Disproportionality in U.S. Public Schools
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What is Disproportionality?

- Disproportionality is defined as “the presence of students from a specific group in an educational program being higher or lower than one would expect based on their representation in the general population of students.”

- Educational practices are inextricably linked to larger societal forces; the distribution of power and socioeconomic status among racial groups that permeates society favors the dominant culture, positioning white, middle-class culture as the lens through which educational standards are set. Thus, minority behavior is assessed through a “deficit view,” in which it is assumed to lack the cognitive and emotional qualities of white behavior.

- The lack of culturally responsive curricula, assessments, and evaluations impact the way minority students are perceived, often leading to unnecessary disciplinary and special education referrals.

- Compounding this problem, the majority white and female teaching population must work with an increasingly growing proportion of minority students in American public schools.

- School factors that contribute to disproportionate situations include underfunding; high staff turnover; uncertified and provisionally licensed teachers; teachers with low expectations and invisible racist practices; limited technology; limited extracurricular opportunities; and a lack of specialized educators and resources to tackle specific issues.

Disproportionality in Special Education

- Nationwide, Black, American Indian, and male students are significantly overrepresented in special education services, particularly in the case of subjective disability categories, and are often placed in racially segregated classrooms, whereas Hispanic students are underrepresented in all disability categories except learning disorders.

- English Language Learners are often incorrectly referred to special education programs because of the incorrect use of screening and evaluation methods, especially where language acquisition and the development of cognitive and academic proficiency in the target language are in process.
• Placement in a special education classroom, in which there is often a less rigorous, slower-paced curriculum, has been linked to high dropout rates, decreased graduation rates, and limited preparation for post-secondary educational opportunities.\textsuperscript{viii}

• Cultural differences can lead to incorrect disability identification where the racial group with the most power applies its social norms and boundaries to assessment of the behavior of students from other cultures, leading to an inaccurate assessment of disability in minority students, especially where there is a lack of clear policies and standards for disability identification, or where inappropriate assessment tools are used.\textsuperscript{ix}

**Disproportionality in School Discipline**

• Black, Hispanic, American Indian, male, and special education students are disproportionately represented in disciplinary incidents, referrals, detentions, and suspensions.\textsuperscript{x}

• Excessive use of school discipline can increase students’ negative feelings about and alienation from school; suspicions of mainstream authority; negative academic identity; and feelings of disenfranchisement. Exclusion from the classroom also diminishes learning opportunities and exposure to instructional time, which leads to poor academic performance, dropout, and potential involvement in the school-to-prison pipeline.\textsuperscript{xi}

• Educators working with low-income, minority student bodies often fear loss of control in the classroom, which leads them to place great importance on controlling student behavior. Other factors motivating disciplinary referrals include low expectations; deficiencies in classroom management skills; teacher biases and belief in stereotypes; and misinterpretations of cultural behavioral norms.\textsuperscript{xii}

• Research supports the use of school-wide Positive Behavioral Intervention and Support (PBIS) model, which includes constant evaluation of school discipline data; implementation of proactive and collaborative school discipline teams; culturally-responsive professional development; and the use of positive behavior support models to reinforce proper classroom behavior. Other useful interventions include projects to promote youth engagement, dropout prevention, and suspension alternatives.\textsuperscript{xiii}

**Culturally Responsive Solutions**

• Culturally responsive pedagogy can be used to address underlying issues that generate disproportionality. It integrates cultural knowledge, prior experience, frames of reference, and the performance styles of ethnically diverse students to increase the effectiveness of teaching practices, drawing from students’ cultural identities, families, and community support systems to make students feel validated and meet their academic and social needs.\textsuperscript{xiv}

• Culturally responsive professional development encourages teachers to critically reflect on their racial attitudes and gaps in cultural understanding, which may generate unnecessary consequences for students.\textsuperscript{xv}
• Schools and districts can address disproportionality through partnerships with social services, community organizations, families, and teachers’ unions, where they can inform the community about their policies and decisions and engage with parents to discuss school culture and expectations for success.\textsuperscript{xvi}

Endnotes:


Salend, Garrick Duhaney, & Montgomery, 2002.


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Texas Appleseed. (2007). Texas’ school-to-prison pipeline: Dropout to incarceration, the impact of school discipline and zero tolerance. Austin, TX.


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