

# **Disproportionality in Special Education: The Psychological Toll on Minority Students**

Samantha Gates

School of Education, Thompson Rivers University

Kamloops, BC

## **Author Note**

A capstone project submitted to Thompson Rivers University in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Education. Presented March 28th, 2021

## Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction .....	5
How I Came To Know Disproportionality .....	5
Significance Of Disproportionality .....	7
Presenting The Argument .....	8
Chapter Two: Literature Review .....	10
History of Disproportionality Research .....	10
Comparing Intercultural Competence .....	11
Discouraging Minority Student Effort .....	14
Segregation Becoming Normalized .....	16
Disproportionality as a Self-Fulfilling Prophecy .....	18
Chapter Three: Application .....	21
Disproportionality in the Lower Mainland .....	21
Mitigating Disproportionality's Effects .....	24
Reformed Referral Process .....	27
Better Screening Tool .....	29
Chapter Four: Conclusion .....	31
Summary .....	31

Implications .....	33
Theoretical Implications .....	33
Practical Implications.....	33
References .....	35

### **Abstract**

The over-representation of minorities in special education is a worldwide and long-standing problem, yet comparatively little has been done to remedy it. This problem is referred to as ‘disproportionality’ by researchers of the phenomenon. Throughout my career as an educator and as a student of Education, I have come to realize that my passion lies in two facets: the influence of the educational setting on young students and the bias that is unfortunately at play within those settings. It is hypocritical to teach and condemn inequities of the past without first solving the inequities within present school settings. In this paper, I claim that when minority students become cognizant of disproportionality, it has the potential to cause them psychological harm. Special education carries a stigma and when minority students see members of their cultural group placed in special education at higher rates than others, it creates an environment for cultural dissonance and questioning of their abilities. Raising our future members of society in prejudiced environments teaches students that intelligence and ability is dependant on ethnicity, and this has lasting negative repercussions for minority students. Educators often treat disproportionality as inevitable, but if they were made aware of the potential damage caused to minority students, they most certainly would not take this complacent attitude. By exposing the psychological effects that disproportionality can have on minority students, the issue becomes humanized which, I hope, will help educators understand the urgency of the problem.

**Keywords:** disproportionality; minorities in special education; special education screening tools

## **Chapter One: Introduction**

In the following chapter, I explore how I developed an interest in the topic of disproportionality, the over representation of minorities in special education, as an educator and as a student. I then discuss the personal and professional significance of the topic in my own life as well as the wider significance of the topic in its lifelong effects on minority students. My argument is presented and followed by an explanation of how the remainder of the paper will proceed.

### **How I Came To Know Disproportionality**

My passion for helping vulnerable populations has influenced many of the decisions I have made in my life and it is this passion that has guided me on the journey to coming upon the concept of disproportionality. When I graduated with my bachelor's degree in English I struggled to find satisfactory employment. I eventually began work as a data processor which was a low-paying, and unfulfilling position. My lack of progress in accomplishing my, then, vague dream of finding work in a compassionate field was beginning to consume my thoughts and I felt the need to quit immediately. I began to actively search for jobs, determined to procure fulfilling employment, when I came across the listing for my current job where I work as a tutor for children with learning disabilities. It was during the interview that I realised this is what I was meant to do; not being an educator specifically but helping people who had been failed by traditional systems.

My first few months on the job were tremendously inspiring, however, my reach was limited to only my students. I realised that in order to make a bigger impact I would need to further my education. My financial situation dictated where I could or could not attend school because I had to continue working full time and be available for twelve hours per day. It is

because of the TRU program's flexibility that I was able to more closely approach my goals. I felt as though my needs and the needs of those like me were considered by this program and this inspired me even further in my passion for helping the vulnerable.

Before the program even began, I had carefully scanned the elective options and chosen the courses which would best inform me about helping vulnerable students. At this point, I still did not know what I was hoping to achieve, but I felt that I was making progress toward that ambiguous goal. It was during my first course in my first semester that I came across the issue of disproportionality. I was lucky enough to come across my topic early in the program and as such, I have been able to develop my interest and examine the topic from different angles in different courses.

In the Research Methods course, I completed a literature review on the topic which gave me a solid foundation upon which I could explore the boundaries of the topic. The next significant milestone in my exploration of disproportionality was the Curriculum, Teaching and Learning course in which I designed a preliminary curriculum around this issue which made the change I wanted to see in Special Education more tangible. I began to feel more passionate in my work and I put more attention into my job. As all courses require some level of self-reflection, I was able to realise the effect that this topic was having on my commitment to my students which is part of the reason why I believe all educators should be made aware of it. About half of the courses I completed enabled me to incorporate disproportionality in some way and I am beyond pleased that it has culminated in the ability to share my own perspectives on this issue.

Underlying all of this was my struggle to balance school work and excessive hours at my job to be able to afford tuition. My financial situation throughout the year made the

disproportionality problem personal to me. I realised the immense privilege that it is to be able to attend school at this level and that my struggles pale in comparison to those young students who are struggling before even reaching post-secondary. I had finally clarified my interest: protecting the right of every child to obtain an education in a non-discriminatory environment.

### **Significance of Disproportionality**

This topic is significant to me personally and professionally in that I am passionate about helping students who are failed by the traditional schooling system. This is why I am in the field of special education and why I chose to enter the M.Ed. program in the first place.

Disproportionality puts minorities at an extremely unfair disadvantage in school and has drastic psychological effects that have not been sufficiently considered by research. It is important that I contribute to the fight against the disproportionality problem as I believe it is one of the most damaging violations to the education of minority students. As someone who struggled to afford post-secondary education, I am appalled that others struggle to even make it through their grade school education. Though this issue is most prevalent in the United States, it exists in Canada but one would be hard-pressed to find research on Canadian disproportionality, let alone the psychological effects it has on Canadian students. This is a gap in the literature which must be examined in order to address the unique needs of Canadian students affected by this issue.

The wider significance of exposing the effects of disproportionality on minority students is that this could humanize the problem, causing more educators to take interest in solving it. Historically, the focus of research on this issue has been quantitative in nature and has failed to display the struggles of the students themselves. This is a typical pattern that plagues disproportionality conversations and viewing it as a technical problem is hindering the discovery of a realistic solution. The psychological effects that disproportionality has on students is large

and lasting. These young and malleable students learn that they or their race is lesser than others. On top of struggles in school, these children grow up and enter the workforce, bringing the acceptance of segregation with them. They may be more passive about discrimination in their careers such as accepting lower pay than their majority counterparts or failing to reach for promotions which they deserve. Transforming the disproportionality conversation into one which considers student psychological well-being is the only way to appeal to the empathetic side of educators. If educators were to realise the hardships faced by victims of disproportionality, they certainly would not continue to allow this problem to take place in their schools.

### **Presenting the Argument**

In this paper, I claim that when minority students become cognizant of disproportionality, it has the potential to cause them psychological harm. The first reason for this is that when confronted with negative beliefs about their culture, minority students may begin to question their cultural identity. Students will inevitably compare intercultural competence and when members of their culture struggle academically more than others, it creates an environment for cultural dissonance (Brookie, 2016). The second reason for my claim is that the knowledge of their culture's comparatively worse performance makes it seem as though their own success is unlikely or pre-determined which discourages them from trying. Students begin to realise that "who a student is is more important than how they perform academically" (Voulgarides et al., 2017, p. 62) and they are at risk of losing motivation to strive for success. The third reason for this is that disproportionality treats segregation as a natural consequence of intercultural environments with minorities as lesser than others. Because "prior learning experiences have cognitive consequences in terms of how they view the world" (DeCapua & Marshall, 2015, p. 364), minorities are at risk of applying their experiences with segregation in school to other parts



of their lives. This issue becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy by teaching minority students to assume that they are of lower ability than their peers (Hutchinson 2018). Disproportionality takes a psychological toll on minority students which must be addressed in order to humanize this problem.

### **Outline of the Paper**

This paper proceeds by presenting a literature review which attempts to show how disproportionality affects minorities psychologically as per my argument. I then apply this to a more personal and local context by exploring disproportionality in the Lower Mainland. My ideas for improved special education screening tools will be presented as potential solutions to this issue and my experiences with vulnerable populations are presented as personal evidence as to the damages done to students who face disproportionality. I conclude by presenting a summary as well as the implications of my paper.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

The concept of disproportionality has been a topic of much concern over the last several decades for both research and policy. In this chapter, I examine the history of disproportionality research and how it came to be recognized as a major issue in Education in the United States. I then explore how cultural dissonance in minority students arises from disproportionality, how it demotivates these students, and how the normalization of racial segregation affects them throughout their lives. I also discuss how acceptance of segregation by both teachers and students as well as flawed referral tools make disproportionality a self-fulfilling prophecy.

### **History of Disproportionality Research**

The over representation of minorities in special education is a phenomenon first examined in the late 1960s and has since been a target for research and later for many flawed policies (Cruz et al., 2018). The issue itself has mostly remained stagnant with disproportionality rates seeing little significant improvement, however, the approach and focus of research has shifted. Since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, research has tended to expand its scope to include all ethnicities and all disabilities handled by special education (Cruz et al., 2018). Generally, studies will obtain data on students with and without learning disabilities and analyse it through different variables such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and gender to discover the root cause of disproportionality.

In their 2011 study, Shifrer et al. made a significant discovery about the disproportionality phenomenon. While trying to understand the influence of race, socioeconomic status, and native language on LD diagnoses and whether any patterns that emerge could be explained by race, they determined that when the non-white population in the school increased, the amount of LD placements decreased for all ethnicities. In a similar study, Coutinho et al.

(2002) had also determined that when the non-white population in an area went up, LDs went down for all ethnic groups. The implication of these discoveries is that the ethnic makeup of a school is linked to LD diagnosis and special education placement.

The Cruz et al. study (2018), as a synthesis of 26 studies on disproportionality, provides as close to a consensus of the causes of the issue as possible. All studies used Caucasian and African American as categories and studies consistently found that African American students were overrepresented in intellectual disability placements. Some studies do contest that disproportionality even exists and rather suggest underrepresentation of minorities (Hibel et al., 2010) but most studies have found that race is in fact, a “strong predictor for special education placement” (Cruz et al., 2018, p. 58). The idea that disproportionality does not exist has been countered into illegitimacy by a great many researchers (Blair et al., 2012; Coutinho et al., 2002; Shifrer et al., 2011). It is largely accepted that disproportionality exists and studies are beginning to shift toward examining the effects and searching for solutions.

### **Cultural Dissonance**

Little research has been specifically performed on the effects of comparing intercultural competence as causing cultural dissonance, however there are many studies which address this indirectly. Most studies either focus on displaying the rates of disproportionality in different regions, showing its effects on students and teachers, and exploring methods of reducing cultural dissonance such as through culturally responsive teaching.

Disproportionality in Wisconsin is a popular topic of study for displaying high rates. This state has a particularly negative history with disproportionality with the vast majority of the population being White but with African Americans being 1.26 times more likely to be in special education (Bal et al., 2018). Minorities already tend to stand out in a negative way in populations

where they are severely under-represented and disproportionality is shown to be an additional difference between them and majority students.

This issue is not isolated to a few states; in the United States nationally, minorities comprise 15% of the public education system but 20% of the special education system (Vallas 2009). There is, however, variation in disproportionality rates across states due to differences in demographics, beliefs, and educational practices which means that in one state a particular student may be classified as have a learning disability where in another state they may not (Vallas 2009). There is no available data that I could find on student experiences of transferring between states and seeing how their race is treated differently by schools in different states. There is little available data on Canadian disproportionality and BC seems to be the only province which widely reports on it in a way that is easily accessible to other researchers (Gabel et al., 2009). According to BC Ministry of Education statistics (2020), Aboriginal students made up 12.1% of all students in BC public schools while they made up 22% of all students with disabilities as well as being severely under-represented in the gifted category. They also feel less safe at school, are more frequently bullied, and graduate at lower rates (BC Ministry of Education, 2020). As students start to compare cultural differences in ability, they will be exposed to the idea that being placed in special education is a consequence of being a member of their race (Annamma et al., 2014) as the most visible discernible difference between special education and general education students is their race.

Teacher reaction to students exhibiting feelings of cultural dissonance has also been studied. When confronted with discussions of cultural dissonance with students, they try to avoid the conversation rather than using it as a learning tool (Brookie, 2016). Teacher response to cultural dissonance has been shown to harm students by dismissing their feelings because of

their own fear of critical conversations about race (Brookie 2016). It has been found that they fear being pegged as racist and feel the need to avoid speaking about race altogether (Voulgarides et al. 2017). This response is rooted in their desire to avoid potentially confrontational discussions with students, but it is questioned whether this response is appropriate. When students start to feel ashamed of, disconnected from, or regretful of their cultures it has been shown that treating this conversation as a scandalous topic actually causes students more emotional turmoil (DeCapua & Marshall, 2015). Because about 40% of the student body of the United States is 'ethnic' and about 90% of teachers are White (Vallas 2009), researchers express that it is no wonder they are not well equipped for providing support for cultural dissonance (Hutchinson 2018).

Culturally responsive teaching was developed to reduce cultural dissonance in students arising from inequities in education (DeCapua & Marshall, 2015). There are five tenets involved in this type of teaching, all of which are helpful in reducing cultural dissonance in students as explained by DeCapua and Marshall (2015). A culturally relevant curriculum is important because it allows for positive role models. Also vital is providing a supportive learning environment that understands and celebrates cultural differences, even in terms of differences in behaviours. In order to provide this environment, teachers need to have cultural competence so that they can recognize the differing behaviours and nuances of individual cultures (2015). This also ties into the need to establish cultural congruity in the classroom as different methods of learning will benefit different students. The final tenet is effective teaching which states that content must be presented in accessible ways to all students. While standardized teaching methods may work for some, there are many differing needs in one classroom and culturally

responsive teaching has been shown to help teachers become cognizant of the needs of all students and reduce cultural dissonance (2015).

Because the dominant race controls the narrative, minority students are constantly subjected to the idea that their culture is inferior (Annamma et al. 2014). There are certainly more available statistics telling us that disproportionality exist than there are conversations about it. DeCapua and Marshall (2015) performed among the few studies that directly address cultural dissonance arising from disproportionality and they show that it leaves students feeling vulnerable and confused. Culturally responsive teaching is the only heavily researched practice that is specifically designed to reduce cultural dissonance and its psychological effects on students.

### **Discouraging Minority Student Effort**

While little research exists on cultural dissonance arising from issues of disproportionality, there is much more to be found on minority student effort. Because disproportionality means that “who a student is matters more than how they perform” (Voulgarides et al., 2017, p. 65) this is a more noticeable and sympathetic issue, making it a fruitful area of study. Most studies in this area tend to agree that the referral process is flawed in its focus on stigmatized behaviours, and they discuss the problematic effects on students. There is also a solid body of research on teacher and environmental effects and their role in minority student motivation when confronted with disproportionality.

Under the commonly used refer-test-place model for determining special education needs, teacher opinion and perception is the primary driver for special education and problems are caused due lack of understanding of cultural differences in learning needs and behaviours (Kamphus et al., 2010). Behaviour plays a large part in how teachers perceive their students and

so it plays a large role in the referral process. Behaviour playing such a large role in the referral process causes minority students to be referred at higher rates because how a normal child should behave has become racialized (Ahram et al., 2011). When students realise that they cannot escape these systemic barriers placed before them due to the racialization of the referral process, it has been found that they become easily discouraged and they lose motivation to succeed (Annamma et al., 2014).

Some studies try to display the influence of these flawed referral tools and show how altering the referral process can help preserve minority student effort. When using a self-screening tool for special education and removing the element of teacher bias, Dever et al. (2016) show that many of the students would not be placed in special education if not for flawed screening tools. Disproportionality is essentially eradicated for African Americans with the self-screening process in this study and they show that though teachers see stereotypical behaviours as predictors of risk, students do not. In this study, African Americans were overrepresented in two categories: those at risk who are not receiving services and those receiving services who are not at risk. These results show that they are not having their needs met whether in special education or not which further ties into the idea that the student's race is more important than their academic effort (Voulgarides et al., 2017). Kamphus et al. (2010) also performed a successful screening experiment showing that when different and simplistic screening tools are used that rely less on teacher perception, special education referrals were more accurate. Of the refer-test-place model, these studies focused on modifying the 'refer' stage which is where biases in perception of behaviour can affect minority education quality.

Teachers and the social environment have been shown to play a large role in student motivation. Daniel & Cooc (2018) explain self-determination theory as the idea that all students

are motivated to improve themselves but they need a supportive social environment to do so. These researchers state that teachers need to create autonomous and competence supporting environments for students to succeed. Vallas (2009) furthers this theory stating that low expectations by teachers for students causes them to lose motivation to rise to or above these expectations. In addition to low expectations, other discriminatory acts from teachers are shown to harm student motivation including the higher likelihood of harsh punitive measures based on race or disability (Annamma et al., 2014). The social environment of the school and society also shapes minority students because the promise of future reward from education is thought to be low for them (DeCapua & Marshall, 2015). A combination of pre-existing racial barriers, a lack of role models within their schools, and inferior status from disproportionality causes them to become discouraged quickly (Annamma et al., 2014). It is well-known that being in special education has economic and social repercussions which outlast completion of school and researchers find that this causes them low-self esteem and that their lowered expectations for themselves also lowers their motivation to succeed (Vallas, 2009). There is a lack of research on how to remotivate students who have specifically been demotivated by their experiences with disproportionality.

### **Segregation Becoming Normalized**

As the education system is a microcosm of society dealing with the same social issues, disproportionality in special education is thought to be a reflection of inequities that adult minorities face in society (Cooc & Kiru, 2018). The Cooc & Kiru study (2018) found that most disproportionality results from structural inequalities within society that cross into schools such as poverty, unequal funding, and unequal access to resources. This is further supported by Vallas (2009) who explains that the placement of minority students into special education at high rates



stems from White pushback against desegregation in the 1950s. At the time, White people suggested that Black people cannot perform to the same caliber as them and so they should be separated by ability to allow all students to achieve their highest potential. Vallas further explains that segregation has not been eradicated but simply masked and normalized (2009). Gabel et al. (2009) also touch on this stating that “if education for all and special education have become ubiquitous throughout the world, the global phenomenon of disproportionality questions how much progress has been made in achieving educational equity” (p. 635).

What this acceptance of segregation means for minority students has also been studied. As adolescent minorities begin to enter the workforce and participate in mainstream society, the barriers they faced in school will still be working against them in adulthood (Annamma et al., 2014). When students learn that segregation by intelligence as pre-determined by race is natural, it has been shown that they will be more likely to accept segregation later in life because it has become the norm (Annamma et al., 2014). The acceptance of the racialization of ability and fewer available opportunities in school, are thought to hinder their chances of future success and Annamma et al. suggest that they are likely to be pushed into the adult justice system as they are already twice as likely to end up in the juvenile justice system than their white peers (2014). Many researchers state that disproportionality is just a masked form of segregation (Voulgarides et al., 2017; Vallas, 2009) or that ability or normalcy is racialized (Ahram et al., 2011), but there has been little inquiry into what this means for the future of these students.

Freire’s (2018) work may offer some loose insight into what the future holds for these students. Though he never directly addressed disproportionality in the United States, his insights are highly relatable to this topic, particularly the relationship between the oppressed and the oppressor. The way in which the oppressed- in reference to disproportionality this would be

minority students- view themselves becomes poisoned by the oppressor's views of them. This ties into the idea that their teachers' low expectations of them causes them to accept and perform to these lower standards (Vallas, 2009). They start to believe the narrative that the oppressors have created to keep them in their inferior position which causes them to develop a fatalistic attitude (Freire, 2018). As minorities start to detach from their culture and attach onto the imposed image, the segregation that they face also becomes accepted. Another important teaching of Freire is that the oppressed become self-depreciating, convinced that they are incapable of learning in contrast to majorities. A final teaching is that they become emotionally dependent on the oppressor. Freire uses a conversation with a peasant as his example wherein the peasant releases their frustrations at home because they feel they cannot stand up to mistreatment at work. Freire calls this the "destruction of life" (Freire, 2018, p. 65) because when they accept segregation or oppression, they no longer have a chance at humanizing themselves. Freire's work suggests many of the same ideas about 'the oppressed' as disproportionality researchers do in their studies. His teachings show the life-long effects that oppression has on students and people in general.

### ***Disproportionality as a Self-Fulfilling Prophecy***

Disproportionality rates have been quite steady across the past several years in spite of several attempts at remedying the issue through policy and individual district efforts. Christopoulos and Kean (2018) believe that this lack of progress is because disproportionality is a self-fulfilling prophecy. These researchers explain that general education teachers are highly inaccurate in referring students to special education yet little is being done about it. Hutchinson (2018) suggests that biased tools and teacher misconceptions will keep the cycle of disproportionality going; the more minorities are disproportionately represented in special

education, the more teachers will view them as intellectually deficient and the more easily they will assign them to special education, and so the cycle continues. Hutchinson states that the existing pool of teachers and preservice teachers is not nearly as racially diverse as the student body they will serve and many of them will not have had sufficient exposure to multi-racial environments (2018). He further states that there is little instruction prior to becoming a teacher on cultural capital and how this ties into special education. This lack of preparation of teachers for the task of special education referrals combined with lack of action in correcting these shortcomings is thought to fuel the cycle making disproportionality a self-fulfilling prophecy (Hutchinson 2018; Christopoulos & Kean 2018).

This idea has been explored through the lens of teacher misconceptions as well as minority students' own negative feedback loops. One of few qualitative studies on disproportionality asked teachers for their opinions and they expressed that disproportionality "is what it is" (Shippen et al., 2009, p. 232). Furthermore, teacher perception of academic motivation is contingent upon race (Daniel & Cooc, 2018) meaning that minority placement in special education is essentially pre-determined. All of these factors come together to form a cycle which is enabled by the flawed referral system (Vallas, 2009). Annamma et al. (2014) describe the self-fulfilling prophecy idea through the student lens in the pipeline to prison idea, explaining that minorities are faced with so many barriers that the demotivation they face makes poor performance and outlooks inevitable.

## **Summary**

Though there are gaps in many areas, the literature demonstrates that minorities face psychological harm in various forms due to their experiences with disproportionality. Research in this area is trending toward problem-solving rather than measuring disproportionality as it has

in the past. The psychological effects of disproportionality on minority students include cultural dissonance, loss of motivation, and acceptance of segregation, and the impact may be a life-long threat. The BC Ministry of Education reports little improvement in Indigenous disproportionality since reporting began in the year 2000 (2020) and Vallas (2009) finds little improvement in the United States since 1992. Though disproportionality is thought to be an inevitable phenomenon, new methods for solving this problem, such as pre-screening tools, are considered to be possible solutions, though it is still unknown exactly how these tools should be applied (Dever et al., 2016).

### **Chapter Three: Application**

I consider the disproportionality problem to be a heart wrenching yet completely solvable issue in Special Education with the help of the right tools. This chapter connects disproportionality to my local context and explain some of my professional experiences with it. I also further explore culturally responsive teaching by discussing how I apply the theory to my practice in addition to exploring other methods I use to mitigate harm to minority students. Finally, I explain my own idea for a reformed referral system which makes use of screening tools based on various successful methods from the literature in order to halt disproportionality at the onset.

#### **Disproportionality in the Lower Mainland**

As discussed in the previous chapter, there is limited data available on Canadian disproportionality so studies that try to examine Canadian disproportionality are forced to limit their scope. The lack of available research certainly does not mean that students in the lower mainland or other parts of Canada are not subject to the same psychological damage that disproportionality has been shown to cause. It does mean that finding a solution is problematic because researchers suggest focusing on solving disproportionality locally (Ahram et al., 2011) and there is little information available to do this successfully. Despite this gap in the literature, there are still many reports and statistics which can be used as a starting point for addressing the psychological damage done to minority students in the lower mainland due to disproportionality.

Statistics measured in BC show that there is a huge disproportionality problem regarding representation of Indigenous Peoples (BC Ministry of Education, 2020). In the 2000-2001 school year, they comprised 7.2% of total students yet 13.9% of behavioural or severe learning disabilities. They were also drastically underrepresented in the gifted category at a shocking nine

times less likely to be assigned a gifted designation than White students. Perhaps the most upsetting statistic is that they performed lower in all measured grade ten-twelve courses, including Indigenous Studies. While the BC Ministry of Education clearly puts some effort into improving the performance of Indigenous students by collecting annual statistics and satisfaction reports and by running initiatives like the Tripartite agreement, the data shows no significant improvement since data collection began in 2000. Breaking down cultural inequities is a slow-moving process, but 20 years seems too long a time to have shown so little improvement.

Non-Canadian studies rarely reference Canadian disproportionality which is likely due to the lack of available data as stated by Gabel et al. (2009). Though this study does not go into extensive detail about Canadian disproportionality, it is among the few that actually compare it to disproportionality in other countries. This study was only able to speak of disproportionality in BC, citing a lack of available information from other provinces. They found that BC was similar to other regions which have a history of abuse towards Indigenous Peoples such as Australia and New Zealand in that the ‘West is best’ mindset persists. Another non-Canadian researcher that considers Canadian disproportionality is Brookie (2016) who states that in the context of ESL classrooms, teaching about culture leads to immigrants being viewed as empty vessels required to be filled up by adopting Canadian culture. I was not an ESL tutor long enough to be able to confirm this fully, but I do know that I was expected to spend much of my time teaching culture and norms and I was often asked to pick English names for the ESL students I taught. More non-Canadian studies would be extremely useful in connecting Canadian disproportionality to the global scene so that possible solutions to the issue and its damaging effects in other regions could be explored for Canada as well.

My own experiences with disproportionality have been limited and its effect on the students I teach has been mixed. Many of the Indigenous students I have worked with are happy, ambitious children, seemingly unaffected by the issue. However, there are a few Indigenous student I have worked with that have certainly become aware of inequities in Education and society and this tends to occur in older students. I have watched, seemingly helplessly, as some of the older Indigenous students developed a passionate dislike for school and learning. These few students consistently undermined their own abilities and intelligence by using phrases like “I will never understand this” or “I am just not able to do this”.

The most painful effect of disproportionality to watch them endure is cultural dissonance. When their parents would converse with me about Indigenous celebrations they have at home, family traditions, and so forth, the students refuse to talk about it, often walking away or hiding their faces in their hoodies. I found this unusual at first, especially for the children who are normally extremely talkative when I meet with their parents. One student even told his mother to “shut up” when she started a conversation of this nature in the presence of other kids. This same student rolled his eyes when I asked him to explain a concept his mother was discussing the previous day and refused to talk about it which was very out of character for him. It is heart breaking to see my students display shame or embarrassment of their cultures and their wonderful traditions. This is how the psychological damage caused by awareness of disproportionality, specifically cultural dissonance, appears in practice.

It is concerning that there is so little data and research on Canadian disproportionality especially since our disproportionality affects Indigenous Peoples; a group that has already undergone so much needless trauma. Any initiatives or projects undertaken are simply hypocritical if they are doing little to nothing to help the suffering students. Cooc and Kiru

(2018) state that intergenerational trauma and loss of cultural identity impact the educational opportunities available to current Indigenous students. That historical mistreatment is still hugely impactful today is well-known, which makes the lack of Canadian data quite shocking. If more information regarding disproportionality in the lower mainland were to become available, it would be much easier to effectively help these students overcome any psychological harm that disproportionality has caused them.

### **Mitigating Disproportionality's Effects**

Culturally responsive teaching is an effective method of reducing feelings of cultural dissonance in minority students. Cultural dissonance is, in my opinion, the worst of the psychological effects of disproportionality as it forces minority students to question the fabric of their existence. I personally try to employ parts of this method, though my contract technically forbids any discussion of race. I will demonstrate how I use each of the five tenets of this method in my practice. I try my best to have cultural competence that goes beyond the basics of knowing holidays and beliefs and by studying disproportionality and the psychology of it I think I am better able to understand the Indigenous students' points of view. Integrating culturally relevant curriculum is difficult for me because I mostly focus on literacy skills but I still try to integrate it into the material for older students. For example, one student often goes fishing with her father and enjoys talking about the traditions they share. I often use this as a topic for her writing. It is certainly easy for me to provide a supportive learning environment as I work with students one-on-one. I have become skilled at detecting the optimal learning conditions for each student and discovering the underlying reasons for behavioural problems to be dealt with more effectively. My job inherently makes use of cultural congruity as I must search for the most effective methods of sharing information with students individually, in ways that they can personally



relate to. The final tenet, effective instruction, is also an inherent part of my job and it is much easier for me to provide this service than a general education teacher who has a full classroom to think about. Culturally responsive teaching has proven helpful in getting me to better understand the students I teach and provide more effective educational and psychological support.

Though there is much research on the reduction of minority student effort due to disproportionality, there is little information on how to encourage students to put effort into their learning who have specifically been discouraged from this. Therefore, teachers must draw on their own experiences to determine what would best re-motivate these students. It is a much different task to motivate a child that is struggling in school due to a learning disability than it is to encourage one who is becoming awakened to the harsh realities of unfair treatment of minorities.

Two Indigenous students I teach have been particularly challenging to re-motivate. They are each suspected by their schools to have oppositional defiance disorder but upon comparing their behaviours to my other students who have confirmed or suspected ODD diagnoses, they behave quite differently and their behaviours seem to be outside of the realm of ODD. I am by no means qualified to make this determination but based on my experience with ODD students, I do not think these two students actually have it which makes me think that they may be facing racial bias at school.

These students have required very different approaches to re-motivation. One student responded very well to the introduction of a writing task about Indigenous medicines and he ended up writing two more paragraphs at home when I had only asked for one. This is a student that I struggle to get to write even three sentences for me. I knew the other student would not respond well to this approach because he refuses to talk about anything related to Indigenous

culture, the same student who told his mother to ‘shut up’ when discussing their traditions. Instead of focusing on the cultural dissonance aspect, I focused on simply recovering his motivation to succeed. Knowing his passion for video games, we created a poster together on the topic and displayed it in my office. He seemed proud of his work, which is an emotion I had never seen him express toward anything before. My experiences with these students have taught me that they cannot be placed into another category of ‘demotivated students’ as this would further segregate them from their peers. These students need to be treated as individuals and any help they receive must be personalized.

There is no segregation by race where I work because my workplace is not a traditional classroom and the one-on-one nature of instruction puts everyone on equal ground. I have, however, seen some segregation occurring among students in some courses I have taken. One instance of this occurred when an in-person course required us to pick groups for a project and these groups ended up being entirely divided by race with not a single group containing a member of a differing culture. This contrasts with online courses where the groups have always been a cultural mosaic, in my experience. It appears the online versus off-line presence has an effect on cultural divisiveness. My other experience with this is when a course required that we make groups which contained members from at least two different countries. I suppose this was an effort to stop the cultural divisions that seem to occur in face-to-face classes. As a disclaimer, the cultural divisions were entirely due to the choices of the students and though I am unsure of the best approach, any initiative to get members of different cultures to work together is valuable.

As someone very new to the field of Education and new to the professional world in general, I feel as though I do not know enough to add my input into most conversations in the

field. However, observation of some of my work colleagues with more years of experience, assures me that if I continue trying to learn how to empower the Indigenous students I teach, I can do so successfully without overstepping or acting as a ‘White Saviour’ which is my greatest fear in entering this conversation. Reading DeCapua and Marshall’s (2015) condemnation of teachers who are afraid of critical conversations about race for fear of being thought of as racist, I feel that I must be more open to entering myself into these conversations as not doing so is more harmful to the students. In my practice, I try to take all that I have learned about disproportionality into consideration to provide more knowledgeable help to my students.

### **Reformed Referral System**

The referral system for special education is certainly failing many students and I, like many others, believe it needs drastic reform. Ahram et al. (2011) suggest that there are three points at which disproportionality is caused: learning opportunities before referral, decisions made leading to special education placement, and the quality of the placement. Their study focuses on the first of these stages. I focus on the third in my practice and I will focus on reforming the second stage in the following section. They explore how “children’s opportunities to learn are affected by teachers’ perceptions of their students’ ability... and how perceptions of race/class/culture are superimposed onto ideas about ability and disability” (p. 2238-2239). It is vital to examine solutions to disproportionality at each of these stages because more information can be gained on the crossover of societal bias into Education, however it seems like an unreachable ideal to target the first stage in practice. The second stage is more realistic because to try to stop it at the first stage is to try to eradicate racial bias from Education altogether which is an ambitious goal for an entity of society with racial bias. Stopping disproportionality at the

referral stage is a reasonable expectation of Education rather than trying to control the crossover of societal views into the classroom and this is why I have chosen to target this stage.

Dever et al. (2016) target the second stage by employing a screening process that attempts to dilute the influence of teacher bias on referrals. They create a pre-screening process wherein students essentially decide if they are at risk for needing special education. It is a universal screening tool given to all students which tests for emotional, behavioural and other related risks and is designed as a kind of alternative to teacher perception. As discussed in the previous chapter, this study found that disproportionality was either lowered or non-existent when using this tool and I hope to emulate this success in a practical and efficient way. Kamphus et al. (2010) confirm the utility of screening tools, explaining that many teachers have not been specifically trained on what behaviours or issues to look for in order to make referrals and they also have differing teaching methods and life outlooks that could cause students to not be referred correctly. In their study, they were successful in increasing correct referrals and proving the utility of screening tools.

Christopoulos et al. (2020) further support the use of screening tools. They show that early intervention specialists for language disorders were most accurate at referrals, followed by parents, and then teachers. Parents were found to be twice as accurate in their predictions than their child's teacher. My suggestions for an alternative screening tool propose the reduction in teacher intervention for this reason. The goal of the screening tool is to prevent disproportionality from occurring in the first place, so that future students will not have to suffer from further psychological harm. I rely on much of what I learned from the successes of these researchers and well as my own experiences to suggest a more efficient and effective special education screening tool.

### ***Better Screening Tool***

Creating an entirely new screening tool is outside the scope of what I am currently capable of as I do not have access to or training for analysing screening tools in depth. I can, however, provide my insights on how to better the screening process in broad rather than specific terms. My ideas for reform are as follows: reducing teacher involvement in the referral process by adding more layers before referral and universally applicable screening tools based upon past successes.

Screening does not diminish the need for teachers in the referral process (Kamphus et al., 2010) and though they often make inaccurate judgements, they still have valuable insights into the child's disposition. As it stands in the refer-test-place model, there is little prerequisite at the refer stage. My suggestion is to add two stages prior to referral in order to increase referral accuracy. The first will be a student self-screening tool similar to the one used in Dever et al. (2016). The second layer will be a teacher questionnaire which can only be completed for students who self-identified as at-risk in their questionnaire. Those who are identified as at-risk in both stages can continue to the process of referral for special education. This method must be monitored closely as it calls for much self-awareness on the part of the students. Academic performance and behaviours should still be monitored closely by teachers for inaccuracy in the self-screening tool, but the successive nature of this process should ensure less disproportionality and more referral accuracy.

A universally applicable screening tool seems like an obvious suggestion but many current screening tools are actually either inefficient or inaccurate which is why they are very scarcely used despite the proven utility (Kamphus et al., 2010). Kamphus et al. (2010) outline three criteria for an effective and efficient screening tool: a sound psychometric chart, meeting

the needs of all users (effective for students, quick and easy for teachers), and accuracy. If a multi-staged screening tool could be developed that adheres to these criteria, it would surely be more widely used than current screening tools. The time it would take to develop such a tool is likely great, yet taking time now to design and test new tools, will save time and suffering later by reducing disproportionality rates. The psychological harm that minority students endure would essentially be eradicated with the dismantling of disproportionality itself through the use of screening tools.

## **Summary**

It has been uncomfortable for me to attempt to share my voice in the disproportionality conversation because I am very aware of my privilege. However, I also know how necessary it is for students to feel supported. My experiences in my practice, this program, and in researching disproportionality have all taught me that it is much better to actively help students who struggle with unequal opportunities through conversation about racial inequities than to leave them to process it alone. That disproportionality exists ultimately means that a system that is intended to create equitable learning environments for students with disabilities instead creates further disparities for minorities, subjecting them to lasting psychological harm. I hope to one day have the knowledge and power to design a fully effective screening tool to combat disproportionality but for the moment, I will continue to support my own students individually.

## **Chapter Four: Conclusion**

This chapter begins with a summary of the paper which: reiterates the argument, shows the connections between the previous chapters, and shows the success of the paper. The implications, both theoretical and practical, are then be discussed with particular reference to specific applicable settings on both the small and large scale.

### **Summary**

In this paper, I have argued that disproportionality inflicts psychological damage upon minority students by causing cultural dissonance, loss of motivation, and the normalization of racial segregation. When minorities are consistently over-represented in special education at such alarming rates, the comparison of intercultural competence is inevitable. It is important for all educators to be able to recognize when students are experiencing cultural dissonance and to possess the skills to help them cope. Students who experience disproportionality easily lose motivation to succeed as the challenges they face begin to feel insurmountable (Vallas, 2009). The normalization of segregation is not only a threat to minority students but also to all students and educators because it means that schools are operating unjustly. For minorities, normalizing segregation means that they will be more likely to accept unfair situations later in life such as in their careers or future schooling (Annamma et al., 2014). The psychological harm caused by disproportionality is highly damaging and long-lasting yet comparatively little has been done to remedy it. Exposing the effects that disproportionality has on minority students humanizes the issue and shows the urgency of finding a permanent solution.

The previous three chapters have collectively shown that disproportionality is solvable, and an immediate solution is necessary for the well-being of minority students. The first chapter presents my journey to coming upon the concept of disproportionality and the personal

significance of it in a way that, I hope, other educators can relate to. The wider significance was also discussed and attempts to invoke compassion in readers for the victims of the issue before presenting the argument. The literature review of the second chapter objectively presents much of the available research and data on disproportionality in order to showcase the psychological damage it inflicts. The literature is most prolific in the areas of demotivation and acceptance of segregation while cultural dissonance has received less attention from researchers. However, there has been more research on solutions to the latter problem and culturally responsive teaching is proven to be successful in reducing cultural dissonance (DeCapua & Marshall, 2015). The third chapter attempts to explore the argument through the local context of Canadian and lower mainland students, as well as present temporary and permanent solutions. There is much available research on disproportionality for African American students in the United States, for example, but little for Indigenous students in Canada which is the frame of reference I have used to suggest ways to mitigate the harm caused by disproportionality. This chapter also discusses the potential of screening tools to put a permanent end to disproportionality and presents my suggestions for their reform. I have suggested that screening tools rely less on teacher perspective by incorporating multiple stages which include the insights of both the parents and the students themselves. These three chapters have worked together to present and prove the claim and to present realistic measures for change.

This paper has successfully proven the claim that disproportionality causes psychological harm to minority students by exposing its harmful effects and how they interact to negatively impact the lives of minority students. Little research exists on the challenges minority students are confronted with due to disproportionality and even less research exists on the mental strife they endure. Any attempt at examining the topic from the students' perspective is valuable, even



for the simple reason that their struggles are grossly underexamined. The success of my paper is essentially found in the fact that the psychological well-being of the students is given consideration in both the disproportionality conversation and the search for temporary and permanent solutions which is a considerable gap in the literature. For the student viewpoint to be included is long overdue and morally vital as they are the ones who are suffering.

### **Implications**

Disproportionality is well-known to educational policy in the United States as well as to quantitative research in Education. However, this problem warrants in-depth, qualitative analysis and humanization as it causes much hardship for the students who are forced to endure its effects. There is little accessible information or insight into the psychological effects of disproportionality on minority students, likely due to the same issue as its cause: racial bias. My paper fills a detrimental gap in the literature and it offers both small and large scale solutions.

### ***Theoretical Implications***

This paper contributes to the disproportionality conversation in a crucial way by considering the effects on students. The aim is not necessarily to fill a gap in the literature, but to spark a new branch of disproportionality research which actually considers the victims of its theme. Despite the obvious moral need for this, a qualitative angle is much more adept at inducing both sympathy and empathy in readers which may be the key to making a solution seem more critical.

### ***Practical Implications***

My paper has offered both small scale solutions, for teachers, and large scale solutions, with the potential to be executed globally. The small scale solutions examined are those designed to aid teachers in helping students overcome the harmful effects of disproportionality. For

example, culturally reflective practice and methods of boosting motivation can easily be employed by teachers of all grades and experience levels. Also, teachers who become acquainted with the topic may be more reflective and thoughtful in their special education referrals, thereby reducing the problem at the source.

Another practical implication is that the screening tool improvements proposed by my paper offer realistic and proven solutions to the disproportionality problem that can easily be implemented globally. Screening tools which are universally applicable and contain multiple stages would be more attractive in their simplicity and accurate in their checks and balances. The development of such a tool may prove challenging but it is certainly promising in putting an eternal end to disproportionality.

## **Summary**

By bridging the disconnect between the typical quantitative disproportionality research and the psychological damage it inflicts upon minority students, my paper addresses a critical gap in the literature. The small scale solutions can help currently suffering students, but the overarching goal must be to employ a permanent solution to disproportionality. The racial prejudices of society easily infiltrate into schools but screening tools show promise as a defence against this. Failing to put an end to disproportionality is to allow “the myth of the industriousness of the oppressors and the laziness and dishonesty of the oppressed as well as the myth of the natural inferiority of the latter and the superiority of the former” to continue to plague the Education system (Freire, 2018, p. 140). As a societal institution which intends to mold compassionate and critically-thinking students, Education must be rid of disproportionality, for the good of all students and for an equitable future society.

## References

- Ahram, R., Fergus, E., & Noguera, P. (2011). Addressing racial/ethnic disproportionality in special education: case studies of suburban school districts. *Teachers College Record*, 113(10), 2233-2266.
- Annamma, S., Morrison, D., & Jackson, D. (2014). Disproportionality fills in the gaps: connections between achievement, discipline and special education in the school-to-prison pipeline. *Berkeley Review of Education*, 5(1), 53-87.
- Bal, A., Sullivan, A. L., & Harper, J. (2013). A situated analysis of special education disproportionality for systemic transformation in an urban school district. *Remedial and Special Education*, 35(1), 3–14.
- BC Ministry of Education, Governance and Analytics Division. (2020). *Aboriginal report 2015/16 – 2019/20 – How are we doing?* <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/education/administration/kindergarten-to-grade-12/reports/ab-hawd/ab-hawd-school-district-public.pdf>
- Brookie, H. (2016). Navigating cultural conflict and dissonance in the immigrant ESL classroom: teacher cognition and classroom practices. *TESOLANZ Journal*, 24, 63-73.
- Christopulos, T. T. & Kean, J. (2020). General education teachers' contribution to the identification of children with language disorders. *Perspectives of the ASHA Special Interest Groups*, 5(4), 770-781.
- Cooc, N., & Kiru, E. W. (2018). Disproportionality in special education: a synthesis of international research and trends. *The Journal of Special Education*, 52(3), 163-173.
- Coutinho, M., Oswald, D., Best, A. (2002). The influence of sociodemographics and gender on the disproportionate identification of minority students as having learning

- disabilities. *Remedial and Special Education*, 23(1), 49-59.
- Cruz, R. A., & Rodl, J. E. (2018). An integrative synthesis of literature on disproportionality in special education. *The Journal of Special Education*, 52(1), 50–63.
- Daniel, J. R., & Cooc, N. (2018). Teachers' perceptions of academic intrinsic motivation for students with disabilities. *The Journal of Special Education*, 52(2), 101–112.
- DeCapua A., Marshall, H.W. (2015). Reframing the conversation about students with limited or interrupted formal education: from achievement gap to cultural dissonance. *NASSP Bulletin*, 99(4), 356-370.
- Dever, B. V., Raines, T. C., Dowdy, E., & Hostutler, C. (2016). Addressing disproportionality in special education using a universal screening approach. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 85(1), 59–71.
- Freire, P. (2018). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Gabel, S. L., Curcic, S., Powell, J. W. W., Khader, K., & Albee, L. (2009). Migration and ethnic group disproportionality in special education: an exploratory study. *Disability & Society*, 24(5), 625-639.
- Hibel, J., Farkas, G., & Morgan, P. L. (2010). Who is placed into special education? *Sociology of Education*, 83, 312–332.
- Hutchinson, C. B. (2018). Re-thinking disproportionality in special education as a self-fulfilling prophecy. *Insights into Learning Disabilities*, 15(2), 113–116.
- Kamphus, R. W., DiStefano, C., Dowdy, E., Eklund, K., & Dunn, A. R. (2010). Determining the presence of a problem: comparing two approaches for detecting youth behavioural risk. *School Psychology Review*, 39(3), 395-407.
- Shifrer, D., Muller, C., & Callahan, R. (2011). Disproportionality and learning disabilities:

parsing apart race, socioeconomic status, and language. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 44(3), 246–257.

Shippen, M. E., Curtis, R., & Miller, A. (2009). A qualitative analysis of teachers' and counselors' perceptions of the overrepresentation of African Americans in special education. *Teacher Education and Special Education: The Journal of the Teacher Education Division of the Council for Exceptional Children*, 32(3), 226–238.

Vallas, R. (2009). The disproportionality problem: the overrepresentation of black students in special education and recommendations for reform. *Virginia Journal of Social Policy & the Law*, 17(1), 181-208.

Voulgarides, C. K., Fergus, E., & Thorius, K. A. K. (2017). Pursuing equity: disproportionality in special education and the reframing of technical solutions to address systemic inequities. *Review of Research in Education*, 41(1), 61–87.