

**Identifying the Root Causes of  
Disproportionality**  
New York University  
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Disproportionality

**METROPOLITAN CENTER FOR RESEARCH ON EQUITY  
AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF SCHOOLS**

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## Introduction

Disproportionality is pervasive and occurs nationwide. After receiving a citation for disproportionality under indicators 4, 9, or 10 or being identified as at risk for a citation under any indicator, districts should begin the process of exploring the root causes of the disparate outcomes. There are three indicators associated with disproportionality: indicators 4, 9, and 10.

- Indicator 4 monitors the suspension of students with disabilities by race and ethnicity.
- Indicator 9 monitors classification patterns of students with disabilities by race and ethnicity.
- Indicator 10 monitors the placement patterns of students with disabilities by race and ethnicity.

Disproportionality occurs when students are:

- *Overrepresented* in special education services due to inappropriate referrals to special education. Overrepresentation can occur in classification, placement, and suspension.
- *Underrepresented* in intervention services, resources, access to programs, and rigorous curriculum and instruction—either through placements in more restrictive special education services or through discipline policies that remove students from school (NEA Truth in Labeling, 2007).

A citation for disproportionality does not necessarily mean a district is intentionally producing inequitable outcomes. Oftentimes as the root causes of a district's disproportionality are explored, it becomes clear that existing beliefs, policies, and practices have unintentionally created the environment for inequity to thrive. One theory that explains this occurrence is fragmented harm (Payne, 1984), which implies that inequality is sustained because either opportunities that can be provided are not or systems of inequality go unchallenged or unquestioned (Pollock, 2010). Thus, a key first step in understanding a district's root causes of disproportionality is questioning how practitioners either contribute to or help sustain disparate outcomes in practice. While exploring the root causes of disproportionality, it is important to be mindful of the tensions you may feel when trying to understand and address racialized outcomes in practice.



## What to Expect: The Three Core Tensions



### What can **I** do? (PERSONAL)

- Each teacher routinely questions his or her own personal readiness to become the type of professional who can successfully engage issues of race and racism in his or her life and classroom practice.



### What **can** I do? (STRUCTURAL)

- Teachers routinely question the power of the individual educator to counteract structural or societal problems of racial and race-class inequality via the classroom.



### What can I **do**? (STRATEGIES)

- Teachers routinely search for concrete actionable steps they can take in their classrooms and schools, questioning how abstract ideas of theories about racial inequality and difference can help them.

From Pollock, Deckman, Mira, & Shalaby (2010, p. 211).

Pollock and colleagues (2010) contend that practitioners may encounter personal-, structural-, and strategic-level tensions when they begin facilitating conversations and reflections around race. Practitioners should be prepared to engage with these tensions when exploring the root causes of disproportionality in their district.

### *Facing and Understanding Disproportionality*

Multiple factors influence the occurrence of disproportionality, making it complicated and at times sensitive work. Practitioners in a district should reflect on a personal, structural, and strategic level. One way to facilitate this exploration is to use a culturally responsive educational systems approach. The approach critically assesses the intersections between policies, practices, and people as they deliver educational services to all students, and considers how these intersections affect disparate outcomes in special education (Klingner et al., 2005).

Culturally responsive practices require practitioners to develop a nuanced, reflective, and critical social consciousness and cultural competence about race, power, and privilege in society (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2001). These practices make up a culturally responsive lens through which deficit-oriented beliefs and approaches to educating students are challenged through systems, policies, and people (Harry & Klingner, 2006; Klingner et al., 2005). Using a culturally responsive lens implies that students “can excel in academic endeavors



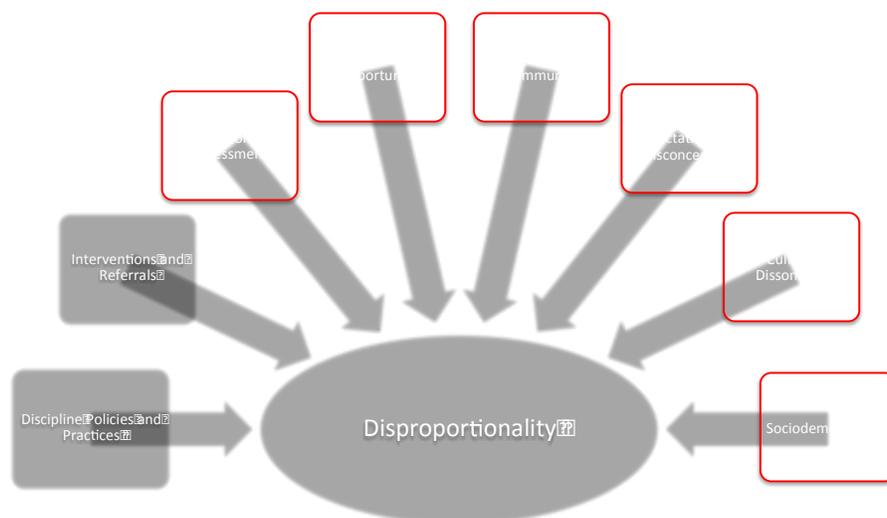
when their culture, language, heritage, and experiences are valued and used to facilitate their learning and development, and they are provided access to high-quality teachers, programs, and resources” (Klingner et al., 2005, p. 8). A culturally responsive lens ensures all differences are embraced (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994), high expectations are set for students (Delpit, 1995, 2012), and schools provide protective factors for all students (Beale Spencer, 2006).

The following section offers a brief snapshot of the research on each of the contributing factors to disproportionality, followed by some critical questions to facilitate practitioners’ reflections on each factor. The section ties together common root causes of disproportionality with questions that expose some of the connections between beliefs (people), policies, and practices and how these relate to disparate outcomes.

*What Factors Contribute to Racial Disproportionality in Special Education?*

Disproportionality has no one cause but is rather the product of a confluence of contributing factors. These factors provide the conditions and environment in which disproportionate outcomes for students of color occur. For example, research has shown that the following influence disproportionate outcomes for culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education: (1) discipline policies and practices, (2) interventions and referrals, (3) instruction and assessment, (4) differential access to educational opportunity, (5) family and community partnerships, (6) teacher expectations and misconceptions, (7) cultural dissonance, and (8) district sociodemographics.

**Disproportionality is Complex**



When exploring the root causes of disproportionality in a district, there are a number of complex relationships between interacting factors to keep in mind. In the following sections, we provide some probing questions to facilitate your conversations around these issues. The questions are limited in scope but should serve as starting point from which to think about how disparities may be manifesting in your school or district.

## *Discipline Policies and Practices*

There is a complex relationship between discipline, achievement, and ability. Research suggests that when students are excluded from the schooling process, via a suspension or expulsion, they are less likely to be engaged in learning (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010). Research also suggests that students of color are more likely to be harshly disciplined and interpreted as having a disability than their white peers (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002).

Questions to facilitate exploration of your district's root causes:

1. What is the rate of students suspended by disability? Race? Gender?
2. What is the rate of disciplinary referrals to suspensions by disability? Race? Gender?
3. What is the most common disciplinary referral by academic level (i.e., NYS exam scores, IEP, gifted and talented)? Disability? Race? Gender?
4. Are there differences in suspensions and length of suspensions by academic level (i.e., NYS exam scores, IEP, gifted and talented)? Disability? Race? Gender?

**REFLECTION:** Are there disparities in your district's discipline data by race, ability, or gender? What are the potential sources of these disparities? Are different groups of students referred for different reasons? If so, why do you think that is? What does your discipline data say about your referral, intervention, and discipline systems? What does this reveal about the effectiveness of suspensions? Are there variations in the suspension rates between groups?

## *Interventions and Referrals*

A multitude of researchers have found that the special education eligibility and placement process is highly subjective (Gotlieb et al., 1994; Hosp & Reschly, 2003). The subjectivity of the placement process can contribute to the disproportionate representation of students of color in special education because a practitioner's personal judgments about a student's ability are relied upon rather than data of the student's academic performance (Harry & Klingner, 2006). Students are also often referred to special education without sufficient



exposure to high-quality interventions that support their learning (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Harry & Klingner, 2006), leaving them without adequate opportunities to succeed.

Questions to facilitate exploration of your district's root causes:

1. What are your district's or school's tier 1, tier 2, and tier 3 interventions? Are interventions evidence based? Are all staff aware of and able to use the district's or school's intervention systems? Do current intervention systems operate systematically throughout the district and school?
2. Who—by academic level (i.e., NYS exam scores, IEP, gifted and talented), disability, race, and gender—is receiving the majority of tier 1 interventions? Tier 2? Tier 3?
3. Is there a problem-solving team (IST or PPT)? Is this problem-solving team a resource that builds teacher capacity around tier 1 interventions?

**REFLECTION:** Are there disparities in your intervention data by race, ability, or gender? What are the potential sources of these disparities? Are tier 1 interventions implemented and progress monitored with fidelity? Are tier 1 interventions exhausted before moving to tier 2?

### *Instruction and Assessment*

Placement in special education does not always ensure students receive quality schooling (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Harry & Klingner, 2006; Losen & Orfield, 2002). For example, research study findings suggest that instruction for special education classrooms can be less rigorous, in particular for students of color (Harry & Klingner, 2006). Additionally, once a child is placed in special education, there is often little movement out of it (Harry & Klingner, 2006). Research has suggested that the methods used in practice to assess and teach students with disabilities are often unscientific and based on the day-to-day decisions of school personnel (Harry & Anderson, 1994).

Questions to facilitate exploration of your district's root causes:

1. At the district level, what is the rate of students identified as students with disabilities (SWD) by race? Gender?
2. Within each school, what is the rate of students identified as SWD by race? Gender?
3. What is the rate of students by race and gender identified by disability category?
4. What are the most common sources of referrals for students identified as SWD (i.e., parents, outside professionals, school-based staff)?



**REFLECTION:** Are there disparities in your district's or school's classification data by race, ability, or gender? Do special education teachers have access to the same professional developments, materials, and resources as general education students? Who is influencing the referral and classification process the most?

### *Differential Access to Educational Opportunity*

Research on access to educational opportunities focuses on understanding how historical and social circumstances either facilitate or hinder positive student outcomes. Additionally, it examines how both macro and micro factors contribute to inequities in practice. This line of research often explores how differential access to resources within communities and schools relates to prejudices, racism, classism, and other forms of biases that influence student outcomes (for examples see Carter, 2013; Darling-Hammond, 2004). Studies have also looked at how the student and community racial and class composition of a district affects students' perceptions of academic ability and engagement (Tyson, 2011), implying a diverse school system has race and class dynamics that affect student outcomes.

Questions to facilitate exploration of your district's root causes:

1. How well are students performing in each of the content areas (grades and test scores) by ability, race and gender?
2. What are the mean and median grades for each racial/ethnic group?
3. What is the rate at which each group receives a grade of an A, B, C, or D?
4. Has there been a change in the racial makeup of your district over time, and how does this relate to the academic data?
5. What are the rates of course enrollment by race in the following classes: gifted and talented, advanced placement, special education, and intervention services?

**REFLECTION:** Are there disparities in the academic performance and/or course enrollment of individual subgroups compared to other subgroups? What are the potential sources of these disparities? How do demographic changes relate to academic data?

### *Family and Community Partnerships*

Parent and community involvement in school activities is crucial for student success, along with effective means of communication between parents and schools (Epstein, 2001). However, research on disproportionality in special education reveals the race and class of students with disabilities and their parents affect how practitioners interact with them and the quality of services and education they receive (Harry, Allen, & McLaughlin, 1995). Therefore, it is



necessary for schools to proactively engage with parents and community members in order to ensure racial and class differences do not affect student outcomes (Harry, 1992).

Questions to facilitate exploration of your district's root causes:

1. Do school leaders assess the opinions of families (surveys, interviews, focus groups)?
2. Is there an active PTA or parent council? Do the members reflect the district's racial and socioeconomic composition?
3. Does the school offer parent workshops relevant to academic, behavior, and school climate issues? Do the participants reflect the district's racial and socioeconomic composition?
4. What is the daily attendance for all subgroups? Are there specific groups missing more days than others?
5. Are parents viewed as partners or assets in supporting their child's education?

**REFLECTION:** Are there disparities in the participation of parents by race and socioeconomic level? What are the potential sources of these disparities? Do all parents feel welcome and feel their voices are heard? Do parents influence school and district decisions that affect their children?

### *Teacher Expectations and Misconceptions*

Research has also shown that when there is cultural dissonance and mismatch between practitioners and families, the kind of services offered to students are often of lower quality and shrouded in low expectations and misunderstandings (Delpit, 1995; Harry et al., 1995). Teachers may hold implicit, preconceived notions about particular racial and ethnic groups of students that they may subconsciously apply to students (Elhoweris, Mutua, Alsheikh, & Holloway, 2005; Irvine, 1990; Tobias, Cole, Zibrin, & Bodlakova, 1982; Zucker & Prieto, 1977). Thus research on teachers' dispositions towards students' demographic characteristics, such as race and ethnicity, show they may shape their perception of student ability.

Questions to facilitate exploration of your district's root causes:

1. Do academic or behavior referrals initiate from particular teachers or classrooms?
2. What do district practitioners cite most commonly as the reasons for and/or their beliefs about poor student performance?
3. Are staff and administration comfortable with discussing issues of race, ethnicity, or differences in their classroom and curriculum?



**REFLECTION:** How might commonly held beliefs about particular subgroups of students, the community, or families influence practice? Are the quality of relationships between practitioners and their students and families affected by those beliefs? How might teacher beliefs influence the referral and classification process or disciplinary incidents?

## *Cultural Dissonance*

Several researchers have found that cultural dissonance or cultural mismatch between practitioners, families, and students can negatively affect student engagement, academic performance, and behavior (Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Pollock, 2004). Additionally, research shows that cultural dissonance between students and teachers significantly contributes to educational difficulties for students of color (Gay, 2000). For instance, teachers' perceptions of a student's socioeconomic background (Rist, 1970) and culturally specific behaviors may moderate how teachers view that student's academic ability and behavior (Foster & Peele, 1999; Nieto, 2004; Perry & Delpit, 1998).

Questions to facilitate exploration of your district's root causes:

1. Is the curriculum responsive to the diversity and lived experiences of the student body in your district?
2. Do teachers rely upon a diverse set of instructional strategies to reach all learners?
3. Do teachers and administrators hold high academic and behavioral expectations for all students? Are these expectations clearly communicated to students and parents?
4. Are student-staff, parent-staff, community-staff, administrator-staff, and staff-staff interactions respectful and productive to the educational process?

**REFLECTION:** Do practitioners in the district know, understand, and honor the lived experiences of their students, parents, families, and the community? Do all stakeholders have the opportunity to contribute to the development of expectations and community norms? Are the local community norms and culture reflected in district practices?

## *District Sociodemographics*

Some disproportionality research has tried to explain how the structural conditions of a school and district affect disproportionate outcomes in special education. For example Oswald, Coutinho, and Best (2002) used nationally representative data from the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) and found that gender and ethnicity are significantly associated with the risk of being identified for special education. The authors also found that as the percentage of nonwhite students increased in a district, the more likely it was that students of color would be classified. Collectively, the sociodemographic studies establish that sociodemographic conditions of a



school district are strongly associated with the proportion of students identified for special education (Losen & Orfield, 2002, p. 6).

Questions to facilitate exploration of your district's root causes:

1. Has the district's student population been contracting or expanding over the past five years?
2. What is the racial makeup of the student body? Has the makeup changed over the past five years?
3. Are there demographic shifts in each grade level at the district level or across school buildings? Has the makeup changed over the past five years?
4. What percentage of students in the district are English language learners (ELLs)? Has the percentage changed over the past five years?
5. What percentage of students qualify for a free and reduced-price lunch? Has the percentage changed over the past five years?

**REFLECTION:** How have shifts in the racial, ELL, and socioeconomic makeup of your district affected teaching and learning? Are all practitioners comfortable with teaching and serving a diverse and changing student body? What shifts in educational policies and practices might be necessary to serve a changing student body?

### *Taking Action*

Exploring the complex factors contributing to disproportionality in your district is an important, yet difficult and time consuming task. However, once you begin to understand your district's root causes you can begin to take action. One way to do so is to map out how the root causes manifest themselves in district beliefs (people), policies, and practices that contribute to disproportionality in special education. This will allow you to identify places where you can begin to change practice and address disproportionality. The following chart offers a structure to do this.



	Belief	Policy	Practice
Discipline policies & practices			
Interventions & referrals			
Instruction & assessment			
Educational opportunity			
Family & community			
Teacher expectations & misconceptions			
Cultural dissonance			
Sociodemographics			

### Conclusion

Understanding your district’s root causes of disproportionality and identifying how policies, practices and practitioners either contribute to or help sustain disparate outcomes in practice allows you to generate specific and actionable steps to address disproportionality.



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