

Introduction

We may have to defend a radical approach to democracy that seriously undermines the privilege of those who have skillfully carved that privilege into the foundation of the nation. We will have to adopt the position of consistently swimming against the current.

(Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 22)

Springfield High School¹ sits on top of a hill, looming over the medium-sized northern town inhabited by a mix of big city runaways and racially diverse working-class families. A little less than half of the students in the high school are students of color, predominantly Black and Latinx,² and a bit more than half of the total student body is considered “economically disadvantaged” (The State³). In many ways, this school functions as the epicenter for public schooling in Springfield because it operates as the sole high school, where the roughly 2,000 students are all funneled.

About 15 years ago, members of the Ku Klux Klan and affiliated white supremacist groups held a rally on the very same hill on which the high school sits. They emphatically called for public demonstrations because of alleged attacks on white students, specifically from Black students in the high school. On the day of the protest, records indicate that the white supremacists were met with an even larger number of antiracist counterprotesters. This moment in the town’s history embodies not only the undercurrent of racial tension that exists in the community, but also how the school itself operates as a pivotal site of conflict. Our public schools have always operated as a microcosm, or mirror even, of our larger society. Springfield offers an example of how schooling is much more than four walls and a chalkboard, but rather, a platform to reinforce systemic racism that continues to churn out disproportionate experiences and outcomes for the most marginalized students and families in our society.

In 2018, the Center for Disproportionality (CfD) was a training and technical assistance provider for the Springfield School District, following the District’s state citation under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) for over-suspending Black and Latinx students with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). On one particular day in late fall of that year, four

of the CfD associates (trainers) were tasked with engaging all high school staff in a full-day session highlighting some of the key understandings related to Culturally Responsive Education (CRE). For this session, our content ranged from “*What are the key components of Culturally Responsive Education?*” to “*What does it mean to have white privilege?*” Each of us had about 30 participants in our respective rooms, including classroom teachers, administrators, resource staff, and paraprofessionals. As was our practice, we cued up our PowerPoints, stuck up our chart papers, and dove into the work of building the capacity of the participants in front of us to develop the knowledge, skills, and abilities to become culturally responsive educators.

As we stepped out of our session for our scheduled lunch break, it was clear from each of our faces that we all had experienced some form of intense pushback in our rooms. One CfD associate was cursed at and heckled by a group of educators in the back of the room. One Black woman participant (one of just a few in the entire staff) left one of the rooms crying, overwhelmed with emotion from her colleagues’ refusal to even engage in a dialogue about the causes of disproportionality.

Disproportionality runs rampant in schools where feelings of isolation, resistance, and hostility are pervasive responses to attempts at uncovering inequities; where anger and defensiveness take over and where there’s an inability to reimagine what students truly deserve. Disproportionality is the outcome of a history of schooling in the United States that was always set up to exclude marginalized students and communities through beliefs, policies, procedures, and practices (BPPPs). These BPPPs manifest in many ways, including through exclusionary discipline and White-centered curricula; schooling that was formed by whiteness as the operating norm; and a system that all too often replicates the anti-Black racism that is a ubiquitous part of the United States. The above example of Springfield should not serve to lambast a particular school, community, or group of educators. Rather, it outlines some critical layers of how school inequities continue to exist. Through uncovering our process and the work of over 15 years of in-district training and technical assistance, this book aims to provide a much more expansive look at district-based disproportionality.

WHAT IS DISPROPORTIONALITY?

During training sessions in partnering districts, associates would start with defining disproportionality and unpacking how disproportionality is measured. This would often take place during an opening circle,⁴ asking participants to share their name, roles, and their own definition of disproportionality. There were always a wide range of responses from, “disproportionality means an unequal playing field” to “disproportionality is unfair.” Associates would subsequently offer participants two definitions,

Table 1.1. Disproportionality Definitions

U.S. Department of Education Definition:	YCfD Definition:
<p>Disproportionality is . . .</p> <p>The over-representation of a specific group in special education programs or disciplinary outcomes relative to the presence of this group in the overall student population, and/or</p> <p>The under-representation of a specific group in accessing intervention services, resources, programs, rigorous curriculum and instruction relative to the presence of this group in the overall student population.</p>	<p>Disproportionality is . . .</p> <p>The outcome of institutionalized racism and bias that result in discriminatory beliefs, policies, and practices, which negatively affect historically marginalized⁵ groups in contrast to privileged groups.</p>

which you can see in Table 1.1, from the U.S. Department of Education and from the youth wing of the CfD, the Youth Technical Assistance Center on Disproportionality (YCfD) (see Table 1.1).

As they always do, the young folks who are continually impacted by disproportionality offer a much more powerful understanding of disproportionality as is evident by their definition. Building on the government’s opaque definition that highlights the over- and underrepresentation of a specific group in an outcome area (in the case of CfD, special education assignment and/or suspensions), YCfD pushes us to grapple with the evil underbelly of disproportionality itself. The youth make the direct connection to root causes that lead to disproportionality: institutionalized racism; discriminatory beliefs, policies and practices; and a history of power and privilege for some and marginalization for others. To that end, CfD operated under the definition provided by YCfD in its work with districts.

WHAT IS THE CENTER FOR DISPROPORTIONALITY (CfD)?

CfD’s Mission Statement:

The Center for Disproportionality (CfD) provides regional Professional Development and Technical Assistance to school districts. Our mission is to disrupt, dismantle, and eliminate disproportionality by building the capacity of educators to implement Culturally Responsive Equity-Based Systems that meet the needs of every student and family.

For 15 years, CfD operated through a state contract with the express purpose of supporting districts that were cited for disproportionately assigning students of color, often Black and Latinx students, into special education (often classifying them into particular special education categories and special

education placements) and for disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline (e.g., out-of-school suspensions). During this time, CfD also provided regional support to regions consisting of multiple districts cited for disproportionality. The process of receiving a district citation was amplified by the re-enactment of IDEA 2004. IDEA sought to require states to actively address their disproportionality. That said, while being cited for disproportionality offered a potential entry point to engage the inequities in a school district, the citation system often fell flat in terms of holding districts accountable to sustained, systemic change. It was often the case that school districts were cited year after year without ever committing to ongoing training and development to particularly respond to the racialized outcomes present in the district. There often was a clear lack of accountability. Furthermore, if they did attempt to contend with the citation, many districts aimed at reaching compliance under IDEA rather than taking a systemic approach to identifying the root causes of disproportionality (Sullivan & Osher, 2019; Kramarczuk Voulgarides et al., 2017, 2021).

Sadly, Springfield is just one of countless examples where students of color are disproportionately negatively impacted by our education system. Racial disproportionality in disciplinary outcomes and special education classification and placement is endemic in the fabric of the American educational system. Disproportionality in special education parallels the very persistent history, highlighted in Springfield, of chronic socioeconomic and racial inequalities that relate to the country's history of exclusion and denial of educational opportunities to students of color, multilingual students, and students with disabilities (Losen et al., 2013). Thus, it is important to draw the distinction that disproportionality is not solely a special education issue as it is often seen; rather it is an outcome of broader educational inequality (Kramarczuk Voulgarides, 2018). That said, special education classification and suspension disproportionality data were simply the entry point for CfD to tackle the root causes of disproportionality (Fergus, 2017; Kramarczuk Voulgarides, 2018; Milner, 2020). What always festered below the surface layer data, the numbers on the page, was the true scourge of the American educational system—embedded white supremacist systems that continue to be fostered and maintained by BPPPs. CfD offered a way forward that was grounded in culturally responsive-sustaining education (CR-SE⁶), a pedagogical approach to schooling that is built on welcoming and affirming the identities and experiences of every child.

A DEEPER LOOK AT BELIEFS, POLICIES, PROCEDURES, AND PRACTICES

Schools are a particularly harmful institution for young people. Trouble gets made because schools engender it, exclude it, and ultimately work hard to simply erase it. Schools try to make trouble invisible, most often by attempting to eliminate the young people who are working so hard to make it visible.

(Shalaby, 2016, p. 152)

Disproportionality is linked to historic forms of systemic racism and is entrenched in our educational system's BPPPs. To create systemic change, we must reframe how we look at "the problems" in education—refusing to resort to the blaming and so-called fixing of students and their communities, but rather, interrogating the system itself. To systematically address disproportionality, we must focus on mindset shifts or the beliefs held by educators. The beliefs that individual educators hold about students of color and their communities become systemic beliefs codified in policies and procedures that are enacted through their practices. Policies and procedures can also be unwritten guidelines that educators are expected to operate under. The practices then become the ways that we enact our beliefs that are either aligned or not aligned with the policies and procedures of a school/district. These beliefs are the mental models, assumptions, values, and dispositions that our educators hold, both explicitly and implicitly, about our educational system and the students, families, and communities it serves.

For example, educators and the schools/districts in which they work often hold the belief that Black students, wearing particular clothing or hairstyles, are demonstrating inappropriate behavior or a more coded justification, "not demonstrating professionalism" (Knipp & Stevenson, 2022). In other words, the devaluing of Black students' cultures is "often equated with poor academic performance" (Ladson-Billings, 2021). All of which becomes code for not conforming to cis-gendered, white normative school culture. As a result, educators and school systems will codify this belief in their policies, like the code of conduct, and disproportionate disciplinary referrals for Black children may be the result. In this way, a disproportionate outcome and school experience for Black students is grounded in a *belief*; in racist ideology held by individuals and the system itself. The belief is then codified in a uniform policy that lives in the district, etched in school manuals and maintained through the *procedures* and *practices* of excluding Black students from school—teachers and administrators send students out of class and often home, for being out-of-compliance. This is how BPPPs continue to reinforce systemic racial disproportionality.

There are several bias-based beliefs that are pervasive in our educational system that call for our shared understanding and deeper unpacking. The following list is not exhaustive, but offers framing for core beliefs that we know contribute to racial disproportionality (Fergus, 2017):

Color-Evasiveness⁷ is a dominant belief that purports seeing and talking about race as problematic. Individuals that hold a color-evasive lens contend that "seeing everyone the same" is actually the fairest way to engage difference. Color-evasiveness sounds like: "I do not see color, I see behavior;" "I do not care if the student is white, Black, purple, green, or polka dot, I treat all students the same regardless of color." The impact of such a belief discredits and denies the role that racism plays in the lived experiences of various

racial groups and obscures its role in systemic inequities. In fact, we are often left with blaming the individuals and communities for the impact of systemic racism when we maintain a color-evasive lens (Bonilla-Silva, 2003).

Deficit Thinking places the blame of achievement and opportunity gaps on students, families, and their communities. Deficit thinking sounds like: “If Black families and communities cared more about education, their children would do better.” Deficit thinking, like color-evasiveness downplays or denies the role of systemic racism. In addition, deficit thinking pathologizes students, their families, and communities while simultaneously discounting the role of educational systems in manufacturing and maintaining racial inequities. Much of the foundation of deficit thinking is based on fallacious genetic deficits and the myth of a culture of poverty (Valencia, 1997).

Poverty Disciplining focuses on punishing the behaviors and thinking held by people from low-income backgrounds. Poverty disciplining moves to change the behavior of these individuals to reflect that of the white middle class. Poverty discipline sounds like: “When students do not conform to school culture and rules, we must punish them, or they will not know how to operate in the real world.” It is important to note that while this belief does not explicitly focus on race, it is often used as a proxy to blame Black and other people of color for the conditions of schooling and their academic achievement (Fergus, 2017, 2019).

REALITY CHECK: SCHOOLING CONDITIONS FOR BLACK AND LATINX STUDENTS⁸

The above beliefs are deeply rooted in our educational system and translate into policies, procedures, and practices that are disproportionately impacting Black students, in particular. For example, research has shown that pre-school teachers are more likely to look for signs of challenging behavior of young Black children—especially young Black boys—in comparison to young white boys (Gilliam et al., 2016). Research has also shown that Black children receive harsher punishment for similar behaviors as their white counterparts and are often punished for more subjective behavior such as disrespect and insubordination as opposed to more objective behavior such as smoking (Skiba et al., 2002; Skiba & Williams, 2016). Additionally, the ACLU (2020), *Cops, and no Counselors* report, which analyzed the Office of Civil Rights data from 2015 to 2016, found that: Students of color are more likely to go to a school with a police officer [SROs], more likely to be referred to law enforcement, and more likely to be arrested at school. Nationally, Black students are more than twice as likely as their white classmates to be referred to law enforcement. Black students are three times as

likely to be arrested as their white classmates, and in some states, Black girls are over eight times as likely to be arrested as white girls. During the 2015–16 school year, 1.6 million students attended a school with a sworn law enforcement officer and no counselor.

Although ambiguously titled, School Resource Officers (SROs) are certified law enforcement officers assigned to schools on a long-term basis. What becomes one's experience of schooling if you are more likely to be criminalized than supported? Researchers for some time now have highlighted the concept of the school-to-prison pipeline (Wald & Losen, 2003), but what becomes clear when we examine the conditions and experiences that our most marginalized communities far too often face is that schooling becomes much more of a school-to-prison nexus (Meiners, 2007), where schools themselves are sites of exclusion, violence, and isolation—chief markers of our prison system. As we layer these systemic barriers, it should become quite clear how racist ideologies and explicit and implicit biases continue to push students of color, and Black students even more acutely, out of the classroom and often problematically into special education assignment and placement.

THE ROLE OF CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE EDUCATION

CfD centered CRE as a remedy for ever-present bias-based beliefs serving as the catalyst for addressing policies, practices, and procedures contributing to the continual disproportionality across the nation. Foundational to CRE is examining the biases that educators hold so they can mitigate potential harm and more effectively affirm the ethnic and racial identities of their students through curriculum and teaching practices (Ladson-Billings, 1995a). CfD knew that we must start with the individual and ultimately connect self to the system to address disproportionality, because it is people who make policy and enact practices. CRE provided the framework for how we approached this theory of change. CfD associates often used the analogy that culturally responsive education was not an add-on to a full plate but is the plate itself and everything else should be placed on that foundation.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

If we are serious about systemic change, based on justice and liberation for oppressed communities, it is critical that we contend with the often complicated and layered connections needed to disrupt and dismantle disproportionate outcomes and experiences. This book will provide an overview of CfD's approach alongside four case studies to highlight important lessons learned.

In Chapter 2, we will unpack CfD's multi-tiered approach to engaging with district partnerships. We will provide an in-depth overview of CfD's guiding frameworks, including a further breakdown of disproportionality. We also outline the Root Cause process and CRE trainings that were ultimately CfD's foundation—core to uncovering and responding to existing inequities in a district. We will further highlight the methodology and the distinct approach that CfD used to address disproportionality through connecting BPPPs.

Chapter 3 provides a case study of the Elmer City School District. In this chapter, we will explore a district that needed to respond to the Attorney General Office's 2013–2014 complaint and investigation of over-suspending Black students alongside a state citation for over-suspending Black students with disabilities. This chapter will underscore the processes that led to developing a strategic plan centered on culturally responsive practices and the ongoing work that the Office of Pupil Support Services has led, slowly chipping away at bias-based beliefs and existing disproportionate outcomes. Further, this chapter will underscore how Elmer used data systems that calculate disproportionality to monitor their disparate outcomes.

Chapter 4 focuses on Palisades City School District. In this chapter, we will unpack the strengths and pitfalls of the role of leadership in shifting disproportionate outcomes. This chapter will further explore the impact of only focusing training and technical assistance support on district and building leadership and the lack of internal capacity built from this approach. Lastly, the shortcomings of rigid, siloed district leadership and its impact on ultimately shifting racialized experiences and disparate outcomes that exist throughout a district will be examined.

Chapter 5 will provide a case study of Hamsburg City School District. In this case study, we will explore their initial lack of readiness to address disproportionality. That said, once readiness grew, they systematized equity through data systems, the strategic hiring of an equity leader, district-led culturally responsive trainings, and centering family engagement. The story of Hamsburg stresses the impact of developing a readiness mindset in districts in order to shift disproportionality.

Chapter 6 will provide a case study of Hayward Unified School District. We will highlight Hayward Unified School District's ongoing journey to develop competency, and ultimately capacity in culturally responsive practices through a Train the Trainer (TTT) model. In addition, this chapter will address the barriers that exist when district leadership recognizes the urgency of addressing disproportionality, but wants to expedite the process without offering sufficient time and resources to effectively implement practices. We will offer perspectives from long-time, district-based CRE co-facilitators engaging with how they defined CRE as "life's work."

We will close with a chapter acknowledging key lessons learned and critical frameworks that are informing current work. We end each case

study chapter with guiding questions in an effort to make this text more of a call to action than a static memorial of work from the past. Throughout our case studies, we look to challenge the notion that the measure of evaluating success in disrupting and ultimately dismantling disproportionality solely lives in the reduction of problematic data (i.e., decrease in suspensions rate, etc.) or state/federal compliance. Instead, we will argue that because disproportionality is a result of racist systems, we must focus on changing the beliefs of educators to support equitable policies, procedures, and practices. This becomes the first step before we can expect any trainings to radically change the “numbers” of disproportionality. Without this paradigm shift, policies and new initiatives will continue to fall short. Finally, the last few years have not only reinforced, but in many ways exacerbated structural and institutional inequities in the United States—inequities with clear, direct impacts on the experiences and outcomes of our students of color in our schools across the country. We hope to build on the long legacy of community, educator, and researcher activists actively pursuing and cultivating schools as sites of liberation, as environments that foundationally celebrate Black joy and Black genius; schools as full representations of the communities they serve.