of students calculated by dividing students’ SLI status (yes/no) by the total of all five racial groups.

You can see from the contingency table below that white students (ages 6-21), nationally, make up the largest percentage of SLI students (60.4%). The remaining 39.6% of SLI students were broken up into the following racial categories: Hispanic (20.7%), Black (14.6%), Asian or Pacific Islander (3.1%), and American Indian (1.2%). Our null hypothesis ( $\chi^2 = 1.986E6$ ,  $p < .001$ )—that there is no difference between the distributions of SLI for students of different racial backgrounds—was rejected. In other words, speech and language impairment does occur at different rates between races.

		Race of Student <sup>a</sup>					Total
		1	2	3	4	5	
Not Speech Language Impaired	Observed	1343740	1290626	1156976	1085688	517269	5394299
	Expected	1085281	1063551	1082318	1091679	1071470	5394299
	% within SLI	24.9%	23.9%	21.4%	20.1%	9.6%	100.0%
	% within Race	98.8%	96.8%	85.3%	79.3%	38.5%	79.8%
	% of Total	19.9%	19.1%	17.1%	16.1%	7.6%	79.8%
Speech Language Impaired	Observed	16846	42717	199895	282918	826002	1368378
	Expected	275305	269792	274553	276927	271801	1368378
	% within SLI	1.2%	3.1%	14.6%	20.7%	60.4%	100.0%
	% within Race	1.2%	3.2%	14.7%	20.7%	61.5%	20.2%
	% of Total	.2%	.6%	3.0%	4.2%	12.2%	20.2%
Total	Observed	1360586	1333343	1356871	1368606	1343271	6762677
	Expected	1360586	1333343	1356871	1368606	1343271	6762677
	% within SLI	20.1%	19.7%	20.1%	20.2%	19.9%	100.0%
	% within Race	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
	% of Total	20.1%	19.7%	20.1%	20.2%	19.9%	100.0%

Table 1.1. <sup>a</sup>(1) American Indian, (2) Asian or Pacific Islander, (3) Black (not Hispanic), (4) Hispanic, (5) White (not Hispanic). Special thanks to Jacqueline Gosz for fielding questions about Chi-Squared analysis. Adapted from “Data Accountability Center (DAC), Class of 2008,” available from [www.ideadata.org](http://www.ideadata.org).

The racial distribution of SLI students is presented below. Of the four nonwhite racial categories (Native American, Asian or Pacific Islander, Black, and Hispanic) that were aged 6-21 and were served under IDEA, Black and Hispanic students comprised the largest number of students who were speech language impaired. A negligible amount of Native American and Asian and Pacific Islander students were speech language impaired.

Since we only had data from 2008, and were only looking at a snapshot of what is going on, there was not really a trend we could report on. However, if we compare Figures 1.1 and 1.3 (2008 Census Population Data) to Figure 1.2 (Racial Distribution of Speech Language Impaired students), you can see that even though the largest group of students aged 6-21 that were served

under IDEA and were speech language impaired were whites, one must also note that white 6-21 year olds were also most prevalent in the general population among the five racial categories.

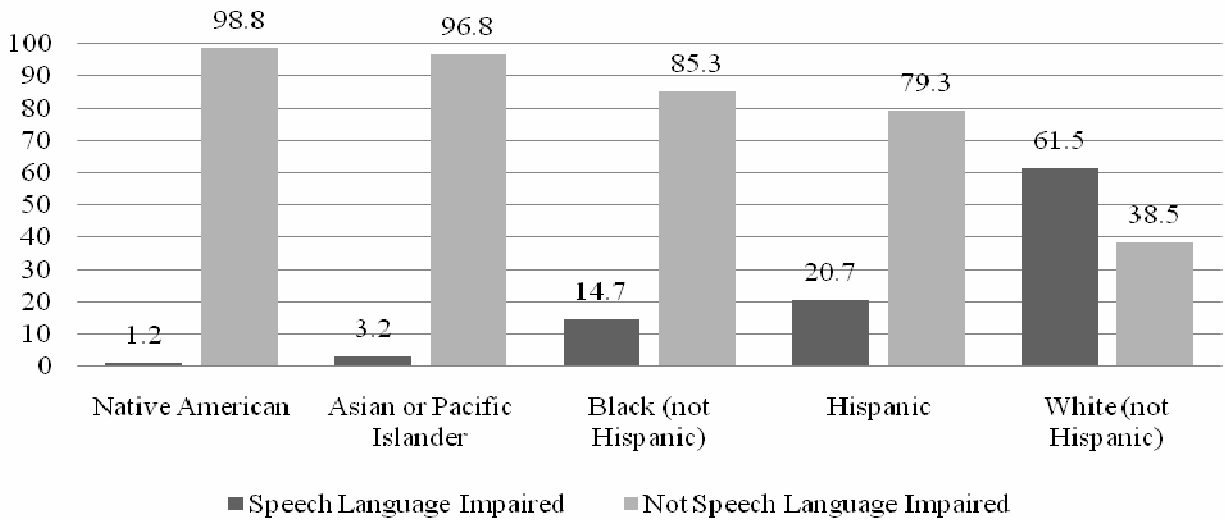
**Figure 1.1 2008 Estimated Population by Race and Age<sup>a</sup>**

Age	Race					
	Total <sup>c</sup>	American Indian, Alaska Native	Asian & Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander <sup>b</sup>	Black or African American	Hispanic Origin <sup>c</sup>	White
6 years old.....	4,835	50	182	588	934	3,081
7 years old.....	4,875	50	184	604	919	3,118
8 years old.....	4,657	48	168	585	848	3,008
9 years old.....	4,574	47	166	581	804	2,976
10 years old...	4,582	47	170	589	798	2,978
11 years old...	4,611	47	173	593	796	3,002
12 years old...	4,701	48	176	605	802	3,070
13 years old...	4,770	49	173	632	802	3,114
14 years old...	4,797	50	172	653	792	3,130
15 years old...	4,884	52	173	677	790	3,192
16 years old...	4,954	55	173	686	785	3,255
17 years old...	5,017	55	173	698	776	3,315
18 years old...	5,096	56	176	711	771	3,382
19 years old...	4,907	55	177	673	728	3,274
20 years old...	4,852	54	175	650	725	3,248
21 years old...	4,818	53	174	633	720	3,238
<b>Total.....</b>	<b>76,930</b>	<b>816</b>	<b>2,785</b>	<b>10,158</b>	<b>12,790</b>	<b>50,381</b>

Figure 1.1 <sup>a</sup>This is as of July 1, 2008 and is presented in thousands (For example 207,007 represents 207,007,000). Does not include individuals who identify as "two or more races." <sup>b</sup>Asian and Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander were combined. <sup>c</sup>Persons of Hispanic origin may be any race. Adapted from "Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2008," by the United States Census Bureau, 2008.

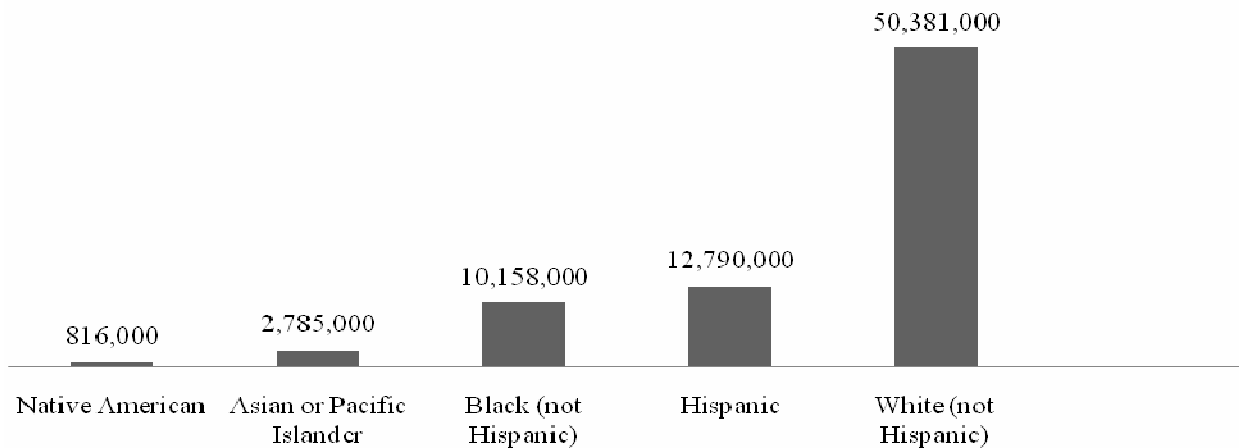


**Figure 1.2 Display of Speech Language Impaired Students<sup>a</sup>**



*Figure 1.2* <sup>a</sup>This represents all students aged 6-21 who were served under IDEA who were classified SLI in 2008. The racial distribution of speech language impaired students includes five racial groups. Each racial group has two columns: (a) the darker gray column represents the percentage within that race that is speech language impaired, and (b) the lighter gray column represents the percentage within that race that is not speech language impaired. Note: Due to rounding, percentages within each racial category sum to 100%.

**Figure 1.3 Display of 2008 General Population of 6-21 Year Olds by Race<sup>a</sup>**



*Figure 1.3* <sup>a</sup>This represents the estimated total number of 6-21 year olds by race in 2008. Each of the five racial group has one column which represents the total number. Note: This number was simply the “total” or the last row in Figure 1.1. (Tabular form) transformed into graphical form.

### Discussion

According to our findings, white students do carry the largest percentage of students who are speech language impaired. Multicultural researchers and texts should not view these results

(finding racial differences) as a problem per se. Rather than conducting polemical research that pits whites versus nonwhites or SLI versus non-SLI, future research based on these results should investigate what can be learned from these racial differences in the distribution of SLI students.

Specifically, we feel that future research studies might ask the following: (1) Are SLI differences systematic, institutional, and/or physiological/psychological in nature? (2) How might schooling and environmental factors impact SLI risk among students of various racial groups? (3) Are certain racial groups more resilient than others in overcoming SLI? If so, how?

One limitation of this study is that the SLI racial population variation we found may be attributable to state's differential handling of IDEA Part B data. For clarity purposes, the DAC provides information and data notes on the ways in which states collected and reported data differently from the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). This information can be found on the DAC web site under Part B Data Notes: 2007-08 Reporting Year and Fall 2008 (DAC, 2008).

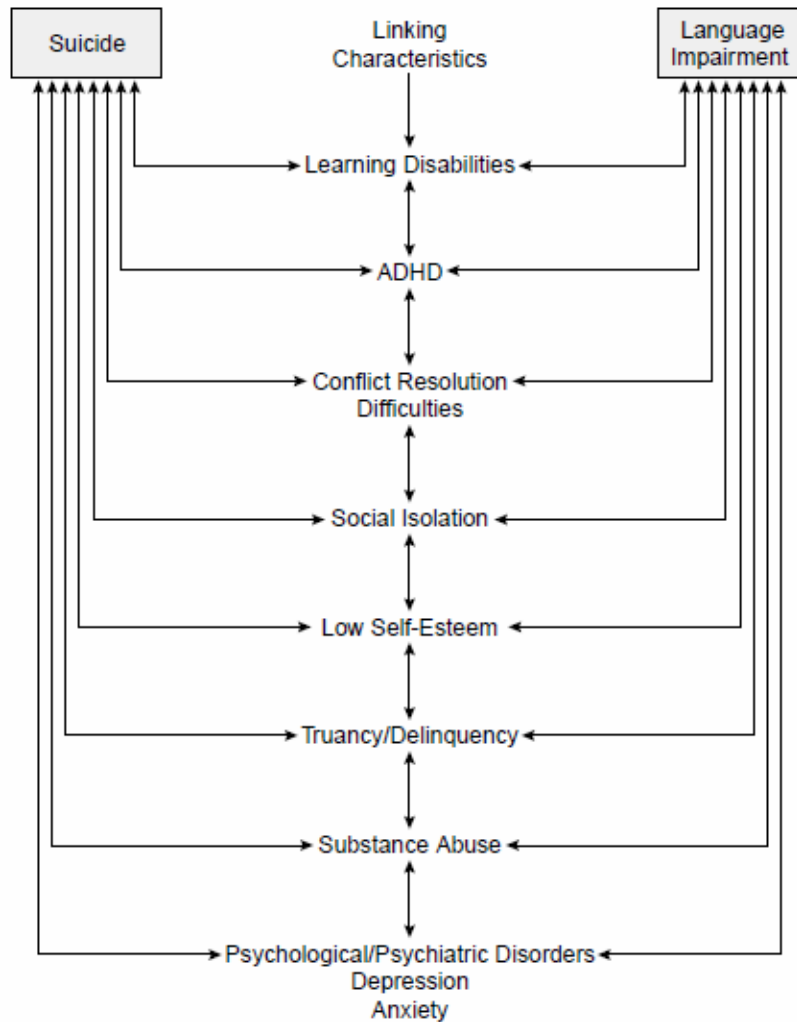
Lastly, the implications of this study may be pursued by researchers who potentially look at "older" years of data, and/or data that was collected "regionally" (as opposed to national data) to ascertain whether or not our findings are consistent with these aforesaid-collected data. This would be a conceptual difference. Researchers may also entertain the possibility of a different methodological (i.e., qualitative measures) or theoretical (i.e., disciplinary or grounded) approach.

Overall we feel strongly that one of the myriad goals of multicultural research is to positively effect change in the lives and educational experiences of all SLI students, keeping in mind that many who suffer and are silenced are students of color. This research is highly

important given that research indicates that language impairment (such as SLI) is linked with youth suicide (see Figure 1.4). In this chapter, we used George Lipsitz's (1998) theory of "the possessive investment in whiteness," linking it to *The King's Speech* (2011). We discussed the contexts of the silencing of SLI students of color by drawing on critical race theory to explain this societal- and self-silencing. Our statistical analysis of DAC data followed, showing that speech and language impairment does occur at different rates between races. We discussed the results of our analysis and suggested that additional SLI student advocacy is needed to raise awareness, by making visible to the wider society those students who suffer from speech or language impairments.

*The King's Speech* (2011) is the most recent manifestation of media showcasing the struggle and triumph of a white man who battled SLI. The movie's message and messengers ought to be interrogated for their motivation to produce such a film. This chapter's research is extremely important given that research indicates that language impairment (such as SLI) is linked with youth suicide, as shown in Figure 1.4 below. Although the data shows that more whites stutter than African Americans, we believe that SLI (including stuttering) is more detrimental for African Americans, especially poor ones. SLI creates a system of institutional, educational, and insular failure, and societal- and self-silencing causes this racial group to go unheard by the fluency dominant society. SLI people of color remain marginalized and misunderstood.

**Figure 1.4 Possible Links between Youth Suicide and Speech Language Impairment**



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Reed (2011) states that there are possible links between youth suicide and speech language impairment, and we feel that future studies might investigate this linkage.

### **Conclusion**

Rethinking speech and language impairments within fluency dominated cultures is a difficult task. There is a lack of usable data on the numbers and incidents of SLI students, and SLI students remain an underwritten-about population. However, if multiculturalists are

genuinely concerned with equity and equality for all student learners, textbooks must include their stories and struggles. This chapter was our attempt to assess the “lack of voice” and silencing of SLI students of color through the use of critical race theory. Our findings that whites comprise the largest share of SLI students does not mean that SLI students of color are not silenced, as Pitt’s (a black man) epigraph attests: SLI students may unavoidably slip back into patterns of silence to avoid the shame of stammering and stuttering (Ginsberg, 2000; Ginsberg & Wexler, 2000; Klompass & Ross, 2005; Pitts, 2009). Charles Van Riper’s (1982, p. 2) comment, that “Stuttering is not merely a speech impediment; it is an impediment in social living” is correct, given that mainstream American culture is fluency dominant.

Throughout this chapter we have argued that *The King’s Speech* and speech language associations are complicit in perpetuating misperceptions of SLI students in that they all attend to a white racial constituency—reinforcing a possessive investment in whiteness. Whereas comedians make fun of African American stutterers, reifying the belief that African Americans are most likely to be SLI, our analyses revealed otherwise: whites are more likely to be SLI than African Americans. Past research confirms our study’s findings; however, we argue that this knowledge is not enough. This racial distribution discrepancy should cause SLI students of color to receive more equitable attention and more advocacy work in terms of educational researchers’ attention. As critical race theoreticians, we feel that SLI is more of an issue for students of color, namely, African Americans, than it is for whites. This is the urgent issue that we sought to bring to bear and why are seeking that multicultural texts and future research address SLI students of color.

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### **Endnotes**

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<sup>i</sup> Many authors of multicultural education volumes decidedly or unknowingly do not cover SLI students within their pages. Educational research associations—i.e. the American Educational Research Association—are also complicit in not reaching the SLI population: proposal submissions for AERA’s 2012 Annual Meeting in Vancouver, BC, Canada only provided auditory, orthopedic, and visual accommodation options for prospective presenters. The expectation that presenters verbally participate overlooks the diversity of researchers’ speaking and articulation abilities, such as those who may not be able to discuss their research findings orally. It seems logical that AERA would offer accommodations for SLI persons given that it is the premier educational research association; however, this is not the case when looking at its proposal submission process. We wonder, is this because the SLI population is silent in the association, or does AERA silence its SLI membership through its practices and policies?

<sup>ii</sup> We focus on African American and use the term and black interchangeably.

<sup>iii</sup> Director Eddie Murphy’s (1989) *Harlem Nights* portrays an African American boxer who stutters.

<sup>iv</sup> Bernie Mac, an African American comedian, in director Spike Lee’s (2000) *The Original Kings of Comedy* has a standup routine in which he distastefully mocks a supposed African American stutterer. While the audience clearly cannot contain its laughter, Mac’s standup act is very offensive to stutterers and people with SLI. The fact that so many people in the audience find it humorous is indicative of the fluency dominant culture of the mainstream population. In addition, as a part of his performance, he linked stuttering to mental retardation (in his words).

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<sup>v</sup> At the time of conducting research for this chapter, all of the National Stuttering Association's Board of Directors and also staff were white men (8) and/or women (8).

<sup>vi</sup> While we have no empirical evidence for these claims, readers of our chapter may want to visit these web sites and view these films for themselves. Also, see endnotes 3 and 4.