13
Addressing Disproportionality with Response to Intervention

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Fifty years ago, the United States' educational system began a transformation to accommodate the large increase in background diversity resulting from the Brown v. Board of Education (1954) decision. Large-scale studies, like the Moynihan (1965) and Coleman (1966) reports, were conducted to better assess and evaluate the health of this transformation both inside and outside school systems, and programs such as Head Start and Upward Bound were created to increase the probability of success for people of color. Efforts were noble, but results were found to be less than ideal because poor students, ethnic minorities, and/or non-native speakers of English were found to be more likely to be placed in special education programs than their white peers (Dunn, 1968). This trend of disproportionate representation of minorities in special education has continued for the next 40 years (Chinn and Hughes, 1987; Heller, Holtzman, and Messick, 1982; Hosp and Reschly, 2004; MacMillan and Reschly, 1998; Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Simmons, Feggins-Assiz, and Chung, 2006).

Disproportionality in special education is concerning because of the effects of labeling, segregation, and low exit rates from special education services. Consistent with the classic research on the power of labels (Rosenthal and Jacobsen, 1968), students identified as having behavior problems are perceived and addressed in a more negative manner by teachers regardless of whether or not there is a difference in behavior compared with their peers (Mehan, Hertweck, and Miehls, 1986). They may suffer from a diminished self-concept (Campbell-Whatley and Comer, 2000), and poor postsecondary outcomes (Malmgren, Edgar, and Neel, 1998). Despite the least restrictive environment provisions of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004, 2006), students of color receiving special education services are more likely to be taught in segregated environments than Caucasian students (Donovan and Cross, 2002; Hosp and Reschly, 2002). These realities have pushed educators to examine the disproportionate representation of minorities in special education more closely.

Research examining disproportionality has generally been conducted at the district level, or occasionally the state level (i.e., comparing identification rates among districts or states). Although this is important work to establish the presence or severity of a problem, it has not been fruitful at identifying *solutions* to the problem (Chinn and Hughes, 1987). One reason for this could be that this research has focused on placement rates rather than reasons for identification for special education services or the outcomes from their provision. Some scholars have examined methods of predicting disproportionality (cf., Finn, 1982; Oswald, Coutinho, Best, and Singh, 1999), but these have not yielded educationally relevant solutions perhaps because most of the identified predictors are inalterable variables (Hosp and Reschly, 2004). While this research is important from a civil rights perspective, it has failed to yield solutions to inequitable education outcomes among different groups of students.

In recent years, some have called for studies that extend the literature to the individual level (i.e., looking at what variables specific to individual students might predict disproportionality) so that more sensitive analyses can be conducted regarding the

reasons for identification of special education eligibility and to compare educational outcomes for minority groups. These foci align well with the purposes and procedures of response to intervention (RTI; Gresham, 2002), as defined in recent federal special education regulations. The remainder of this chapter will present some principles and methods of monitoring disproportionality of minority students in remedial and special education. Because RTI aims to improve educational outcomes for all students, it is important to be able to identify those outcomes for all students, as well as to compare them for traditionally marginalized groups of students.

13.1 Examining Disproportionate Representation at the Individual Level

Monitoring disproportionality at the individual level within a school or district should focus on three general principles:

1. Reliable, valid data are collected and used to make educationally relevant decisions.
2. The focus of instruction and assessment is on socially valid or important outcomes.
3. Effectiveness of intervention is demonstrated through improved performance on important outcomes.

When these three principles are met it can be inferred that each individual's needs are being met, no matter what race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, native language, or any other factor that can be used to "differentiate" a student from their peers.

Even in schools or districts that have histories of disproportionate identification rates, if focusing on each student's education decisions and outcomes shows that every individual's needs are being met, then it can generally be assumed that those needs are also being sufficiently addressed at the group level. In addition to this general principle, there are several specifics to keep in mind that can help ensure that each student's educational needs are being met, and, therefore, disproportionality is more a result of need than a lack of fairness in provision of services.

13.1.1 Do Not Assume That Culture Equals Race/Ethnicity (or Any Other Student Characteristic)

The expression of culture varies across communities, families, and individuals. It is no secret that variability is higher within groups than between. What may be true of one family's approach to education may not be true of another's, even within the same cultural community. It is important to note that many ethnic minorities struggle to resolve as many disconnects as possible between their home life/culture and the demands/expectations of schooling (Boykin, 1994; Ogbu, 2004; Phelan, 1998). Their academic success is dependent upon their ability to navigate efficiently between the contexts of home and school. Given differences in personality, family histories, and resources, we can imagine an endless list of approaches and strategies to education among the "typical" African American, Asian, Latino and/or American Indian communities, not including the countless variations in applying the approaches within each family of the respective communities.

Unsure about their own ability to contribute effectively, many ethnic families may see the school system as a necessary extension of their own family and place their trust entirely in the schools (Chavkin and Gonzalez, 1995; Walker, Wilkins, and Dallaire, 2005). This perspective grants teachers license to demand more of the student personally, but also puts them in the position to address psychosocial concerns of identity and relationship development. Other ethnic families may see the school system as entirely separate from the home. The families may view schooling as a nine-to-five job, figuratively clocking in and out and bringing the "office" home as little as possible. The home provides the morals and the discipline, the school provides the knowledge (Chavkin and Gonzalez, 1995). Many ethnic minorities view the school system as the key to success, but vary in the degree to which they trust the school system to ensure or assist in reaching their career aspirations (Graham, Taylor, and Hudley, 1998; Jackson, Kacanski, Rust, and Beck, 2006; Viadero, 2004). Obviously, there are variants and hybrids of each of the previous perspectives, so where does one begin in order to properly understand and apply contextual factors that may explain disproportionality?

13.1.2 Find Out the Individual's Wants, Needs, and Preferences

One of the most important steps to ensure meeting a student's needs is, of course, to identify what those needs are. As far as educational needs (i.e., which skills have not yet been mastered that the student is expected to master), these should be identified through assessment, evaluation, and the problem-solving process. Student wants and preferences are not always as easy to determine. Preferences can often be determined by watching what a student selects when given the choice, e.g.: Does the student prefer small-group work, whole-class work, or individual assignments? Does the student prefer reading about animals, cars, or a different topic? (Cooper, 2001; Morgan, 2006). If the student is able to state his preferences, asking about them is also an easy and direct method. A student's wants are often the most difficult to determine, since they can often vary among settings or occasions (i.e., Does the student want more take-home projects? Does the student want someone at home to talk to about school?) (Cooper, 2001; Livingston and Nahimana, 2006).

13.1.3 Include Parents in Decision-Making

Parent involvement historically has been low among racial/ethnic minorities. It is imperative that this historical precedent does not reduce efforts to include all stakeholders in the process. Parent involvement to some degree is an indicator of the climate and mirrors the outreach of the school. Often, low parent involvement is not a result of a lack of interest or caring, but rather is impeded by economic factors (e.g., the need for a parent to work multiple jobs), social factors (e.g., the parent not speaking English and/or no one in the school speaking the parent's native language well enough to communicate effectively), or knowledge factors (e.g., the parent may not be familiar with educational jargon or expectations, school personnel may not be familiar with the parents' expectations; Casas, Furlong, Solberg, and Carranza, 1990).

While working to include the parents in decision-making, it is also important to include the student. Students know their wants, needs, and preferences better than anyone. Considering possible problems with trust, motivation, and an academic attitude, a participative process that increases the probability of student buy-in by default improves the capacity of any potential intervention.

In addition to including the parents and student in the process of decision-making, it is useful to have someone else involved who is familiar with the student and their family, especially if the student and their parents are not able to participate. If the student is having difficulty with schooling, then there is a possibility that one of the parents may have had similar school problems. What this creates is a potential dynamic in which both the parent and the student are uncomfortable, anxious, and possibly intimidated by the school system. A significant step toward reducing this discomfort and ensuring cooperation and follow-through occurs when the family has an ally within the school system (Trotman, 2001). This person should not be a neighbor or relative, but rather a school staff or faculty member who has taken the time to get to know the family and student and that the student and family can trust (Salas et al., 2005; Trotman, 2001). This would function to increase parental involvement for two reasons: (1) the parent will feel more connected to the school and (2) teacher–parent discourse can occur without concerns of negative stereotypes and low expectation (Chavkin and Gonzalez, 1995; Trotman, 2001). Some schools have community liaisons whose role it is to do exactly this. If a school does not have such a position, then often the school psychologist, counselor, social worker, or classroom teacher will perform this function.

The school-based family ally can function merely as an interpreter of spoken word or of tradition and cultural expectations. This would ensure that someone on the team is familiar with language and cultural issues that may affect the student and their family. Regardless, the presence of an ally facilitates communication and may allow for a better fit between student and the instructional intervention.

13.1.4 Enhance Cultural Sensitivity in Instruction

Researchers have argued that minority students are sometimes placed into special education to make it easier for teachers to deal with culturally diverse populations (Gravois and Rosenfield, 2006). In these instances, the teachers do not have to adjust as much to the culturally diverse students who do

not fit their pedagogical philosophy or delivery. Artiles and McClafferty (1998) argued that a resistance to the training necessary to pedagogically evolve to diverse populations is a key factor in referral and placement rates. This resistance should not necessarily be seen as a manifestation of some inherent bias or discomfort with culturally diverse students when the opposite may very well be the case. Many teachers believe that adjusting to students of diverse backgrounds will be acknowledging differences and not adopting a color-blind approach which opens the door to prejudices and discrimination by others (Keyes, Burns, and Kusimo, 2006). Their natural response in being fair to all students is to treat everyone the same. A problem with this approach is that, for various reasons outside of a teacher's control, students are not the same.

There should be little debate that not all students are equally proficient in English. If a student is communicating in their second (or third, or fourth) language, then it is possible that critical ideas will get lost in translation. This will make it more difficult to follow directions or understand and perform tasks in the classroom—things that are crucial to learning the material being presented. While bilingual programs can offer this in several different ways to meet students' language needs, it can also be accomplished along with content instruction in English. If at least part of the instruction or directions are presented in the student's native language (or one she is more familiar with than English), then when the student begins to convert her ideas it increases the odds that no idea would get left behind and, therefore, that she would have a better chance of learning the material. Moreover, students may also bring different background knowledge and experiences to school. One way to address this is to again explore the student's preferences and interests. Of course, this is the kind of thing that is important to do with *every* child, since it is likely to enhance their interest and motivation and it helps them to make important connections among their knowledge bases.

13.1.5 Enhance Cultural Sensitivity in Assessment

Previous chapters in this volume go into greater detail on issues of assessment within RTI (Barnett et al., Chapter 8; Christ and Hintze, Chapter 7; Kavale and Flanagan, Chapter 10; Olson, Daly, Andersen, Turner, and LeClair, Chapter 9); however, in relation to disproportionality, there are a few key principles to remember. First, it is important to ensure that the assessment method is aligned with the purpose for which data are collected. This means that the data being collected should be the most relevant to the decision being made. Related to this is having a clear understanding of the decision and why that decision is needed. It also means ensuring that the student understands the assessment task and its parameters (e.g., that it is timed and she only has 3 minutes to do as much work as possible).

When using norm-referenced tests (NRTs), it is important to make sure there is adequate representation of students similar to the one you are working with in the norm group. For example, if the student is American Indian, it is important to check the technical manual that there were enough American Indians to make a reliable comparison or that studies were conducted to demonstrate similar predictive power and discriminant (i.e., discriminating mastery/nonmastery of a skill) ability for American Indian students compared with other racial/ethnic groups. If the norm group only included 80 American Indians of ages ranging from 5 to 75 and only one of those was in the same grade as the student you are working with, then the test may not be appropriate for making decisions about that student's performance.

Just as with NRTs, there are issues to be aware of with criterion-referenced tests (CRTs). First, make sure that the tasks performed for the assessment are similar to those expected of or taught to the students. If a student is taught to summarize paragraphs as a demonstration of her reading comprehension, but then is asked to answer factual questions for the assessment of her reading comprehension, she is not likely to accurately demonstrate her reading comprehension skills (Dochy, Moerkerke, and Martens, 1996; Snyder, Caccamise, and Wise, 2006). Thus, her poor performance may be an indication of the testing conditions rather than skill performance, and the decision made about this performance could be inaccurate. One instance when it might be appropriate to use a different task for assessment than instruction is when trying to determine how well a student can generalize a skill to a different task; then, it is important to select a different task.

Tasks used in the CRTs should also be predictive of future success on important outcomes. Many times performance on a CRT *is* the actual outcome that is being used (the same is true for NRTs). However, even outcome measures should be compared with others that purport to measure the same content and should be compared with other outcomes that are important (e.g., Does earning a mastery score on this test predict high-school graduation?).

13.2 Examining Disproportionate Representation at the School/ District Level

Disproportionality of identification for special education services for an entire school or district is generally identified through statistical methods. This can happen because groups of students are being compared; however, when there are only a few students of any one group in the school or district, statistical analyses become unreliable and perhaps unusable. The most common method of statistical analysis of disproportionate representation is to compare proportionality between or among groups.

13.2.1 Comparing Proportionality

Two indices and two ratios are the most common methods used to compare disproportionality. These are the composition index, the risk index, the odds ratio, and relative risk. Each has pros and cons. For a more thorough discussion of each, as well as a comparison, see MacMillan and Reschly (1998) and Hosp and Reschly (2003).

13.2.1.1 Composition Index

The composition index is calculated by finding the percentage of students in a certain special education category that are from a specific group. For example, if there are 50 students identified as having a learning disability (LD) in a district (the category) and 20 of these students are African American, then the composition index for African American students in that district is 40%. If African American students make up 20% of the population of that district, then it looks like there is overrepresentation of African American students in the category of LD. However, a problem with the composition index is that this kind of comparison is not reliable and has a tendency to overstate the issue (MacMillan and Rechly, 1998). Thus, composition index is rarely used in isolation.

13.2.1.2 Risk Index

The risk index is calculated by finding the percentage of a group placed into a certain category. For example, if in our example district 20 of the 1000 African American students are identified as having LD, then the risk index for African American students is 2% (i.e., 20/1000). Use of the risk index provides an easier comparison of proportionality, since a risk index can be calculated for each racial/ethnic group and this can be compared; however, solely using the risk index does not make this comparison explicit (i.e., it is not turned into a single statistic).

13.2.1.3 Odds Ratio

The odds ratio was the first statistic used that incorporated the comparison of groups into it. An odds ratio compares the odds of placement of one group to the odds of placement of all others. The odds of placement for a group equal the number of students identified for a category divided by the number of students not identified for that category. For example, the odds of African American students identified as LD would be 20 divided by 980, or 0.020. As is probably apparent, the "odds" is not an easy statistic to interpret by itself. Where the ratio comes in is when African American students (odds = 0.020) is divided by all other students (e.g., odds = 0.015). Using this ratio, the odds ratio for African American students in the category of LD is 1.33, meaning African American students are 1.33 times more likely to be identified as having an LD than their non-African American peers.

13.2.1.4 Relative Risk

Because of the difficulty interpreting the odds (and its accompanying ratio), and the benefit of comparing the risk index of two groups, some researchers have advocated using a ratio of rates called relative risk. Relative risk divides the risk index of one group by the risk index of another. Since the risk index is the rate of identification for a group, it is

easy to interpret; therefore, the accompanying ratio (the relative risk) is also easier to interpret. It does not come without some controversy though.

13.2.1.5 Difference of Denominators

Some researchers have tried to overcome the problems of the odds ratio by changing denominators. Interestingly, this is also the difficulty some people have had with relative risk. Two different approaches are to compare the group of interest with (1) another group or (2) all other students.

When comparing with another group, white students are often used as the standard. The reasoning for this is that white students are the majority nationally and are generally the standard that others are compared with. This may not be true in a specific school or district, and it also assumes that the representation rate of the white students is "correct" or ideal. Again, this may not be true.

The alternative is to compare the group of interest with all other students (as the odds ratio does). While this could eliminate the need for a correct or ideal comparison group, it raises the problem of when there are two or more groups with disproportionate representation. For example, a school might have a population that is 1/3 African American, 1/3 Latino, and 1/3 White. The risk index for each group is 3% for African American and Latino, but 1% for White. If the white students are used as the denominator (i.e., the comparison group), then the relative risk for each other group is 3.0, or a rate that is three times that for white students. If all other students are used as the denominator, then the relative risk becomes 1.5 for each group—half what it would be using a different denominator. This is said to mask disproportionality, because a very different decision could be made about a relative risk of 1.5 than 3.0.

13.2.1.6 Multiple Gating Procedures

To offset the limitations of different disproportionality indices, some have used a multiple gating procedure (e.g., Reschly, Hosp, and Fox, 2003). Multiple gating procedures use one statistic first, followed by use of another (and sometimes a third) in order to find out whether a school or district has a "true" disproportionate representation. The rationale for this approach is that if representation looks disproportionate despite the statistic being used, it is probably the most severe and a "true" disproportionality.

Many of these issues are not just statistical arguments though. There are pedagogical issues that arise, such as the value of special education and the appropriate provision of services. Coutinho and Oswald (2000) argue that the primary problem is not necessarily which index is used, but the failure to properly reference the chosen index and outline its impact on subsequent interpretations.

13.2.2 Comparing Group Outcomes

Another comparison that could be made between or among groups is to compare the outcomes between them. This is occasionally known as the achievement gap, since these comparisons often yield a gap between groups. The first step in comparing outcomes is to select the outcomes that are important to measure and determine how they will be measured. Because group performance on state CRTs is now used across all states and districts for Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) reporting for No Child Left Behind (NCLB; 2002), this is an outcome that is likely to be important to administrators at the school, district, and state level. Generally, it can be used in multiple grades and multiple content areas (but not all grades or content areas). Any other measure can be used as long as the scores can be converted to a metric that is useful for comparison.

Once outcomes and measurement thereof are identified, how to compare them needs to be determined. The benefit of CRTs is that they can be divided into performance categories, or even a proficient/nonproficient decision. This allows easy calculation of the percentage of each group achieving proficiency. This is simple to calculate, simple to display, simple to interpret, and can be used to show changes over time. It also lends itself to statistical analysis, such as using the chi square statistic, because it is easily placed into a 2×2 grid. Chi square is a reasonable statistic to use because it does not require large groups and can be calculated readily using common spreadsheet software. One problem with the chi square statistic is that it is affected by the size of the total population being compared. Large populations are more likely to show statistical difference than small ones. Conversely, in

small populations each individual is given a greater "weight." This means that the change of one student from proficient to nonproficient in a small population might change the chi square decision (i.e., is the difference significant or not), whereas with a large population it might take a change of 5, 10, or even 50 individuals. This is a somewhat paradoxical effect, but illustrates why it is important to look at disproportionate representation in various ways.

13.3 Developing a System for Monitoring Disproportionality

In any school or district, it is important to have a clear plan for monitoring disproportionality. Consistent with most RTI approaches, this requires a system-wide plan that covers individuals, classrooms, schools, and possibly an entire district. The more that the same data can be used for multiple purposes, or to make decisions at multiple levels, the more efficient the system will be.

When making decisions at the school or district level, it is important to examine the patterns over time rather than at a single point in time. Significant fluctuation in representation or performance rates can occur from year to year. If only looking at a single point in time, then a very different conclusion could be reached than if multiple years' worth of data are used. Consistent patterns of disproportionality are stronger evidence of systematic unfairness than a single year's worth.

While also comparing data across years, it is important to look across comparisons. Monitoring proportionality in representation rates is an important component, but it should not be considered in isolation. Adding a comparison of outcomes provides a sort of cross-check that representation is not due to unfairness, but rather a differential need for services. For example, finding that African American students in a specific district are identified as having LD at three times the rate of their peers for several years in a row is a shocking finding. By looking at these data only, a reasonable conclusion is that there is an overrepresentation of African American students in the category of LD and that it might be caused by some systematic unfairness. However, if we couple those data with the fact that African American students in this district also are half as likely to reach proficiency on the state CRTs, then we might not be as alarmed, because there *appears* to be a greater educational need of the African American students. What this also gives is an indication for solutions (i.e., the need to focus academic interventions to improving the performance of the African American students).

Although there may appear to be a greater need for African American students, we are not in a position to infer causality between disproportionality and achievement. Lower achievement might "cause" overrepresentation just as much as overrepresentation might cause low achievement. More likely is the explanation that there are other factors involved and they require more detailed analyses. While disproportionality (in placement or outcomes) at school/district level can *suggest* a problem, this decision must be confirmed/disconfirmed by using individual level data. School- or district-level data cannot identify what the decision-making process looks like for each individual and, therefore, how "accurate" those decisions turned out to be. Decisions about disproportionality are subject to following the convergence of evidence as much as instructional decisions made for individual students.

A promising approach to accomplishing this at a systemic and individual level is the tiered system of instructional delivery coupled with a problem-solving approach that is generally associated with RTI (Ikeda et al., Chapter 19). With effective instruction provided to all students, the proportion of students needing additional help (which could include special education) is reduced and the related problems of disproportionality are also reduced. Below is the description of a district that used this approach to address disproportionality while being monitored by the Office of Civil Rights.

13.4 An Example of Response to Intervention Being Used to Address Disproportionate Representation

The disproportionate representation of minorities in special education was addressed in one Mid-Western school district with a problem-solving model. As described by Marston, Muyskens, Lau,

and Canter (2003), decisions were made based on a continuous teach–test–teach–test model.

There were four steps included in the model:

1. Specifically describe the student's problem.
2. Generate and implement strategies for instructional intervention.
3. Monitor student progress and evaluate effectiveness of instruction.
4. Continue the cycle as necessary.

First, students were screened to determine current academic levels and inform necessary instructional changes. Those identified as not meeting expectations from the screening were targeted for classroom interventions. The interventions and modifications were implemented and the progress of the student was monitored. In addition, background and cultural data were gathered. If the classroom teacher felt as though interventions were not necessary, then a multidisciplinary team was assembled to review the data and develop stronger, more specific interventions and to continue monitoring progress. Because a team was developing the general education interventions, setting the goals, and monitoring the progress, it reduced the probability of individual bias significantly influencing the referral process. If there was inadequate progress made toward the goals, the team could decide to refer the student for a comprehensive evaluation to determine eligibility for special education services. It is important to note that the instructional interventions created by the multidisciplinary team were still modified and monitored during eligibility determination. This model places greater emphasis on general education teachers to provide classroom interventions to help guide instruction rather than relying solely on the grade-level curriculum.

The Office of Civil Rights concluded that the problem-solving model reduced bias in the referral, evaluation, and eligibility process for students of color. The number of referrals increased from 657 students to 1303. However, the number of students placed in special education increased only slightly, from 327 students to 364. Even though more students were screened using this model, it did not lead to overidentification, similar to the results of a meta-analysis by Hosp and Reschly (2003). For example, the African American population went from a 25% overrepresentation in referrals to special education down to 10% overrepresentation for placement.

13.5 Conclusions

Disproportionate representation of minorities in special education has been a constant and contentious topic for nearly 40 years. RTI provides a promising foundation for addressing disproportionality through its reliance on collecting and using data to make decisions and its focus on outcomes. Through a closer focus on disproportionality data and a careful examination of educational outcomes for all students, we can finally begin to realize the promise of the Brown v. Board of Education decision.

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