

Disproportionality in Special Education: The School Psychologist's contribution

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What is disproportionality?

- 🌐 Since the beginning of time, 1976, we have known that our special education rosters contain a disproportionate number of minority students
- 🌐 There is a greater likelihood of a student of color being referred to and being placed in special education than a Caucasian student

Current debate: Does Disproportionality really exist?

- 🌐 Morgan et al. (2015)- Minorities are actually under-identified once you factor out various measures e.g. mother's age at birth; birth weight; SES and degree of externalization-1
- 🌐 Morgan's statistical approach has been challenged. 2
- 🌐 Poverty makes a weak and inconsistent contribution to the prediction of disproportionality across a number of disability categories (Skiba et al., 2005)
- 🌐 Rates of suspension and expulsion consistently predict district rates of special education disproportionality.3

How does OPSPI measure Disproportionality?

- 🌐 The weighted risk ratio is a measure of the risk that a student from a specific racial/ethnic group will be served in a specific disability category compared to the risk of all other students being served in that category.
- 🌐 For example, a weighted risk ratio of 1.00 means that students from that group are as likely to be served in the category as all other students. 2.00-twice as likely
- 🌐 Low sample size 'N', eliminates much data that would support disproportionality, e.g. 8/8 Native Americans in a self-contained class-no count since N is too small

Is there a more accurate way to measure disproportionality?

- 🌐 Should we be looking at the time in special ed rather than number of students?
 - 🌐 % of time in the resource room?
 - 🌐 What about services in the general classroom?
 - 🌐 What about self-contained?
 - 🌐 Minutes of service?
 - 🌐 We have no criteria for minutes of service
 - 🌐 In Secondary: number of sped classes?
 - 🌐 You don't need a sped class to deliver sped minutes

Does it matter how we measure it or if it really exists?

- 🌐 The concept is based on a faulty premise: That race is a legitimate phenomenon.
- 🌐 There is no biological basis for race. There are no distinct racial boxes where students can be placed. Humans cannot be disaggregated on the basis of race
- 🌐 Measurement of disproportionality-political and statistical tool. Districts do it because state says so. States do it because the feds say so.
- 🌐 Same student could be identified as Hispanic on federal roll; Hispanic/Asian on the state roll; wWhite/Non-Hispanic on the district roll.

The real value of studying disproportionality

- 🌐 Allows us to explore teacher's cultural sensitivities and biases as well as instructional styles
- 🌐 Encourages us to explore the potential bias in our assessment tools and test administration
- 🌐 Allows us to look at how our teams make decisions and whether there might be subconscious prejudices that influence our decision-making

I know it if I see it

- 🌐 When I walk into the resource rooms at my high school, it is quite obvious that a majority of the students in the room are of color, though the majority of students in my HS are white.

Why do we see it?

- 🌐 The literature seems to focus on:
 - 🌐 The referral process: Classroom teachers don't understand the behaviors or motivations of minorities
 - 🌐 The assessment process: The tests that psychs use, especially those measuring cognitive functioning (IQ), are biased against minorities

What about referral and race?

- **Black/Native American students overrepresented in the EBD and LD categories**
- **Possible reasons:**
 - **Differences in school readiness; lower expectations for CLD populations**
 - **Insufficient training for teachers in working with CLD populations**
 - **Limited family and community involvement in CLD populations**
- **Minorities are often victims of academic tracking, limited curriculum or insufficient intervention**

What about test bias and race?

- 🌐 Nationally, black and Native American students identified more often as ID and LD than whites
- 🌐 In some states, black students identified as ID 14 times more likely than whites; no difference in other states.
- 🌐 “Cultural test bias represent problems in the construction, design, administration or interpretation of tests” (Brown, Reynolds & Whitaker etal. 1999)
- 🌐 Possible sources of test bias: construct validity, content or item bias, inappropriate sampling, examiner and language bias, and differential predictive validity

Construct validity bias

- 🌐 IQ tests used with minorities are measuring not inherent aptitude but rather the extent to which test-takers share white middle-class knowledge and values (Mercer, 1979)
- 🌐 Test items have different meanings and relationships with other items for different subgroups. Little evidence to date that this is the case. Construct validity seems to hold up (Brown et al 1999)




Sampling

- 🌐 By definition, minority populations if sampled proportionately to the population, are under-sampled and the test is not representative of their group.
- 🌐 Doesn't seem to hold true (Harrington, 1984; Hickman & Reynolds, 1987)

Predictive Validity

- 🌐 Using regression formulas to predict outcomes for minorities based on IQ tests, did not yield evidence for test bias.
- 🌐 That said, there has been some evidence that our IQ tests are not as predictive for Latinos

Item Bias

-  Lack of exposure of minority groups to information required by our IQ tests may result in biased scores.
-  Any analysis done looking at individual test items has failed to reveal bias.
-  When you think about it, not that many individual items are so biased as to create much of a difference.

Language and Examiner Bias

- 🌐 Our tests often seem to measure the student's familiarity with the English language more than aptitude or achievement.
- 🌐 The psych's attitude or skin color could also be a factor. Examiner unfamiliarity (i.e. different race) does indeed seem to play a significant role, in particular, when the student is of low socioeconomic status.
- 🌐 Behavior rating scales completed by teachers seem particularly susceptible to bias due to language and misperception re. behaviors

The current research

- 🌐 There are several decision points or ‘gates’ that the School Psychologist is very invested in.
- 🌐 The decisions made at these gates can decrease or exacerbate the disproportionality problem.
- 🌐 What happens to proportionality at each of these gates?
- 🌐 Referred students(N=264) in Shoreline Schools (2 HS; 2 MS; 7 Elementary Schools) were followed

Decision-making points

Referral
Proportionality

Decision to Test

Eligibility based
on assessment

Exit from
Sped?

Minority
Overrepresentation



Caveats

- 🌐 Those who think that race is a clean set of boxes that students can be placed in without overlap; and those who think that HC is a clean set of boxes that students can be placed in without overlap , are naive.
- 🌐 Present study simply looked at Caucasian vs. all other categories of race; and collapsed all Handicapping Categories.

The gates of decision-making in the sped eligibility process : The referral process

- Is the proportion of minority students being referred as a focus of concern, representative of building's student body?

-Only looked at SSTs where a decision had to be made whether to:

-continue, intensify or change intervention

-refer for 504 evaluation


-refer for sped evaluation

These were NOT meetings simply designed to look for AT-RISK students

Factors influencing Referral to building team

- 🌐 Academic progress in the classroom or on state testing
- 🌐 Academic progress via screening analysis
- 🌐 Academic progress via progress monitoring assessment
- 🌐 Behavioral concerns overshadowing academic need
- 🌐 Attendance as major factor
- 🌐 Family or outside support
- 🌐 Student not taking advantage of opportunity for help

Why can't teachers get it right?

-  “Teachers should be familiar with the beliefs, values, cultural practices, discourse styles, and other features of students’ lives that may have an impact on classroom participation and success and be prepared to use this information in designing instruction” Donovan & Cross (2002), p373

Why teachers can't get it right

- 🌐 **Tolerance of another culture-Your beliefs/attitudes/behaviors and values don't necessarily change**
- 🌐 **Acceptance of another culture-Behaviors will change but not necessarily your beliefs, attitudes or values**
- 🌐 **Cultural sensitivity-Can mask real problems as you ignore or gloss over inappropriate behavior**
- 🌐 **Cultural humility-realization that beliefs/attitudes/ behaviors and values of other culture have importance**
- 🌐 **But in no case can you truly identify with another culture or truly understand the meaning behind their behavior**


Results for Shoreline: Referral



Why didn't I find disproportionality at the referral stage?

- 🌐 As we move toward universal screening, academic referral becomes more objective.
- 🌐 Conscious effort to not over-refer minorities
- 🌐 At secondary level, referral usually a result of either failing grades or failing assessment-objective?
- 🌐 At high school level, fewer referrals because of behavior? Increased discipline

Gate 2: The decision to formally assess

-  The assessment decision: Of those referred, is the proportion of minority students being formally assessed different than for majority students?

Factors influencing the Decision to Formally Test for Sped

- 🌐 Student motivational level
- 🌐 Degree of exposure to content not being mastered
- 🌐 Perceived support systems
- 🌐 Performance on prior state assessments
- 🌐 Analysis of academic progress
- 🌐 Influence of parent or outside intervention
- 🌐 Perceived immediacy of need for support

Key themes in the Conversation

- 🌐 “Should we give this student some more time-give interventions a chance?”
- 🌐 “Does this student have adequate support to make more progress?”
- 🌐 “Are there extenuating circumstances explaining why progress not made?”
- 🌐 “Student is high risk-we must help now”
- 🌐 “We’ve got parents or doctor really pushing hard”

Results for Shoreline: Decision to test



The gates of decision-making in the sped eligibility process III

- 🌐 Eligibility decision: Once tested, is the proportion of minority students found eligible for special ed different than for majority students?
- 🌐 The underlying question/assumption: Our tests, designed and administered by Caucasian psychologists, are either biased in design or administered with conscious/subconscious prejudice
- 🌐 Neither our scores (despite the concept of standardization) nor our interpretation entirely objective

Think about it

- 🌐 Is your behavior as examiner, independent of the student's attitude/behavior?
- 🌐 Might your behavior as examiner be interpreted differently by students of different cultures?
- 🌐 Because your approach is guided by standardization, does that mean that every student, of every culture gets the 'same' test the 'same' way? Can queries mean different things to different students of different cultures?
- 🌐 Because a test sample contains 15 Native Americans from one tribe attending a public school, does that mean that the test is appropriate to assess their IQ, academic achievement, adaptive skill level or behavior?

The discussion in literature re. test bias

Results for Shoreline: Eligibility



Why didn't I find disproportionality at the Eligibility Assessment stage?

- 🌐 Decisions are not made in vacuum based on objective data- comprehensive with multiple sources of data
- 🌐 Data for eligibility decision –objective (color blind)
- 🌐 The tests are not biased







The decision to exit

- 🌐 Exit decision: Is the proportion of minority students exited from special education (either 3-yr or earlier) different than for majority students?
- 🌐 The comparison is between the exit rates of special education students. 55% of special education students in Shoreline are Caucasian. 61% of students exited from special education are Caucasian.






Results for Shoreline: Exit



Key Factors in the decision to exit

-  Success in the classroom
-  Success on state assessments
-  Support from home
-  Motivation to succeed
-  High self-esteem
-  Good organizational/study skills

Key themes in the conversation about exiting

-  Support
-  Motivation
-  Skill development
-  Progress to IEP goals
-  Success in class/state assessments

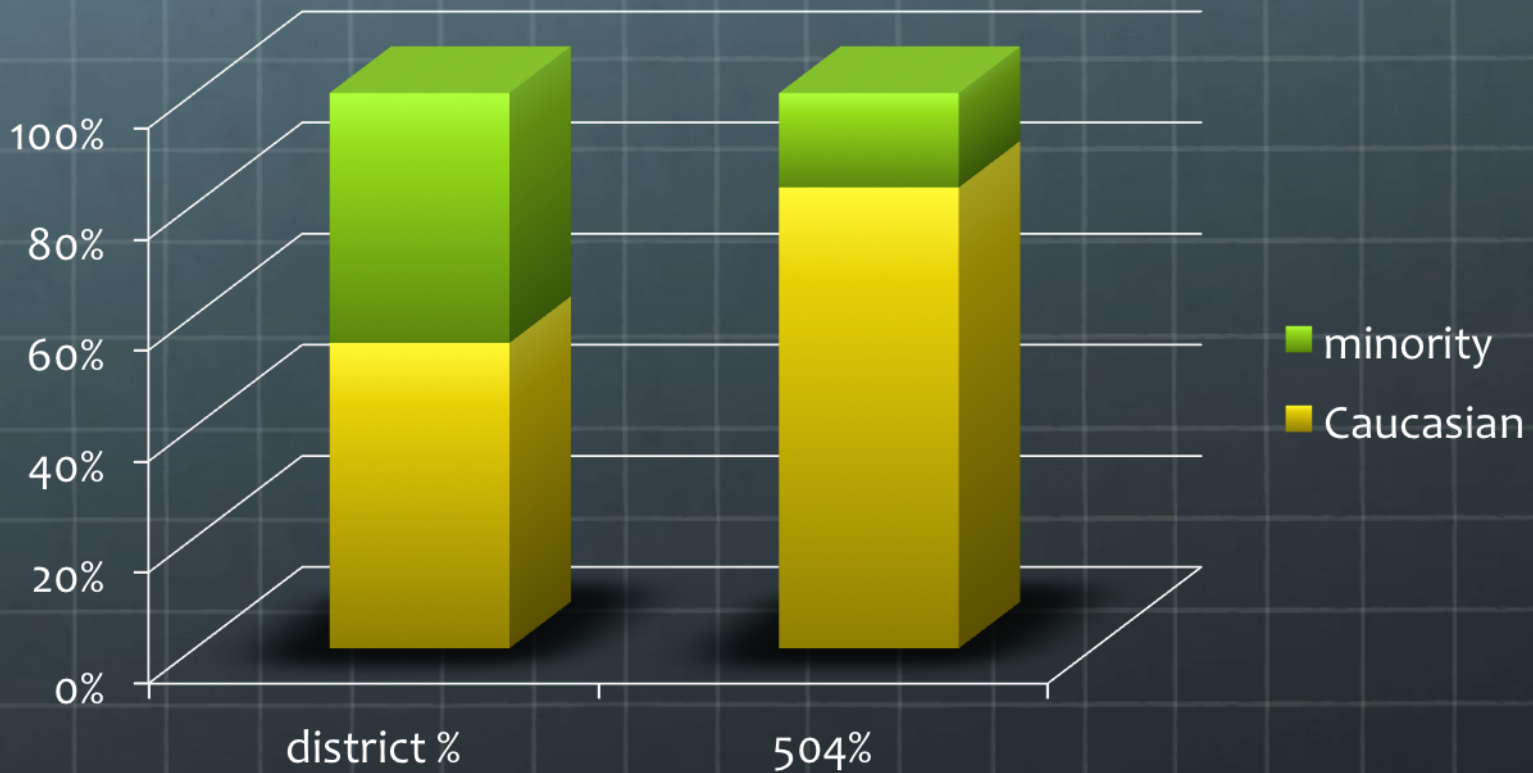
What you never hear

- 🌐 “The committee (National Research Council) is not aware of any published studies that compare the quality of special education programs or the efficacy of special instructional practices among various racial/ethnic groups.”
- 🌐 Is what we are doing and attempting to do the same for all sped students across racial/ethnic lines?

Some hypotheses

- 🌐 Decision to formally assess:
 - 🌐 “Lets give them some more time” (for Whites and Asians) How much support do they have?
 - 🌐 3 options: interventions; 504 plans; sped (equally administered?)
- 🌐 Decision to exit:
 - 🌐 “Do they have the motivation to make it out there?”

Is the 504 plan a 'whites-only' strategy?



How does this data fit?

- 🌐 When faced with the decision as to continue/change intervention, refer to 504, or refer to sped assessment, teams will consider the 504 if the student is white.
- 🌐 This results in proportionately fewer sped assessments with white population.



Where to from here?

- 🌐 Analyze the conversations being had at the SST level.
- 🌐 Are the themes being shared a preparation for a skewed or disproportionate approach to sped assessment?
- 🌐 Are the criteria for looking to exit a student from sped prejudiced toward white students?

What next?

- 🌐 Preparation of three or four identical scripts that contain all the data needed to make the SST decision.
- 🌐 Have every sped teacher/specialist review the scripts, make a decision and justify their decision.
- 🌐 The only difference in the scenarios: the subtle identification of the student with a particular minority group.
- 🌐 Each teacher/psych/admin will see three different scenarios. 1/3 of the readers will be reading the scenario with a 'white student' orientation; 1/3 Asian orientation; 1/3 Latino orientation. Will the 'white' students be referred for sped assessment less often?




WANTED

-  Developing scripts that contain sufficient data is not easy. Having two or three co-authors will make it doable and more creative (read consistent).
-  Districts sufficiently interested to let their sped teachers spend 15 minutes completing our survey.




Action research-we can do it!

- 🌐 There are research questions all about us
- 🌐 Barriers to you doing research
 - 🌐 Time- I never analyzed research at my desk ; did mostly at night and weekends-work in teams
 - 🌐 Developing the research question- do it as an area or region and collect data as an area or region
 - 🌐 Getting district(s) on board-make it part of your personal growth plan!




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