

Moving Beyond Compliance and Toward Equity to Address Racial Disproportionality

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Abstract

The rights of approximately seven million students with disabilities are secured via the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Despite these protections, consequential inequities still need to be addressed. Racialized inequities in special education outcomes persist across classifications, placements, and disciplinary outcomes—often referred to as racial disproportionality. The disjuncture between the promises of IDEA and persistent racial disparities highlights an equity dilemma. We tackle this dilemma and provide recommendations for educators to move beyond IDEA compliance and toward equity when addressing racial disproportionality. We discuss how efforts to address the inequity can be reimagined across personal, classroom, and system levels. We provide three broad recommendations responsive to IDEA provisions and the myriad of root causes contributing to racial disproportionality.

Keywords

IDEA, compliance, equity, racial disproportionality, racism, ableism

The rights of approximately seven million students with disabilities are secured via the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act's (IDEA 1997, 2004; U.S. Department of Education [U.S. DoE], 2022) individualized procedural protections, which were established shortly after the civil rights era in response to a sordid history of seclusion, exclusion, discrimination, and eugenic logics that impacted how students with disabilities were treated in schools (e.g., Ferri & Connor, 2005; Harry & Ocasio-Stoutenburg, 2020; Mayes, 2023). Despite the promises of IDEA to rectify the marginalization of students with disabilities in U.S. schools, consequential inequities remain unaddressed. Racialized inequities in special education outcomes—often referred to as racial disproportionality, are characterized by both over- and under-representation whereby a racial or ethnic group of students labeled with a disability is unequally represented in classifications, placements, and/or disciplinary outcomes nationally and/or within a state education agency (SEA) or local education agency (LEA) (Ahram et al., 2021; Waitoller et al., 2010).¹

Racial disproportionality is most evident across the following disability categories: specific learning disabilities (SLDs), intellectual disability (ID), emotional

disturbance (ED), speech or language impairment (SLI), other health impairment (OHI), and autism (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). For instance, in a report commissioned by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), de Brey et al. (2019) show that nationally, during the 2015 to 2016 school year, Black students and American Indian and Alaska Native students were more likely to receive services under IDEA as compared with all other races—indicating a broad level of overrepresentation for these groups. Black students also had a higher rate of classification for ID as compared with all other groups. On the other hand, Black and Pacific Islander students were underrepresented in the category

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of speech and language impairment as compared with all other groups.

These disparities can be consequential for students at the intersection of race and disability. Students with disabilities are at an increased risk of involvement with the carceral system and school push-out (e.g., school non-completion) and are less likely to complete postsecondary education as compared with those not placed in special education (Ballis & Heath, 2021; Skiba et al., 2014; Tuck, 2012). The trends are more pronounced for Black, Indigenous, and youth of color (BIYOC) with disabilities (e.g., Annamma, 2017; Losen et al., 2014). Thus, the disjuncture between the promises of IDEA, persistent racial disparities, and the negative outcomes associated with the receipt of special education services points to a significant equity dilemma.

This article tackles this equity dilemma and provides recommendations for educators to move beyond IDEA compliance and toward equity when addressing racial disproportionality. We discuss how efforts to address the inequity can be re-imagined across personal, classroom, and system levels. We provide three broad recommendations responsive to IDEA provisions and the myriad of root causes contributing to racial disproportionality.

Racial Disproportionality and the IDEA Equity Requirements

The systems of oppression driving and sustaining disproportionality occur along multiple dimensions—beliefs, policies, and practices (Fergus, 2017; Hernandez et al., 2022) and the root causes of the inequity are diffuse across educational systems (Voulgarides, 2023). Thus, technical and narrowly focused measures to address the inequity embedded with the 2004 reauthorization of the IDEA, which are both compliance-based and tied to numeric metrics, cannot sufficiently address the inequity (Albrecht et al., 2012; Cavendish et al., 2014). Moreover, there is little to no research indicating that the current IDEA approach for addressing racial disproportionality has been effective in reducing broadscale racialized inequities (Albrecht et al., 2012; Strassfeld, 2019; U.S. Government Accountability Office [GAO], 2013). There is an equity paradox that allows for racial disparities to persist under the guise of IDEA compliance via the harmful logic of compliance (Voulgarides, 2018; Voulgarides et al., 2021)—pointing to an acute need to re-imagine remedies and approaches for addressing the inequity.

Moving Beyond Compliance and Toward Equity

Compliance with IDEA is clearly important given the historical legacy of exclusion of students with disabilities from schools and the need for assuring the rights of students with

disabilities are upheld in schools. This includes a need for mandated compliance reviews and SEA technical assistance support (e.g., IDEA Part B disproportionality monitoring) and educator efforts to implement individualized (e.g., individualized education programs [IEPs]) and system-wide interventions (e.g., Multi-Tiered Systems of Support [MTSS]). However, these tools and technical interventions often locate deficits within individual students and groups (Beratan, 2006; Triano, 2000; Ziegler, 2020) and allow for compliance with IDEA to be documented while failing to address the systemic, historic, and current dynamics associated with race and disability in the United States that drive disproportionality (Voulgarides et al., 2017). Therefore, to move beyond compliance when addressing disproportionality, it is necessary to develop intersectional, race, and ability-conscious interventions, practices, policies, and programs that are responsive to best practices in special and general education and IDEA procedural protections.

We draw from research that calls for reform of culturally responsive, race, and ability-conscious systems (e.g., Klingner et al., 2005; Kozleski & Smith, 2009; Kozleski et al., 2020; Thorius, 2023) to develop our recommendations. We highlight ways in which educators can focus on implementing student support systems (e.g., IEPs, MTSS) that consider both the technical (IDEA compliance) and adaptive (history, culture, social context, and identity) components of educational practice that are necessary to address complex equity issues (e.g., Barrio, 2017; Barrio et al., 2017; Milner, 2020).

Recommendations for Practice

The first and second recommendations for practice are linked to classroom practices and educators' mindsets as they exist within broader systems of support (e.g., MTSS: response to intervention [RtI] and positive behavior interventions and supports [PBISs]). The third recommendation combines personal-, classroom-, and systems-level strategies to move beyond compliance and toward equity when addressing the disproportionality problem. All recommendations have direct application to classroom settings and beyond.

Recommendation 1: Focus on Fixing Educational Systems, Not Students and Families/Caregivers

Individualized remedies cannot address systemic inequities like disproportionality (Artiles, 2019). Although special education services are designed to provide student-based individualized support, research indicates that the individualized nature of special education can exacerbate racial and economic inequalities (e.g., Ong-Dean, 2009; Saatcioglu & Skrtic, 2019; Skrtic et al., 2021). Focusing on individual student needs can supersede the critical examination of inequitable learning opportunities and access to high-quality educational resources and instruction across and within schools (Carter & Welner, 2013). Moreover, when

instruction addresses individual needs without attention to broader contexts, deficit perspectives about students and families flourish (e.g., Marsh & Walker, 2022; Tefera et al., 2023, Voulgarides, 2021).

Therefore, approaches to addressing disproportionality that rely on interventions aimed at improving student behavior and/or academic skills without critically addressing environmental and systemic factors can place the blame on students, their families, and their homes. With this orientation, a student's home environment, family/community language, culture, and genetics are viewed as deficient or pathological (Howard, 2010). A pathological and deficit approach blames students, families, and communities for disparities. On the other hand, a difference approach (Howard, 2010) asks practitioners to address disproportionality by transforming their environments in ways that incorporate students' cultural, linguistic, and familial assets into the structures, policies, and practices of schools. With a difference perspective, practitioners embrace improvement efforts that include: (a) supportive relationships, (b) bias-aware environments, (c) culturally responsive curricula, instruction, and assessment, (d) data used for equity, and (e) the incorporation of student and family goals, perspectives, and voices in school policies and practices (Gregory et al., 2017; Harry & Ocasio-Stoutenburg, 2020). Table 1 provides a series of goals, strategies, and a non-exhaustive list of recommended resources that engage with a difference perspective and focus on fixing educational systems, not students and families, in the classroom and beyond.

Recommendation 2: Acknowledge Racism and Ableism Operating Within Classrooms, School Communities, and Beyond

Racism and ableism are evident in laws, policies, and educational practices (Annamma et al., 2013; Bell, 2018; Welton et al., 2018), including IDEA (Beratan, 2006) via intersectional oppressions (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Crenshaw, 2017). Racism "includes an array of antiblack practices, the unjustly gained political-economic power of whites, the continuing economic and other resource inequalities along racial lines, and the white racist ideologies and attitudes created to maintain and rationalize white privilege and power" (Safir & Dugan, 2021, p. 13). Ableism is "a system that places value on people's bodies and minds based on societally constructed ideas of normality, intelligence, excellence, desirability, and productivity" (Lewis, 2022, n.p.). Both operate through conscious and unconscious mechanisms in people, social structures, school and district policies, and educational practices that justify segregation, exclusion, discrimination, and ultimately legitimate notions of racial and ability superiority and inferiority (e.g., Annamma et al., 2013; Bastart et al., 2021; Thorius, 2019).

It can be challenging to pinpoint precisely where racist and ableist practices manifest in practice. Therefore,

although educators may seek specific and discrete strategies related to addressing these issues—focusing on strategies alone neglects what Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz (2022) calls the "Archeology of the Self," or the need for deep self-examination to gain critical awareness of one's culture, identity, experiences, biases, and stereotypes. Critical self-reflection is a central component of the development of intersectionally conscious (Boveda & Weinberg, 2022) and culturally responsive teachers (Villegas & Lucas, 2002) and leaders (Khalifa et al., 2016). The self-reflective process can influence the creation and enactment of more equitable education policy and programming and contextualized understandings of racial disproportionality. Thus, both critical mindsets (i.e., personal reflection) and strategies (i.e., academic and behavioral) must be simultaneously employed via culturally responsive and sustaining remedies (e.g., Carter et al., 2017; Deckman & Aguilar, 2022; Milner, 2020; Neri et al., 2019; Pollock et al., 2010; Richards et al., 2007).

Table 2 provides a series of goals, strategies, and a non-exhaustive list of recommended resources that require critical self-reflection to be employed with research-based instructional and behavioral supports, so that, disparities can be interpreted with a more contextualized and situated lens.

Recommendation 3: Engage in Systemic Change Models That Include Self-Study From the Personal to Systems Level

Carelessly viewing inequities in data (i.e., IDEA racial equity data) can reinforce racist stereotypes and other bias-based beliefs that leave the systems and practices driving disproportionality unchallenged (Carter et al., 2017; Bertrand & Marsh, 2021; Lasater et al., 2021). Disaggregating data to address educational disparities is essential and necessary, but it is not enough to ensure educators will critically reflect to address ableism, racism, and the beliefs, policies, and practices that sustain disproportionality. Therefore, self-study that spans the personal to the systems level is necessary to move beyond compliance and toward equity.

Educators can engage in the self-study process by looking within their classroom, school, and district contexts. Educators in the classroom can begin by disaggregating all student outcome data by race, disability, and other markers of identity to inform instructional decisions. Using both quantitative and qualitative data collected through surveys, interviews, focus groups, and document analyses, the self-study process allows educators to engage in critical discussions about what is working and what is not in their classroom and beyond. From these data, they can create an action plan that assesses current policies and practices related to suspension and expulsion rates, identification of students to receive special education services (i.e., RtI, MTSS), and the implementation of these services (i.e., IEPs, service delivery).

At a broader scale, disaggregated data analyses can spur discussions amongst key players within a school about what

Table 1. Strategies for Fixing Educational Systems, Not Students and Families in the Classroom and Beyond.**Goal 1: Ensure a bias-aware and culturally responsive classroom and climate**

- Create MTSS Tier I behavioral and academic supports that are focused on making students feel welcomed, safe, included, and respected
- Conduct empathy interviews with those most impacted by disproportionality
 - Identify students, families, and other members of the educational community and classrooms to talk to about their experiences in classrooms, the school, and with school staff
- Conduct culturally responsive classroom and school walkthroughs to examine relationships, student connection, school climate, student access and participation in extracurriculars, and school and classroom physical environments that enhance student learning and identities
- Conduct classroom observations to reflect on and improve culturally responsive practices that are responsive to varied identities—racial, ethnic, linguistic, ability, and so forth
 - Review curriculum for bias and stereotypes, to ensure student representation in all classroom materials.

Recommended resources

- Aguilar, E. (2020). Appendix B: The equity rubric. In *Coaching for equity: Conversations that change practice* (pp. 311–334). Jossey-Bass
- Bryan-Gooden, J., Hester, M., & Peoples, L. Q. (2023). *Culturally responsive ELA curriculum scorecard*. Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools, New York University
- Coomer, M. N., Skelton, S. M., & Kyser, T. S. (2017, February). *Assessing bias in standards and curricular materials*. The Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center
- Garcia, S. B., & Ortiz, A. A. (2008). A framework for culturally and linguistically responsive design of response-to-intervention models. *Multiple Voices for Ethnically Diverse Exceptional Learners*, 11(1), 24–41
- Harry, B., & Klingner, J. (2014). *Why are so many minority students in special education?* Teachers College Press
- Gregory, A., Skiba, R. J., & Mediratta, K. (2017). Eliminating disparities in school discipline: A framework for intervention. *Review of Research in Education*, 41(1), 253–278
- Klinger, J. K., & Edwards, P. A. (2006). Cultural considerations with response to intervention models. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 41(1), 108–117
- New York State Dept. of Education. (2018). *Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework*. <http://www.nysed.gov/common/nysed/files/programs/crs/culturally-responsive-sustaining-education-framework.pdf>
- Peoples, L.Q., Islam, T., & Davis, T. (2021). *The culturally responsive-sustaining STEAM curriculum scorecard*. New York: Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools, New York University
- Powell, R., & Rightmyer, E. C. (Eds.). (2011). *Literacy for all students an instructional framework for closing the gap*. Routledge
- Safir, S., & Dugan, J. (2021). *Street data: A next-generation model for equity, pedagogy, and school transformation*. Corwin and Learning Forward.

Goal 2: Implement culturally responsive practices in the classroom

- Ensure curricula, assessment, and pedagogy validate, and affirm student identity across multiple identities
- Consider student cultural norms and preferences when making curricular, teaching, and learning decisions
 - How are varying teacher and student interpersonal and interactional styles supported in the classroom and beyond?
 - What motivations, incentives, and rewards for learning are being used?
 - How are students asked to demonstrate comprehension and competence?
 - What do work, study, and performance spaces look like?
 - How are physical and social settings organized for task performance?
 - What techniques for organizing and conveying ideas and thoughts are being used?
 - How are students asked to work through learning tasks?
 - What content is being taught?
- Identify student and familial cultural funds of knowledge and strengths. Embed these into classroom instruction, curricula, routines, and norms

Recommended resources

- Baglieri, S., & Lalvani, P. (2019). *Undoing ableism: Teaching about disability in K-12 classrooms*. Routledge
- Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and Practice*. Teachers College Press
- Harry, B., & Ocasio-Stoutenburg, L. (2021). Parent advocacy for lives that matter. *Research and practice for persons with severe disabilities*, 46(3), 184–198
- Hollie, S., & Allen, B. (2018). *Culturally and linguistically responsive teaching and learning: Classroom practices for student success*. Shell Education
- Moll, L. C., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory Into Practice*, 31(2), 132–141
- New York State Dept. of Education. (2018). *Culturally responsive-sustaining education framework*. <http://www.nysed.gov/common/nysed/files/programs/crs/culturally-responsive-sustaining-education-framework.pdf>
- Ocasio-Stoutenburg, L., & Harry, B. (2021). *Case studies in building equity through family advocacy in special education: A companion volume to meeting families where they are*. Teachers College Press

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)**Goal 3: Engage with culturally responsive multi-tiered systems of support**

- Response to intervention (RtI)
 - Ensure interventions are validated with students like those whom it will be applied
 - Consider mediating classroom contexts (relationships, dispositions, skills)
 - Consider broader educational community influences (i.e., community culture)
 - Construct culturally responsive Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) through genuine partnerships with families by embedding familial and community cultural assets within plans
- Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBISs)
 - Co-construct school- and classroom-wide behavioral norms and expectations with students and families
 - Identify and reflect upon practitioner cultural values and norms as they relate to families and caregivers
 - Practice identifying and naming cultural mismatch/conflict and the various forms of bias and stereotypes impacting judgments of student behavior
 - Share power with students and families by partnering with students and families to engage in ongoing problem solving related to behavior
 - Work to co-construct solutions with families and students

Recommended resources

- Bal, A., Thorius, K. K., & Kozleski, E. (2012). Culturally responsive positive behavioral support matters. *Equity Matters: In Learning, for Life*. http://dm.education.wisc.edu/abal/intellcont/CRPBIS%20Brief_Bal%20et%20al_2012-1.pdf
- Barrio, B. L., Ferguson, S. L., Hovey, K. A., Boedeker, P., & Klutz-Drye, B. (2023). Voices beyond the numbers: A systematic review of qualitative studies of disproportionality in special education. *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth*, 67(1), 39-47
- Barrio, B. L., Miller, D., Hsiao, Y. J., Dunn, M., Petersen, S., Hollingshead, A., & Banks, S. (2017). Designing culturally responsive and relevant individualized educational programs. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 53(2), 114-119
- Carter, P. L., Skiba, R., Arredondo, M. I., & Pollock, M. (2016). You can't fix what you don't look at: Acknowledging race in addressing racial discipline disparities. *Urban Education*, 52(2), 207-235
- Garcia, S. B., & Ortiz, A. A. (2008). A framework for culturally and linguistically responsive design of response-to-intervention models. *Multiple Voices for Ethnically Diverse Exceptional Learners*, 11(1), 24-41
- Klingler, J. K., & Edwards, P. A. (2006). Cultural considerations with response to intervention models. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 41(1), 108-117
- Levenson, M., Smith, K., McIntosh, K., Rose, J., & Pinkelman, S. (2021, March). PBIS cultural responsiveness field guide: Resources for Trainers and Coaches. <https://www.pbis.org/resource/pbis-cultural-responsiveness-field-guide-resources-for-trainers-and-coaches>
- McIntosh, K., Girvan, E. J., Fairbanks Falcon, S., McDaniel, S. C., Smolkowski, K., Bastable, E., Santiago-Rosario, M. R., Izzard, S., Austin, S. C., Nese, R. N., & Baldy, T. S. (2021). Equity-focused PBIS approach reduces racial inequities in school discipline: A randomized controlled trial. *School Psychology*, 36(6), 433-444
- McIntosh, K., Girvan, E. J., McDaniel, S. C., Santiago-Rosario, M. R., St. Joseph, S., Fairbanks Falcon, S., Izzard, S., & Bastable, E. (2021b). Effects of an equity-focused PBIS approach to School Improvement on exclusionary discipline and school climate. *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth*, 65(4), 354-361
- Milner, R. H. (2020). *Start where you are, but don't stay there, second edition: Understanding diversity, opportunity gaps, and teaching in today's classrooms* (2nd ed.). Harvard Education Press.
- Rossetti, Z., Sauer, J. S., Bui, O., & Ou, S. (2017). Developing collaborative partnerships with culturally and linguistically diverse families during the IEP process. *TEACHING Exceptional Children*, 49(5), 328-338
- Smolkowski, K., Girvan, E. J., McIntosh, K., & Horner, R. (2016). Vulnerable decision points for disproportionate office discipline referrals: Comparisons of discipline for African American and White Elementary School students. *SSRN Electronic Journal*

Goal 4: Cultivate culturally responsive family/caregiver engagement

- Assess family engagement practices and create plans for forming equitable partnerships with families that are reciprocal and respectful.
- Take responsibility for cultivating positive and genuine relationships with students and caregivers.
- Consider strategies for cultivating learning alliances with students through the application of trust generators
- Identify methods for collecting and analyzing data showing the ratio of positive to negative student affirmations/interactions and ensure high rates of positive feedback and behavior related praise across student groups
- Take an interest, and become present in, aspects of students' and families' lives outside of the classroom and/or school

Recommended resources

- Flamboyant Foundation. (n.d.). *Classroom family engagement rubric*. <https://s28742.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/School-rubric-06-19-2014.pdf>
- Hammond, Z. L. (2015). *Culturally responsive teaching and the brain: Promoting authentic engagement and rigor among culturally and linguistically diverse students*. Corwin Press
- Herrera, S. G., Porter, L., & Barko-Alva, K. (2020). *Equity in school-parent partnerships: Cultivating community and family trust in culturally diverse classrooms*. Teachers College Press
- Herrera, S. G., Rodríguez, D., Cabral, R. M., & Holmes, M. A. (2023). *Equitable and inclusive teaching for diverse learners with disabilities: A biography-driven approach*. Teachers College Press.

policies, practices, and beliefs contribute to disparate outcomes and what needs to change to shift disparities. Moreover, research shows that forming district and schoolwide equity

teams that are demographically representative of local communities and that work collaboratively to conduct root cause analyses to identify beliefs, policies, and practices contributing

Table 2. Acknowledge Racism and Ableism Operating Within Classrooms, School Communities, and Beyond.**Goal 1: Center an explicit orientation toward equity, and an understanding of race(ism), ableism, and culture in professional development and classroom practices**

- Engage in the “archeology of the self”—self-study and reflection related to race, racism, culture, and identity to understand the ways in which power, and privilege have impacted what educators come to know as “right” or “wrong” and “good” or “bad” behavior and knowledge
- Explore racial and ability identity development by considering messages one receives about race, ability, and identity from adults in their life and the world around them (e.g., media, popular culture), the messages students may receive, and the ways those messages impact student and practitioner understanding of their own identity and culture in the context of schools and classrooms
- Reflect on practitioner culture and learned behaviors enacted in the classroom.
 - Consider the ways these learned behaviors impact classroom management, reactions to student behavior, and the development of school and classroom behavioral systems and instructional routines
- Name and discuss various forms of bias and stereotypes that permeate U.S. culture, media, and language related to race and ability
- Make connections to the ways they impact classroom management, reactions to student behavior, and the development of school and classroom behavioral systems and instructional routines

Recommended resources

- Baglieri, S., & Lavani, P. (2019). *Undoing ableism: Teaching about disability in K-12 classrooms*. Routledge
- Boveda, M., & Weinberg, A. E. (2022). Centering racialized educators in collaborative teacher education: The development of the intersectionally conscious collaboration protocol. *Teacher Education and Special Education, 45*(1), 8–26.
- Carter, P. L., Skiba, R., Arredondo, M. I., & Pollock, M. (2016). You can't fix what you don't look at: Acknowledging race in addressing racial discipline disparities. *Urban Education, 52*(2), 207–235
- Fergus, E. (2017). *Solving disproportionality and achieving equity: A leader's guide to using data to change hearts and minds*. Corwin Press
- Gregory, A., Skiba, R. J., & Mediratta, K. (2017). Eliminating disparities in school discipline: A framework for intervention. *Review of Research in Education, 41*(1), 253–278
- Hammond, Z. L. (2015). *Culturally responsive teaching and the brain: Promoting authentic engagement and rigor among culturally and linguistically diverse students*. Corwin Press
- Price-Dennis, D. M., & Sealey-Ruiz, Y. (2021). *Advancing racial literacies in teacher education: Activism for equity in digital spaces*. Teachers College Press
- Sealey-Ruiz, Y. (2022). An archeology of self for our times: *Another talk to teachers*. *English Journal, 111*(5), 21–26
- Social Identity Wheel: <https://unitedwaysem.org/wp-content/uploads/2021-21-Day-Equity-Challenge-Social-Identity-Wheel-FINAL.pdf>
- Tatum, B. (1992). Talking about race, learning about racism: The application of racial identity development theory in the classroom. *Harvard Educational Review, 62*(1), 1–25

Goal 2: Utilize disaggregated data in the classroom and beyond

- Create disaggregated data systems (i.e., race, gender, ability) to identify disparities in student outcomes (academic, behavioral, student placement) that exist along multiple markers of social identity, both within and outside of special education
 - Understand common measures and data sources used to identify disproportionality and disparities in student outcomes
 - Create data management systems that allow for regular tracking of student outcomes using disaggregated data
 - Create multidisciplinary school-based teams to review data regularly to identify trends both within and outside of special education
- Utilize disaggregated data in conjunction with understandings of intersectional identities, race, ability, identity, culture, bias, and stereotypes to identify where and how policies and educator beliefs and knowledge about race, ability, and identity impact student outcomes and experiences

Recommended resources

- Center on PBIS: https://assets-global.website-files.com/5d3725188825e071f1670246/65370853b577b4a8a7c76eb5_Discipline%20Disproportionality%20Problem%20Solving-%20%20A%20Data%20Guide%20for%20School%20Teams.pdf
- Fergus, E. (2017). *Solving disproportionality and achieving equity: A leader's guide to using data to change hearts and minds*. Corwin Press
- Levenson, M., Smith, K., McIntosh, K., Rose, J., & Pinkelman, S. (2021, March). *PBIS CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS FIELD GUIDE: Resources for trainers and coaches*. <https://www.pbis.org/resource/pbis-cultural-responsiveness-field-guide-resources-for-trainers-and-coaches>
- Lopez, D., Nabors, A., & Jacobs, J. (2023). *Using quantitative data to identify and address inequities*. https://www.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/SER-Using-Quantitative-Data-to-Identify-Inequities_FINAL_ADA.pdf
- McIntosh, K., Girvan, E. J., Fairbanks Falcon, S., McDaniel, S. C., Smolkowski, K., Bastable, E., Santiago-Rosario, M. R., Izzard, S., Austin, S. C., Nese, R. N., & Baldy, T. S. (2021). Equity-focused PBIS approach reduces racial inequities in school discipline: A randomized controlled trial. *School Psychology, 36*(6), 433–444
- Morales-James, C., & Stemberge, A. (n.d.). (rep.). *Addressing disproportionality through the creation of culturally responsive problem-solving teams*. New York University Technical Assistance Center on Disproportionality at the Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools
- WestEd Resources: https://www.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/CISELSS-PBIS-Centering-Equity-in-DBDM_FINAL-ADA.pdf
- https://www.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/SER-Using-Quantitative-Data-to-Identify-Inequities_FINAL_ADA-Dec.pdf

Goal 3: Engage in learning about, and gather information related to, the prevalence of biased-based beliefs at the intersection of race and disability

- Understand bias-based beliefs at the intersection of race and disability to critically assess their impact on the enactment of behavioral and academic support systems and special education policies and practices.
 - Examine and name deficit thinking, which blames cultural groups for disparities
 - Examine and name color-evasiveness, which omits and/or refuses to consider the impact of race and other social identities on schooling outcomes
 - Examine and name poverty disciplining, which assumes poor character/citizenship are core cultural components of working-class students and families and/or those experiencing poverty

Recommended Resources

- Annamma, S. A., Jackson, D. D., & Morrison, D. (2017). Conceptualizing color-evasiveness: Using dis/ability critical race theory to expand a color-blind racial ideology in education and society. *Race ethnicity and education, 20*(2), 147–162
- Annamma, S., & Morrison, D. (2018). DisCrit classroom ecology: Using praxis to dismantle dysfunctional education ecologies. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 73*, 70–80
- Fergus, E. (2017). *Solving disproportionality and achieving equity: A leader's guide to using data to change hearts and minds*. Corwin, a SAGE Publishing Company
- Harry, B., & Klingner, J. (2007). Discarding the deficit model. *Educational leadership, 64*(5), 16

to disproportionality across a variety of outcomes—including AP/Honors/Gifted enrollment, special education, behavior, attendance, and other outcomes, can improve student outcomes (Fergus, 2017; Hernández et al., 2022). The data gathered through this process can be used to develop short- and long-term plans for sustainability and systemic equity change.

Educators must also intentionally create a professional climate that engages with and sustains conversations about race and racism, disability and ableism, culture, and equity when leveraging IDEA. This requires that school communities and educators commit to introducing and utilizing norms, agreements, and protocols that address racism and ableism to sustain meaningful engagement around these topics in the classroom and beyond (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2019; Carter et al., 2017; Singleton, 2015).

In addition, experiential data should supplement disaggregated analyses, so that, the culture and context of a school system can be incorporated into programmatic changes and decisions. Student surveys, community listening sessions (Barrio, 2017), focus groups, and empathy interviews (Roulston, 2021) that center the voices of those most impacted by systemic racism, ableism, and other inequities should be employed (Knips et al., 2022; Safir & Dugan, 2021). This experiential data can inform the creation of a task force that includes community members (i.e.,

teachers, administrators, family members, and students) empowered to develop ideas and implement policies that can shift disproportionality outcomes (see Barrio, 2017). In this sense, the personal and the systemic merge to create data-informed and responsive structures of teaching and learning that promote equity. Table 3 provides a series of goals, strategies, and a non-exhaustive list of recommended resources that promote self-study from the personal to the systems level.

Discussion

According to the Accelerating Systemic Change Network (2021), systemic change is achieved when “all or most parts of a system” are impacted through a set of interconnected elements and interactions that lead to equitable and accessible educational outcomes. Our recommendations draw upon a pathway for transformation that involves active reflection, multi-level participant and community commitment to change, strategies for identifying the parts of an educational system that can be shifted to promote equity, and purposeful action planning that engages the personal and systemic levels. This multi-faceted approach is necessary to move beyond individualized remedies and technical compliance and toward equity.

Table 3. Engage in Systemic Change Models that Include Self-Study From the Personal to the Systems Level.

Goal 1: Create, or leverage existing, equity focused and culturally responsive school and/or district problem-solving teams to address disproportionality

- Identify beliefs, policies, procedures, and practices contributing to and sustaining disproportionality both within and outside of student support/special education systems and practices
- Assess current school- and district-level teams' capacity to engage in equity-centered data review and root causes analysis where attention is paid to culture and cultural differences, race and racial dynamics, as well as bias and stereotypes
- Build a multidisciplinary team, representative of the educational community that includes family representation, to engage in ongoing data review and root cause analysis to identify and address disparities in outcomes and experiences related to racial disproportionality in the classroom and beyond
- Establish norms and protocols to support and sustain dialogue about equity, justice, racism, ableism, culture, and identity
- Assess and build data infrastructure and capacity to utilize data for equity
 - Review software systems, assessments, and data infrastructure to gauge their capacity to inform disaggregated analyses
 - Build staff capacity to utilize disaggregated data to identify and address disparities in student outcomes.
 - Build staff capacity to collect and utilize a variety of non-quantitative data sources to inform problem-solving protocols (e.g., empathy interviews, focus groups, listening sessions)

Recommended resources

- Bal, A. (2018). Culturally responsive positive behavioral interventions and supports: A process-oriented framework for systemic transformation. *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, 40(2), 144–174
- Bal, A., Thorius, K. K., & Kozleski, E. (2012). Culturally responsive positive behavioral support matters. *Equity Matters: In Learning, for Life*. http://dm.education.wisc.edu/abal/intellcont/CRPBIS%20Brief_Bal%20et%20a1_2012-1.pdf; NIRN. (2018). Stakeholder Engagement Guide
- Fergus, E. (2017). *Solving disproportionality and achieving equity: A leader's guide to using data to change hearts and Minds*. Corwin Press
- Hernández, M., Lopez, D., Swier, R., (2022). *Dismantling disproportionality: A culturally responsive and sustaining approach*. Teachers College Press
- Lopez, D., Nabors, A., & Jacobs, J. (2023). *Using quantitative data to identify and address inequities*. https://www.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/SER-Using-Quantitative-Data-to-Identify-Inequities_FINAL_ADA.pdf
- McIntosh, K., Barnes, A., Eliason, B., & Morris, K. (2014). *Using discipline data within SWPBIS to identify and address disproportionality: A guide for school teams*. OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports. www.pbis.org
- Morales-James, C., & Stemberge, A. (n.d.). (rep.). *Addressing disproportionality through the creation of culturally responsive problem-solving teams*. New York University Technical Assistance Center on Disproportionality at the Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools
- NIRN: https://nirn.fpg.unc.edu/sites/nirn.fpg.unc.edu/files/imce/documents/Stakeholder%20Engagement%20Guide_10.12.18_0.pdf
- Safir, S., & Dugan, J. (2021). *Street data: A next-generation model for equity, pedagogy, and school transformation*. Corwin and Learning Forward

(continued)

Table 3. (continued)**Goal 2: Take a systems approach to root cause analysis and action planning**

- Utilize root cause analysis and action planning that includes compliance with special education legislation, while also considering the enabling conditions and essential supports needed to address disproportionality
- Review beliefs, policies, procedures, and practices related to behavioral systems, student placement/scheduling (e.g., LRE, Gifted/AP/Honors, etc.), and or classification processes for equity
 - Document review of discipline policies and practices
 - Document review of academic and behavioral interventions and referral patterns
 - Document review of instructional and assessment tools
 - Document review of family and community engagement protocols
- Collaboratively name and discuss your school's discipline processes, which identifying gaps in policy implementation and vulnerable decision points that contribute to disproportionalities
 - Conduct an intervention inventory (behavioral, academic, etc.) to assess for gaps, inconsistencies, and cultural responsiveness
- Create comprehensive action plans that address root causes of educational inequities that include critical examination of both "special" and "general" education spaces
- Write SMART goals that include core components of educational equity
 - *Speak precisely about educational equity:* Names the students, families, and community group members that are negatively impacted (e.g., race, ability, gender, etc.)
 - *Numerically frame equity:* Includes specific and measurable shifts in inputs (resources, staffing, etc.) and outcomes (academic, behavioral, etc.)
 - *Humanize the framing of equity:* Include, where relevant, a focus on the social and emotional experiences of students and families
 - *Utilize a social justice framing of equity:* Where relevant, names the practices to be changed that hinder equitable access and opportunity (e.g., removing use of suspension, ceasing use of teacher recommendations for access to AP/Gifted, etc.)
 - *Engage with a culture and belief environmental assessment of equity:* Where relevant, acknowledge and address bias-based beliefs and take an asset based, culturally responsive approach to equity shifts

Recommended resources

- Bryk, A. S. (2010). *Organizing schools for improvement: Lessons from Chicago*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Fergus, E. (2017). *Solving disproportionality and achieving equity: A leader's guide to using data to change hearts and Minds*. Corwin Press
- Hernández, M., Lopez, D., Swier, R., (2022). *Dismantling disproportionality: A culturally responsive and sustaining approach*. Teachers College Press
- Khalifa, M. A. (2018). *Culturally responsive school leadership*. Harvard Education Press.
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- Neri, R. C., Lozano, M., & Gomez, L. M. (2019). (Re)framing resistance to culturally relevant education as a multilevel learning problem. *Review of Research in Education, 43(1)*
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- Swier, R., Hernández, M.G. & Lopez, D. (2021). *Culturally Responsive Sustaining Education Assessment Tool*. Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools, New York University
- Voulgarides, C. K., Zwerger, N., & Noguera, P. (2013). *Identifying the root causes of disproportionality*. Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools. https://education.hunter.cuny.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Voulgarides-Zwerger-and-Noguera-Identifying_the_Root_Causes_of_Disproportionality.pdf

Goal 3: Conduct a comprehensive assessment of culturally responsive practices that includes all components of the educational system that contribute to inequities within schools

- Consider how multiple factors at the classroom, school, and district level interact, how they are or are not culturally responsive and sustaining, and how they might contribute to ongoing inequities
 - Examine student-centered supports and services
 - Examine classroom-, school-, and district-level expectations for students and access to rigorous instruction
 - Examine available professional development opportunities along with ongoing learning and supports for school and district staff
 - Examine the scope and nature of family and community connections
 - Examine training opportunities and supports for district and school leadership
- Develop classroom and school improvement plans that identify essential supports, informed by school improvement research, that support equity outcomes through the implementation of culturally responsive and sustaining systems across:
 - School and district leadership structures
 - Professional learning opportunities
 - Instructional guidance systems
 - Student-centered learning climates
 - Family and community connections

Recommended resources

- Bryk, A. S. (2010). *Organizing schools for improvement: Lessons from Chicago*. The University of Chicago Press
- Hernández, M.G. & Lopez, D. (2021). *Culturally Responsive Sustaining Education Assessment Tool*. Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools, New York University
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Note

1. The inequity is typically measured by a risk ratio that compares the risk of a racial and/or ethnic group for a particular outcome as compared with the risk for that outcome of another group (Westat, 2005). For instance, using a standardized risk ratio for comparison, the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS, 2016) found that in Louisiana (LA) 22 of the 144 LEAs in the state had risk ratios exceeding the national average for Black students identified as a student with a specific learning disability from 2011 to 2014, accounting for 15.28% of LEAs in LA.

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