

In Search of Meaning Beneath the Surface: The Heart of Racial Disproportionality

By Marcus Karega Rausch, PhD; and Russell J. Skiba, PhD; School of Education, School Psychology Programs, Indiana University

Minority disproportionality in special education has been identified as an issue almost since our field began—and it remains so today. Why are racial disparities in special education so difficult to change? What is it about this issue in particular that makes it so hard to create improvement?

This seeming intractability suggests that, in order to address disproportionality—or for that matter, any of the numerous inequities in our educational system—we need to look beyond the surface to understand the ways our educational systems may be perpetuating inequity. Along with the need to explore deeply, there is the incumbent need to look broadly, since there are many possible reasons why disproportionality may exist. Unless we are able to consider all of them, including inaccurate and harmful attitudes and actions that may yet exist in our systems, it will probably remain impossible to address all of the root causes of inequity in our schools.

In this essay, we offer reflections on why disproportionality in special education continues to occur. These reflections are based on our personal experiences, understanding of the literature, and experiences of working with school district teams to address special education disproportionality over the last five years.¹ We also offer some suggestions on how we might begin the difficult, yet necessary, process of improvement.

What We Know about Racial and Ethnic Disproportionality

The best information² we have about disproportionality suggests that it is:

- Consistently documented. Since first identified in the scholarly literature by Lloyd Dunn, disproportionality has occurred at fairly stable levels since 1968. Given the attention disproportionality has received from the federal government and research communities, such stability is noteworthy.
- Most consistent for African American students. Findings of overrepresentation for Latino students have been inconsistent to date. African American students, however, have been consistently found to be 2–3 times more likely than other students to be identified as eligible for special education service.
- Found in more “subjective” disability categories. African Americans tend to be overrepresented in more “subjective” disability categories, like mental retardation and emotional disturbance, and not disproportionately identified in more “objective” categories, like hearing and vision impairment.
- Found in educational placements. In addition to being identified as having a disability at higher rates than we would expect, African American students with a disability are more likely to be placed in more restrictive settings. Investigations that examine the most common placements for students with disabilities show African American students as more likely to have a separate class placement than other students with a disability, and less likely to have a general education placement.

What Doesn't Explain Disproportionality Fully

Research does not, in fact, support some of the more typical explanations for disproportionality, such as poverty or dysfunctional family lives. While the challenges of poverty tend to increase the risk for academic failure, recent research has found that poverty tends to make only a weak contribution to actual minority disproportionality and by no means explains racial differences in special education services.³ There is also no evidence to support the claim that African American families are in general more dysfunctional than other families; taking this perspective often leads to ignoring the positive support systems in African American and Latino families and communities that act as a protective factor against negative social conditions.⁴

Some have suggested that African American disproportionality in educational placement is due to over-representation in disability categories that are often served in more restrictive settings (e.g., mental retardation and emotional disabilities). However, recent research has shown that African American students are less often served in the mainstream, regardless of the severity of the disability.⁵

Why Else Might It Be Occurring?

Our experiences have taught us that virtually all of the educators we have interacted with genuinely have a passion to see their students succeed. Yet persistent racial inequities remain. Why might this be?

One possibility is through what researchers call culturally reproductive systems and actions. Often without conscious awareness, our behaviors are shaped by policies, cultural norms, and institutional expectations that serve to support and maintain the racial status quo. Examples of these kinds of reproductive processes that lead to disproportionality in special education have been recently illustrated by Beth Harry and Janette Klingner in the book *Why Are So Many Minority Students in Special Education?* They illustrate how placement in special education for minority students is shaped by a number of school-based risk factors, such as poor teaching quality, arbitrary application of eligibility decision-making criteria, and special education programs that are themselves ineffective or overly restrictive.

There are additional factors that may contribute to the problem: the less-than-perfect processes in special education, particularly around eligibility and decision making, and the unequal opportunities for students of color in general education.⁶ Research suggests that both general and the special education possess shortcomings that get in the way of ensuring that the “right students” are being identified. And it is reasonable to think that, whenever general education limits the educational opportunities of a group of students, that group’s risk for special education increases. Unfortunately, the influence of factors such as the quality of a school’s curriculum, instruction, resources, or teacher training on disproportionality in special education referral and eligibility have yet to be directly studied. Clearly, we need to know more about the specific factors in both general and special education; but what is apparent is that disproportionality in special education is a complex problem, caused and maintained by interactions among a number of factors.

It is also important to recognize that the explanations for why racial disparities occur often tend to come primarily from the perspective of the dominant culture. Recently, scholars in the American Educational Research Association have argued that, indeed, African American interpretations of inequity have been largely ignored and marginalized in the research on racial and ethnic disparities. If we expect to have any success in addressing these difficult and long-standing issues, we must make sure that all explanations for inequity are brought to the table and examined.

Our culture has deeply embedded beliefs about race and ability that may not have been fully brought into the open and examined. Until relatively recently, it was the “common sense” understanding that those of African ancestry were simply not as intelligent as people from European backgrounds. White society also “knew” that uncivilized blacks were a danger to society. It made logical sense then, that black people should be separate from whites in all areas of public life, including public education. It is striking then that, although we view our modern society as having left the explicit racism of our past behind, African American overrepresentation is the most marked in categories that provide a judgment of a student’s intellectual capacity (mental retardation) and ability to effectively behave in “appropriate” ways (emotional disturbance, suspension/expulsion). Tempting as it may be to view such patterns as “coincidental,” we ignore these patterns at the peril of failing to fully understand how we may still be reproducing historical patterns of inequity.

Processes for Addressing Inequity

Our best knowledge suggests that disproportionality is a highly complex phenomenon, a product of a number of social forces interacting in the lives of our children. The multiply determined nature of disproportionality means that, in order to effectively address this issue, we must intervene comprehensively and base our response on local needs. At Indiana University’s Center for Evaluation & Education Policy, we have begun to work with districts interested in addressing disproportionality through a process known as Local Equity Action Development (LEAD). Some specific elements of that process include:

Examine local data. Racial disparities are so widespread in America as to constitute the norm. It is thus important for local practitioners to examine their own data critically, with an eye towards identifying specific areas of disproportionality that need attention. It is not necessary, and probably not helpful, to assign blame for disproportionality. Rather, the necessary—and productive—first step is to accept the data as an indicator of a problem that needs to be addressed.

Consider all hypotheses and develop interventions. It is an uncomfortable but important truth that our reaction to issues of equity often differs depending on our ethnic background. As we begin to discuss why disproportionality may be occurring in a school or district, we must include and value in that discussion a diversity of voices. If our solutions are to be comprehensive and effective, we must tap into the knowledge, perspectives, wisdom, and expertise of communities that have been most effected by inequity. Addressing inequity also requires direct and open conversations about race and racial disparities, no matter how uncomfortable they may be. We

have been struck in our work by the difficulty many educators have in openly discussing race. Unless we break the taboo on talking about race and acknowledge both the problem and our differing perspectives on that problem, it seems very unlikely that we will be able to progress toward a resolution.

Monitor progress toward the target of equity. One cannot assume that efforts to improve a system in general will change racial and ethnic disparities in particular. A district might develop a sophisticated Response-to-Intervention (RtI) procedure to reduce special education referrals. But if it did so only by reducing the referrals for the majority of students (e.g., white students), such a project could increase disproportionality, even while reducing overall referrals. It is therefore important to ensure that we implement not only RtI or positive behavioral supports (PBS), but ensure that we develop culturally competent RtI or PBS programs, and continue to monitor the impact of those programs on minority disproportionality.

Conclusion

It is extremely important to understand that the current inequities in our system of education, including minority disproportionality in special education, are not by any means new, but are the product of hundreds of years of oppression, discrimination, and segregation. It is uncomfortable and awkward to confront these disparities. It is even more uncomfortable to acknowledge that our interpretation of the facts varies, depending on our racial or ethnic heritage. But unless we are willing to live with and work through such discomfort, it is almost certain that our efforts will never touch the inequities still embedded in our institutions. Racial inequity has deep roots in the American psyche and in our nation's institutions; the process of undoing and redoing will also take a long time, and require a conscious and sincere effort.

Notes

1. For example, see the Equity Project website at <http://ceep.indiana.edu/equity>.
2. National Research Council (NRC). *Minority Students in Special and Gifted Education*. Edited by the Committee on Minority Representation in Special Education; M.S. Donovan; & C.T. Cross. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 2005.
U.S. Department of Education. *26th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Volume 1*. Washington, D.C.: Author, 2006.
3. Skiba, R.J.; L. Poloni-Staudinger; A. B. Simmons; L. R. Feggins-Azziz; & C. Chung. "Unproven Links: Can Poverty Explain Ethnic Disproportionality in Special Education?" *The Journal of Special Education*, 39 (2005), 130–144.
4. Harry, B. & J. Klingner. *Why Are So Many Minority Students in Special Education? Understanding Race and Disability in Schools*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2005.

5. Skiba, R.J.; L. Poloni-Staudinger; S. Gallini; A. B. Simmons; & L. R. Feggins-Azziz. "Disparate Access: The Disproportionality of African American Students with Disabilities across Educational Environments," *Exceptional Children*, 72 (2005), 411–24.
6. Skiba, R.J.; M. K. Rausch; A. B. Simmons; S. Ritter; J. Cuadrado; & A. Gibb. "Understanding Inequity in Special Education," *Exceptional Children*, in press.