



RACIAL DISPROPORTIONALITY IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

Racial disproportionality in special education refers to the identification and/or disciplining of students from any racial/ethnic subgroup at significantly higher rates than their peers (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Key myths exist regarding disproportionality, including:

- Legal and policy guidelines in the United States ensure adequate educational opportunities for students with disabilities.
- Poverty explains racial disproportionality in special education.
- Students of color, particularly, African American students, are under-represented in special education.

What do we know about racial disproportionality in special education?

- Students of color are overrepresented in special education¹²³⁴
- Although important legal and policy advances have been made, differential educational opportunities (e.g., access to high quality teachers) and outcomes e.g., academic achievement) for students with disabilities occur based on race, income, language, gender, and disability categories⁵⁶⁷⁸

¹ Artiles, A. J. (2019). Fourteenth annual *Brown* lecture in education research. Reenvisioning equity research: Disability identification disparities as a case in point. *Educational Researcher*, 48(6), 325-335.

² Cavendish, W., Artiles, A. J., & Harry, B. (2015). Tracking inequality 60 years after *Brown*: Does policy legitimize the racialization of disability. *Multiple Voices for Ethnically Exceptional Learners*, 14(2), 1-11.

³ Donovan, M. S., & Cross, C. T. (Eds.). (2002). *Minority students in special education and gifted education*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.

⁴ Tefera, A. A., & Voulgarides, C. (2016). Is educational policy alleviating or perpetuating the racialization of disabilities? *Teachers College Record*, 118(14), 1-24.

⁵ Artiles, A. J., (2011). Toward an interdisciplinary understanding of educational equity and difference: The case of the racialization of ability. *Educational Researcher*, 40(4), 431-445.

⁶ Fierros, E. G., & Conroy, J. (2002). Double jeopardy: An exploration of restrictiveness and race in special education. In D. J. Losen & G. Orfield (Eds.), *Racial inequity in special education* (pp. 39-70). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

⁷ Losen & G. Orfield (Eds.), *Racial inequity in special education* (pp. 15-35). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press. Parrish, T. (2002). Racial disparities in the identification, funding, and provision of special education. In D. J. Losen & G. Orfield (Eds.), *Racial inequity in special education* (pp. 15-35). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

⁸ Sullivan, A. L., & Bal, A. (2013). Disproportionality in special education: Effects of individual and school variables on disability risk. *Exceptional Children*, 79, 475-494.



- There is not one factor that explains racial disproportionality. Instead, racial disproportionality varies by state, district, geography, grade level, and disability category⁹¹⁰¹¹¹²
- Racial disproportionality is a complex phenomenon that should not be simplified as either under- or over-representation for any racial/ethnic or linguistic population¹³. For example, examining within-group differences of emergent bilinguals¹⁴ (e.g., proficiency in native language, language support program, access to literacy in native language, grade levels) create more nuanced understandings of disproportionality.

KEY TAKEAWAY: Racial disproportionality is a complex (special) education equity challenge that requires a multidimensional approach that looks beyond isolated student traits such as race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.

⁹ Artiles, A. J., Rueda, R., Salazar, J. J., & Higareda, I. (2005). Within-group diversity in minority disproportionate representation: English language learners in urban school districts. *Exceptional Children, 71*(3), 283-300.

¹⁰ Parrish, T. (2002). Racial disparities in the identification, funding, and provision of special education. In D. J. Losen & G. Orfield (Eds.), *Racial inequity in special education* (pp. 15-37). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Civil Rights Project.

¹¹ Skiba, R. J., Simmons, A. B., Ritter, S., Gibbs, A. C., Karega Rausch, M. & Cuadrado, J. (2008). Achieving equality in special education: History, status, and current challenges. *Exceptional Children, 74*(264-288).

¹² Sullivan, A. L., & Bal, A. (2013). Disproportionality in special education: Effects of individual and school variables on disability risk. *Exceptional Children, 79*, 475-494.

¹³ Skiba, R., Artiles, A. J., Kozleski, E. B., Losen, D. J., & Harry, E. G. (2015). Risks and consequences of oversimplifying educational inequities: A response to Morgan et al. (2015). *Educational Researcher, 45*(3), 221-225.

¹⁴ Artiles, A. J., Rueda, R., Salazar, J. J., & Higareda, I. (2005). Within-group diversity in minority disproportionate representation: English language learners in urban school districts. *Exceptional Children, 71*(3), 283-300.