



HOW “DEFECTCRAFT” HELPS EXPLAIN RACIAL DISPARITIES IN SPECIAL EDUCATION



Five decades of [scholarly research](#) suggest that students of color are disproportionately represented in special education and that students with disabilities are disproportionately subject to suspension, expulsion, and other types of so-called exclusionary discipline that causes students to miss out on learning by removing them from their classrooms and schools.

An [article](#) published this month in the *American Educational Research Journal*, a peer-refereed publication, draws upon the results of a carefully orchestrated case study to help explain the persistence of these violations of students’ civil rights. The article is authored by [Adai A. Tefera](#) of the University of Arizona, NEPC Fellow [Alfredo J. Artiles](#) of Stanford University, [Catherine Kramarczuk Voulgarides](#) of the City University of New York–Hunter College, [Alexandra Aylward](#) of the University of Texas at Austin, and [Sarah Alvarado](#), an independent scholar.

The study focuses on an unnamed suburban school district that has been repeatedly cited for disproportionately disciplining Black students (with and without disabilities) and placing them in special education. The research entailed interviewing 30 educators and students, engaging in participant observation, and examining relevant documents such as staff handbooks and news media accounts.

Throughout the article, the authors use the idea of DefectCraft to point to “othering processes and practices that peg deficits and deficiencies to already stigmatized individuals

and groups [and that] makes the newly attached deficits distinctively inherent traits of these groups.” Originally coined by Artiles, the phrase “construes racial disparities in disability rates as detached from considerations regarding unjust access to opportunities, discriminatory infrastructures, historical wealth disparities, racial segregation, and stratified access to health care and food delivery systems.”

Evidence of DefectCraft abounded. While educators who worked for the district described their district as a “family,” they did not necessarily see Black students that way, instead characterizing them as “others” who, in the words of one staff member, have a “different . . . family culture and value for education.” The researchers traced these attitudes to the origins of the district, which was created as White families fled the rapidly diversifying nearby city in the post-World War II era. In more recent years, a superintendent was forced to depart due to political pressures after attempting to desegregate the district’s schools and make them more equitable.

Multiple school and district employees portrayed Black students and emergent bilinguals as damaged, suggesting that they could not meet the high expectations of their schools. For example, one administrator said:

[W]hen a student transfers into our building, and our expectations are set a little bit higher, some of those people are caught off guard. Then you will have to question, is this an appropriate setting for them to be transferring [into], if they’re a student with special—a special education, or if they’re just a Black student in general?

Under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, districts that have significant racial/ethnic disproportionality in identification, placement or discipline are required to set aside funds to address the situation. The district that was the subject of the study responded by offering racial bias training.

“This led to a focus on ‘fixing’ teachers and children’s academic or behavioral challenges rather than encouraging critical reflection about how broader social and contextual factors (e.g., community race relations) and organizational contexts contributed to disproportionality,” the study’s authors write.

Moreover, when some employees objected to the training, the professional development was made optional. Although the district may have met its legal obligations by offering the training, the study’s authors suggest that “even full compliance with the law can lead to manipulations that reduce the intended benefits of compliance and genuine transformation.” Understanding DefectCraft’s roots and working to overcome those obstacles will be necessary for deeper progress.

NEPC Resources on Special Education

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