Standing in the Gap:

Black Educators Speak on Black Students, Disproportionality, and Special Education

By

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"In a way that is not typical of America as a whole, the Black communities throughout the nation have traditionally sent their ablest men and women into the field of education."

Nathan Wright, Jr, 1970

With gratitude that spans the decades, I dedicate this dissertation to several Black educators who inspired, supported, or encouraged me along the way:

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CLD   Culturally and Linguistically Diverse

ED   Emotional Disturbance

ELL   English Language Learner

IDEA   Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

IEP   Individualized Education Plan

MMR   Mild Mental Retardation

MTSS   Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

NAACP National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

PBIS   Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports

RtI   Response to Intervention

SLD   Specific Learning Disability

SRO   School Resource Officer

SUMMARY

Research chronicles the way in which the culturally familiar presence of Black educators has always benefited Black students, a fact which was highlighted in the years immediately following the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision. After Court mandated desegregation orders were handed down, many Black schools were shuttered, and many Black school teachers were displaced when Black students were moved to integrated schools with White teachers. Without the mitigating influence of educators who believed they had the ability, the capacity, and the right to be educated, a disproportionate number of Black students were subsequently labeled with cognitive impairments and placed in racially segregated special education classrooms. The inverse association between the attrition rate of Black teachers and the surge of Black special education students illustrated how special education services became "a more socially accepted, even normalized, category of marginalization for students of color" (Ferri & Connor, 2005, p.454) used to institute "continued segregation under a seemingly natural and justifiable label" (Reid & Knight, 2006, p.19).

Although they currently comprise just 7% of the American teaching workforce (Taie & Goldring, 2017), data supports that Black educators continue to exert a positive, powerful influence in the lives of Black students. Researchers suggest that Black students taught by Black teachers earn higher scores on standardized tests, perform better academically and socially, are disciplined less often and less harshly, and express more interest in attending college (Gershenson et al., 2017). However, much of this affirming research has been conducted in the general education environment and focuses on students without disabilities.

This narrative study informed by elements of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) examined how eight Black educators who work with Black special education students experience factors related to disproportionality, characterize their professional agency, and describe social and institutional structures that contribute to disproportionate identification patterns in special education. Each educator participated in two in-depth interviews. Thematic analyses revealed nine external and internal structural factors that constrain Black educators in their efforts to perform as (a) advocates, (b) cultural mediators, (c) culturally responsive practitioners, and (d) role models for Black students. Participants also identified several limitations routinely encountered as they seek to improve student outcomes while serving in these enhanced capacities.

Participants in this study offered a unique critique of the structures that sustain disproportionality from their dual vantage point as both products and agents of an educational system that has never been optimized for the success of Black Americans. In their own words, participants also explain how they professionally navigate racialized workspaces as they seek to improve the plight of Black students. The value of their professional insight is enhanced by the reality that there remains an acute shortage of qualified and certified minority special education teachers (Tyler, et al., 2004). The benefit of their culturally affirming perspective is augmented by the fact that differences in culture, language, customs, values, attitudes, and beliefs render Black students with disabilities particularly vulnerable to teachers who harbor lowered expectations and deficit thinking (Ford, 2012). Implications for further research and professional practice are offered.

I. INTRODUCTION

In my seven years as a special education coordinator, I have facilitated approximately 1,600 meetings for students either receiving or being considered for specialized services. While most of these meetings were routine and forgettable, two are forever etched into my memory. In each case, a Black elementary age male student experiencing behavioral difficulties in the general education setting was newly labeled with an Emotional Disturbance (ED). Despite my advocacy efforts as the team leader, district politics steered the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) teams to significantly restrict these boys' access to general education curricula and peers. One student was sent to a behavior modification classroom and the other was placed in a private day school. Both boys were placed outside of the district within a year.

At the conclusion of each of these eligibility meetings, a White principal approached me, the sole Black professional in the room, and told me what a great job I had done helping to remove the student from their school. I found these interactions both troubling and conflicting. Although the children were not meeting expected social and behavioral norms, there had been considerable room for improvement in each school's response. Both IEP teams went through the motions of following steps established in the Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) process, but it was clear that the goal was simply to check the necessary boxes for eventual outplacement, not to teach prosocial skills or to remediate behaviors. I reluctantly signed my name to the paperwork that formalized the placement changes, feeling professionally restricted by the forces that steered the IEP teams to make these questionable eligibility and placement decisions. I also wondered if other Black educators experienced similar conflicts, and if so, how they dealt with the emotional dissonance.

The Evolving Discourse on Disproportionality

Irregularities in special education identification and placement practices for culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) children were first identified in the research literature roughly five decades ago (Dunn, 1968; Mercer, 1973). It is critical to note that this was less than two decades after schools were first ordered to desegregate by the Supreme Court in the historic *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision. Prior to *Brown,* Black teachers were the primary educators of record for most Black American schoolchildren, particularly in the South. By several accounts, these educators were well regarded as an invaluable source of academic and community support. They stood on the front lines for generations of Black schoolchildren who were greatly disadvantaged by de facto and de jure racial segregation throughout secession, Reconstruction, and post-*Brown* White resistance (Fairclough, 2007; Walker, 1996; 2013).

Up until the passage of *Brown*, familiar Black educators had been instrumental in establishing learning environments that helped Black students receive an education despite the crippling negligence of local White school boards (Walker, 1996). Once Black children were forced into classrooms with White teachers, large numbers of these students were identified with disabilities and placed in restrictive classroom settings (Southern School News, 1956, as cited in Ferri & Connor, 2005). Some researchers labeled this practice an exclusionary tool purposely wielded to resegregate schools along racial lines (Blanchett, 2006; Codrington & Fairchild, 2012; Kohli et al., 2017). These researchers cite the ways in which identification for special education services allowed for "continued segregation under a seemingly natural and justifiable label" (Reid & Knight, 2006, p.19) and became "a more socially accepted, even normalized, category of marginalization for students of color" (Ferri & Connor, 2005, p. 454). Such observations triggered a heated political discourse on the topic of overrepresentation, and in the decades since Dunn's article, there have been several policy briefs, position statements, and federal mandates

purported to remediate contributing factors (Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), 2004; National Education Association, 2007; Skiba, 2012; Sullivan & Osher, 2019).

Although the earliest research on disproportionality focused on the overidentification of CLD students with intellectual impairments in restrictive placements, colloquial use of the term has gradually evolved. The working definition has now expanded to include the underidentification, overrepresentation, and underrepresentation of students of color in both academic and behavioral domains (Munk et al., 2020). As understanding of the term has evolved in recent decades, so have the tone and tenor of scholarly discourse. Research on disproportionality continues to evoke strong emotional responses, and scholars have generated data that has been cited in policy changes and legal challenges. The efficacy of remediation efforts remains a matter of ongoing debate given that some modern researchers hold differences of opinion regarding which student populations are impacted by disproportionality and in what specific ways (Blanchett & Shealey, 2016; Morgan et al., 2015b; Skiba et al., 2016). There has also been disagreement surrounding how to analyze and interpret statistics as well as how best to support impacted students (Ford & Tolson, 2015; Morgan et al., 2017; Morgan & Farkas, 2016; Welner, 2015).

Data on Disproportionality

Over the years, disproportionality has been calculated in various ways, including the use of raw aggregate numbers, representation indices, and the identification probability approach (Peters et al., 2019). Given the centrality of race and ethnicity in discussions on disproportionality, it should be noted that the racial and/or ethnic composition of student enrollment in American public schools has significantly shifted over the years. As Tables 1 and 2 indicate, between fall 2000 and fall 2017, White student enrollment decreased from 61% to 48%, Hispanic student enrollment increased from 16% to 27%, and Black student enrollment

decreased from 17% to 15%. By the 2018-2019 school year, 14% (7.1 million) of public-school students received specialized services under IDEA, and roughly a third of these students were identified with specific learning disabilities (SLD) (NCES, 2020). American Indian/Alaska Native students comprised 18% of those who received services, though they represented just 1% of public-school enrollees the prior school year. Black students represented 16% of those who received services while accounting for 15% of prior year enrollment, and Hispanic students represented 13% of those receiving services while accounting for 27% of prior year enrollment. In contrast, White students accounted for only 14% of service recipients while comprising 48% of prior school year enrollment (NCES, 2020).

Table 1

Racial/Ethnic Trends in US School Enrollment (NCES, 2020)

Race	Fall 2000 Total Enrollment	Fall 2017 Total Enrollment	Changed by
Black	17%	15%	-2%
Hispanic/Latinx	16%	27%	+9%
White	61%	48%	-13%

Table 2

Racial/Ethnic Trends in US Special Education based on 7.1 million or 14% of 3-21 y/o public school students receiving services under IDEA (NCES, 2020)

Race	Total Enrollment	Total Receiving Services under IDEA 3-21 y/o	Difference
American Indian/Alaska Native	1%	18%	+17%
Black	15%	16%	+1%
Hispanic/Latino	13%	27%	+14%
White	48%	14%	-34%

Historically, research on disproportionality has been impacted by the lack of available data; many school districts neither gather nor disseminate the type of local information that researchers would need to be able to control for multiple covariates (Sullivan & Bal, 2013). This results in scholars being unable to account for nesting within schools over time and contributes to various interpretations of available information (Cruz & Rodl, 2018). Complex analyses of available data are further compromised by the fact that in the United States, socioeconomic status (SES) and race are closely associated (Carter & Reardon, 2014). In addition, some researchers have found that the relationship between race and risk of special education identification is so complex that it depends on the disability category itself; children of color may exhibit greater risk than White children when exhibiting behavioral challenges and White children may exhibit greater risk when exhibiting academic challenges (Fish, 2017).

Despite all the divergent data and contradictory conclusions, it is evident that even five decades after Dunn first introduced disproportionality into the literature, our understanding of the topic remains incomplete (Sullivan & Artiles, 2011). However, life outcomes related to disproportionality are more clear. In school year 2017-2018, Black students receiving special education services posted the lowest rate (66 %) of all racial and/or ethnic groups who graduated with a high school diploma and the highest rate (12%) of those who instead received an alternative certificate of completion (NCES, 2020). Black students were also found to commonly exit special education by dropping out of school altogether. Such students were then less likely to pursue a postsecondary education, more likely to be inadequately prepared to enter the workforce, and they also demonstrated higher unemployment rates (Balcazar et al., 2012; Cameto, 2005; Chamberlain, 2005).

Differential outcomes have also been established in the court system. *Diana v. State Board of Education* (1970), *Larry P. v. Riles* (1972), and *PASE v. Hannon* (1980) have found that CLD children were being disproportionately assigned to functional skills classes which unfairly limited their future career outcomes. Other lawsuits have established that overrepresentation effectively perpetuates long standing cycles of educational inequities for children of color (Rocha & Hawes, 2009; Sullivan & Artiles, 2011).

Disproportionality, Black Educators and Brown

History draws a direct connection between disproportionate representation of Black students in special education, the wide-scale reduction in force of Black educators, and the passage of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). *Brown's* heavily flawed roll out in a climate of rigid White resistance triggered several unfortunate outcomes, among them the shuttering of Black schools and the systematic culling of roughly a third of the employed Black teaching force. Unwelcome to teach in many newly integrated settings, the ranks of Black teachers plummeted, and the lack of available jobs steered aspiring Black educators onto alternate career paths.

It was in *Brown's* aftermath that disproportionality, generally defined as "the extent to which membership in a given ethnic group affects the probability of being placed in a specific special education disability category" (Oswald et al., 1999, p. 198), was initially noted in scholarly literature. Researchers in the late 1960s were among the first to document that "socio-culturally deprived children with mild learning problems" were inappropriately labeled and assigned to settings where they were unlikely to receive effective educational services (Dunn, 1968, p. 5). Concerns also emerged regarding the clear lack of ethics in special education labeling and identification practices for CLD students (Mercer, 1973). It was determined that these children, already vulnerable to racism, were being subjected to additional social and

academic stigmatization due to disability labels and placements (Gillung & Rucker, 1977; Jones, 1972).

Statement of the Problem

As a group, the voices of Black educators have remained largely silent in many important discourses in educational settings (Delpit, 2006; Michie, 2007). While there is an abundance of available research on the topic of disproportionality and a rich body of scholarship focused on the experiences of Black educators (Anderson, 1988; Etter-Lewis, 1996; Fairclough, 2007; Foster, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Walker, 1996, 2009a, 2009b, 2013), much less is known about the junction at which these two topics intersect. Specifically, how do Black educators currently experience factors related to disproportionality in their workplaces, and how do they exercise their professional agency on behalf of Black students identified to receive special education services?

A considerable body of literature establishes the unique protective benefits that Black educators provide for Black students (Bates & Glick, 2013; Dee, 2004; Dee, 2005; Downey & Prebish, 2004; Egalite et al., 2015; Figlio, 2005; Fox, 2016; Gershenson et al., 2018; Grissom & Redding, 2015; Holt & Gershenson, 2017; Irizarry, 2015; Joshi et al., 2018; Lindsay & Hart, 2017; Penney, 2017; Pigott & Cowen, 2000; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Villegas & Irvine, 2010; Wright et al., 2017; Yarnell & Bohrnstedt, 2017). However, much of this research focuses on the general education context. One study that did examine both general education and special education settings found that kindergarten students of color with disabilities did not appear to benefit from having same-race teachers, although students of color with no disabilities did appear to demonstrate fewer externalized problem behaviors (Gottfried et al., 2019).

Studies with such nuanced findings illustrate both the need for and the importance of having research specifically focused on the special education context, as it cannot be assumed

that general education findings transfer to special education settings. There is also room for a fuller examination of the sociocultural context of disability and the direct connections that can be traced back to the passage and roll-out of *Brown:* the systematic culling of Black educators, the disproportionate representation patterns of Black children in restrictive settings, and the legal precedence for expanded special education services. In this discussion, there is both room, and a need, to hear the perspectives, experiences, and the voices of Black educators who continue to remain chronically underrepresented in the K-12 teaching population.

It is recognized that differences in culture, language, customs, values, attitudes, and beliefs render Black students with disabilities particularly vulnerable when they have teachers who harbor lowered expectations and deficit thinking (Ford, 2012). Given that there is an acute shortage of certified special education teachers of color, educators of all backgrounds can benefit from the knowledge and insights provided by Black educators who believe in the value of Black children, and who nurture their growth and development. Participants in this study offer perspectives from their dual vantage points as both products and agents of an educational system that has never been optimized for the success of Black Americans. As such, these educators can share how they professionally navigate racialized workspaces in their efforts to both avoid and prevent the type of "bias-based spirit-murdering" of Black children that many educators of color experienced in their own schooling (Williams, 2018, p. 4).

Purpose of the Study

Despite the enduring relevance of Dunn's fifty-year old observations and the accompanying body of related research, relatively little is known about how Black educators experience disproportionality in professional contexts. Given their diminishing overall presence in American classrooms, the underrepresentation of Black educators in this decades-old discourse represents a population gap in the qualitative literature. The purpose of this study was

to investigate how Black educators experience factors related to disproportionality as well as how they characterize their agency working with Black students engaged in the special education process. Using a narrative approach informed by specific elements of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014), I conducted 16 interviews with eight participants to elicit detailed accounts of these educators' lived professional experiences. My goal was to promote a deeper understanding of the issue as well as to garner insights that practitioners may use to improve Black students' academic, disciplinary, and postsecondary outcomes. Specifically, I desired to investigate how Black educators compared their professional experiences with observations made by Dunn in 1968. To that end, I asked participants to reflect on several variables, and interrogated the ways in which they work to influence the educational trajectories of Black children involved in special education.

Research Questions

  1. How do Black educators define, describe, or otherwise characterize their

     agency working with K-12 Black students receiving special education services?

  2. How do Black educators within the K-12 setting describe their professional

     experiences with several specific variables related to disproportionality?

  3. What specific structures within schools do these educators identify as factors

     that contribute to the presence and/or persistence of disproportionality?

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

To provide historical context for this narrative inquiry, I reviewed available research on the sociocultural contexts of both race and disability in America. I also highlighted the cause, context, and consequences of the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision (hereafter referred to as *Brown)*, as it triggered a sequence of events with two devastating outcomes for the Black community: the decimation of Black teaching ranks and a glut of Black children assigned to largely segregated, highly restrictive classrooms. The significance of these two *Brown* outcomes is essential to understanding how and why disproportionality in special education got started, why it continues to exist, and how it reflects larger American social trends. Scholarship focusing on the historical role and proven efficacy of Black educators is also examined, as it directly informs the research questions. First, however, I situate this inquiry within a theoretical framework.

Theoretical Framework

As a discipline, the field of special education hails from positivist roots and has traditionally held to a "medical model" of instruction and intervention (Boveda & McCray, 2020; Deno, 1970). Special education qualitative research has become more accepted only in recent decades due to the efforts of scholars who have worked to advance the status and acceptability (Anzul et al., 2001; Brantlinger et al., 2005; Pugach, 2001; Trent et al., 1998). Even still, there remains room for qualitative offerings from perspectives centered in increasingly diverse theoretical frameworks (Boveda & McCray, 2020).

This topic of inquiry is two-pronged; it centers on disproportionality while focusing on the lived and professional experiences of Black educators who work with special education students. While no one theoretical framework has been applied to the substantial body of research on either topic, critical race theory (CRT) is often employed to frame educational

studies that focus on the role of sociohistorical race relations and discrimination in education settings (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). However, in recognition of the fact that many Black educators actively seek to employ the use of emancipatory pedagogies for the benefit of their Black students (Duncan, 2019), this project focuses on the way they navigate the institutional structures that govern both public and special education. For this reason, the sociological lens of structural theory was chosen.

Structural Theory

Structural theory is no one single-defined theory or approach. While it has been applied to disproportionality research (Conyers, 2002; Sullivan & Artiles, 2011), it has also been used across several different disciplines and applied in myriad ways. In essence, structural theory posits that the world is understood based on social structures that influence human actions and interactions to unfold in some ways, while also preventing them from unfolding in other ways. Examples of social structures may include laws and regulations as well as the conventions and cultural practices of institutions and organizations (Galvin, 2020). Schools and neighborhoods are considered social structures because they are designed, influenced, and altered by human behavior.

For many years, sociologists wrestled with the notion of whether society was ultimately determined by individual agents or by social structures. Giddens (1979; as cited in Pearman, 1980) structuration theory suggests that there is a "duality of structure"; abstract social structures do influence human actions, but they also persist due to the human actions which reinforce and reproduce them. Giddens also asserts that some individual agents are afforded a greater degree of influence over the nature of social structures than others, and that these agents may wield their power and attendant resources to either preserve existing structures or to effect structural changes (Galvin, 2020).

The power needed to shape or alter social structures comes in several forms, and can include material power, institutional power, people power, or discursive power. Material power may exist as a valued medium of exchange such as money. Institutional power is often bestowed upon those with official or political positions. People power can be found in the form of protest movements or acts of civil disobedience, and discursive power may be wielded through public discussion or debate (Galvin, 2020). Although Black educators have not historically been among the ranks of those empowered to directly effect change in many societal structures, they are uniquely positioned to speak on disproportionality. As both educators and citizens in a highly racialized society, Black educators' specialized training and professional roles grant them a unique vantage point from which to contribute to this decades-long discourse.

Racist Structures. Bonilla-Silva posits that societies organized according to racialized structures have specific mechanisms, practices, and social relations that create and reproduce racial inequities at all levels (1997). Although the persistent patterns of inequity experienced by Blacks in the United States have roots deeply embedded in more explicit social structures such as slavery and Jim Crow, Bonilla-Silva asserts that "racial practices that reproduce racial inequality in contemporary America are increasingly covert, are embedded in normal operations of institutions, avoid direct racial terminology, and are invisible to most Whites" (1997, p.476). It can be argued that disproportionality in special education meets the last three of these criteria.

Ableist Structures. Although primarily associated with racism, disproportionality also presents Black students with barriers resulting from ableist societal structures. Defined by Linton (1998) as "discrimination in favor of the able-bodied", ableism situates those with disabilities as inherently inferior to those without disabilities (p. 9). The social model of disability challenges this notion and suggests that it is the social environment that "disables" some individuals; ergo, a person in a wheelchair "is disadvantaged not by her inability to walk,

but by the way in which buildings are designed and constructed" (Crossley, 1999, p. 654). The

social model also offers explanations for the complexities inherent in the interactions of

disability within cultural, historical, legal, medical, and social discourses (Connor & Ferri, 2005).

Critics of the social model note that it presents the notion of disability solely as a fruit of

oppression and structural exclusion which should be eliminated, without necessarily

acknowledging that "people are disabled by society *and* by their bodies" (Shakespeare, 2006,

p.2).

Intersectionality

There is a rich body of research supporting the notion that individuals impacted by both

racism and ableism often "experience a complex interconnectivity shaped by social

disenfranchisement" (Banks, 2018, p. 896). Intersectionality, a theoretical framework rooted in

Critical Race Theory and Black feminism, seeks to uncover the roots of social inequities and the

processes that engender and maintain them. Initially introduced by Crenshaw (1989),

intersectionality is often invoked in discussions on race and disability and is employed as a

useful lens through which to examine the social and material consequences of categorical

identities, as well as how "power has clustered around certain categories and is exercised against

others" (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 375).

Use of the intersectionality term has broadened beyond its original application to the

sociohistorical plight of Black women and is now commonly used to explore and expose the

hidden dynamics of how structures of oppression are interrelated and linked (Carbado et al.,

2013). Black students who receive special education services are subjected to compounded

structural barriers and social disadvantages; an intertwining which has existed at least since the

nineteenth century when the concept of disability was racialized in the rhetoric of immigrant

restrictionists. These individuals regarded immigrants with visible or suspected disabilities as evolutionary and economic impediments, considered them socially and economically inept, and deemed them unable to meaningfully compete in, or contribute to, American society (Baynton, 2016).

Several researchers have examined the intersectionality of race and segregation based on disability (Blanchett, 2006; 2009; Shealey et al., 2005; Walker, 2014), and some have emphasized the way that racism and White supremacy quickly converged within special education (Boveda & McCray, 2020). In the years after *Brown's* passage, the processes used to identify and assign children to special education programs came under increased scrutiny due to the employ of mechanisms that served to reproduce White supremacist notions and to preserve prevailing systemic inequalities. Concerned scholars have exposed and long argued against these practices, charging that they seek to unfairly pathologize the behavior of CLD students and to rationalize depriving them of educational opportunity (Blanchett, 2006; Chhuon & Sullivan, 2013; McCall & Skrtic, 2009; Skiba et al., 2016). In many ways, *Brown's* botched implementation laid the groundwork for what was to come: the racial opportunity gap, the racial achievement gap, the continuing Black teacher shortage, disparate disciplinary practices, and disproportionality in special education.

Summary

The American education system creates and maintains a preferred social order which in turn, controls access to coveted resources and capital. Therefore, through the lens of structural theory, the persistence of disproportionality in public schools is just one example of how schools are used to preserve the social status quo. Culturally and linguistically diverse children with disabilities who also live in poverty are at double or even triple jeopardy in school systems (Fierros & Conroy, 2002; Waitoller & Artiles, 2013). While this is largely attributed to the

interactive effects of disability status, ethnicity, and poverty (Heller et al., 1982; Mercer, 1973), insufficient school funding, culturally inappropriate and unresponsive curricula/pedagogy, and inadequate educator preparation are also contributing factors (Blanchett, 2006). Poor students who are poorly educated may be afforded fewer opportunities to escape their assigned place in the social hierarchy. Teachers responsible for these students are key agents in reinforcing existing inequities, particularly when they utilize school structures to engage in discriminatory evaluation and identification practices (Stanton-Salazar, 1997).

The Social Construction of Disabilities

Subjectivity is a key concern in the discourse surrounding disproportionality since opportunities for bias permeate every single stage of the special education process. The students that are referred for evaluation, the teachers that refer them, the psychoeducational tests that are chosen, how those results are interpreted, and the decisions ultimately made at IEP eligibility determination conference meetings are all highly subjective (Brinkman et al., 2009; Cormier, 2012; Harry & Klingner, 2007; Lloyd et al., 1991; Sax, 2003). So much subjectivity at so many different levels undoubtedly influences decisions regarding which students will be identified with disabilities and which will not. In addition, there is also ambiguity between some disability categories due to overlapping criteria, which introduces yet another layer of subjectivity (Eyal, 2013; Liu et al., 2010; Ong-Dean, 2009).

Subjectivity on the part of school staff also figures prominently in the social context of disabilities, as identification and assessment instruments have often been found to yield varying results across different ethnic groups. This variability suggests that "special education referral, assessment, and eligibility rely on processes and instruments that are culturally and linguistically loaded" (Coutinho & Oswald, 2000, p. 147). Under-resourced schools and overwhelmed teachers

have also been found to contribute to the problem, particularly in cases where differential referral practices and the perceptions and decisions of classroom teachers reduce special education identification to "a social-construction process at work" (Harry et al., 2002, p. 72; Losen & Orfield, 2002). Early studies (Donovan & Cross, 2002) also cited inappropriate evaluation and referral practices, the arbitrary nature of team processes and decisions, and failure to adhere to legal guidelines as evidence of social construction (Harris et al., 2015; Knotek, 2003; MacMillan et al., 1998; Singer et al.,1989; Ysseldyke et al., 1982).

The federal eligibility categories of autism, hearing impairment, other health impairment, orthopedic impairment, traumatic brain injury, and visual impairment are among the labels which generally require some form of accompanying objective diagnostic criteria from a licensed professional external to the school setting. In contrast, emotional disturbance (ED), intellectual disability, specific learning disability and speech and/or language impairment are considered more subjective categories where eligibility is likely to be based solely on the professional judgment of school staff (O'Connor & DeLuca Fernandez, 2006). In the 2018-2019 school year, nearly 64% of students served under IDEA were found to be identified under more subjective eligibility categories (NCES, 2020). The ED label has proven particularly problematic as Eaves (1982) once observed that the eligibility criteria "borders on mindless" due to the "muddled" definition in federal law and the high degree of variability in the conceptualization of ED by school professionals (p. 464).

The social construction of disabilities also helps to explain why some disabilities hold higher status than others (Fish, 2019; McDonald et al., 2007; Thomas, 2000; Tringo, 1970). For students who are struggling in school, it may be more advantageous to be labeled with a higher status disability such as autism, other health impairment, or speech and/or language impairment,

as these labels are generally less stigmatized (Blanchett, 2010; Harry & Anderson, 1994; Ong-Dean, 2009), and are often perceived as being either unrelated or positively related to overall intelligence and general cognitive functioning (Charman et al., 2011). These labels also tend to accompany higher levels of general education inclusion (U.S. Department of Education & OSEP, 2015), offer accommodations and more support from classroom teachers, and come with a medical rationale for low academic performance (Conrad, 1976).

Lower status disability labels such as ED and intellectual disability are typically associated with greater degrees of social stigma (Blanchett, 2010; Harry & Anderson, 1994; Ong-Dean, 2009). In the case of ED, there is also a higher level of association with the juvenile justice system (Rutherford et al., 2002). The intellectual disability and ED categories are generally considered the least desirable among all categorizations, as one indicates lower intellectual capacity and the other signifies more behavior problems. These children also suffer a higher likelihood of being excluded from general education settings (Fish, 2019).

Specific learning disability (SLD) is considered a stratified status disability category as it confers lower status to some students and higher status to others (Blanchett, 2010; Fish, 2019; Ong-Dean, 2009). As noted by Sleeter (2010), SLD evolved as a preferred option for White parents who wanted their low-performing children to receive the benefits of specialized services without the associated stigmatization. This "allowed racist notions of ability to remain in place…since White students might be failing but not for the same reasons as minority, poor and immigrant students" (Ferri, 2004, p. 511). This mindset also contributed to the so-called "discrepancy model" which became a prevailing practice for SLD identification. Use of this model required that a discrepancy be noted between a student's measured intellectual ability and their demonstrated academic achievement. Collins and Camblin (1983) were among the first to

argue that the historic misuse of, and inherent cultural bias in, IQ tests resulted in Black students being less likely than Whites to be able to achieve an IQ score sufficiently high to significantly contrast with a low academic score. For this reason, Black students have historically been more likely than Whites to be labeled with intellectual impairments rather than specific learning disabilities.

The 2004 Reauthorization of IDEA included Response to Intervention (RtI) to end widespread use of the discrepancy model and to help special education teams improve assessment and identification practices. Recommendations included the use of high-quality, research-based instruction and intervention at three distinct tiers for all students (Fuchs et al., 2010). While the use of RtI was widely considered a promising tool to reduce disproportionate identification of CLD students, the lack of available research on some of the intervention tools' success with diverse student populations was considered problematic (Garan, 2002). There was also concern that CLD students might be at risk for being erroneously labeled with learning disabilities if they failed to respond to interventions that had not been designed for them in the first place (Waitoller & Thorius, 2015). Though a promising practice, a review of research on RtI cited that it was still an imperfect diagnostic tool since it was unable to either exclude or to identify a disability (Hoover, 2010). There were also challenges related to implementation of evidence-based instruction. In addition, Johnston (2011) argued that RtI did not resolve the danger of deficit-based thinking. In cases when an intervention did not work, staff might presume that the lack of response to intervention was simply "a fixed trait of the child" (p. 517) rather than possible issues with intervention fidelity, problems in the learning context, or challenges transferring interventions into the classroom setting.

The Social Context of Disproportionality

Disproportionality is not unique to the American education system. The U. S. political, economic, and legal systems are also highly racialized and structured in a way that maximizes opportunities for the privileged (Bonilla-Silva, 1997). Evidence of this can be observed reviewing the history of the American South. The abolition of slavery triggered the creation of Jim Crow laws. *Brown* was implemented to get rid of the Jim Crow laws that regulated school segregation, and it would later be invoked to provide the legal framework that would eventually codify special education. Improvements in special education were expressly intended to enfranchise students with disabilities, but these changes also led to disproportionality, which further disenfranchised Black students. Throughout the century or so in which this chain of historical events occurred, the prevailing Southern social structure established during slavery remained largely intact, both maintained by, and directly embedded within, existing social institutions.

Over the years, it has become increasingly evident that ethnic and racial disproportionality in U.S. schools is not only confined to individual student factors but that the issue must be properly situated within larger contexts. Waitoller et al., (2010) used the metaphor of a canary in a coal mine to illustrate the interconnectedness between overrepresentation and the policies and practices of the educational system at large. Scholars have suggested that overrepresentation patterns are influenced by macro level structural factors such as school funding, teacher quality, discipline policies, and high stakes testing (Losen & Orfield, 2002). They also cite micro level shifts in school culture and the values and capacities of school administrators and staff (Osher et al., 2002). In summary, disproportionality does not exist in a vacuum. It is the product of a structured society deliberately working to maintain a preferred social order.

Black Educators and *Brown*

Within the highly racialized social context of America, Black educators have effectively functioned as "equalizers" for Black school children; they have often stood in proxy of uneducated, overwhelmed, and under resourced Black parents, transmitting principles of social and educational capital to generations of Black students in their communities. The transformative potential of Black American educators can be seen when examining events surrounding one of the most pivotal legal decisions in history: *Oliver Brown et al., v. Board of Education of Topeka et al., (1954).* A critical examination of the roles of Black educators in the antecedent, advent and aftermath of the *Brown* decision provide clear and compelling examples of Black educators' willingness to make painful sacrifices on behalf of the greater good. It also reveals the ways that *Brown* fell far short of achieving its expressed purpose and how it ultimately worsened the plight for Black teachers as well as for Black students identified for special education services.

Black Educators Prior to Brown

Prior to *Brown*, Black educators held positions of considerable influence in the Black community. Even during slavery, when it was illegal for the enslaved to receive any formal schooling or reading instruction at all, anecdotal accounts are found of those who first learned and then illicitly taught others to decipher the written code at great personal risk (Douglass, n.d.). During and after the American Civil War, the Black community determined to educate themselves by organizing sabbath or Sunday schools, which were established by and for the formerly enslaved. It is estimated that these Sunday schools played a significant role in increasing the Black literacy rate from just 6% at the end of the Civil War to nearly 77% by the 1930s (Anderson, 1988). In response to aggressive lobbying efforts, sympathetic Republican politicians, the Freedman's Bureau, the Union army, and Northern missionary societies were all actively recruited to help establish state-supported, universal public education for Black children

(Anderson, 1988). In the late 1800s, many of the nation's Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) were founded as training institutions for future Black teachers, and by the time segregated schools were officially established, these literate and educated Black adults became the first employed teachers in the Black community.

Black educators faced many challenges in their quest to educate Black children in a harsh and unwelcoming society. Racism and segregation in all social institutions, including schools, had been formally sanctioned with the United States Supreme Court's *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857) decision. Although Congress abolished slavery in 1865 and went on to pass Amendment XIV to the U.S. Constitution in 1868, for the better part of the next century, the Court's rulings on race-related cases would reflect the inner struggle of a nation wrestling with the meaning of "liberty and justice for all". Supreme Court decisions have frequently been vague on both impact and implementation, and this is quite clear when one considers the fundamental similarities in the many Court cases that have been litigated on race. Decade after decade, Americans appealed to the legal system to clarify nuances in the legal interpretation of the concept of equality. Even though Amendment XIV to the U.S. Constitution declared that states could not deny any citizen the right to equal protection under the laws, Southern states continued to pass boldly racist legislation under the auspices of "state's rights".

A particularly prominent example of such legislation was Louisiana's Separate Car Act of 1890, which required that Black and White passengers be seated in "separate but equal" railway cars (NPS, 2001). This case came to the attention of the Supreme Court when Homer Plessy, an octoroon who was seven-eighths White and one-eighth Black, was charged with a violation. When he lost his Louisiana court case, Plessy's lawyers challenged the Act's constitutionality in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), only to have the Court decide that equal

protections applied to civil rights rather than to social rights (Townsend Walker, 2014). For the next half century, *Plessy* constituted the legal foundation of America's two-tiered social system, establishing that racial segregation was constitutionally permitted if segregated facilities were "equal" in quality. Since the "equal" part of that notion was never actually enforced by federal law, Blacks continued to live their lives as second-class citizens separate from and unequal to their White counterparts.

It was the "separate but equal" tenet of *Plessy* that The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) would specifically target on their long march towards *Brown*. Over and over, the NAACP lawyers strategically selected and tried cases to attack the foundation of *Plessy*, demanding educational opportunities for Blacks that were equal to those provided to Whites. In 1951, lawyers from the NAACP approached Oliver Brown, a resident of Topeka, Kansas, and asked him if he would attempt to enroll his six-year-old daughter Linda in the White school nearest their home. It is important to note that the Brown family, like many other Black families, reported being satisfied with the education their children were receiving in segregated schools. Linda Brown, who never had to endure any of the hardships of forced integration, and so technically never benefited from the decision which was later made on her behalf, has shared fond memories of her Black teachers. "They were wonderful. They wanted you to learn, and you would learn under them" (Brown, 2004). Brown's memories are consistent with research which suggests that though Black schools were materially poor prior to *Brown*, they possessed other intangible riches; "The environment of the segregated school had affective traits, institutional policies, and community support that helped Black children learn in spite of the neglect their schools received from White school boards" (Walker, 1996, p.3).

Black schools were staffed with teachers whom the families respected and trusted. These teachers demonstrated an ability to relate to Black students, and they employed methods of teaching that resulted in student achievement. In many cases, Black teachers served as disciplinarians, represented surrogate parental figures, acted as counselors and role models, and served as trusted advocates for the academic, cultural, emotional, moral and social development of Black students (King, 1993). Some researchers surmise that part of Black teachers' efficacy stemmed from the fact that they were unlikely to rationalize the shortcomings of students by blaming either familial or societal circumstances. Instead, these educators accepted their students' weaknesses, and did their best to help them achieve anyway (Foster, 1990; Milner & Howard, 2004). According to U.S. Census data at the turn of the 20th century, Black teachers numbered close to 70,000 and represented almost half of the Black professional population. This was both a direct reflection of the high demand for teachers in segregated Southern schools, as well as harsh evidence that few other professional occupations were open to Blacks at that time (Cole, 1986). Between 1932 and 1948, the numbers of Black teachers doubled in size (Milner & Howard, 2004).

Black teachers and principals were generally afforded the freedom to do what they felt was best in their buildings, and if no problems were reported, they were largely left to their own devices by White area superintendents and administrators (Milner & Howard, 2004). During this time, Black teachers also actively sought equity for their students working through social and political organizations. The relative anonymity provided by professional and social group affiliations allowed these teachers to accomplish advocacy tasks that were too personally and professionally risky for them to approach on their own, given their vulnerability to the threat of White backlash (Walker, 2013). Many of these Black educators became sacrificial advocates in

financial partnership with the NAACP and willingly appeared to ascribe to the "messianic view that dominated the era": the loss of Black teaching positions was deemed a necessary sacrifice if it advanced the cause for the greater good of school integration (Tushnet, 1987, p. 207).

When the NAACP approached Oliver Brown about filing a lawsuit against segregated schooling, they did so on principle. Even though many Black schools were safe, nurturing community spaces in which Black children were learning, there was a clear lack of needed financial and material resources. White neglect of Black schools led to what has often been referred to as "double taxation" because Black parents, teachers, and administrators had to pay local taxes that supported the area White schools as well as provide basic materials and supplies for their own children's schools (Anderson, 1988). This practice was inherently unjust and formed a foundational part of the NAACP's legal argument for equality in access and provision. As expected, little Linda Brown was refused enrollment at the White school nearest her home, and this denial formed the legal impetus for Oliver Brown to formally agree to join the lawsuit that would forever etch his name in the annals of American legal history.

The single case commonly referred to as *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954), might more accurately be described as the product of five separate but associated state cases that were argued together before the U.S. Supreme Court: South Carolina's (*Briggs v. Elliott, 1952*), Virginia's (*Davis v. County School Board, Prince Edward County, Virginia, 1952),* Delaware's *(Gebhardt v. Belton, 1952),* Washington, DC's *(Bolling v. Sharpe, 1954)* and Kansas's *(Brown v. Board of Education, 1954)* (Frazier & Lewis, 2019). Of the five composite *Brown* cases, *Briggs* was the first to be filed. In *Briggs*, Black parents initially petitioned the school board for bus transportation and equal facilities because their children were forced to walk approximately eight miles to and from school, while White students were bused to a closer building. However, once

filed by Thurgood Marshall, the core of *Briggs* was shifted to focus on segregation. This would prove to be a key strategic point of distinction. In that finding, only one judge dissented with the majority opinion, which was to deny the plaintiffs and uphold *Plessy* (Townsend Walker, 2014). The second case, *Davis,* was initiated by a student due to a disparity in the physical conditions of the local Black and White schools. When *Plessy* was once again upheld by the local court, *Davis* too, was rolled forward.

  Belton v. Gebhardt and *Bulah v. Gebhardt* were brought on behalf of students who were denied admission into White schools and forced to attend dilapidated, segregated schools located farther from their homes. Although one of those cases had been decided on behalf of the plaintiff, the school board appealed, which sent that case to the Supreme Court (Townsend Walker, 2014). *Bolling,* the final *Brown* case, was different from the others in that it was first introduced in the District of Columbia. This made it subject to federal rather than state laws. The *Bolling* case was also argued solely on the unconstitutionality of school segregation rather than on disparate resources or facilities. When the district court dismissed *Bolling* and once again upheld *Plessy*, the plaintiffs appealed, making it the final associated *Brown* case. With *Brown*, led by attorneys Charles Hamilton Houston and Thurgood Marshall, the NAACP finally had the case that would successfully challenge the prevailing social order of segregation which had been protected by *Plessy* for years (Kluger, 1977; McNeil, 1983; Rosenberg, 1991).

Black Educators During Brown

  While the passage of Brown should have been the harbinger for equal opportunities for Black teachers and students alike, this would not prove to be the case. On May 17, 1954, Chief Justice Earl Warren, who as governor had made California the first state to end school segregation just seven years earlier, led a reluctant Supreme Court to deliver a unanimous decision that finally dealt Plessy the decisive legal blow that the NAACP had long sought. In his

decision, Warren famously wrote, "we conclude that, in the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal" (Brown, 1954, p. 492). Black families and community leaders rejoiced in the Court's decision and saw it as a means to obtain the resources they had long desired for their children, as the NAACP's primary goals for *Brown* had always centered more on the lack of equal resources than on the presence of separate school buildings. Warren thought it imperative that the Court show a united front and hand down a unanimous 9-0 decision, lest a divided Court further inflame White opposition. He lobbied hard to that end. In securing the support of his Supreme Court colleagues, Warren had to walk a fine line, as he knew that Plessy had been the foundational support for many Southern state laws and could not now be overturned on judicial error (Green, 2004).

The sitting U. S. president, Dwight Eisenhower, directly lobbied Warren against a decision for the *Brown* plaintiffs. According to a documented account in *The Atlantic*, Eisenhower took Warren aside and implored him to reflect on the issue from the perspective of Southern White parents. "These are not bad people,' the president implored. 'All they are concerned about is to see that their sweet little girls are not required to sit in school alongside some big Black bucks'" (O'Donnell, 2018). Confronted with this specific fear and other perceived threats to the social order they knew and held dear, Whites immediately assumed a collective hostile stance against the *Brown* edict and responded in ways that ran the gamut from passive ignoring to active, organized resistance (Balkin, 2001; Martin, 1998; Walker, 1996; Wilson, 1995). *Brown's* supporters and dissidents alike were keenly aware that the social implications of this case were not confined to schools and classrooms. Students who went to school together would not only learn together, but they would also socialize, play, and eventually

learn to live together (Johnson & Nazaryan, 2019). *Brown* represented a threat and was widely

regarded to be a foundational crack in a strategically erected social structure that not everyone

wished to see dismantled.

Due to the sheer magnitude of White opposition, the process of desegregation proved to

be a lot more complicated than the simple handing down of the Court's decision. Whites with the

power and the responsibility to oversee the law's implementation were slow to meaningfully

respond, adopting the pace of what legal scholar Walter Gellhorn described as an

"extraordinarily arthritic snail" (Johnson & Nazaryan, 2019, p.39). Widespread resistance

ensued, which prompted the Court to release *Brown v. Board of Education* (1955) the following

year to address lingering implementation issues with the 1954 case. *Brown* (1955) ordered local

school authorities to actively dismantle their dual school systems "with all deliberate speed." As

with the original desegregation mandate, this clarifying directive also went largely ignored

(Ogletree, 2005).

While school desegregation could and certainly should have marked a victorious

milestone for Black educators in their quest for equal access, the way *Brown* was implemented

instead resulted in the effective bulldozing of the infrastructure of the entire Black educational

community. *Brown's* lawyers and plaintiffs neither foresaw, nor desired to have Black students

forcibly snatched from their familiar, protective schools and moved into hostile White schools.

Unfortunately, this is exactly what began to happen. Black schools were shuttered, Black

students were displaced, and Black teachers lost their jobs en masse. Prior to *Brown*,

"interpersonal, institutional, community and black achievement variables" "interacted and

influenced each other in culturally compatible ways," but all of that changed as *Brown* was rolled

out and the Black community became more fractured and less cohesive (Irvine & Irvine, 1983, p.

421). In addition to the wholesale loss of Black teachers, another of *Brown's* more trenchant effects was forced busing due to a host of desegregation orders which peaked in the 1960s and continued until the 1980s (Johnson & Nazaryan, 2019).

Black Educators in the Aftermath of Brown

Although some scholars maintain that *Brown* was never given a fair opportunity to demonstrate its true transformative potential (Greeley & Sheatsley, 1971), it did rather quickly change the professional status of Black educators in America. White communities' overall reluctance to have White children taught by Black teachers resulted in the firing of approximately 38,000 Black educators across 17 states between 1954 and 1965 (Holmes, 1990; King, 1993). This number represented roughly a third of the employed Black teaching force at that time (Foster, 1997), and this trend continued well beyond *Brown*'s passage and initial rollout. With fewer teaching opportunities on the horizon, the number of Black college students choosing to major in education dropped by 66% between 1975 and 1985, and an additional 21,515 Black teachers lost their jobs between 1984 and 1989 (Hudson & Holmes, 1994; Smith, 1987). In 1991, approximately 232,000 Black teachers represented just 8% of the teaching force compared to Black students constituting 16.4% of the American K-12 student population (Hawkins, 1994; as cited in Hudson & Holmes, 1994; NCES, 1991). Currently, just under 7% of the nation's teachers are Black (Taie & Goldring, 2017; USDOE, 2016), with Black male teachers representing just 2% of the entire educator workforce (NCES, 2016). It is unfortunate that nearly seven decades later, the status of Black teachers has still not rebounded to pre-*Brown* levels.

White communities and students may have emerged from the social experiment of school desegregation largely unscathed, but this was certainly not the case for the Black communities who watched their schools close and shutter, nor for the many Black teachers who lost their jobs.

It is also worth noting that Black teachers were not *Brown's* only collateral damage. Surely the entire Black community was psychologically impacted by the media images of angry White mobs terrorizing Black children who were simply trying to go to school. Those scornful public displays have come to characterize the roiling racial atmosphere in which *Brown* was unevenly implemented across the nation. Even so, a historical retrospective suggests there is quantitative evidence that desegregation was beginning to work, even in the hearts and minds of American citizens. In 1942, just 40% of non-Southerners and 2% of Southerners favored integration, but by 1956 those percentages had increased to 61% and 14% respectively. By the time President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 into law, 73% of Northerners and 34% of Southerners expressed support for integration (Greeley & Sheatsley, 1971).

It is unfortunate that the potential impact of wide scale, responsibly and fully implemented school desegregation will never be known. The courts completed most litigation surrounding desegregation by 1977, and although it was only implemented in earnest for about 15 years, select communities throughout the nation had begun to show evidence of a radical transformation in desegregation's wake (Johnson & Nazaryan, 2019). Over the years, many Black scholars have shared their views on the costs and benefits of *Brown*. Some acknowledge that *Brown* enabled at least a portion of Black America to progress in ways previously impossible, others countered that the price of progress for those few may have been too high for the vast majority (Phillip, 1994). Linda Brown would later reflect, "the impact of *Brown* is best seen in the increasing numbers of Black professionals today. These are the people that after 1954 were able to have some degree of choice. This surely made a difference in their aspirations and achievements" (Brown, 2004).

In June of 2007, 53 years after *Brown* was decided, the U.S. Supreme Court issued a decision in *Meredith v. Jefferson County Board of Education* (2007) that many consider a substantive reversal of *Brown*; race-conscious assignment plans to achieve racial balance in K-12 schools in Seattle, Washington and Louisville, Kentucky were declared unconstitutional (Horsford, 2009). Nearly seven decades post-*Brown*, the very foundations of this historic case had been renegotiated, and American schools have quietly, overwhelmingly settled back into segregation. As one scholar noted, "many of us see America as a culturally integrated mecca of progressivity, not realizing that the racial makeup and social conditions of our public-school classrooms are nearly identical to those of the Jim Crow era" (Johnson & Nazaryan, 2019).

Had there been a more equitable sharing of the risks and responsibilities associated with *Brown,* Black communities might have been able to retain one of their main pre-*Brown* strengths, which was the familiar presence of Black educators. Had desegregation started with Black teachers rather than with students, it is conceivable that the outcome might have been somewhat different. Black and White teachers and administrators could have slowly started to trade places, with some White educators being assigned to Black schools, and some Black educators being assigned to White schools. This might have allowed the adults to absorb the initial blows associated with school desegregation and could have laid the pathway for greater racial tolerance across both environments. This difference in approach might also have had the benefit of sending at least some of the needed resources to Black schools along with the White teachers, who surely would have demanded them. But, of course, this is not what happened. The relatively few Black teachers who applied to work at the newly desegregated schools were confronted with crippling employment hurdles and many had to take tests to be certified, hired, and rehired. In some cases, local educational authorities established or raised minimum cut-off scores for these tests and

thousands of Black teachers suddenly found themselves "unqualified" to teach the Black students they had successfully taught for years, simply because those Black students would now have White classmates (Green, 2004).

The contingent of Black teachers who did manage to remain employed after desegregation found that they were no longer held in the same esteem in their integrated workplaces. Black teachers and administrators assigned to White schools lost much of their professional authority and had to submit to White teachers and administrators who maintained control over the curriculum as well as the social and cultural milieu of the educational process (Green, 2004). As a result, Black teachers who survived the post-*Brown* winnowing quickly discovered that their professional voices had been largely muted, and their sense of professional self notably diminished (Milner & Howard, 2004).

Brown, Special Education and Disproportionality

In the wake of *Brown*, Black students also had to adjust to a new, stark reality. In many ways, the single greatest illustration of just how deeply the loss of Black teachers impacted the community was seen in the academic assessment of Black students in newly integrated settings. One of the most effective components of the Black teacher/student dynamic had been that Black teachers demonstrated a fundamental belief that Black children had the need, the right, and the ability to learn. White educators, however, immediately began to raise questions concerning the intellectual capacity of Black children. Black students' low self-esteem, decreasing aspirations, ability grouping, labels and placement rates in special classes began to proliferate once White teachers were given charge of Black learners (Hawkins, 1994; as cited in Hudson & Holmes, 1994). In their newly integrated settings, many Black students were assigned to the classrooms of White teachers who either outright opposed desegregation, barely tolerated the presence of Black students, or at the very least were culturally unaware of Black ways of life, norms, customs,

family, and community values (Dempsey & Noblit, 1996). This confluence of factors undoubtedly sowed the initial seeds that would quickly germinate into the overrepresentation patterns noted by Dunn a decade and a half post-*Brown*.

Blanchett (2009) has noted the ironic way *Brown* actually "gave birth" to the field of special education. Although racial integration of schools was never fully realized under *Brown*, *Brown* did provide a sound legal precedence that would later be used to open school doors for students with disabilities. In so doing, *Brown* would also signal the beginning of a complex relationship between special education, urban education, and disproportionality. As Artiles (2011) notes: "an interesting paradox in the racialization of disabilities is that the civil rights response for one group of individuals (i.e., learners with disabilities) has become a potential source of inequities for another group (i.e., CLD students) despite their shared histories of struggle for equity" (p. 431). In other words, while *Brown* inspired the legal premise for special education, those same specialized services would then eventually become weaponized to justify overrepresentation patterns. To further Blanchett's observation, it might then be argued that in effect, disproportionality is the "grandchild" of *Brown*, and has crafted a newly noxious version of the very segregation that *Brown* intended to overturn.

While *Brown* expressly dictated that separate and unequal school facilities were no longer legally permissible, there were many new ways that institutional White resistance gradually led to Black and White students having separate and unequal educational experiences within the exact same school building. Just fourteen years after *Brown*, researchers began to cite Office of Civil Rights (OCR) survey data from schools and districts which indicated that CLD students were effectively being resegregated into restrictive special education placements. Dunn was the first to explicitly question the quality of education that "socio-culturally deprived children with

mild learning problems who have been labeled educable mentally retarded" were receiving, noting that such students were often inappropriately labeled and assigned to settings where they were unlikely to receive effective special education services (Dunn, 1968, p. 5). Noting the proliferation of special education day classes and the fact that more than one third of the nation's special educators were assigned to these restrictive settings, Dunn made what are commonly regarded as the first scholarly observations about disproportionality when he observed that between 60% to 80% of the students assigned to self-contained special education classes were CLD students.

Special Education Evolves

A brief synopsis of the history of special education may be necessary to properly situate the context for Dunn's observations as well as to explain the way that race and ability came to be so deeply intertwined in sociohistorical contexts. Prior to *Brown,* students with disabilities had also experienced inequitable treatment; during that time, it is estimated that nearly half of the four million U.S. children identified with disabilities were not receiving any form of public education at all (Public Law 94-142, 1975). *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Citizens (PARC) v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (1972) built upon the legal precedent established by *Brown,* and along with *Mills v. Board of Education of the District of Columbia* (1972), is widely hailed as a foundational special education legislative victory. These cases would later pave the way for President Ford to sign the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, or Public Law 94-142, into law in 1975. Public Law 94-142 was considered a groundbreaking piece of legislation for children with disabilities aged three to 21 years of age and was designed to: "(a) improve how children with disabilities were identified and educated, (b) evaluate the success of those efforts, (c) provide due process protections for children and families and (d) financially incentivize compliant states and localities" (Public Law 94-142, para 2; USDOE, 2015). In 1986,

amendments were made to the law which extended services to children from birth to age three, and in 1990, Public Law 94-142 was rebranded as The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

Although IDEA offered much needed specialized services and supports for children with disabilities, like *Brown,* many of the intended benefits have never been fully realized or equitably distributed. Researchers noted that IDEA was being misused, resulting in CLD children experiencing inadequate service delivery, low-level instruction, and unwarranted exclusion from general education curriculum and peers (Losen & Orfield, 2002). Irregularities were also noted in the identification process, which, according to law, was to be conducted by a multidisciplinary team and free of bias and discrimination (Harry & Anderson, 1994). As a result, so-called "second generation resegregation" patterns (Meier et al., 1989) quickly began to emerge in the nation's desegregating schools during the time when integration should have been increasing.

Special Education and Disproportionality

Early concerns emerged regarding a disproportionate amount of Black and Mexican American students in California who were being labeled with cognitive impairments in school although they appeared to demonstrate age-appropriate adaptive skills in other settings (Mercer, 1973). Concerns about the meaningful interpretation and use of intelligence quotient (IQ) tests were largely validated in 1969 when the American Association on Mental Retardation decided to change the cutoff point for mental retardation from 85 to 70. This somewhat arbitrary decision instantly and inexplicably "cured" thousands of individuals who had previously met the criteria to be labeled mentally retarded (Harry & Anderson, 1994; Mercer, 1973). Specific concerns about the inappropriate use of IQ testing on Black children eventually led to California's *Larry P. v. Riles* (1972, 1974, 1984, 1986), which is probably the best-known legal challenge on the issue. The *Larry P.* decision declared that the disproportionate representation of Black students

in mild mental retardation (MMR) programs was discriminatory, banned the administration of IQ tests for Black students and ordered the elimination of overrepresentation of Blacks in educable mental retardation programs (MacMillan & Balow, 1991).

The gravity of the *Larry P.* court decision and the ensuing policy changes reflected a growing understanding that children who had been assigned special education status were facing lasting social and academic stigmatization due to their disability labels and placements (Gillung & Rucker, 1977; Jones, 1972). Disparities in special education status have been attributed to a complex interplay of many social factors, including but not limited to racial and cultural bias, uneven policy implementation, inequitable resource allocation and distribution, and questionable professional practices (Losen & Orfield, 2002). In the early eighties, an investigation was conducted analyzing available data on students identified with MMR. Possible explanations for discrepant findings were offered in the form of six explanatory rubrics which suggested that patterns of disproportionality might be explained by: (a) federal funding policies that served to incentivize the assignment of particular disability labels, (b) individual student characteristics, (c) quality of classroom instruction, (d) bias stemming from culturally insensitive assessment instruments, (e) student environmental/family factors, and/or (f) historical and cultural factors (Heller et al., 1982).

In recent years, the terms overidentification, underidentification, overrepresentation and underrepresentation have all come to be used to signify the presence of disproportionality. Overidentification is perhaps best described as inappropriate identification of a child who does not actually need specialized services. Underidentification is the failure to appropriately identify a child in actual need of services. Overrepresentation is when a child from a given racial and/or ethnic group has a higher risk of being represented, and underrepresentation is when a child from

a specific racial and/or ethnic group has a lower risk of being represented in a given context (Munk et al., 2020). The 1997 reauthorization of IDEA focused on improvements for CLD students, and states were newly required to collect and analyze data related to the poor educational outcomes of these students. In response to the charge that special education was increasing access for some and rationalizing sophisticated forms of segregation for others (Boveda & McCray, 2020), this iteration of IDEA also included increased emphasis on the notion that special education is not a "place", but instead consists of supports and services, and that those supports and services are to be offered in the least restrictive environment. Research has established that students with disabilities benefit most when they are afforded opportunities to learn alongside peers in the general education environment (Losen & Welner, 2002), and data suggests that larger numbers of students are increasingly being afforded inclusive opportunities (Gilmour, 2018).

Special Education and Disparities in Discipline

In addition to disparities in placement rates, disparate outcomes for Black students have also been well-catalogued in the area of discipline (USGAO, 2018). In a body of literature dubbed the "school-to-prison pipeline" (Wald & Losen, 2003), studies have repeatedly demonstrated a connection between exclusionary discipline practices and juvenile incarceration rates (Behnken et al., 2014; Losen, 2015; Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2009; Skiba et al., 2014). Although some researchers have not supported these findings (Morgan et al., 2019; Wright et al., 2014), other scholars have presented evidence that Black students are disciplined more frequently and more severely than their peers in other ethnic groups (Browne et al., 2002; Skiba & Knesting, 2001) despite not engaging in higher levels of disruptive behavior (Dinkes et al., 2007; Rocque, 2010). This phenomenon is sometimes referred to as "the discipline gap," and

was first documented in a Children's Defense Fund (1975) report which documented the prevalence of these disciplinary discrepancies.

McCarthy and Hoge (1987) took issue with the Children's Defense Fund findings, asserting that neither race, socioeconomic status nor gender affected the type of punishment a child received. However, more recent research soon affirmed the Children's Defense Fund claims. In 2000, Harvard University Civil Rights Project published Opportunities Suspended, a report developed by the Civil Rights Project. This report was the first comprehensive review of the disproportionate impact of zero-tolerance policies in schools on students of color. The report indicated that Black students comprised 17% of the U. S. public school enrollment yet accounted for 32% of those suspended from school. In contrast, White students were found to make up 63% of total enrollment and to comprise just 50% of school suspensions. The Civil Rights Project report also suggested that Black students were more frequently disciplined for nonviolent offenses such as disrespect, defiance, and disobedience (Blake et al., 2011), offenses which are contextual in nature and therefore highly subjective.

Underrepresentation Patterns in Gifted Education

Just as schools have a legal obligation to appropriately meet the needs of students with disabilities, they also have a professional responsibility to ensure that students who are gifted and talented are appropriately served. Since the 1970s, Asian and White students have consistently comprised the majority of those served in gifted education (Peters et al., 2019; Yoon & Gentry, 2009). This ongoing disparity at the national level is hampered both by the lack of a federal mandate for gifted education as well as by state level variability in identification criteria, educational practices, and data management strategies (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Rinn, 2020). It should be noted that in the absence of an existing federal mandate to uniformly identify and

service gifted and talented students, children who are culturally and linguistically diverse are likely to remain chronically underrepresented in this category.

Federal Policy Interventions to Increase Equity for Black Students

Brown and IDEA each extended to disenfranchised students a paperwork pledge to provide equal access and opportunities in mainstream educational settings, but those promises for an integrated education have remained largely unrealized in many important ways. Over the years, other federal policies have also failed to produce equitable learning environments for Black students. Even when conscientious policies were created with the intent to remedy social injustices, irresponsible implementation of those policies by resistant agents has resulted in a condition like "iatrogenesis"*,* a medical term that describes an intervention implemented to cure, but which instead turns out to have a more detrimental impact than the initial problem (Irvine & Irvine, 1983).

The 2001 reauthorization of the Every Student Succeeds Education Act, more commonly referred to as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), received the broad endorsement of both political parties in both the House (381–41) and Senate (87–10) when it passed. The overarching goal of NCLB was to have 100% of students performing at grade level in math, reading and science, a laudable goal which proved impossibly lofty. Among NCLB's more realistic requirements were the hiring of highly qualified teachers in classrooms and disaggregated score reporting for English language learners, racial/ethnic subgroups, low-income students, and students with disabilities. Schools were required to show that they were making progress toward 100% of students performing at or above grade level, which was termed Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Schools who failed to make AYP toward the 100% goal were subject to a list of punitive processes which included school restructuring and state take-over of school operations. Schools

who failed to make AYP three years in a row had to provide families the option to enroll in a

local higher-performing school, or to obtain supplemental educational services such as tutoring

from a list of approved vendors.

Though NCLB did result in the improvement of some test scores, positive effects were

relatively short-lived (Lee, 2006). The test focused on producing high test scores without

acknowledging the systemic factors that contributed to low test scores, and this simply served to

produce low-level classroom instruction heavily focused on test preparation. No Child Left

Behind also proved particularly punitive for schools that served primarily poor and Black

students. Poor Black students were more likely to attend underperforming schools with teachers

who were considered ineffective, inexperienced, or unqualified for the subjects they taught

(Haycock et al., 2001; Sanders & Rivers, 1996). The poor instructional profile at such

underperforming schools resulted in fewer qualified and experienced teacher applicants due to

NCLB linking financial compensation with student achievement (Irvine & Irvine, 2007). In

addition, NCLB scores revealed notable performance gaps between students identified with

disabilities and those without (Klein et al., 2006). The ultimate failure of NCLB is yet another

notable example of a federal policy that was purported to promote equity but instead proved to

be short-lived, ineffective, and ultimately damaging.

Divergent Views and Discrepant Findings

As the decades pass, increasingly divergent views have emerged in scholarship focused

on factors that contribute to disproportionality. In a review of work published from 1968 through

2006, roughly a third of included studies were found to focus on the sociodemographic traits of

students and their contexts, approximately two-thirds focused on the role of professional

practices, and nearly five percent focused on the sociohistorical contexts of overrepresentation

(Waitoller et al., 2010). Such differences in theoretical approach and analytical framing have predictably contributed to discrepant conclusions and outcomes. A June 24, 2015, New York Times op-ed piece entitled, "Is Special Education Racist?" took mainstream media by storm. In a study utilizing methodology that was highly critiqued by research peers, Morgan et al., (2015b) cited conflicting empirical studies; some suggesting that CLD children were overidentified with disabilities (e.g., Oswald et al., 1999; Sullivan & Bal, 2013) and others indicating they were underidentified (e.g., Hibel et al., 2010; Morgan et al., 2012; Morgan et al., 2013; Shifrer et al., 2011; Sullivan, 2013). Morgan's team declared that ultimately, they "failed to find any evidence that racial-, ethnic-, or language- minority children in the United States are being disproportionately overrepresented in special education" and that such children were actually "comparatively underrepresented" (Morgan et al., 2015b, pp. 285, & 281). The fact that these findings were disseminated via mainstream media no doubt increased the article's impact factor, and the topic was widely discussed by academia and members of the public alike.

Some of Morgan's colleagues openly derided the amount of sudden "prominence and traction" his worked gained in the field, resenting the "significant attention paid to a small number of scholars who claim overrepresentation does not exist, and lack of significant attention paid to a large number of scholars who focus on the origins, manifestation, and suggested resolutions regarding overrepresentation" (Connor et al., 2019, p. 723). Several researchers responded swiftly and forcefully to Morgan, charging that his analysis, methodology and conclusions were all heavily flawed (Skiba et al., 2016; Welner, 2015). Blanchett and Shealey (2016) sharply rebuked Morgan's "deficit derived claims" and disparaged his "deficit theoretical and conceptual framework" as an attempt to "erase nearly five decades of strong empirical research" (p. 1). Welner (2015) noted that Morgan's study was based on longitudinal data that

was questionable given that the students were in kindergarten back in 1998 when it was first collected. Ford and Tolson (2015) raised concerns that Morgan only looked at five federal disability labels instead of all thirteen. Morgan and Farkas (2016) responded to the tide of criticism with a direct rebuke of Skiba et al., (2016), and published a replication study in which many of their original findings were repeated (Morgan et al., 2017).

Morgan's conclusions were particularly controversial given that the 2004 Reauthorization of IDEA had outlined several measures to combat disproportionality in identification, placement, and discipline rates and in so doing had introduced three new terms into policy: disproportionate representation, significant discrepancy, and significant disproportionality. However, none of these terms had been specifically defined, and it took the Department of Education an entire year to provide additional guidance to the educators responsible for policy implementation. In 2013, the U. S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) disseminated findings focused on significant disproportionality and came to three major conclusions: there were inconsistencies in measuring disproportionate representation and significant disproportionality across states, far fewer Local Education Agencies (LEAs) admitted disproportionality in identification, placement and disciplinary removal than expected, and district officials reported that the process of determining disproportionality was too complicated, resource intensive and duplicative. Based on these findings, the GAO recommended more clarity for the public and a standard measure for significant disproportionality. The GAO did not, however, recommend increased consistency between definitions of significant disproportionality and state performance plans.

In March of 2016, more than three years after the GAO report and twelve years after the 2004 IDEA Reauthorization, the Department of Education finally proposed significant disproportionality regulations. In December of 2016, the proposed regulations were finalized and

were set to take effect on July 1, 2018. By that time, however, there had been a change in presidential administration, and the Department of Education decided to delay implementation for two years, citing the highly controversial Morgan (2015a; 2015b) findings among reasons for the delay (Yudin, 2018). A vociferous portion of the education community disagreed, and a lawsuit was filed. In March of the following year, *Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates (COPAA) v. DeVos (2019)* was decided in favor of the plaintiffs and the delay was overruled by the courts. In May of 2019, the Department of Justice appealed the *COPAA* decision and requested feedback on the use of methodology including risk ratios. The Department of Education filed an intent to issue new proposed significant disproportionality by December of 2019, and months later withdrew the *COPAA* appeal.

Although Morgan's controversial findings raised awareness of an important topic, it also weaponized data in the hands of influential individuals who lacked sufficient historical context and understanding. Policy makers proved eager to entertain the relative novelty of Morgan's claims and openly questioned long-held assumptions about the relationship between CLD students and special education. As once researcher noted, "as it has not resolved overrepresentation, special education now seeks to make it disappear. By negating overrepresentation, the field reveals its own moral limitations in favor of political concerns" (Connor et al., 2019, p.740).

The Efficacy of Black Educators

To date, no specific federal intervention has been able to deliver policy with the power to produce equitable educational outcomes for Black children. This strongly suggests that answers will need to come from the local level in the form of improved school and classroom practices. In the classroom, Black educators have consistently been identified as an asset for Black learners, and it is hard to ignore the link between Black children's problems in special education

and the systematic removal of Black educators from the nation's classrooms. Many Black educators bring a shared cultural understanding of their students' home and community life to the classroom (Easton-Brooks, 2013; Milner, 2006). They also possess enhanced abilities to bridge culture and curriculum (Villegas et al., 2012), and demonstrate the ability to create an environment that reflects students' heritages and cultural traditions (Irvine, 2003). In addition, Black educators have often been identified as the determinant factor in whether Black students are likely to receive positive affirming appraisal of their academic abilities or whether they are overlooked in classrooms (Irvine, 2003).

Meier et al., (1989) examined the link between Black teachers and Black students' access to educational equality in desegregated schools. They found that Black teacher presence correlates with fewer Black students in special education, more Black students in gifted and talented programs, and higher Black high school graduation rates. Black teachers may hold higher expectations for Black students than do their White counterparts (Dee, 2005; Fox, 2016; Gershenson et al., 2018), and those higher expectations may positively impact student achievement (Figlio, 2005; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). Additional research suggests that when taught by same race teachers, students of color have been found to attain higher test scores (Clotfelter et al., 2006; Dee, 2004; Egalite et al., 2015; Joshi et al., 2018; Penney, 2017; Yarnell & Bohrnstedt, 2017; but see Ehrenberg et al., 1995), and to demonstrate significantly higher scores in math (Irvine & Fenwick, 2011). Black students with Black teachers are also less likely to be disciplined or to be considered "behavior problems" (Bates & Glick, 2013; Dee, 2005; Downey & Prebish, 2004; Irizarry, 2015; Lindsay & Hart, 2017; Pigott & Cowen, 2000; Wright et al., 2017) and are more likely to enroll in college (Gershenson et al., 2018). For these reasons and others, Black teachers have often been described as a "commodity", a term which

acknowledges the ways they have specifically been recruited to work with Black students both in the segregated South and in modern urban settings (Brown et al., 2018).

Brown et al., (2018) explored the historical use of metaphors commonly ascribed to Black teachers, one of the most common being the "role model". Use of this metaphor extends back to the early 1800s when Black teachers were charged with serving as a symbol of so-called "racial uplift" (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999). This oft-used metaphor was based on the premise that Black teachers possessed both social and intellectual capital, and thus were expected to serve as model Black citizens (Brown et al., 2018). Black teachers have also had "kin relations", "other mother", "other father", and "other familial relations" metaphors ascribed to them, which acknowledge the historical links between Black teachers and their family and community responsibilities (Brown et al., 2018). The exploration of how and why Black teachers are defined metaphorically does much to explain the additional responsibilities that are often consciously or subconsciously ascribed to them. In one notable modern example, former Education Secretary Arne Duncan made a statement suggesting that Black male teachers could function as "surrogate fathers" for Black sons of single mothers in a new "5 by 2015" initiative. His goal was to hire 80,000 Black male teachers by 2015, boosting the population of Black male teachers by 5% (Brown, 2012).

Duncan's plan for these educators to serve as "surrogate fathers" is closely related to yet another observed phenomenon; despite representing just 2% of the educator workforce (NCES, 2016), Black male teachers report being routinely expected to serve as de facto disciplinarians for errant Black students in their school settings. Another study confirmed these findings, stating that these men often receive the message that their value as a school professional lies within this narrow constraint (Brown, 2012); some perceive that their peers and school administrators

deliberately position them to serve as disciplinarians first and as teachers second. One study reported that some Black male teachers reject the notion that they are somehow "magically constructed" to serve in the capacity of disciplinarian for misbehaving Black boys by lone virtue of shared racial and gender affiliation (Bristol & Mentor, 2018, p. 218). It is also worth noting that while an estimated 2% of all teachers are Black men, considerably fewer than that are special education teachers. So, both the smallest population of teachers and the largest population of students in special education are Black and male (Voltz, 2019).

Yet another metaphor ascribed to Black educators has been that of the "silver bullet". This refers to the ways in which Black teachers are "often misunderstood as a charmed cohort that with little effort and minimal resources can remedy the persistent PK-12 academic achievement gap between underperforming students of color and their White peers" (Brown et al., 2018, p. 288). Several researchers have noted the flaws in this characterization (Jay, 2009; Sleeter, 2010) suggesting it is just as dangerously unrealistic as the "savior" trope occasionally ascribed to White teachers (Brown, 2015; Cann, 2015). While there is much evidence to support the notion that ''Black teachers are without a doubt the key'' to the academic success of Black students (Meier et al.,1989, p. 6), they are no "silver bullet". However, they do appear to make a significant difference in several factors related to disproportionate overrepresentation.

Barriers Faced by Black Educators

Despite the many ways in which Black teachers are crucial to the success of Black students, they remain an underrepresented presence in American public schools. According to U.S. Census data, at the turn of the 20th century there were almost 70,000 Black teachers, which represented roughly half of the entire Black professional population at that time. Currently, approximately 7% of general educators (Taie & Goldring, 2017; USDOE, 2016) and 8.5% of special education teachers (Billingsley et al., 2019) are Black, although significant declines have

been noted among Black teachers in a number of U. S. cities (Albert Shanker Institute, 2015).

Black teachers were shown to have the least amount of growth in all teacher subgroups from

1987 to 2007, widening existing racial parity gaps with Black students (Villegas et al., 2012).

Many hopeful Black teacher candidates encounter roadblocks early on in their journey to

initial teacher certification. For some, certification and basic skills tests function much like a

modern "poll tax". Just as the poll tax once kept poor Southern Blacks from being allowed to

vote, rigorous teacher certification exams are further reducing the already shrinking Black

teacher candidate pool. The strategic use of such exams is not a novel tactic. Post-*Brown*, some

Black teachers who applied to work in newly integrated Southern schools were made to take

certification tests to be certified, hired, or rehired, only to have educational authorities

strategically establish minimum cut-off scores that rendered thousands of these educators

suddenly "unqualified" to teach the very students they had taught for years (Green, 2004).

Black teacher candidates who are able to successfully pass certification requirements are

still likely to face additional hurdles. Some candidates report facing employment barriers in the

form of hiring and evaluation practices that do not acknowledge the value of Black educators'

unique pedagogical potential (Bailey et al., 2016; D'Amico et al., 2017). Black teachers who do

secure teaching positions report that they often experience structural racism in education systems

(Roberts & Carter Andrews, 2013), routinely have their professional credentials challenged or

questioned, and often feel like outsiders with their majority White coworkers (Scott et al., 2020).

Some new teachers who are assigned to classrooms find that they are not adequately prepared for

the demands of teaching; although many Black preservice teachers indicate an intent to return to

urban settings to teach after graduation, urban field training is not routinely offered in their

preservice training programs (Mawhinney et al., 2012). Concerns have also been raised that

racially and ethnically diverse teachers are more likely to be dismissed based on unfairly low performance ratings (Bailey et al., 2016).

Survey data suggests that Black teachers exit the profession at a higher rate than others due to these and other school environmental factors (Albert Shanker Report, 2015; Griffin & Tackie, 2017) including working in urban schools with increased poverty, higher rates of racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity, larger concentrations of immigrant populations, and higher student mobility rates (Kincheloe, 2010). Research from 2012-2013 also cites lack of administrator support, poor working conditions, limited funding, and few opportunities for advancement as reasons that contribute to teachers of color choosing to exit the field (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Ingersoll et al., 2017). In addition, increased ancillary in-service expectations and structural and institutional factors have been indicated (Gist, 2018; Milner, 2012; Wysienska-DiCarlo et al., 2016).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with prominent educational researchers to determine how they considered the role of major policies on the Black teacher population. Some of the researchers described these policies as having an unintentionally detrimental impact while others believed them to be a form of institutional racism that played an implicit role in the systemic marginalization of Black teachers (White et al., 2019). Collectively, it is believed that these factors and others may contribute to the structural and institutional barriers that Black educators must commonly negotiate in the workplace. That Black teachers must navigate so many barriers at all is particularly troubling considering that many teachers of color tend to report entering the teaching field to combat their own past negative schooling experiences (Irizarry & Donaldson, 2012).

The Importance of Cultural Competence

Differences in culture, language, customs, values, and attitudes coupled with the unique needs of Black learners with disabilities make these students particularly vulnerable to teachers who harbor low expectations and deficit thinking (Ford, 2012). Schools are often staffed with educators who are ill-equipped to effectively teach Black children and who routinely use curricula that is neither culturally appropriate nor culturally responsive (Blanchett, 2006). Most American classrooms are designed for the success of the "ideal student", one who is more likely to be able to sit quietly for long periods of time, speak standard English and passively cooperate in the classroom setting (Kunjufu, 2005). These observations have led researchers to note that Black students are being penalized with special education assignment due to cultural differences in learning style and behavior when they are assigned to teachers who do not establish culturally responsive learning environments. Lack of sensitivity and cultural consideration have resulted in many Black boys who look, speak, behave, and learn differently than others being placed at greater risk for "misidentification, mis assessment, misclassification, misplacement and mis instruction" (Obiakor, 1999).

While much has been touted about the many ways in which Black teachers are perhaps uniquely situated to teach Black children, it is dangerous to conclude that Black teachers alone are suitable for the task. Ladson-Billings' (2009) focus on culturally relevant teaching and the fact that it is positioned separate and apart from a teacher's race is of crucial importance. Any teacher of any race can work effectively with Black students if they are willing, able, and adequately prepared to do so. However, Ladson-Billings underscores the crucial importance of White teachers being willing and able to deal with the discomfort of acknowledging racial differences and color-blindness or "dysconscious racism". Defined as "an uncritical habit of mind that justifies inequity and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given"

(King, 1991, p. 133), the willingness to acknowledge and purge oneself of dysconscious racism is an important step towards being able to teach in an environment that produces equitable outcomes for Black children. Rather than being ignored, racial and cultural differences must be acknowledged and respected if the status quo is to be challenged on behalf of those who are disadvantaged in urban classroom settings. Gay (2000) explains the importance of not only acknowledging cultural and racial differences, but also of responsibly incorporating that acknowledgement within the classroom setting:

> Knowledge and use of the cultural heritages, experiences, and perspectives of ethnic groups [of students] in teaching are far more important to improving student achievement than shared group membership. Similar ethnicity between students and teachers may be potentially beneficial, but it is not a guarantee of pedagogical effectiveness (p. 205).

III. METHODOLOGY

Knowledge derived through qualitative inquiry has the power to transform special education policy and practice, particularly when such research is empirical in nature and the findings are coherently articulated (Brantlinger et al., 2005). In this narrative study, Black educators were invited to speak from personal and professional experience regarding the disproportionate representation of Black students receiving special education services. They were also encouraged to share their recommendations for changes in practice. While the narrative form is particularly well-suited to convey personal stories of individuals' lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Dauite & Lightfoot, 2004), interpretation and findings are considerably strengthened by a systematic form of data analysis. To that end, my narrative approach is informed by elements of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014).

Research Design

Narrative research is an exercise in human story-telling that seeks to capture, understand, and theorize about humans' lived experiences for the expansion of social science knowledge (Josselson, 2011). Narrative researchers are open to a variety of epistemologies, or ways of knowing, and may choose to gather stories and generate theories through thematic, structural, dialogic, or visual approaches (Riessman, 2008). Heavily influenced by ethnography, hermeneutics, literary studies, and phenomenology (Lewis, 2014), narrative inquiry seeks to elevate the most essential components of the human experience to the level of academic discourse.

Narrative inquiry centers on "voice" (Lewis, 2014). It is a distinct form of discourse focused not only on events, but also on the accompanying human emotions, interpretations, and thoughts. Narrative researchers "develop their own voice(s) as they construct others' voices and realities", although they must take care not to "other" research participants in the process of re-

storying (Chase, 2005, p. 657; Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). According to Polkinghorne (1988), narrative inquiry can be either explanatory or descriptive in nature. Descriptive narrative can "produce an accurate description of the interpretive narrative accounts individuals or groups use to make sequences of events in their lives or organizations meaningful" (pp. 161-162). The fact that narrative research is able to give voice to historically silenced and marginalized communities can render it a particularly powerful tool for social justice issues.

Other scholars have completed different types of studies which directly privilege the voices of Black educators, and in these works, they skillfully interweave narration with narrative (Foster, 1997; Mawhinney, 2014; Walker, 1996). In the tradition of these scholars, I aimed to situate my study within the specific context of Black educators sharing stories about their work with Black students who receive special education services. Given that narrative inquiry can lead to new, more expansive ways of interpreting the human experience (Murray-Orr & Olsen, 2007), I elicited stories about these educators' own academic histories, invited them to share their informed perspectives, and asked them to connect their professional praxis to findings chronicled in a piece of seminal research authored by Dunn (1968).

Although research has been conducted on both disproportionality and the proven efficacy of Black educators teaching Black children (Fish, 2019), less is known about the perceptions and experiences of these educators and their work with Black special education students. I argue that there is a unique relationship between Black educators and Black students who receive special education services. The loss of the former led to the proliferation of the latter. Their shared racial identity results in several common social vulnerabilities. However, Black educators have successfully navigated their way through a school system rarely optimized for the success of

Black Americans and emerge uniquely qualified to lead Black students in a way that many of their professional colleagues may not be.

My specific interest centered on participants' perspectives on disproportionality, and so this study seeks to utilize a narrative lens to interrogate the following three research questions: (1) How do Black educators define, describe, or otherwise characterize their agency working with K-12 Black students in receipt of special education services? (2) How do Black educators within the K-12 setting describe their professional experiences with several specific variables related to disproportionality? (3) What specific structures within schools do these educators identify as factors that contribute to the presence and/or persistence of disproportionality?

Researcher as Instrument

In the qualitative world, the role of the researcher as an instrument is emphasized across all interpretive paradigms, particularly when semi-structured interviews are the data collection method of choice (Galletta & Cross, 2013). Narrative inquiry requires authentic self-reflection on the part of the researcher, as well as the disclosure of personal biases and beliefs (Lewis, 2014). Interview texts, which are often the product of narrative interviews, are heavily influenced by interactions between the researcher and the researched (Polkinghorne, 2007). Researcher reflexivity is needed to provide context on how the researcher's experiences, values, and inherent biases may influence epistemology, theoretical framework, methodology, design, and interpretation of the data (Trainor & Graue, 2014).

Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

I am a Black special educator who is also the mother of a child with a disability. I have 26 years of experience in education, half of which have been spent as a special education professional. In many ways, my own experiences have fueled my interest in examining the perspectives of other Black educators and how they reflect on their personal and professional

agency regarding disparate educational practices. As a special education doctoral student, I have been trained in research data collection and analysis. I have also written and presented on ways that schools and IEP teams can advocate for and support the needs of Black students who receive special education services. This dissertation study expands my research focus to include Black educators' unique perspectives on the roles they play to support Black students who receive special education services.

My experiences as a special education parent and educator have shaped my beliefs regarding the ways in which parents and children should be treated in the IEP process. I have seen that some parents are more likely than others to be denied competent, compassionate treatment due to institutional apathy or blatant bias from school staff. Accordingly, my motivations for study design are assumption laden. I assume that Black educators are more likely to be personally invested in successful outcomes for Black students, although I acknowledge that they may lack adequate professional training and experience required to achieve those ends. I further assume that my participants may not have had formal preservice or in-service professional training centered on educational access and equity. I realize that any such lack of training may influence both their perceptions and their interpretations of their own experiences.

Participants

Sampling Criteria

Purposeful sampling produced a population of Black educators who met the following established inclusion criteria: must (1) self-identify as African American or Black, (2) have a professional license to work in a K-12 public school setting, (3) be actively employed as either a special education teacher, general education teacher, school psychologist or administrator, and (4) work in a professional capacity with Black students who receive special education services.

Anyone who did not meet these criteria was excluded from participation. There were no limitations put on participant age or years of professional experience. Participants were offered a stipend of $25 via Zelle or CashApp sent electronically at the conclusion of each interview.

Recruitment Process

Approval was sought from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of Illinois at Chicago in October of 2020. Once approval was granted, recruitment documents (Appendix A) were shared with professional contacts and were also posted on Facebook and Group Me social media pages frequented by Black educators. Within the recruitment posting was a link for interested respondents to provide contact data for initial interviews. All scheduling contacts were made through email, and respondents were asked to confirm that they met inclusion criteria prior to scheduling the initial interview.

The determination of IRB was that my project met exempt status since it involved minimal participant risk (Appendix B). Therefore, written documentation of informed consent was not required. The first eligible participant response was received through the recruitment link on October 24, 2020. By November 11, 2020, eight (*n=8*) qualified participants were successfully recruited from a total of 20 respondents. Of these 20, four respondents did not meet posted inclusion criteria, seven did not respond to an invitation to schedule the initial interview, and one individual was dropped due to being unable to successfully complete the initial interview.

My IRB request was for no more than ten study participants. While there is no set recommended sample size for a narrative study, eight participants are within the commonly recommended range for studies with a homogeneous sample (Kuzel, 1992) as well as for reaching data saturation in interview studies (Guest et al., 2006). Given that special education is a team process composed of several individuals with distinct, complementary roles, it was

deemed critical to include a variety of professional voices. As Table 3 reflects, two general educators, two special educators, two administrators and two school psychologists were eventually recruited to comprise the participant pool.

Table 3

Participant Demographics

Participant's Pseudonym	Age	Years of Experience	Number of Districts Worked in	Professional Role	Grade Level Served	Highest Degree Attained
Ahmad	44	17	1	School Psychologist	PK-8	M*
Fiona	36	6	2	Special Education Teacher	7th	M
Janna	44	16	3	General Education Teacher	K-5	M
Kara	30	5	2	General Education Teacher	2nd	M*
Monica	52	2	2	Special Education Teacher	9-12	M
Nicole	51	25	2	District Administrator	PK-12	M*
Tamara	27	5	2	District Administrator	PK-12	M*
Wanita	66	33	4	School Psychologist	K-8	M

Note. All participants self-identified as Black or African American, although Tamara claims dual Latinx heritage. Participants designated with M* are currently enrolled in programs of doctorate study. Interviews were conducted on an online video platform due to social distancing requirements related to the Coronavirus pandemic of 2020.

Each educator was asked to participate in two semi-structured interviews. Ages of participants ranged from 27-62 years, with an average of 43 years of age (*M*=43.25; *Mdn*= 44). Seven of the eight participants reported experience working in more than one school district. Professional years of service ranged from 2 to 33 years with participants reporting an average of almost 14 years of experience in education (*M*=13.6; *Mdn*=11).

Instrumentation

Interview Protocol

Semi-structured interview protocols were the primary data collection tool (Appendix C). In addition to ensuring that each participant is asked identical questions in the same order, utilizing a semi-structured protocol also allows participants to elaborate on their own ideas and to be asked follow-up questions as needed. This freedom facilitates the exchange of certain information that might not otherwise be solicited and minimizes perceived power differentials between researcher and subject (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Semi-structured interviewing approaches have been said to be particularly useful in revealing "local causality", or certain processes that result in specific outcomes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). For this reason, the use of semi-structured interviews is considered uniquely suitable for identifying recurrent themes and broader patterns derived from experiences commonly shared by participants (Polkinghorne, 1995; Riessman, 2008).

The interview protocol began with open-ended questions about participants' backgrounds and educational histories. Additional questions centered on professional experiences, personal philosophies and perspectives on the presence and persistence of disproportionality. Each interview was transcribed by the researcher within 24 hours of completion. In addition to interview scripts, extensive memos and research notes were also collected. All data was

reviewed and analyzed concurrently and recursively. This allowed for new connections, questions, and insights to emerge.

Piloting

An early draft of the research protocol focused on seven areas derived from the seminal Dunn (1968) article on disproportionality. This protocol was piloted with twelve Black educators: four administrators, four special education teachers, two school psychologists, and two general educators. All pilot participants held at least one master's degree and had been in the field of education for at least seven years. Participants and a supervising professor were asked to provide feedback on the interview questions and study design. Suggestions for improvement included soliciting more background information from participants, eliminating two of the Dunn related questions, use of a smaller sample, and the addition of a second interview round. All suggestions were incorporated into the current iteration of this study.

Data Collection and Procedures

All data was collected in October and November of 2020. Data consisted of 16 interviews, researcher notes, member checks, and memos. Two narrative interviews were completed with each participant. Both interviews were audio recorded utilizing an Evistr digital voice recorder. Due to social distancing protocols required by the 2020 Coronavirus pandemic, all interviews were conducted via Zoom, an online audiovisual platform provided for student use by the university. While location is considered an important consideration in narrative inquiries (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006) the pandemic precluded interviews from safely being conducted in any other university-approved manner.

Although written consent was not required due to IRB exemption status, all participants provided verbal consent for audio recording prior to the beginning of each interview. There were

928 minutes (15 hours and 46 minutes) of audio recordings in all. Interviews averaged 58 minutes long (range=19-78 minutes) (See Appendix D). Member checks were not captured on digital audio. When the initial interview transcript was sent via email for member checking, participants were asked to schedule their second interview at that time.

Participants were warned of confidentiality risks and advised of the steps taken to safeguard the privacy of any identifiers shared. Those steps included the assigning of a unique pseudonym for participant identity protection. Specific names of students, coworkers, schools, and districts shared during interviews were also either redacted or replaced with pseudonyms. In addition, written and audio transcripts were all password protected and stored after being de-identified.

Research Memos

I composed a total of four analytical memos which were written at various stages throughout the data collection phase. These memos were used to my capture thoughts and impressions as I moved through various stages of coding, building theory, and data analysis. Memos were revised and expanded throughout the data collection process. I started by chronicling ideas for initial codes, and then later moved on to focused coding and generating code categories. This is consistent with common practice in constructivist grounded theory in which memos are generated to encourage reflexivity, minimize the preconception of data, and to capture the highly iterative nature of the interpretative process (Charmaz, 2014). I also used memoing to record the ways in which my external coder and I eventually came to consensus on codes initially disagreed upon.

Data Analysis

Although this is primarily a narrative inquiry centered on participants' stories of lived experiences, data analysis was informed by specific aspects of constructivist grounded theory, an approach that can "complement other approaches to qualitative data analysis rather than stand in opposition to them" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 16). Initial coding, focused coding, and memoing from grounded theory were used to assist in transforming the interview scripts into research text. However, the narrative view of the participants' experiences is strongly foreground in this work and the experiences shared are interwoven with researcher experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The use of certain elements of constructivist grounded theory help to frame participants' experiences in such a way that "the focus of narrative inquiry is not only on individuals' experiences but also on the social, cultural, and institutional narratives within which individuals' experiences are constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted" (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007; p. 42).

As initial themes began to emerge after the first round of interviews, follow up questions were added for the second round. This aided in extracting more information from participants and assisted with codifying recurrent ideas and themes across narrative accounts as broader patterns were established (Polkinghorne, 1995). The engaging of both researcher and participant during the interview in this manner is a form of "dialectical theory building" (Lather, 1986, p. 267), and contributed to the generation of coding categories and as well as to thematic analysis and interpretation of the research findings (Galletta & Cross, 2013).

The initial step in data analysis was for me to transcribe the sixteen interviews so that they could be closely analyzed. Transcribing them myself provided an opportunity to engage closely with the data as there were many cycles of repeated listening and typing. The first round of interviews was conducted over a period of 13 days and each interview was transcribed in the

order in which it was conducted. Once all eight initial interviews were transcribed, responses on

the transcripts were disaggregated by question and subjected to a round of initial coding.

Common patterns and preliminary themes emerged, and these were used to craft follow-up

questions for the second interview protocol. The second round of interviews was completed over

a span of 48 days and the audio files were transcribed one by one. Once the second set of

transcripts was complete, questions were also disaggregated and subjected to an initial round of

coding to determine pattern and theme emergence. All coding was done manually with the use of

a generated codebook (Appendix E).

Initial Coding

In qualitative inquiry, codes are defined as "tags or labels for assigning units of meaning

to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study" (Miles & Huberman, 1994,

p. 56). Codes are allocated to fragments of data such as paragraphs, phrases, or sentences linked

to a specific setting or a particular context (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Codes may derive from

raw data (data-driven), from the study's research questions (structural), or be developed from

existing concepts (theory-driven) (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). The following steps were taken to

inductively develop data-driven codes: "(1) reduce raw information, (2) identify subsample

themes, (3) compare themes across subsamples, (4) create codes, and (5) determine the reliability

of codes" (Boyatzis, 1998; as cited in DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2011, p. 141).

Coding is an intensely iterative process that is greatly facilitated by use of a codebook to

prevent "drift" and maintain code integrity (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Codebooks are

considered essential to qualitative data analysis as they provide a list of codes which have been

defined or operationalized (Crabtree & Miller, 1999; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Fonteyn

et al., 2008; MacQueen et al., 1998). To facilitate code reduction and simplification, I structured

my codebook using the three components described by DeCuir-Gunby et al., (2011) which include listing the code name, an operationalized definition, and an example from raw data.

I started open coding at the level of meaning (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2011). Instead of focusing word-by-word, line-by-line or even paragraph-by-paragraph, this approach involves searching for units of meaning in the form of line, sentence, or paragraph (MacQueen et al., 2007). I first searched for gerunds, or naming actions, that repeatedly occurred in the data. This method is recommended as it encourages close analysis of the interview text and aids in interrogating how context or structure serve to support, maintain, or otherwise influence actions and statements reflected in the data (Charmaz, 2003). The fact that I had already disaggregated the interview data by question greatly facilitated my search for gerunds and further enhanced my ability to compare data across respondents.

Focused Coding

Initial coding yielded a total of 84 codes for the three research questions. Focused coding was then employed to analyze, conceptualize, and categorize larger segments of the data more incisively (Charmaz, 2014). Throughout this recursive process, codes were repeatedly collapsed and regrouped. In the final analysis, twelve focused codes and twenty-five sub codes that adequately captured the essence of the data emerged (Appendix E).

Intercoder Agreement

Intercoder agreement is a term used to describe the practice of having independent coders reach a common conclusion when analyzing transcripts of joint interest. An Ivy League educated Black professional colleague with more than 30 years of experience agreed to serve as my external coder. He has been employed as an adjunct professor at various research one institutions and has also served as a teacher and administrator at five prestigious private schools on two

different continents. Using the screenshare function on Zoom, I explained the coding process and

we coded one practice question together, analyzing interview data from all eight participants.

After this initial round of training was complete, the external coder and I coded 17 of the other

20 research questions separately. The two remaining questions were demographic or factual in

nature and therefore did not require coding. After all items had been coded by both reviewers,

the results were compiled side by side. For responses on which at least 90% intercoder

agreement had not been reached, we came together in discussion to reach consensus. Portions of

these negotiation conversations also contributed to my memos.

Validity

One of the aims of validity is to ensure that results are believable from the perspective of

the participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Terrell, 2016). Rejecting standards more

appropriate for quantitative research, Lincoln & Guba (1985) have proposed that qualitative

researchers should instead aim for establishing "trustworthiness" in the form of credibility,

transferability, dependability, confirmability, and authenticity. While the realities of collecting

data during a pandemic made it difficult to observe some of the practices known to guard against

validity threats, I was able to acquire rich, detailed data by interviewing my subjects more than

once and by relying on verbatim interview transcripts rather than on field notes (Maxwell, 2013).

I also used respondent validation, or member checks, to solicit participant feedback. This was

done in two ways. First, I emailed participants copies of their transcripts soliciting feedback for

form, meaning or content. In addition, during the second interview, I followed up verbally,

directly asking each participant whether they had suggestive feedback. I also followed up with

specific clarifying questions derived from the first round of interviews. Having the opportunity to

ask additional questions minimized the possibility that I had misunderstood or misinterpreted any intended meaning.

Ethics

Ethical considerations were prioritized throughout the study. Verbiage approved by IRB was provided to each participant during the recruitment process and participant understanding was orally confirmed during the initial interview. All participants were over 18 years of age, and none were deemed to be members of vulnerable populations. In accordance with IRB, all written information was de-identified and stored in an approved manner. All materials will be destroyed at the appropriate time after dissertation defense to further minimize confidentiality risks.

Member Check

After interviews were conducted, each transcription was sent to the corresponding participant for a member check review. Member check, or respondent validation, offers participants the opportunity to submit feedback on both the accuracy and credibility of interview data (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013). It is also considered an ethical way to boost study validity (Patton, 2015). Each of the eight participants was asked for feedback on their transcripts to ensure that it was an accurate representation of their thoughts and words. Only one participant submitted member check revisions via email and suggested changes which were promptly incorporated into the script. Participants were not consulted regarding writing, analysis or editing beyond that which was solicited as part of member checking in both rounds of interviews.

IV: RESULTS

This chapter focuses on how participants' responses inform my three research questions: (1) How do Black educators define, describe, or otherwise characterize their agency working with K-12 Black students who receive special education services? (2) How do Black educators within the K-12 setting describe their professional experiences with several variables related to disproportionality? and (3) What specific structures within schools do these educators identify as factors that contribute to the presence and/or persistence of disproportionality? Participant interviews and analytic memos are the primary sources of information for addressing these research questions.

Life Histories

Narrative inquiry offers opportunities to tell stories about people's lived experiences through a collaborative enterprise "between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus" (Clandinin & Connelly 2000, p. 20). The experiences of these educators are uniquely their own. Their stories cannot be separated from their life experiences and these accounts are not presented with the expectation of being generalized into other educational contexts. In attempts to better understand these stories, it is first necessary to meet the story tellers. Therefore, each of the eight study participants was asked to introduce themselves by sharing information pertinent to their individual educational histories, their own experiences with Black educators, and their personal beliefs about education and learning. I am careful to inject the participants' words directly into the text whenever feasible. To that end, I often summarize factual details while employing the use of direct quotes to describe feelings or experiences.

Working from transcripts that were direct accounts of participants' words, I applied what Polkinghorne (1995) refers to as "narrative smoothing" to this manuscript. I omitted repetitive conversational fillers and applied other minor edits to improve narrative flow and readability while maintaining the integrity of the participants' meaning. In some cases, punctuation was added, contractions expanded, or conjunctions were edited to clarify meaning or to conform to an academic writing style. In most cases, colloquial terms or phrases were left unchanged as they provided narrative texture and captured the participants' voices. I chose to use the term "Black" as an inclusive term that avoids the exclusion of specific ethnicities or national origins. Where participants chose to use the term African American, their own word choice was reflected. I chose to use the term "White" to refer to people of European ancestry, but one participant, Kara, repeatedly used the term Caucasian. While I acknowledge that this is a non-preferred term due to its connotative origins, I honor Kara's word choice as her own. Table 4 summarizes pertinent participant information.

Table 4

Participants' Schooling Experiences

Participant	Significant Academic History	Current Role	School Attended as Child	School Employed By
Kara	IEP	Gen Ed Teacher	Urban Public	Urban Public
Tamara	Gifted	Administrator	Urban Public	Urban Public
Nicole	NA	Administrator	Suburban Parochial	Urban Public
Ahmad	NA	School Psychologist	Suburban Public	Urban Public
Wanita	NA	School Psychologist	Rural Public	Suburban Public
Janna	NA	Gen Ed Teacher	Suburban Public	Suburban Public
Monica	NA	Special Ed Teacher	Urban Parochial	Urban Public
Fiona	NA	Special Ed Teacher	Suburban Parochial	Suburban Public

Kara

"Each child deserves to receive an education."

Kara is a 30-year-old second-grade general education teacher who was born and raised on the East Coast. Of the eight participants, Kara is perhaps the most intimately connected with the various intersections that characterize this research topic as she spent her early years as a self-contained special education student in a racially segregated classroom setting.

> I needed to be bused from my home, so I was always known as "the kid on the short yellow bus." I had to go to that school because that's where the services were, and you could definitely tell the difference from where I lived and the area I went to school in. I wouldn't necessarily say I was bullied for being in special education, but I did feel uncomfortable being in a dominant Caucasian school. I don't feel like I was treated differently by the teachers, but just some of the kids, you could tell the way they were raised at home. It made me a little bit uncomfortable. It was kind of awkward for me in kindergarten through fifth grade attending two different schools, being maybe one of five students in a class. When we had assemblies, you could literally count on your hands how many African American students were in the entire school. Out of 200 students, fifteen percent, maybe less than that were African American. The sad part was most of us were all in the special education classes. There were really none of us in those general education classes.

Although the absence of Black general education peers seems to have left a distinct impression on Kara, she did not directly comment on her lack of Black teachers. Instead, she reported feeling treated well by her White teachers and shared remembered-advice from her former second-grade teacher.

Being in a dominant Caucasian school and being made fun of, not fitting in, she

told me, "don't let anyone bring you down. You can do anything you put your

mind to." She said, "you can't let what people say bring you down because

regardless of your skin tone, you can do it." I tell people I'm struggling right now

in my doctorate degree with writing papers and everything, but I'm getting As and

Bs. So, if you have that one person that tells you don't give up, you can still do it,

that's the whole point, and she was that person for me.

Although she received "a good education" from her White teachers, Kara reported having

relatively few Black adults to look up to in her school setting. She was able to recall some Black

cafeteria workers, a speech language pathologist, a special education teacher and some office

secretaries. Kara also noted that the demographics of her peer group radically shifted once she

entered her neighborhood high school, and that upon her exit from specialized services in ninth

grade, she was placed in tracked C-level classes. Unlike the gifted A-level students or the

average B-level students, Kara and her C-level classmates were all performing below the

expected grade level in reading. Kara remembered that many C-level students had IEPs and that

most were Black. It was not remembered as an ideal learning environment. "There was a

Caucasian teacher, and the class was mostly Hispanic and African American kids. I wasn't able

to make a connection to them. We were always getting yelled at. I'm like, we didn't even do

anything! Just that stereotype."

After graduating high school, Kara attended community college and earned an associate's

degree. She describes it as a great experience as well as a convenient and economical way to start

her journey towards teacher certification. Kara went on to earn a bachelor's degree and was

fortunate enough to get hired after completing student teaching at the very school she formerly

attended. At the conclusion of her preservice training, Kara felt "very prepared" to teach and has

been employed as a general educator in a Southern state for five years. Kara has taught in two

different school districts and currently teaches in a Title I school that serves mostly Black and

Latinx students. Although she is not currently designated as an inclusion teacher, Kara does have

students in her class who have IEPs for speech and others who receive services under Section

504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

It is clear from Kara's narrative that her early experiences as a special education student

have shaped the development of both her personal and professional identities. Despite having to

work hard to overcome early academic deficits, Kara has benefitted from strong supportive

social networks, and she has demonstrated both resilience and resolve in pursuit of her academic

goals.

> Yeah, I was in special education. I really had a barrier! I had to pause and say you
>
> know what? It's OK you had a speech impediment. It's OK that you were in those
>
> classes. Guess what? You can do anything you put your mind to. So, I kept
>
> chugging along. I got tutors. I got help. I had encouragement from my family.

Despite her early start in self-contained racially segregated special education classes,

Kara achieved educational outcomes not afforded to many students with similar backgrounds.

She has been able to earn a college degree, a graduate degree, has a successful teaching career,

and is currently enrolled in a doctoral program. Kara also has hopes of opening her very own

school one day. Her journey has been remarkable, but it has certainly not been without

challenges. She keeps her faith firmly rooted in a higher power.

> I'm not going to sit here and lie. I've cried. There have been times when I was in
>
> community college, I went through depression, people called me names, I've been

through the dirt and more. I tell people I'm struggling right now in my doctorate

program with writing papers and everything, but I'm getting As and Bs. I can

finally say I'm about to complete my doctorate degree within two years. I'm going

to have my own academy, my own school, in a of couple years, so despite

everything I just have to say God is going to get me through this.

Tamara

"Education has the power to liberate, but for centuries it has been used to incarcerate,

indoctrinate and subjugate."

Tamara is a 27-year-old community engagement school administrator in a Southeastern

urban district in which 100% of the staff and 98% of the students are Black. Prior to assuming

this administrative position, Tamara taught high school language arts. Currently in her fifth year

in the profession, she has worked in two different districts. Twenty-seven percent of the students

in her current district are now receiving special education services, and Tamara describes her

work with these students and their families as "meeting the needs of the folks who exist within

the margins of the margins." She positions the needs of students identified with disabilities "at

the center of every bit" of her professional planning.

Tamara's early school years were spent in urban schools comprised exclusively of other

children of color. Tamara's parents immigrated from the Dominican Republic and Spanish was

the primary language spoken in her childhood home. When Tamara first started attending school,

it was erroneously assumed that she spoke no English. As a result, she was identified as an

English Language Learner (ELL) and offered the attendant services. Tamara reported that in fact,

she had acquired both Spanish and English simultaneously, and once school staff realized that

she was a very capable bilingual student, she was removed from ELL services and identified as a gifted learner instead.

When asked what inspired her to become an educator, Tamara reflected deeply on her own educational journey from monocultural settings into predominantly White institutions.

Having the culture shock of what that was like really shifted my entire understanding of what it meant to be educated and "college-ready." It really pushed me to want to make sure that children who looked like me, who are from communities like mine, who had upbringings like mine, have access to the kinds of resources that I only had available to me once I got into the international baccalaureate high school program, and then into a predominantly White institution because of what Whiteness affords. That was the first time an educator told me that if there is something you're looking for and it doesn't exist yet, then that means you're the one who is uniquely positioned to create it. I wanted to share that with children so that they know that they are not just people who are taking in knowledge, that they can also create it themselves.

According to Tamara, the intersections of her identity form an important part of how she conceptualizes her role as an educator, and one of her main goals is for her students to remember her as an educator who made space for them to be their most authentic selves.

A lot of the kids I have served, they haven't had a Black Latinx person in front of them, and then adding a person who is non-binary and is asking them to refer to them as Mx and not Miss or Mrs.- all those things come together to create something that then gives these students an idea of what is possible. It really

shows children every bit of what they could be, what they could have, and helps
them reimagine everything that they know.

The importance Tamara attached to being able to fill this role for her students is perhaps evidenced by aspects of her own educational experience. "Even in my doctoral program right now I haven't necessarily existed in too many spaces that made space for me to thrive as my whole self, so I just figure it out as I go."

When asked about her former teachers, Tamara remembered that her first Black educator was a third-grade math teacher. She also reflects with obvious fondness on a sixth-grade social studies teacher who went above and beyond during a traumatic time in Tamara's life. When Tamara suddenly began demonstrating externalizing behaviors at school, this teacher did not give up on Tamara. Instead, she reached out, asked questions, and began to incentivize Tamara with love.

> I was the kid who would always try to hug her. Her response of "eww" as a joke
> would then make me want to hug her even more, so it became our thing. So, she
> challenged me, "if you get back to an A in my class, you not only will get a hug,
> but we'll have lunch together. It will just be me and you, our time."
> Tamara smiles when she reflects on the day she finally earned her promised reward:
> So, we had our one-on-one lunch, and we got to talk, and I got to tell her about
> my plans and everything that had happened over the year and she gave me
> cheesecake. I remember that day and I remember exactly what it tasted like
> because it was the thing that made me love cheesecake. We're still in contact.

After experiencing the transformative power of a good educator, Tamara knew that she wanted to become an educator herself, and she explained why she chose Teach for America, an alternative pathway to teacher certification.

> I wanted to teach but I didn't necessarily want to use my degree for that if that makes sense. A lot of the programs that I saw were pretty restricting, to be quite frank. There were a few courses on race, a few courses on pedagogical theory that would be grounded in critical race theory, but most were not focused on that. So, Teach for America gave me the opportunity to really merge those things that I was passionate about and be able to use my degree in Africana studies and my double minor in neuroscience and gender studies so that I'm able to apply that into context. I'm able to use my education as a tool for liberation and not just be confined to what someone says pedagogy should be. I am also able to use what I know and to do what I believe is best for children.

When asked if she felt adequately prepared to teach after pursuing this alternative certification route, Tamara admitted that she did not. "Most of the pieces that I've been able to master have come intuitively, not from training. There are pieces that come with serving the populations that I come from, the population I serve. You can't find that in a textbook."

Nicole

"I did not get into this job to be quiet. I can always use my voice."

Nicole grew up in a family that valued education. Her mother taught public school for 35 years and her father returned to school at the age of 42 to become a doctor. Nicole grew up in a Midwestern suburb and attended private Catholic schools from kindergarten through eighth grade. On days the archdiocese closed her school, Nicole traveled into the city and helped in her mother's classroom. Her mother's "powerful classroom presence" inspired Nicole to consider

pursuing a career in education, but after exiting undergrad with a psychology degree, she was unsure how to proceed. When she applied to graduate school and learned more about how the field of psychology informs the educational process, Nicole described it as "kismet." Now twenty-five years into her career, Nicole is 51 years of age and has recently accepted an administrative position in the psychology department of one of the nation's largest public-school districts.

Nicole recalled her own schooling as an overwhelmingly positive experience. "For the most part, I had an easy time making friends, doing the work, and fostering positive relationships with teachers. My mom was a teacher, so I always knew that my teachers had my parents' full support." Initially, Nicole attended a grade school composed predominantly of students of color, but when she switched schools in sixth grade, the demographics were suddenly reversed.

I was in the minority for the first time in my life and that's something that took

me almost a full day to realize. I remember that realization kind of coming to me

in the last period of the first day as I looked around my class like, "Oh, there are

only two other Black people in my room! This is different."

When one of her new White classmates called her a highly offensive racial slur to her face, Nicole reported, "I can't remember if I actually punched the guy who said it, but it didn't happen again."

Nicole only had one Black teacher who was a high school physical education instructor. Although she did not have much of an opportunity to relate to Black educators when she was a student, Nicole spoke fondly of the preservice internship in which she prepared to become a Black educator. She trained in the same large urban city in which she now works and was

surprised how much she enjoyed working with the parents despite the many words of warnings she had received.

> There was always "don't go there, you know the parents are buck wild" and all of that coded language, but what I found was just the opposite. I found gracious people who cared about their children's education just as much as anybody else. I felt like I could really connect with those parents and that they really listened to what I was saying. For someone who was 24 years old at the time, that's like oh my gosh, you mean adults are listening? They think what I say has merit? That's fantastic! So, there was that reward in there. That was probably the most surprising part of my training.

> Twenty-five years into her career, Nicole focuses on policy. Currently, this includes

making decisions about how students who receive special education services are offered remote learning services during the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. As a doctoral student, Nicole also studies disproportionality, particularly as it relates to student interactions with school resource officers (SRO). Nicole is alarmed about emerging patterns that suggest that Black students in her district are being targeted for disciplinary interactions and she is concerned about the potential academic and social implications. When asked how she wants to be remembered by the students she has worked with, Nicole shared," no matter how impaired the student I was working with was, I always made a point to talk to them about their future. I want them to look back at me as someone who affirmed their dreams."

Ahmad

"I know how to talk to Black boys. I know how to reach Black boys. The way they are doing it isn't helping."

Ahmad is a school psychologist with 17 years of experience working in a large urban school district. He spent ten years as a city-wide psychologist, traveling around addressing emergency situations, but for the last seven years, he has primarily been focused on K-8 special education referrals and evaluations. Ahmad is also licensed as a physical education teacher and a general administrator. He is currently on the cusp of reaching the candidacy level in a school psychology doctoral program. Ahmad grew up in a Midwestern suburb in a vibrant community and attended racially diverse public schools. He fondly recalls having freestyle rap battles with his friends at lunchtime.

> We would just have two of our friends look around for security. They don't like Black people getting together, especially in the suburbs, but if security were nowhere around, one person would start beating their hands on the desk or on the ground, and we would just have a little rap thing going back-and-forth. Then it turned into the dozens. But it was pretty cool until security would come and break us up.

Ahmad spoke fondly of his K-12 teachers. "I really connected well with the Black educators. White ones were kind of cool too, but it was a different type of connection*."* His first experience attending an all-Black school came when he enrolled in a nearby state university during his undergraduate years, an experience he describes as a bit of "culture shock." For graduate school, he attended a predominantly White state university and termed the experience "the opposite of what I was used to." He reported that he ended up in his chosen professional field almost by default. After being invited to participate in an apprenticeship in the psychology department, a professor who was also a school psychologist suggested that Ahmad consider

entering the field. "I was like, what's a school psychologist? So, he explained it, and I was like, I'll try it out."

Ahmad completed his school psychology internship in a wealthy, predominantly White Midwestern suburb, and this is where he first observed disproportionate special education identification practices in action.

> The traditional White young female teachers were the ones unable to really get
>
> the kids to calm down and so they made the special education referrals. Since I
>
> was an intern, I just kind of sat back and watched the psychologists who were also
>
> White women do the diagnosis and do the testing. When it was my turn, I had a
>
> different approach, but I couldn't do things 100% the way I wanted because I was
>
> still in training.

Now that he is free to make his own decisions regarding the testing and evaluation of students, Ahmad admits that he is concerned knowing that some of the children who cross his professional path do not necessarily belong in special education.

> When you look at their history you find out they have been traumatized but no
>
> one's really addressing the trauma. Or these kids just have bad home lives, and
>
> they just can't cope because they don't know how to cope. When they get to high
>
> school, they stay at home. They just don't show up at all.

Though acknowledging that his contact time with, and therefore his influence on, individual students is limited, Ahmad still has high hopes for the children that he works with.

> I really want children to be active in our future and not to be silent participants. I
>
> want them to vote. I want them to march. I want them to speak their minds about
>
> the community. If things are going wrong around them, I don't want them to

accept it. I want them to speak up. I want them to be productive members of society because they are the future.

Wanita

"Show respect, acceptance, and give encouragement to African American students. African American teachers need to model that behavior for the other teachers because some of them have no idea how to treat or encourage African American students."

Wanita is 66 years of age and has 33 years of experience working as a school psychologist. She is currently employed in a Midwest suburban school district that serves approximately 86% Latinx and 7% Black students. She was raised in an economically poor rural Southern community by a single mother who valued education for Wanita and her 7 siblings. "My mother had a very limited education. This made our learning and getting an education very important to her." Wanita also values education and considers it both a means of social mobility as well as an important way to prevent people from being manipulated by others. Her professional objective is simple. "I want any child, but especially an African American child, to know that they are accepted and respected by me. Whether I'm evaluating them or speaking with them in the hallway, I want them to feel valued by me."

Wanita was born in 1955 and graduated from high school in 1973. She had many Black educators to learn from since education was a valued and well-respected profession for educated Blacks at the time. Growing up in the South, Wanita attended segregated schools up through 1972 when a few White students were bused into her school community. Wanita reported that for her and her classmates, forced integration was an overall positive experience. "As African Americans, I felt we were very accommodating and accepting of our new classmates. They were basically nice students who wanted an education just like we did."

Like her mother, Wanita loved to read and had a strong desire to learn. She had teachers who encouraged her to attend college, and she reported being very careful with the company she chose to keep. "I hung around only those who also wanted better for themselves and who were willing to work for it." Wanita's desire to help the less fortunate eventually led her into the field of education. Of taking classes, learning, studying, and participating in study groups, Wanita remembered, "it was kind of fun, but it wasn't easy for me."

Wanita valued the preservice training required in pursuit of her master's degree because she knew it would prepare her for her life's vocation. Training to be a school psychologist in the eighties in the South, did not equip Wanita to ethically evaluate children classified as ELLs for special education eligibility, a skill sorely needed in the largely Latinx district in which she currently works. For this reason, continuing education and professional development have been particularly important to updating and maintaining her professional skillset.

Although Wanita knows that continuing professional education is important for staff to learn needed strategies to effectively educate increasingly diverse groups of children, she also believes that an educator's personal disposition is even more important.

> You don't have to know about the specifics of a person's background, just love
> them. Be accepting of other students. Sometimes we don't have time to do that
> extra diversity training and even when we do it, we don't always do anything with
> it. You can have the worst of students but if you make them feel like they're very
> special, if you love them, if you do anything for them, if you won't give up on
> them, they'll make you proud.

Janna

"As a Black educator, your eyes go to the Black kids because you want to see how they're being handled and if they're being treated fairly."

Janna is 44 years of age. She is a general educator with 16 years of experience teaching in two different school districts and is currently employed in a large suburban Midwestern district in which 1.4% of teachers and less than five percent of students are Black. The racial demographics of her workplace closely resemble that of the schools she attended growing up where she spent her formative years as one of few, and sometimes the only, Black student.

> That was an experience. By the time I got in high school, it was "The Blacks" and
> with "The Blacks" came all kinds of things: "those are the city kids, the kids who
> get into fights, you're Black, you're mean, you're tough." Since I was Black,
> White girls thought I was extra tough and I could fight. To other Black people, I
> wasn't Black enough. For teachers, I was either invisible or put into a certain
> category before they even knew my abilities.

Despite the difficulties she encountered, Janna contributed much of her eventual educational success to those early experiences. "I learned how to connect and navigate through White landscapes. It wasn't fun, but it gave me skills and helped me meander through this world a bit better than people who may have been brought up in all-Black schools."

Even within the largely White spaces Janna had to navigate, she did have a couple of Black educators, including one who figured quite prominently in her life. In addition to a Black elementary teacher in second grade, Janna remembered Dr. R, a guidance counselor. "He was the only staff of color in the building. I was going through a lot, and he really took time to help me move on to the next level. He helped me get a scholarship to college."

The scholarship that Dr. R recommended Janna for could have been used at either campus of General University System in the Midwest. For Janna, the choice was easy. "After being in school around predominantly White students, I wanted a more diverse experience. So, I really just looked at the demographic data and chose the campus with a higher percentage of Black people."

Janna did not major in education as an undergraduate student, but she taught as a substitute teacher in the city and discovered that she really wanted a career in education. It is a decision she wrestled with. "I feel like I fought it, but it kept following me. 'You should be a teacher!' 'I don't want to be a teacher! I want to graduate and make a lot of money!'" Eventually, she came to peace with herself. "My heart led me to education. I saw a need. My mind was like, I'm in college, I want to have a big career! But my heart was like, I want to help. I want to do this, and I'm kind of good at it." That led to Janna's decision to go back to school and earn a graduate degree in education.

While in graduate school, Janna moved back to the suburbs and completed her practicum and preservice training in districts with few Black students and fewer Black educators. It was during this time that she became more aware of White educators' perceptions of Black students and Black families. "You would hear little things like 'oh, are the parents involved? Is mom involved?' There is an overarching assumption that they're not, and actually a lot of time, it's the reality, which is a whole other topic." When asked if she felt that her preservice training prepared her to lead a classroom, Janna spoke quite candidly, "Probably not. I learned a lot as I taught, made mistakes, and had evaluation meetings with principals. If you have strong leadership, you're able to learn and become more purposeful in what you're doing in the classroom."

As a general educator who has also recently become licensed as a special education Learning Behavioral Specialist (LBS I), Janna shared her concerns for the plight of Black school students in general.

> Our boys are in trouble in school. The girls are too, because if their behavior is
>
> low-key, they're just pretty much ignored. There's a whole dynamic with female
>
> students in general, but Black females are definitely being overlooked, especially
>
> if they're gifted and talented, it won't come out as much. Now if the boys are
>
> gifted and talented, they'll be noticed before a Black girl, but if the Black boys are
>
> naughty? Oh my God, they are notorious throughout the building!

> For Janna, there is one logical way that Black educators can work to improve the plight

of Black students in American schools. "Get the parents in, connect with them. Parents are important. I wish we could get parents of preschoolers in and let them know what they need to do to prepare their children for school. We need to build that network."

Monica

"We need to encourage other Black people to become educators."

At 51 years of age, Monica is a special education teacher in her second year of professional service. She currently co-teaches history and language arts at a charter high school located in a large Midwestern city. Monica attended a "very pro-Black, all Black" Catholic school from grades kindergarten through eight where she benefitted from enriching cultural experiences such as an onsite school performance by the renowned Alvin Ailey dance troupe. Monica had several Black educators responsible for nurturing the culturally affirming atmosphere of her Catholic school, including the principal who was a Black woman. As might be

expected, there were also teachers who were Catholic nuns. Monica remembered, "as Black students, we didn't really feel othered. The nuns were the others, and they were mean."

Of her elementary school years, Monica remembered being a good student who did well in her studies.

I was usually an A/B student. When I got to high school, I struggled a little bit. First, I went to Catholic high school, then I went to a higher performing public high school and the counselor was like, "get her out of here!", so I ended up at a business high school. The funny thing is I always assumed, and my parents always said that I would go to college, but I didn't have any idea of how to make that happen. So, I didn't know you were supposed to go see the counselor, the counselor never approached me, I never took the SAT or the PSAT. I kept telling people, "I'm going to college", but I didn't have a clue in the closet how to do it. No one in my family had been to college so ultimately, I got married instead.

Monica hesitated for just a beat when asked what led her into a teaching career, asking with a small smile, "do you want the true story or the canned story?" I asked for the truth. Monica admitted that though she wanted to enroll in college right after high school graduation:

I didn't know how; my parents didn't know how. I married someone who also didn't go to college right after high school. He was too busy being in jail, but we both went back later. We went to school as a married couple when my son was small. Of course, my husband finished college, and I did not. I went through a cycle of divorce and remarriage and then divorce again.

Eventually, Monica was able to finish her undergraduate degree. As her fiftieth birthday loomed near, she came across an opportunity to earn a graduate degree through a one-year

special education master's program. "I looked at special education and something in me, I think it was God, said 'this is what you do', and it just resonated with me, and everything just clicked and fell into place." Although she was ultimately successful with the intensified, condensed format of the program, it was not easy. "I did well in the program. They almost killed us. One year is crazy, but it happened."

Monica described a very immersive preservice training experience in which she was asked to run the class from day one. Unlike a traditional semester-long student teaching experience, Monica taught the entire school year. She described this as a definite advantage. When asked if she felt that this concentrated, abbreviated training adequately prepared her to lead her own classroom, Monica spoke frankly. "Honestly, no. It gave me a foundation, but I don't feel like it really prepared me. I work with high school, and there are some things that you just can't teach, those little nuances that turn out to be *everything*."

It is evident that Monica's non-traditional route to college, graduate school and into her own classroom has shaped how she views herself as an educator and the legacy she hopes to leave for her students. "I want to be remembered as someone who made a difference, who taught kids about themselves, who genuinely cared, someone who is positive, someone that they can see something different in. Mostly, I want them to feel that I love them."

Of all the participants, Monica expressed some of the more revolutionary views regarding the potential of her agency as a Black educator and her thoughts on how Black educators can collectively best support the education of Black students.

> White teachers are not going to get it by and large. They are not gonna get it. So,
> we have to save our own. We have to become responsible for our own kids. We
> need to become educators. More Black people need to become teachers and we

need our own schools, our own systems, our own curriculums, all that. That's my

opinion.

Fiona

"I have a different connection with the Black students. I can't explain it."

Fiona is a sixth-year special education middle school teacher in a Midwest suburban

school district that serves approximately 86% Latinx and 7% Black students. She is 36 years of

age and hails from a family of special educators; both her mother and sister entered the

profession before her. Fiona spent time volunteering in her mom's classroom as a high school

student and majored in theater as an undergraduate. After several years working as a

paraprofessional, Fiona decided to pursue a graduate degree in special education.

Fiona attended a Catholic elementary school in which she was the only Black student

until seventh grade. She remembered having one Black teacher in second grade, several more in

high school, and she reported being a good student, attributed to the strong influence of her

family.

 I had older brothers and sisters who were great examples of how I should act in

school. They helped out a lot with organizing things, study habits, going to

college. I knew right away that I was going to college. It was not an option, and it

didn't just come from my parents. It came from my siblings as well.

When asked to share about her preservice training experience, Fiona reported that she did

the first part of her student teaching in a nearby rural district. "I was nervous at first because I

was the only Black educator at the school at the time and I was kind of worried because, you

know. However, once I got going, I felt I wasn't treated any differently." When asked about the

student population, Fiona replied, *"*I felt pretty much at home, but there weren't that many Black

students at the school, most were either White or Hispanic." Fiona was offered an opportunity to

complete the second half of her student teaching at the same school she worked as a paraprofessional in. Incidentally, this is also the same district she graduated high school from and is the district she now works in. "It was great to come back in a different role. I already felt at home in the district, so I knew that's where I was going to be."

Fiona expressed foundational beliefs about education that are no doubt inspired by the support she received from her family while growing up. "Education starts at home, so if we can get more parents involved, I think it would signal a great turnaround for our students." She also shared an experience that informs her views on the critical importance of Black professional representation in schools. "A lot of my students ask me, are you a helper? I'm like no, I'm a teacher! I went to school for this! I have a masters! I think they need to see more people of color in those positions."

Although she is still in the early stages of her career, Fiona already knows the legacy she hopes to leave her Black students.

> I want my kids to know that I'm going to bat for them. That where most teachers
> might have just tossed them to the side or not paid attention to their needs, I hope
> they will be able to say, "she really listened to me. She really understood me and
> helped me the way that I needed to be helped."

Summary and Thematic Analysis of Life Histories

As might be expected, there was a considerable degree of variation in participants' personal education histories and the routes they took to teacher certification. Kara's history as a self-contained special education student and a below average high school student was unique among participants. Tamara is the only student who identified herself as gifted. Monica and Tamara, who collectively represent 25% of the sample, both reported pursuing alternative routes to teacher certification. Sixty-three percent of participants credit their families as the primary

inspiration for their academic accomplishments, and 25% specifically named Black school staff-members as memorable sources of connection or inspiration. While Kara and Wanita each indicated that they felt prepared to assume their professional roles upon training completion, Tamara, Monica, and Janna did not.

When asked about the decision to become educators, participants echoed themes found in existing research (Griffin & Tackie, 2017) when they each responded in one of four ways: (1) following in the family professional tradition, (2) fulfilling a responsibility to the Black community, (3) responding to an inner compulsion, or (4) yielding to the voice of God. For Nicole and Fiona, entering the field of education was influenced by the fact that they each spent time as children volunteering in their mothers' classrooms, and they were comfortable with the familiar routines of the school environment. Kara and Tamara both expressed their desire to serve the Black community; Kara referencing her membership in a Black sorority that is committed to scholarship as a guiding principle and Tamara wanting to ensure that "children who looked like me, who are from communities like mine, who had upbringings like mine" gained access to resources she was not offered until she entered majority White learning spaces.

Wanita reported feeling a "strong desire" to help the less fortunate, specifically mentioning education as an empowerment tool that could prevent people from being taken advantage of, and Janna described an inner battle with her inner voice, noting that in the end, "my heart led me to education." While only Ahmad and Monica entered the field in direct response to the voice of God, all participants characterized their occupational choice as an answer to "a higher calling".

For each of my three research questions, I will now introduce and define the focused codes and themes with narrative support to demonstrate how they are grounded in the data. I will conclude each section with a summary and thematic analysis.

Codes and Themes from Research Question One

Three questions with nine sub-questions informed research question one: How do Black educators define, describe, or otherwise characterize their agency working with K-12 Black special education students? Responses to these nine sub-questions yielded 30 different initial codes, which were ultimately winnowed down to five focused codes (Appendix E). Table 5 summarizes themes, number of occurrences and sub-themes for research question one. The five focused codes: "advocating", "cultural mediating", "culturally responsive practitioner", "role models", and "limitations encountered", as well as the five related subcodes are now explored.

When Black educators were asked to characterize their agency, the first description to emerge in coding was that of the "role model", a metaphor which has been explored at some length in extant literature. Recognition of the Black teacher as a role model extends back to the 1800s when Black teachers were widely viewed as symbols of so-called "racial uplift" (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999). As such, they were widely expected to continuously project a positive community image (Brown et al., 2018). Both Tamara and Monica each ascribed some aspects of the role model characterization to themselves, citing the ways in which they function as agents of influence, represent positive Black images, and how they utilize their platforms to inspire their students to envision better futures for themselves.

Table 5

Themes, Number of Occurrences, and Sub-Themes in Research Question 1

Themes	# of Participants (n=8)	% of Total	Sub-Themes
Advocating	7	88%	
Cultural Mediating	7	88%	Blacksplaining; Bridging; Endorsing; Liaising; Protecting
Culturally Responsive Practitioner	4	50%	
Role Models	2	25%	
Limitations Encountered	4	50%	

A second characterization that emerged in coding is that of the "culturally responsive practitioner". Fifty percent of the participants described how they teach to Black students' strengths by creating conduits between culture and curriculum. Extant literature is replete with the work of scholars who have expounded on the ways in which Black educators demonstrate a shared cultural understanding of their students' home and community lives (Easton-Brooks, 2013; Milner, 2006; Villegas et al., 2012) as well as their ability to create an environment that reflects students' heritages and cultural traditions (Irvine, 2003). Ladson- Billings (2009) has contributed much to our collective understanding of the importance of culturally responsive teaching and has underscored the need for educators to create learning spaces that affirm and celebrate CLD students' unique ways of knowing.

In this study, Kara, Tamara, Janna, and Fiona offered examples of how they demonstrate cultural familiarity, incorporate performative pedagogy, and accommodate struggling learners in

culturally responsive ways. Tamara in particular spoke of employing emancipatory pedagogies derived from the scholarship of Cooper (1930), DuBois (1935), Ellis (1917), and Woodson (1933). Educators who ascribe to the philosophies of these scholars routinely (a) set high expectations for Black students, (b) teach lessons that celebrate the accomplishments of fellow Black people, and (c) develop a consciousness that critically examines the root cause of oppression, seeking solutions to end it (Duncan, 2019).

Two additional focused codes, the Black educator as a "cultural mediator" and as an "advocate" inform a theme entitled "standing in the gap". Each of these codes will now be explored in detail and illustrated with direct quotes from research participants as they describe their efforts to professionally intercede for Black students.

Cultural Mediation

Throughout the decades and across the nation, Black teachers have been both directly and indirectly relied upon to mediate the effects of White America's collective social and educational neglect of Black schoolchildren (Walker, 1996). The familiar presence and mitigating influence of Black educators have been crucial to Black children, many of whom are vulnerable to educational inequities rooted in decades of de facto and de jure discrimination augmented by White resistance to public school desegregation (Fairclough, 2007; Walker, 1996; 2013). One of the most powerful ways participants describe using cultural familiarity and influence for the benefit of Black students might best be characterized as a form of cultural mediation, a concept similar to cultural brokering (Jezewski, 1990).

Cultural mediation has been described as a complex social process that may refer to intrinsic psychological traits, the accretion of cultural elements, or the process of social interaction (Teo, 2013). According to Wertsch (2007), cultural mediation can occur through a

variety of tools that may be either explicit or implicit in nature. Cole (1998) provides examples of explicit forms of mediation that include symbols, routines, rituals, and gestures. Examples of more implicit forms include cultural knowledge or internal psychological structures. Wartofsky (1973) further divides these identified tools into three different levels, described as artifacts. The first level includes primary artifacts or physical objects. Secondary artifacts are said to be representations of primary artifacts. Tertiary artifacts include more abstract concepts such as social rules, conventions, and outcomes which in turn, influence thoughts, perceptions, and behaviors (Teo, 2013).

Schools are complex social settings that routinely expose children to various combinations of all these mediation tools in a variety of educational contexts. Given that learning environments are so multi-faceted, schools must be recognized as intersectional spaces in which the institutional culture and the students' home cultures interplay to cultivate knowledge construction, to shape children's thoughts, and to form habits of mind (Tao et al., 2012; Teo, 2013). Since the *Brown* Court decision, many Black children have been routinely required to negotiate significant cultural differences in their home and school discourse communities. Black educators who have the benefit of cultural congruence with these children are generally more qualified to facilitate this critically important negotiation process as they are more likely to be familiar with the cultural experiences of Black students and have themselves successfully navigated through school systems that are rarely optimized for the success of Black learners. It is this unique dual agency- Black educators' status as both former students and present educators within these systems- that increases the impact of their trained professional skillset. Participants in this study report using cultural mediation with staff and students alike to enlighten, to teach, and to transmit social, educational, and institutional norms.

Cultural Mediating with Adults. "Playing that monkey in the middle kind of role."

In most cases, participants reported using cultural mediation strategies to promote understanding and to facilitate interactions between staff, students, and students' families. This concept emerged in the data in five distinct codes: "bridging", "liaising", "protecting", "blacksplaining" and "endorsing." Bridging describes actions taken to promote understanding or to bridge gaps between individuals in a specific social context. Liaising, or serving as an informal liaison between staff and families, was demonstrated when educators offered cultural insight, communication tips or coaching strategies to improve interactions between families and staff. Protecting, as the term implies, describes staff engaged in direct interventions to protect students. "Endorsing" describes the efforts of Black staff to throw support behind White coworkers in specific situations and "blacksplaining" is an in vivo code that describes an attempt to provide cultural context for misunderstood urban parlance, gestures, or behavior.

In most cases, these acts of cultural mediation occurred distinctly, but situational overlap was also observed. Monica, a high school special education teacher, combined blacksplaining and protecting when a White co-teacher made an off-hand comment about the students in their co-taught class.

> One day the seventh graders were acting up and my White co-teacher had the nerve to refer to them as "animals"! Being the person that I am, I just kind of put my head down and thought, okay, I'm going to educate her a little bit, so I tried to blacksplain the kids to her. I told her, "they're not animals! Black kids may be a little bit louder or more demonstrative, but it really doesn't mean they're getting ready to attack you or anything." She was afraid of them! She's afraid of these seventh-grade children! If she's afraid, she shouldn't be here teaching them!

In this instance, the White teacher failed to recognize that the children's behavior reflected a deep cultural norm (Wise, 2016) that she neither understood nor appreciated, so Monica intervened, explaining that the students were simply engaging in a lively form of cultural expression. Then, having attempted to bridge that perspective gap, Monica shifted into a protective stance.

> So, then I just decided to run interference. I became the behavior management
> person in the classroom because I was more equipped to handle discipline. I took
> that upon myself, and she was very happy to allow me to do so. She didn't have to
> fool with these "animals" anymore.

Monica's cultural mediating efforts to both bridge and to protect are motivated by her ability to frame the children's behavior within a wider cultural context. Monica's actions here are consistent with research which suggests that Black students are less likely to have their behavior considered problematic by Black teachers (Bates & Glick, 2013; Dee, 2005; Downey & Prebish, 2004; Irizarry, 2015; Lindsay & Hart, 2017; Pigott & Cowen, 2000; Wright et al., 2017). When Monica offered to assume complete responsibility for classroom discipline, she sought to protect the seventh graders from being misunderstood and maligned. Monica's willingness to take this protective stance also serves as an example of one of the many ways in which Black educators often find themselves taxed with extra or additional responsibilities based on shared racial or cultural affiliation (King, 2016).

Janna, a third-grade general educator in a school with few Black students and even fewer Black adults also describes protective mediation efforts she regularly engages in to shield Black students from harmful disciplinary practices.

As a Black educator your eyes go to the Black kids. You want to see how they're

being handled, if they're being treated fairly, if their deficits really are deficits or

if a White educator just has a stuck scope that they can't see outside of.

However, Janna does not advocate mediation by passive observation alone, and she

suggests that educators also need to speak up to protect Black students from disparate

disciplinary practices. "We need to ask questions. Gear those questions so staff can kind of see

for themselves, 'oh, I did assign different punishments for the same act of misbehavior. Jamal

got this consequence and Brett got that one'". Janna suggested that leading her coworkers to

draw their own conclusions is preferable to simply calling them out because, "I know from

experience when you're too outspoken you get into trouble. Things are perceived as harsher

when I say them than when they come from my White counterpart." Kara, the other general

educator in the study, voiced a similar concern. "I can't have some conversations because

'there's that angry Black woman! There's an African American who thinks they know it all'!"

Liaising, or serving as a liaison, was also coded as a form of cultural mediation. Much of

the liaising described by participants was offered to promote cultural sensitivity and awareness,

or to reduce the judgment of White staff regarding the actions or attitudes of Black parents.

Janna provided an example. "I've had to speak up on behalf of Black parents who are resistant to

put their kids in special education. White teachers judge those parents. I say, 'you don't

understand where this is coming from. It's a legitimate concern historically!'"

Nicole, an administrator with a background in school psychology, offered a different

example of liaising- trying to widen her White coworkers' worldview after several showed

obvious contempt for the way a Black parent arrived dressed for an early morning IEP meeting.

When I was working at one school that I had been at for years, a lot of the parents would work the night shift. They were doing hard labor, and when they came in, they may have just come from work or just come from the construction site covered with cement dust, in their overalls. The White teachers would recoil. I'm like, what? He's coming from work. He has a job! We better accommodate him! And he's here! He literally has worked from 8:00 pm to 8:00 am and then he is here at 9:00 am for a meeting which will be on time, which will end on time, and which will accomplish what he wants it to accomplish!

Nicole provided other illustrations of instances in which she has worked to increase sensitivity, promote understanding, and reduce her White coworkers' judgment. More than one of her examples involved White teachers displaying unease after a Black parent expressed anger or frustration during a tense moment at an IEP meeting.

They would be like, "Oh, my God! The Black man is talking loud! I don't know what to do!" So, I would model for them an appropriate way to talk to a Black parent or any parent who is frustrated with their child's academic development: Listen, shut your mouth, don't tell them they're wrong, and let them finish saying what they have to say! I'm effectively modeling respect and teaching them that customer relations also apply to Black people and that Black people have a right to be upset just as White people do!

While most study participants were largely unclear on whether they felt their attempts to culturally mediate were welcomed by their White counterparts, Wanita seemed to consider her efforts both vital and valuable. "We can provide insights that will help White teachers be more accepting of our students and be more effective when educating the African American students

they encounter year after year." Monica, who has been teaching special education for two years, held a decidedly less optimistic view. "We can't expect White people to think like anything other than White people. I mean, they don't really see their thinking as a problem, so it's not like we can teach them any differently." Echoing sentiments shared by Janna and Kara, Monica also expressed practical concerns about the potential consequences of choosing to cultural mediate with her White coworkers.

> Sometimes it's tough to speak up because no one wants to be fired. To be honest, I don't know that we always have the power to protect a kid, but what we do have the power to do is to intervene with the kids by establishing relationships with them. "JaQuan, be quiet! Come here! Talk to me! Come out in the hallway!" You know that type of thing that our kids understand. We may be rescuing them in the moment from the consequences of their actions.

Cultural Mediating with Students. "Stop calling her the devil!" Monica's hypothetical words to the imaginary JaQuan illustrate the importance that participants also place on cultural mediating strategies used with students. Tamara, a first-year administrator, shared a powerful example from her teaching days of having to help her high school juniors learn to responsibly use their voices to express feelings about racism and social injustice. After leading her language arts class through The Autobiography of Malcolm X (X & Haley, 1965), Tamara was approached by a coworker, a White history teacher who wanted to know why some of their shared Black students had suddenly started referring to her as a "White devil." Tamara still looked mortified as she recounted having to sort through this incident with her students.

> You're going to a history class being taught by a White woman, and now she's wondering why she's being called the devil and she's asking ME?! She also

handles your grade and can call your mom! Stop calling her the devil! I had to do

a little bit of teaching them how their skills are transferable and how they can

utilize that passion, that drive, that fire to also re-examine that lens and the

language that they are choosing to use, especially with the desired outcome of

achieving personal and collective liberation.

Tamara's experience walking her students through this racially charged situation also

demonstrates why cultural congruence with staff matters for Black students. Tamara was able to

speak to her students from a place of what she referred to as "shared generational trauma" when

she taught Haley's text, and she also leveraged the power of cultural connection when she chided

them for calling their White teacher a "devil". Tamara held a position of influence with her

students which inspired them to listen, to reconsider their actions, and ultimately to accept

Tamara's endorsement of the White teacher. In so doing, Tamara's students showed that they

valued her perspective and afforded her a level of credibility that Black students often appear to

extend to same-race teachers (Villegas & Irvine, 2010).

Kara provided an example of a time she also successfully leveraged her cultural

credibility with a Black student when she endorsed a beleaguered and disrespected White

coworker who was later able to establish a positive relationship with the little boy once the

child's attitude improved.

You're going to respect Mr. D the same way you respect me! You have to

understand that when you get in the real world, you're going to have jobs. Your

bosses, Hispanic, Indian, whoever they are, you still need to have the same level

of respect for them!

When asked if she felt that being positioned as a Black educator impacted Black students specifically, Janna recognized that her presence has a culturally mediating effect on all students. She went on to provide an example of how she has used the platform provided by her teaching lectern, her experiences, and her perspective to challenge her White general education students' worldviews and to decenter Whiteness.

> There is an impact. There definitely is, and I would have to say that I think it's the same level for the White kids. It's just a different kind of impact because they are seeing someone in an authority position that looks like me, and my scope is not always going to be in favor of them, it's not going to be the same as theirs. So, I was able to kind of take them out of their world. I used to do a lesson where we talked about what's normal or what's regular, because White people tend to think that white is regular, and I tell them it depends on what your household is. For me, people with brown skin, that's my norm, that's the regular, and that kind of shifts their focus, like, "oh, everyone doesn't look like me or see things like me! It's not all about me at all!"

Cultural Mediation to Reduce Disproportionality. Although they engaged in cultural mediation for many reasons, participants were highly motivated to use these strategies to reduce inappropriate special education referrals. Unlike the Black teachers during the post-*Brown* era, many modern Black educators are well-positioned to reduce disproportionality by bridging knowledge and cultural gaps in the special education referral and evaluation processes. However, with Blacks representing just 7% of all educators, there are simply not enough staff professionally positioned to plug the many holes in the dam of this social construction process.

Wanita, a school psychologist, explained why this matters. "In my career I have seen a limited amount of African American school psychologists. This means that an understanding of the ethnicity and economics of the African American school population is not represented or explained well enough or often enough."

Wanita's observation underscores an important theme that repeatedly emerged from the data; lack of cultural familiarity is a main contributor to unnecessary special education referrals. It also contributes to disparate disciplinary practices that continue to harm Black students. Several participants directly identify the absence of cultural familiarity as one of the main causes of overidentification: "I think that gen ed teachers may be quick to refer certain students who don't look like them, talk like them, or sound like them"; "I see a lot of cultural insensitivity from non-African American teachers. They have stereotypes in their heads, and they buy into those stereotypes about behavior, about education"; "I think we need to be looking at ourselves and really trying to figure out what does that say about us if we have an inability to understand someone who may look, talk, walk, sound or behave differently than us or our children?"

Advocacy

Another prominent code which emerged from the data on participants' perceptions of their own agency was advocacy, a word with a strong historical legacy in the field of special education (Dorsey & Zarate, 2020). There are varying contextual definitions of advocacy; for this study, the Merriam Webster definition of an advocate as one who supports or promotes the interests of others is appropriate. Schools who prioritize advocacy and position it as a shared value are more likely to increase positive home school interactions and less likely to routinely violate policies and procedures.

While every member of an IEP team has both a legal and an ethical imperative to advocate on behalf of students, each of the eight participants in the study reported instances in which they were forced to advocate alone. Some of their advocacy efforts were as simple as requesting needed IEP changes or speaking up on behalf of voiceless children and parents. Others involved intercepting inappropriate special education referrals or requesting changes in institutional policy and practice. Advocacy is undoubtedly most effective when it is practiced collectively, but one raised voice can still effect change. In some of the examples shared, participants reported that their advocacy improved a child's plight. In other cases, it did not. In every situation, these educators raised their voices and fulfilled an important professional obligation.

Advocating to challenge practices: "increasing folks' socio-political awareness". Tamara, a former high school language arts teacher who is now a first-year administrator, described a promising new initiative aimed at reducing inappropriate referrals by encouraging district staff to confront dysconscious racism, the implicit acceptance of White norms and privileges (King, 1991). By raising awareness of the ways in which their school has adhered to restrictive practices that generate unnecessary and avoidable disciplinary interactions, Tamara is advocating for changes in the school culture and climate.

> We just want to make sure that we're training all teachers, all staff
> members on the way that we have internalized Whiteness and how that
> may impact how we engage with children, how we engage in our work,
> how we engage with each other. So that if and when those things come
> up, we can actually sit and really question why we think a particular
> thing is an issue. Is it really a disruption to have a child walking around

the room? Is it bothering anybody? Is anybody unsafe? Like why do we

need to control their bodies in that way? Why are we forcing someone to

raise their hand to get a tissue? You're an eighth grader! Get up and blow

your nose! So, all those things are pieces of what we are working to do

with the staff this school year. This is our first year rolling this out, but

our goal is to make sure that we are curbing that disproportionality and

making sure that we are increasing folks' socio-political consciousness.

The attempts of Tamara's district to reconsider the reasoning behind policies and

practices is a laudable paradigm shift. While no other participant spoke of such far-reaching

advocacy efforts to effect systemic change, several did share examples of their individual efforts

to intercept inappropriate special education referrals.

Advocating against inappropriate special education referrals: "I did not get into this

job to be quiet!" It has been established that the perceptions and referral decisions of classroom

teachers contribute to differential practices that reduce special education identification to "a

social-construction process at work" (Harry et al., 2002, p. 72; Losen & Orfield, 2002). This is

further evidenced by the fact that identification and assessment instruments have been found to

yield varying results across different ethnic groups, affirming that "special education referral,

assessment, and eligibility rely on processes and instruments that are culturally and linguistically

loaded" (Coutinho & Oswald, 2000, p. 147). School psychologists are one of the most important

gatekeepers of the special education process, and two of the participants trained as school

psychologists offered their informed perspectives on how they use their agency to advocate for

students and to preserve the integrity of the identification process.

Wanita shared, "I've had several instances where a child was being referred and the teachers had not, in my opinion, gathered enough information about the child or the child's family to make decisions that would warrant a referral for possible special education." Gathering appropriate cultural data about the child and the family is crucial, particularly given that specific learning disability, emotional disturbance, and developmental delay; a category which only exists in some states, all have paperwork that specifically list cultural factors as exclusionary criteria for eligibility determination.

Ahmad, the other school psychologist represented in the study, shared his own example of one frustrating and ultimately unsuccessful advocacy experience on behalf of a child that he strongly believed should not have been identified for services.

Last year we had a referral for a kid who was believed to have a learning disability in reading and mathematics. No information, no data, because the child just didn't want to work in the classroom. History revealed that the child had been in and out of school and bounced around everywhere, so when he's in the classroom he doesn't know what to do. I had a chance to test him. Everything was low, which makes sense because he's been bounced around everywhere. So, I was like, we can't make this kid special education, this child just needs to be in school. I shared this with the mom who said, "so I can't get an SSI (supplemental security income) check?" and when I heard that, I said THAT's the focus! The teachers were like, "Ahmad, something is wrong with this boy, he can't read!" I was like, he can read, he may not be on grade level, but you can't say that he cannot do it! The special education teacher said, "well, we're going to give him services." I

was like, OK cool. I'll just dissent. I had to do a dissenting opinion, but they went

ahead.

Shortly after this incident, Ahmad's team offered the child an IEP. The mother was then

free to pursue the desired SSI check, but then the school received notice that the family had again

moved, and the child changed schools without having an opportunity to receive any of the

needed academic help.

Ahmad's example illustrates the fact that though Black educators often take seriously the

professional responsibility to advocate for their students, those efforts may not always be

successful. Special education identification is a highly subjective process (Brinkman et al., 2009;

Cormier, 2012; Harry & Klingner, 2007; Lloyd et al., 1991; Sax, 2003), and team members do

not always interpret existing data the same way. Collegial pressure may also be exerted when

individuals come to the eligibility table with competing priorities and conflicting agendas.

Even when advocacy results in an educator taking an unpopular stance, all team members

can benefit from being asked to hear divergent opinions or from being challenged to consider an

alternate point of view. This is particularly important when it comes to disciplinary issues, as

Black children are routinely found to be disproportionately impacted by disparate disciplinary

practices. Differential disciplinary outcomes have been investigated by several researchers, some

of whom have demonstrated a connection between exclusionary discipline practices and juvenile

incarceration rates, commonly referred to as the "school-to-prison pipeline" (Behnken et al.,

2014; Losen, 2015; Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2009; Skiba et al., 2014; Wald & Losen, 2003).

Demonstrating awareness of the disparate disciplinary consequences that Black children are

subject to at school, several participants reported how they actively advocate against ineffective

disciplinary practices.

Advocating against ineffective discipline: "That's not gonna work." Janna speaks
with great conviction about ineffective disciplinary practices and cites cultural disconnect as a
contributing factor.

> There is an art form to dealing with a young rambunctious little Black boy. You
> toe the line of being a stern disciplinarian and giving love and I feel like White
> teachers, especially White females, are ill-equipped for that. They're either extra
> harsh, unjustifiably, or they're just too nice. I don't feel like White women have
> that balance and it's a detriment to our Black boys in the schools. So there have
> been lots of times I've had to speak up on behalf of Black parents, and also step in
> when it's time to deal with Black boys. That's not working for us. I've had to say
> those words: that's not gonna work!

Cultural disconnect is a phenomenon which commonly occurs when individuals from
differing cultures interact, and which frequently occurs in schools when teachers and students'
families do not have a shared cultural, economic, ethnic, linguistic, racial, or religious
background (Reynolds, 2010). Something as simple as the way a classroom teacher makes a
request of a student can lead to a Black child being deemed disrespectful or defiant simply
because he is not spoken to in a culturally familiar manner. A classic example of this is a White
female teacher "asking" Johnny if he would like to join the class on the carpet for circle time,
and Johnny truthfully responding that no, he would not like to. Johnny, whose presence is fully
expected on the carpet, is now in trouble because he does not understand that he was not truly
being offered a choice in the first place.

Culturally, when Black parents make requests of their children, they tend to state
directives (Steinberg et al.,1992), whereas it is more common for White parents to offer choices

with the expectation that their child will choose the desired option (Delpit, 1988). When White teachers who were raised by parents who offered "false choices" bring this culturally unfamiliar practice into classrooms with Black children, the crossed cultural wires can result in children being deemed disrespectful or defiant, which can be particularly detrimental for Black boys (Davis, 2003; Fashola, 2003; Garibaldi, 1992; Howard, 2008; Noguera, 2003).

Janna also offered a similar observation on discipline from an entirely different angle when she shared how discipline was handled in one of her former districts and why she feels so strongly that Black children need discipline that is not only fair and balanced, but which is also effective and appropriately dispensed.

> The way they disciplined was just horrible! Kids were running amok, including the Black students, and it would concern me to a point where I'm like, oh my gosh, these behaviors are not being addressed! The kids cannot go on like this, because if they don't learn how to tone that behavior down now, when they get bigger and blacker and people are going to be more scared of them, discipline is called jail! There were very few Black teachers but so many Black and Latino children there and those teachers were not doing any justice to those kids to just kind of let them misbehave and not address it. That's absolutely the wrong thing to do!

Additional examples of discipline related advocacy were also provided by other participants. In one case, Kara approached her administrators with concerns that they were so focused on discipline for a second-grade student that they were allowing the child's academic needs to go completely unmet. "She already has an IEP specifically for behavior! Let's stop just homing in on an African American child's behavior and let's focus on the academic part! She's

already been retained in kindergarten so she can't be retained anymore!" Once Kara advocated to

get the child's IEP expanded to include academic interventions and scheduled breaks, behavioral

improvement was noted, and the little girl began to make progress.

In another example, Tamara shared how she also advocated to get her district to change

their focus regarding one of her high school juniors who still read on a third-grade level.

He is one of the kids that I was willing to put everything on the line for and I kept

advocating making sure that he would get what he needed. But he had the

community eye on him because of his affiliation with a very big international

gang, and he was in music videos with this big artist from the area. The school's

focus was trying to make sure that they put a cap on his visibility and not on

making sure that he got his needs met. He's definitely one of the kids that I made

sure that I documented as much as possible. I made sure that I kept all his journals

so that I could make sure that I had enough evidence to say we need to get this

child the services that he needs and deserves. Did the school do it? Not

necessarily, but he and I worked to make sure that he got what he needed.

Responses provided by these participants illustrate the ways in which Black educators

who work with students in special education are equipped with both the cultural insight and the

professional knowledge needed to advocate for Black students and their families in many

important ways. Advocacy is best positioned as a community obligation, but it will always be an

individual professional responsibility, and knowledgeable, ethical educators are expected to

speak truth to those who wield power to change children's lives. "Advocacy is important work

because advocates change things. Advocates work to change hearts and minds and in doing so,

they change practices and laws. Advocates work to change culture and climate, and in doing so,

they increase tolerance and respect" (Dorsey & Zarate, 2020, p. 146). Black educators who advocate for vulnerable students in special education are doing some of the most important work they will ever engage in, whether their efforts bear the desired fruit or not.

Summary and Thematic Analysis of Research Question One

This narrative inquiry invited participants to share their professional experiences to guide and inform the development of theory regarding the ways in which Black educators characterize their agency working with Black students in receipt of specialized services. One of the major themes that emerged from data informing research question one was a form of cultural mediation that manifested in five distinct forms: bridging, liaising, protecting, endorsing and blacksplaining. One hundred percent of study participants report engaging in one or more forms of these five methods in their work.

Another thematic thread centered on the notion that 100% of participants reported they became educators in response to "a higher calling". Two of the participants, Ahmad and Monica, indicate that God directly told them to enter the field, elevating their response to the fulfillment of a divine directive. Introducing this overtly spiritual component into the discussion evoked images of these professionals purposely positioning themselves to protect Black children by metaphorically "standing in the gap".

Standing in the Gap. Standing in the gap is a biblical phrase from Ezekiel 22:30 (King James Bible, 1769/2017) which evokes a visual image of one who intercedes to cover another's vulnerability or weakness. Standing in the gap is mentioned in several biblical contexts and with various biblical figures across the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. Although none of the study participants used this specific phrase to describe their professional agency, the codes that inspired this second theme emerged directly from the interviews and describe instances in

which these educators worked to protect their students from the "bias-based spirit-murdering" (Williams, 2018, p.4) that Black children have historically been subjected to by antagonistic or indifferent teachers.

In describing their efforts to advocate, culturally mediate, protect children from racism and discrimination, serve as liaisons, and bridge cultural gaps, participants characterized their agency in ways that both support and supplement conclusions drawn in previous research focused on Black teachers (Scott et al., 2020). Brown et al., (2018) has extensively explored the historical use of metaphors commonly ascribed to Black educators; the so-called "silver bullet" is one of the more common. This metaphor is a direct reference to the way that Black teachers are "often misunderstood as a charmed cohort that with little effort and minimal resources can remedy the persistent PK-12 academic achievement gap between underperforming students of color and their White peers" (Brown et al., 2018, p. 288). Given the ways in which Black educators in this study characterize their agency working on behalf of Black students- serving as cultural mediators, bridging gaps, serving as liaisons, protecting students, advocating, challenging bias and discrimination, coaching and endorsing coworkers- it is patently obvious that there is no "silver bullet" at work. A great deal of effort is being expended as Black educators stand in the gap for their students both in the classroom and in the special education process.

Navigating Race in Racialized Workspaces. The third major themes to emerge regarding Black educators' agency was how they navigate race in racialized workspaces. Several participants acknowledged the importance of maintaining racial awareness when interacting with White staff, and half of the participants reported feeling they were assuming a professional risk when they chose to speak up on behalf of Black children. Though Nicole shared that she always

uses her voice because she "did not get into this job to be quiet!", she also acknowledged that it has sometimes been uncomfortable to do so.

Similarly, Janna and Kara reported being perceived as combative or confrontational "angry Black women" when they confronted questionable actions, beliefs, or behaviors of White colleagues. Their experiences echo findings that preservice Black teachers reported feeling "silenced by Whiteness" and harbored fears of retaliation from White peers if they chose to speak up about race during their teacher education training classes (Amos, 2016; Duncan, 2019, p. 199). Their experiences also mirror those of other educators who have described working in with hostile racial climates for students and teachers alike (Kohli, 2018).

On a related note, Janna offered specific insight on how Black children who attend schools with few same-race teachers and peers struggle to navigate race in racialized contexts.

> That's what starts the bubble with the Black kids, when they start finding their identity, and they're trying to figure out who or what they are and they're acting out in different ways. This is all kids who grew up in predominantly White suburbs, because when you're growing up out here, your blackness is not defined and you're trying to make it, trying to figure out what it is. You're getting to stand out more because you are part of "The Blacks" and then by the time you get to high school, oh my goodness, that's where I think it's at its peak. You're coming in with a reputation. "Oh, we're going to look at Shavonte and that little crew" and…the high schools know who they are, and they're looking at them, waiting for them, so the minute they do something, Shavonte coming in late, or Shavonte got that hoodie on, but let Brett have a hoodie and they don't say anything.

When Janna brings up the ways in which Black schoolchildren negotiate the crafting of their racial and cultural identities in majority White contexts, she introduces yet another benefit that Black educators provide to Black students. Although pre-*Brown* Black educators had to prepare children for the racism they faced beyond the safety of the school doors, modern Black educators are often tasked with helping Black students deal with the racism they face within school walls as well (Duncan, 2019).

Black Educators Confronting their Own Limitations: "The Ones Who Got Away". It is important to reveal the ways in which participants reported confronting the limits of their agency, both actual and aspirational. The final thematic code of research question one, "limitations encountered", captures various difficulties these educators faced in the discharge of their professional duties. Kara, Monica, and Janna all reported feeling limited by the risks inherent in choosing to speak up on behalf of students. Two of them described being viewed as "angry Black women" when speaking to their White colleagues, and the other felt she was risking her employment when trying to help her students. Ahmad reflected on feeling "powerless" to protect a child from an unnecessary identification fueled by a parent in pursuit of an SSI check and an IEP team who invalidated his professional opinion. Other participants spoke of students who suffered tragedy beyond the safety of school walls.

Perhaps the most powerful illustration of this code, "limitations encountered/the ones who got away", was a pilot study administrator who still grapples with his indirect connection to a student's unexpected death.

> When I became a dean or even an assistant principal, I did not really make the
> connection that I too, was a part of exclusionary practices, because that was the
> way it was supposed to be. My thinking has changed. I had a student that I
> personally suspended, and the next day that student was murdered while on the

suspension I gave him. It began to make me think about the impact that we have

on children. Maybe the murder would have happened regardless, whether I'd

suspended him or not, I don't know. What I did ask myself is are we putting

students into a situation that is not actually teaching them anything, but is instead

putting them in a survival situation?

This account inspired me to add a question asking current research participants to share their own examples of students with whom they had attempted to use their agency to make a difference. As anticipated, others also shared sobering accounts of missed opportunities and heartfelt regret.

 Tamara provided a sad update on a high school junior who wanted to learn to read beyond the third-grade level.

Since he left my class, he has gotten incarcerated. It's like a cookie-cutter version

of what already exists in research about how our children end up being funneled

into prison and into the criminal justice system. I just know that if I still had

contact with him, that there could have been more that I was and am able to do. I

think about him a lot.

Janna wiped away tears as she recalled a troubled student she had once tried to help. "He moved the year after I had him. A few years later I saw him at the middle school. He was so happy to see me! I was happy to see he was back and thought, maybe he'll be okay." One day, Janna was bored and decided to look up a few of her old students online. Unfortunately, she learned that this child, now a 21-year-old man, was not okay.

I Googled his name, and he is now in jail for murder. He was involved in an

armed robbery with a group of people. The owner got shot and killed. Now this

child is serving time, I want to say he got life. I don't even know what I could

have done, but this is a young Black boy! He was supposed to be safe out here,

but if that path isn't set out for them, it doesn't matter. That one just breaks my

heart. I found out about a year or so ago. I can't think about that without getting

choked up.

Despite the intentional efforts of these dedicated professionals, regardless of their desire

to reach and to teach, to advocate and to mediate for Black students, many have come to

understand that the impact of their agency is often limited by factors well beyond their control.

In some cases, participants admitted having been unwitting or unwilling actors in systems with

potential to do harm. In all cases, participants report striving to continue to do their best to stand

in the gap for the students who need them the most.

Codes and Themes from Research Question Two

The second research question focused on how Black educators describe their

professional experiences with disproportionality. Several interview items that informed this

research question were inspired by a seminal article written by Dunn (1968), in which it was

determined that "socio-culturally deprived children with mild learning problems" were often

inappropriately labeled and assigned to teachers in special education classes that were "generally

ill-prepared and ineffective" (Dunn, 1968, p.5). Obviously, there has been considerable policy

and legislative reform in the decades since Dunn penned those words. Early change came

through advocacy efforts that led to the decisions rendered in *Pennsylvania Association for*

Retarded Citizens (PARC) v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (1972), *Mills v. Board of*

Education of the District of Columbia (1972) and the Education for All Handicapped Children

Act or Public Law 94-142 (1975). More recent improvements were enacted in 1986, when

specialized services were expanded to include children from birth to age three, and then in 1990, when Public Law 94-142 was rebranded as The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The latest updates were made when IDEA was reauthorized in 1997 and 2004 and amended through Public Law 114-95, also known as Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015).

Given the considerable changes that have occurred, I was interested to hear how Black educators would compare the reality Dunn describes in 1968 to their current professional contexts. Six separate questions on Dunn's observations were captured within research question two: How do Black educators within the K-12 setting describe their professional experiences with several specific variables related to disproportionality? Responses to these six sub-questions yielded 35 different initial codes, which were ultimately winnowed down to five focused codes (Appendix E). The five focused codes: "effective components of special education", "ineffective components of special education", "negative effects of labeling", "positive effects of labeling", and "experiences with disproportionality", yielded a total of eleven subcodes, and are now explored.

Table 6

Themes, Number of Occurrences, and Sub-Themes in Research Question 2

Themes	# of Participants (n=8)	% of Total	Sub-Themes
Special Education is Effective due to Increased Inclusive Practices	2	25%	NA
Special Education is Ineffective	7	88%	Othering; Masking; Policing

Special Education Labels have Positive Attributes	7	88%	Provides Benefits; Offers Opportunities to Challenge Ableist Structures
Special Education Labels have Negative Attributes	8	100%	Stigmatization; Learned Helplessness; Lowered Expectations
Experiences with Disproportionality	4	50%	Staffing; Discipline

Effective Component of Special Education: Increased Inclusive Practices: "It's not just all the bad kids over there anymore."

There can be no doubt that many positive changes have occurred in the field of special education since Dunn's 1968 article. Perhaps most significantly, children with special needs are no longer routinely relegated to restrictive special education classrooms as teams are required to place them in the least restrictive environment (LRE). For an increasing number of children with disabilities, the LRE is identified as the general education classroom (Gilmour, 2018) and participants counted increased general education inclusion among the more effective components of modern special education programming. Janna pointed out that inclusion has been a game-changer for both the general education environment and for students with special needs. "More is put on the general education classroom to accommodate students and be aware of their needs. It's not just all the bad kids over there anymore. They're all in the classroom; good, bad, low ability, high, they're all here."

While this statement is certainly true, it is also important to note that just because "they're all here", it does not mean they are all learning. Inclusion can be done well, but it can

also be done poorly, and Fiona, a middle school special educator, offered an example of why inclusion for inclusion's sake is not always a positive experience. "A lot of the teachers didn't like me bringing my students in for gen ed lessons. The kids really wanted those connections with the other kids. I was really sad to see the teachers not pay attention to my students."

Ineffective Components of Special Education: "Somebody Else's Responsibility"

One of the more prominent codes that emerged from the data on ineffective components of special education focused on the ways in which students identified with disabilities are often the victims of "othering", an exclusionary mindset that prevents them from being fairly regarded and treated ethically by the adults entrusted with their education. Sixty-three percent of participants shared very specific examples of othering, both in mindset and in action. Ahmad revealed concerns about the way staff members think about students with disabilities in general. "I see an issue with our perceptions of special education. We have to stop thinking of special education as 'them' and start thinking as 'we'." Tamara agreed. "We tend to dispose of people who we consider a problem or who we consider unworthy or undeserving." Kara also provided an example of collective othering. "They just throw the kids aside like they're a piece of trash or dirt". Wanita sees it as a systemic issue. "Our educational system should look to teach our gen ed teachers to be more willing to educate ALL students and not to think of the more challenging students as being someone else's responsibility to educate."

Another prominent theme that emerged focused on irregularities in procedures and programming. When asked to reflect on Dunn's 1968 assertion that many children were being moved to restrictive classroom settings to benefit the general education environment rather than the individual child, several participants reported that they believe this practice continues. Specific concerns were raised about decision making in which educators did not always

effectively identify or meet the actual needs of Black students. This inspired two different codes: "policing" and "masking". Although several participants provided examples of disciplinary interactions that might be described as policing, Tamara introduced the in vivo code as a verb.

> I think it's very alarming what is happening in a lot of ways. Especially when I think about how folks just really try to police things and police bodies and then use that as a way to say, "well, this is why this person needs to be referred!" Our goal is to make sure that we are curbing disproportionality and making sure that we are increasing folks' socio-political consciousness so we're not continuing to police Black children, ultimately referring them for special education and then long-term leading them into incarceration. Because that's really how things are functioning in the US, especially in this area.

Masking was another prominent concept grounded in the data and is a term used here to describe what happens when the special education process is used to solve the wrong problem. Masking was noted by fifty percent of participants and is dangerous because it often results in a child being saddled with the stigma that accompanies a disability label without the benefit of ever having their actual needs met. Ahmad, a school psychologist, clarified, "It does more harm than good when kids who don't need special education are identified. Look at their history. They've been traumatized, but no one's addressing the trauma. We're slapping a label on a kid that doesn't need it."

Tamara shared similar concerns about her "one who got away", the junior in high school who ultimately ended up incarcerated.

> It may not be a disability of any sort, it just might be a trauma, some experience that we need to help them to overcome or to deal with. My high school student

was just having the hardest time. Nobody in the school knew that he was the only

breadwinner in the family, that his mom was sick, and he wasn't able to do any

homework because he worked after school. He was under extreme stress.

Monica neatly summed up why masking is a tidy solution that does very little to solve a

complicated problem.

A lot of the kids are traumatized, have experienced trauma and trauma brain is

not the most ideal setting for learning, but we don't address that. We just put all

this academic stuff on top of all that trauma and say, "Here! Get it! We'll just

change it around!" It's not effective.

Positive Impacts of Special Education Labeling: "You find out a name for what's going on."

When asked to reflect on Dunn's 1968 assertion that labeling does more harm than good,

several participants disagreed, inspiring the code "positive effects of labeling". Janna pointed out

that there are parents who now actively seek to have their children labeled. "We've got parents

who want their kids to have a label because then they can get extra time for testing, so right now

it's cool to have a label." Ahmad reasons that labels have simply become a fact of modern life.

"Just like you can't get eyeglasses without a prescription, if you want the services, you've got to

have a label." As a school psychologist, Ahmad can also appreciate the prescriptive insight that

labeling is intended to provide. "With the labels you know what's up. You find out a name for

what's going on."

Fiona appreciates the fact that labels may offer insight to special educators regarding

specific supports that a child might need, but Tamara laments the fact that special education

labels are still necessary at all. "There are so many special education accommodations or

modifications that if we just considered 'good practice', we could avoid a lot of the issues that we see in education right now."

Nicole, a school psychologist currently serving in an administrative capacity, offered her personal perspective on the matter.

I have changed my vernacular. I don't put labels on students, I identify areas of

need. If the child is getting the support they need to close the gap and to catch up,

then I kind of talk to parents in that way. I say, "let's not talk about what we call

it, let's talk about what he needs."

Speaking from yet another perspective, Nicole believes that labels are simply an enduring reality that present both parents and educators with valuable opportunities to challenge existing ableist structures and attitudes.

We have to educate our students about acceptance and not being ableist. Now I

will say this could be like a weird way of looking at it, but I really have been

looking at destigmatizing identification because we all have a learning disability

somewhere. It may not affect you in education, it may affect you somewhere else,

like you're horrible at directions so you're probably not the one to drive when we

go out of town. We all have areas of weakness that impact us to a significant

degree.

The data clearly reveals that several participants view special education labels as necessary and helpful for students who actually need them.

Negative Impact of Special Education Labels: "This is the retarded class."

In addition to the positive points raised about special education labeling, several participants provided evidence of the many ways in which labels continue to harm CLD children

who are already vulnerable to racism. When assigned special education status, these students also become subject to the interactive effects of social and academic stigmatization related to their disability labels and placements (Gillung & Rucker, 1977; Jones, 1972). Eighty-eight percent of participants provided examples which were coded as "stigmatization" and "learned helplessness". Kara shared her perspective as a general educator: "The higher kids ask why are they getting pulled out? The special education kids will try and explain it, then the higher kids were like, 'oh, you can't read'. So that's where the confidence and self-esteem come down."

Participants also included other examples which demonstrate that students are internalizing stigma from their special education labels and placement. " I hear comments like, 'I don't want to go to the dumb room,' and fights get started because somebody called somebody else LD (learning disabled)." These comments support Wanita's observation that, "For our students, being different means being less than."

Tamara shared a particularly disturbing example in which one of her self-contained classes openly telegraphed the way in which they felt both stigmatized and othered.

> One of the groups actually said to me that they were the group that gave me the biggest headache. I think a big part of it was their internalization of what they perceived that people perceived about them, and that led to their misbehavior. But they specifically said, and I hate the word that they used, they said, "well, this is the retarded class! We've been together since we were in sixth grade. We've been together all this time." They were in 10th grade by the time that I got them.

Other participants also drew direct connections between students' internalization of stigma and the way they were openly regarded by teachers and staff. Janna shared, "By the time they get to the upper grades, these children have been treated like they are the low kids for so

long, they already know it. So, they are prepared to give you exactly that." She connected this internalization of the stigma with evidence that some students appeared to accept the limitations placed on them. "They already know the bar is set low and they're ready to be at that low bar."

Monica's students have displayed similar responses. "The kids are like, 'you think I'm dumb, I think I'm dumb too. You don't expect anything of me, I'm going to show you, that's exactly what I'm going to give you. Nothing'". Ahmad shared that in addition to feeling stigmatized, it is also common for students with labels to simply give up. "When they're so used to being helped, kids tend not to try hard. That's where the learned helplessness comes in. Special needs teachers need to challenge their kids until that learned helplessness and feeling of inferiority is gone." As a school psychologist, Ahmad recognizes the importance of these students having opportunities to experience earned success. "Sometimes when you work hard and you get a reward for working hard, you feel good about it. Kids need that, you know. They can't be doing the same five math problems for three months."

Summary and Thematic Analysis of Research Question Two

Although several of the participants reported various negative consequences of students being labeled and placed in restrictive special education settings, there is no question that a full continuum of services is both legally and practically necessary. Participants' concerns were focused on examples of labeling and exclusionary practices being unwarranted and overused, and Kara, a general educator, expressed concern about being adequately informed on finer points of the entire process. "I'm not gonna lie, some of the diagnoses, the forms and procedures are not clear and that makes it harmful too. People don't understand. I wish there were more professional developments, more trainings about the verbiage. We need some background."

Kara's comment is particularly concerning, as it suggests she does not feel she has been provided needed information with which to make her recommendations on labeling and placement.

Thirty-eight percent of participants acknowledged that the overuse of exclusionary practices ultimately disadvantages special education and general education students alike. They believe that students with disabilities benefit from maximized general education exposure and that typically developing students can learn compassion from responsible inclusionary practices. Wanita explained, "the other students in the class would be better served being exposed to students who are struggling. That way, these students will be in a position to offer assistance to these struggling students." Janna explained why this is important. "It teaches tolerance and inclusion. Those special education kids, they learn. They learn from the general education kids and the general education kids learn from them."

The Disproportionality of Lowered Expectations. When asked to speak on their overall experiences with disproportionality, participants discussed the reasons that flawed identification practices are harmful in the larger societal context. In the course of this commentary, Ahmad offered "the disproportionality of lowered expectations" as an in vivo code. When asked to share what he meant by that phrase, Ahmad referred to the social unrest that erupted during the summer of 2020 and suggested that disproportionality in social experiences and life outcomes has simply become psychologically accepted as a byproduct of life in a racially stratified society. "People have been marching all summer and people still aren't getting it. Football players taking a knee for awareness, people still not getting it. This shows that this is more of a psychological issue than anything."

Other participants echoed Ahmad's sentiment and offered examples of how it manifests in classrooms in the form of White teachers holding lowered expectations for Black students.

Fiona reported hearing general educators preemptively say of assignments, "'Oh, the special education kids aren't gonna get it'." Nicole has also heard disparaging comments from disinvested teachers. "We really weren't expecting these kids to do well, so just figure out how we can get some Cs on this report card and move on." Tamara illuminated the ways in which lowered expectations alter teachers' professional practices: "'Oh, well. They did try some of the problems, so I guess that's okay', but I ask, if the expectation was ten problems, why not support them to get ten done instead of just giving up because they did five?"

Janna shared an account of a little boy in her school who had an IEP and was allowed to roam the halls rather than being encouraged to even attempt to do any of his schoolwork because it was "too hard" for him. According to Janna, this is proof the child's White teacher had already "written him off".

> By third grade, you've already wrote this kid's future and you decided that he
> didn't have one, so let's let him walk around the LRC (Learning Resource Center)
> all day and not do any schoolwork. That value wasn't there because somewhere
> along the line there's that repetitive messaging to the teachers, to the admin, to the
> students, that these Black and Latino kids, they're not important; "He's a loser.
> He's not gonna do anything."

Janna was also the lone participant to acknowledge how lowered expectations fuels the chronic underrepresentation of Black students in gifted and talented education. "I've been working on the other end. Let's get them in gifted ed. These kids are gifted and talented and it shouldn't be a surprise just become they come from a rough background, or they transferred from the city." Janna's observation is consistent with research which indicates that Black children who have Black teachers are more likely to be recommended for gifted and talented programs

(Grissom & Redding, 2015). Her acknowledgement of this oft overlooked area is laudable given that widespread efforts to remedy disproportionality in gifted education at the national level are hampered both by the lack of a federal mandate as well as by state level variability in education practices and data management strategies (Rinn, 2020; Donovan & Cross, 2002).

Participants also reported having to regularly decide whether and when to confront colleagues who clearly hold low expectations for their Black students and who treat them as "throwaways". Janna speaks for educators who have not abandoned the potential promise and possibility that these students still hold. "If the child can't read, you don't expect them to read Hamlet and be able to analyze it, but you have high expectations and give them something to aspire to." Nicole also holds firm to the power of setting high expectations. "We still expect progress. He may not ever reach grade level expectations, but we still need to see him gaining skills and moving forward towards a positive outcome." It is perhaps Fiona's simple statement which best sums up the mindset to which all educators who are trying to help Black students identified with disabilities should subscribe. "I feel there is always a way. It may not be the way you like it or the way you want it, but there is a way."

Being Part of the Solution. When asked about solutions for reducing disproportionality, several participants mentioned the need for more Black educators. However, Nicole and Wanita pointed out the necessity of increasing the capacity of all educators to accommodate diverse learners. Their observation aligns with research which focuses on culturally relevant teaching and the fact that it is positioned separate and apart from a teacher's race (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Although much has been touted about the unique strengths that Black educators bring to the task of helping Black students learn, it is dangerous to conclude that Black teachers alone are suitable for the task, particularly given the current shortage. Teachers of any race can work effectively

with any student provided racial and cultural differences are appropriately acknowledged and respected (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Not all participants shared this view. When asked how Black educators could best protect Black students, Monica said of her White colleagues, "They're not going to get it by and large. We have to become responsible for our own kids. We need to become educators. More Blacks need to become teachers. We need our own schools, our own systems, our own curricula." With this observation, Monica invokes Du Bois (1935), who posited that segregated schools were necessary as long as American schools subjected Black students to racist policies and practices. Du Bois reasoned that having Black schools in control of their own curriculum and hiring practices would better serve the needs of Black students because Black educators possess knowledge of Black students as individuals and also "of his surroundings and background, and the history of his class and group" (p. 328). Research suggests that even the notion of all-Black schools continues to battle the *Brown*-related stigma of assumed inferiority, a perception which formed part of the legal argument for the decision to desegregate (Gleibermann, 2018).

The variety of responses that informed this thread of the data demonstrate that although they have many experiences in common, Black educators hold a wide variety of opinions regarding how best to reduce disproportionality. Whether they want to increase the overall capacity of general educators, expand curricular offerings for students who do not aspire to attend college, increase the presence of Black children in gifted education, or return Black children to classrooms led by Black teachers, these educators demonstrate an understanding of many of the structural issues that contribute to disproportionality.

Codes and Themes from Research Question Three

The third research question invited participants to identify specific structures at the local, state, and federal levels that contribute to the presence or persistence of over and underrepresentation patterns in special education. Nineteen initial codes were reduced to two focused codes (Appendix E), and Table 7 indicates how "external structures", and "internal structures" were further informed by nine subcodes. The three codes categorized as external to the school setting were (a) structural racism, (b) White dominant culture, and (c) school funding mechanism. The six codes classified as internal to the school setting were (a) parent engagement practices, (b) resource allocation, (c) intervention practices, (d) professional development agendas, (e) staffing patterns/recruitment practices and (f) instructional practices. These codes and related themes are now explored.

Table 7

Themes, Number of Occurrences, and Sub-Themes in Research Question 3

Themes	# of Participants (n=8)	% of Total	Sub-Themes
External Structures	5	63%	Structural Racism; White Dominant Culture; School Funding Mechanisms
Internal Structures	8	100%	Parent Engagement Practices; Instructional Practices; District Resource Allocation; Staffing Patterns/Recruitment Practices; Professional Development Priorities; Intervention Practices

External Structures

When the data was coded, 63% of participants identified either "structural racism", "White dominant culture", or "school funding mechanisms" as structures beyond school walls that contribute to disproportionality within school walls. Structural racism both impacts and is perpetuated by social institutions such as schools. It focuses not on the motivations of individuals but instead examines racism embedded within institutional practices, policies, and procedures (Blaisdell, 2016, p. 249). Use of the term White dominant culture acknowledges institutional practices such as the privileging of policies that reflect the social values and norms of White middle-class Americans. School funding mechanisms simply references the way communities choose to prioritize, allocate and channel funds into public education. In some cases, participants' responses reflected their understanding that these three concepts may be functionally intertwined.

Structural Racism. In many ways, schools may be thought of as microcosms of larger society, and 25% of participants identified ways in which discriminatory school practices simply reflect the racist attitudes that permeate society at large. Janna reflected that, "Somewhere along the line there's that repetitive messaging to the teachers, to the admin, to the students, that these Black and Latino kids, they're not important." Ahmad's response was similarly disposed. "Segregation, in many different ways, keeps disproportionality going. It's so much a part of us, it's as American as apple pie." Ahmad's observation aligns with research that describes disproportionate identification rates for special education services as "a more socially accepted, even normalized, category of marginalization for students of color" (Ferri & Connor, 2005, p.454) which have allowed for "continued segregation under a seemingly natural and justifiable label" (Reid & Knight, 2006, p.19).

White Dominant Culture. Tamara acknowledged that even Black educators can subconsciously privilege external White social, behavioral, and cultural norms as part of school structures, unwittingly participating in subjecting Black children to the same "bias-based spirit-murdering" that teachers may have experienced when they were students (Williams, 2018, p.4).

> I would say a few things would be punitive discipline practices and our upholding of White dominant culture as a way of determining, measuring, or examining what it means to be successful or a scholar. So, the first thing that came to mind was that we can all be catalysts and drivers of White supremacy, even if we're not White. There are ways that we've internalized White supremacy and the way that Whiteness polices bodies, beings, and experiences. We perpetuate that forward through our own way of really projecting that trauma and those experiences onto Black children.

School Funding Mechanisms. In addition to structural racism and privileging White dominant culture, 38% of participants also identified school funding mechanisms as an external structure that sustains disproportionate identification rates within school walls. However, it is interesting to note that each participant framed finances in an entirely different context. While these variances are likely attributable to their differing professional lenses, responses also appear to reflect different levels of understanding of school finance.

From her perspective as a general educator, Kara sees financial incentivization as a simple but compelling sustaining factor for school districts to identify children for services. "The more special education kids you have, the more money you get." While Kara's observation is factually accurate, it does not appear to reflect the reality that special education in public schools does not generally function as a profitable enterprise, or even as a fully funded federal mandate.

As an administrator with a special education background, Tamara also cites finances, but situates the root of the problem in competing priorities. "We focus too much on compliance and money and not enough on the fact that these children are human beings. This isn't just about money. A child isn't getting what they need." Tamara proposes that the entire system be overhauled to become more child-centered and less fiscally focused. She recommends that school teams start with "nuanced conversations, dialogues and training around disproportionality and special education best practices", suggesting that school staff "remove money from the conversation and let's talk about special education, period." Tamara believes that if these conversations are held without regard to compliance and money, perhaps the identification process would be more effective, and students' needs would be better met.

While Kara and Tamara both specifically highlight special education priorities as they relate to school funding structures, Nicole focused more broadly on how school funding cuts have resulted in fewer fine arts and vocational training opportunities for all children. "I think a lot of our students who struggle with academic classes find their voices in other ways, and I think we lost a lot of students." Nicole went on to add, "I think that college is a wonderful aspiration, but it is not for everybody." With the widespread reduction of vocational training and fine arts curricula, many schools are leaving students with and without disabilities less prepared to explore interests that may either help them experience more success in school or provide them with vocational experiences that can prepare them for post-graduation employment opportunities.

Internal Structures

In addition to external social structures that impact over and underrepresentation patterns in schools, 100% of participants also identified several internal school structures, broadly

described here as "school district policies and practices". These responses encompass many of

the bureaucratic decisions and organizational policies and practices enacted by school and

district agents who create the instructional, academic, and disciplinary policies which govern

children's schooling experiences. Themes under internal factors include "parent engagement

strategies", "resource allocation", "instructional practices", "intervention strategies", "staffing

patterns/recruitment practices" and "professional development priorities".

      Parent Engagement Strategies. Thirty-eight percent of participants identified parent

engagement strategies or more accurately, the lack thereof, as instrumental in the perpetuation

of overrepresentation for Black students. The power of parents has been recognized as so integral

to the special education process that both IDEA (2004) and ESSA (2015) have positioned parent

and community partnerships as central to the success of a children's educational outcomes.

Recently, IDEA replaced the term "parental involvement" with "parent and family engagement",

making an important distinction between these two terms which are often erroneously

interchanged. While parental involvement describes situations in which the extent of parents'

activities at school are primarily organized and structured by schools, parental engagement

denotes the self-structured activities of parents who have actual agency in what goes on in school

settings (Reynolds, 2010). This difference is indicative of the importance of the parental role as it

relates to resolving racialized disparate disciplinary practice in schools as well as

disproportionality in special education identification, particularly in urban settings (Fenton et al.,

2017).

      Fiona believes that one of the reasons Black students are persistently disproportionately

identified for special education services is the simple fact that "a lot of parents don't know or

they're too busy. They don't really understand, and it just goes the wrong way for that student."

When Janna was asked to name changes that might be made at the local level to reduce disproportionality, her answer was similarly straightforward.

> Parents. Our parents. There's a difference. When I worked in (redacted district) for the most part those White parents are there. You have a few sprinkles of people that aren't as active, but you've got enough who are there and they're vocal and they're speaking out. But if you're in a district where the parents are not involved, and they don't participate or they don't question things or push for things? Parents are WAY more powerful than teachers. No one listens to teachers, but you get a bunch of parents blowing up the admins' phone and emails, oh my gosh!

> The lack of Black parent participation mentioned by Janna is indeed a prevailing

perception. In some cases, Black parents report being very engaged in and supportive of their students' education at home, but do not maintain a visible presence in schools for several identified reasons. Griffin (2012) conducted a focus group of 16 Black mothers who indicated they avoid actively participating in their children's school due to: a fundamental lack of trust of school staff; feeling their input is unwelcome and their contributions are unvalued; feeling devalued and cast aside by school staff; and feeing unwelcome in school. Researchers have also suggested that schools' lack of cultural responsiveness, perceived lack of respect, and the deficit views they hold of students and families may be among factors that contribute to low engagement rates by Black parents (Harry, 2008; Wolfe & Duran, 2013). Whatever the reasons, participants suggest that disproportionate practices are more likely to proliferate in schools that do not actively solicit/welcome parental input or prioritize authentic and meaningful parent engagement practices.

Resource Allocation. Resource allocation is described here as the way that school districts allocate available financial, material, curricular and human resources among their buildings, programs, and student populations. Thirty-eight percent of participants identified this as a contributing internal structure. Inequitable provisions, particularly those in racially segregated schools, often obscure the reality that poor environmental conditions are in fact the effects of specific policies (Blaisdell, 2016) rather than mere happenstance. Districts that make a practice of inequitably meting out resources among racially divided member buildings has been noted by researchers who have studied inter-school segregation. Findings suggests that schools with more diverse student populations are more likely to have fewer academic materials, more tracked classrooms, and tend to offer fewer Advanced Placement courses (Michelson, 2003a; 2003b).

Kara suggests that schools in her area are forced to operate according to the so-called "Matthew Effect", because the students who already have the most seem to be afforded the lion's share of available district financial resources. "If it's a magnet school, also known as a choice school or gifted and talented school, doesn't matter what level, they get more money." Kara goes on to echo an oft-made observation regarding school funding inequities for students of color (Abdullah, 2017). "We have a large percentage of African American students. I don't know if that's the reason why we don't get a lot of money, but I would like state and federal to make it fair across the board".

Nicole is employed by one of the nation's largest school districts in a city with housing patterns that remain among the nation's most racially segregated. "Across our district are glaring examples of schools that are worlds apart. Schools and neighborhoods that are predominantly White have music programs. They have art every day. Kids on the west side maybe have it one

day a week!" Nicole goes on to elaborate, "I went to one high school, and I heard ten people on the cello! I'm like ok, our kids, some of them haven't even seen a cello, much less are there ten kids proficient at it playing together!" Nicole then goes on to explain that the lack of cellos in Black schools is not just about the cellos. It is about the benefits afforded to children who have opportunities to explore the fine arts, and she explains the reasons that having those program offerings are critically important. "Our kids need that because all of that enhances performance on standardized assessments, it builds vocabulary, it helps with math."

Instructional practices. Thirty-eight percent of participants noted that the way schools structure and implement their instructional practices can also lead to unnecessary special education referrals. Wanita pointed out that focusing on basic skill attainment as an instructional practice has been all but abandoned, and she does not refer to academics alone. "Our schools need to find a way to meet the emotional, educational and academic needs of our students, and be determined that every child will learn what is taught."

Tamara commented on instructional practices from her administrative lens. "In a lot of schools that I've supported, one of the gaps I've noticed in instruction is that folks don't necessarily break the standards down to the bite-size chunks that are woven into these very big standards." She further elaborated, "what do you need to be able to do to make an inference? You need to spiral that and bring it right back down to the bare bones and then build back up so you can teach that standard." Students who are not taught skills to mastery may be a hold-over from high-stakes testing such as NCLB in which students are offered a narrowed curriculum with low-level instruction focused on test preparation rather than robust instruction that challenges them to make meaningful connections (Dee et al., 2013). In addition to pointing out that teachers have a responsibility to make curricular content digestible for students, Tamara pointed to

another internal structure that directly leads to inappropriate special education referrals and disproportionate identification: lack of adequate teacher training.

Professional development priorities. Half of the study's participants suggested that schools and districts need to restructure their professional development offerings if they truly seek to address disproportionality. Suggested topics of needed training ran the gamut from helping teachers to improve instructional practices, teaching necessary classroom management and discipline techniques, diversity training to help teachers understand cultural relevance, and leadership skills for school administrators.

Kara and Monica spoke to the need for more diversity and sensitivity training. Tamara noted that direct staff training on the causes, contexts, and consequences of disproportionality would be beneficial so that staff have a better overall understanding of the issue. Tamara further observed that if instructional practices are truly to be improved, then educators should receive training that teaches them how to modify and accommodate instructional practices for students who receive specialized services, and that such practices should be broadly implemented for all. Tamara also notes that improving teacher training without including training for school leadership would be largely counterproductive if the goal is truly to maximize highly effective instructional strategies for all students.

Kara acknowledged the need for more diversity at all levels in instructional design. "It goes back to curriculum and training. I pray and wish there were more curriculum writers and leaders that were African American so they can understand and implement that." Nicole mentioned the need for professional training to help address many of the behavioral issues that students present with. "There are things we can really train our staff on that will not cost any

additional money. These are just common sense, social-emotional evidence-based practices that will work."

When asked about professional development offerings in his district, Ahmad notes that though schools and districts are responsible for setting professional development agendas, they do not necessarily have to assume direct responsibility for trying to design and implement all that is needed. "There was a fall conference on equity with six different speakers. My district encouraged all the school psychologists to attend. There's training out there but administrators have to be the ones to tell their teachers to go get it." Ahmad sees the restructuring and reprioritizing of professional development activities as a critical prerequisite for the dismantling of internal structures that support inappropriate identification practices.

Intervention practices. Ahmad, who evaluates students at least once every three years as part of his duties as a school psychologist, acknowledges that conditional improvements have been made on both the front and back ends of the eligibility process. While both MTSS and RtI have increased the responsibility of general educators to support learners with diverse needs, Ahmad cautioned out that intervention efficacy is highly contingent upon implementer fidelity: "MTSS and RtI do work when we actually do it." He also noted that staff need to be fully capable of implementing the interventions and suggested a somewhat radical change to further improve existing processes. "Classroom teachers should also be trained as special education teachers. They need to know the special education process; they need to know how to do interventions." Ahmad's comments underscore the way that improper intervention implementation poses a threat to CLD students. These children are often subject to deficit-based thinking in cases when interventions appear not to work. Teams often assume that the failure of the intervention is "a fixed trait of the child" (Johnston, 2011, p. 517) rather than attributable to

potential issues with fidelity, the learning context, or with challenges transferring the intervention into the classroom setting.

Other participants also identified lack of fidelity to programs and practices such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), RtI, and MTSS as sustaining factors in disproportionality. Some staff casually regard required intervention strategies as a sort of "pre-flight checklist" that must be completed prior to referring a child for special education, and Wanita pointed out that school staff should always be reminded of the true purpose of strategic intervention: "We need to help them. Find out what they are dealing with. Not judge them because of it but help them through it and be determined to do that before we look at trying to give them a label for services." Wanita's admonishment is consistent with observations made by scholars who argue that the focus is often on pathologizing the behavior of culturally and linguistically diverse students, examining them through a deficit-lens, and ultimately, depriving them of educational opportunity (e.g., Blanchett, 2006; Chhuon & Sullivan, 2013; McCall & Skrtic, 2009; Skiba et al., 2016).

Nicole, who also has a background in school psychology, sees the social-emotional redemptive value in intervention as well. "MTSS, really implementing it with fidelity as intended, I think that it will go a long way to making Black students feel connected to their schools." Nicole feels that this can be particularly effective for children who have had multiple disciplinary infractions and interactions with School Resource Officers.

Staffing patterns/recruitment practices. Staffing patterns and recruitment practices was the final code identified by 63% of participants as an internal structure which contributes to the persistence of disproportionality. It was also identified as one of the ways in which participants believe that special education remains "generally ill-prepared and ineffective" (Dunn, 1968, p.5).

Two participants expressed the belief that the lack of Black staff involved in the special education process is one of the main reasons that ineffective practices continue to unduly impact Black students. Three participants, including general educator Kara, pointed to inadequate professional practices, citing lack of adequate teacher training for general educators responsible for instructing students with disabilities. "I'm a good educator, don't get me wrong, but I don't have a special education background." Kara also pointed to inadequate staffing practices as an ongoing problem for special education classrooms. "I've seen it in my district where like they have the art teacher come into a special education class as a sub if the teacher is not there. The art teacher doesn't know what the heck they're doing!" Having inadequately trained staff responsible for instructing students with disabilities on a regular basis is likely to lead to frustration for staff and wasted instructional time for students.

The value of having more Black educators to help reduce disproportionality has been firmly established in the extant research as well as by the participants in this study. Kara and Fiona each underscored the need for more Black educators to be visible and available for the benefit of Black students and Tamara repeatedly spoke to the need to "disrupt Whiteness as dominant culture", which is difficult to do in schools who have no Black teachers or administrators. Janna challenged districts who claim to be truly invested in the progress of Black and brown students to "do things such as hire more diverse staff and hire more diverse administration. Have actual diversity plans, not just 'oh, we read literature where there are Black characters.'" These challenges and others faced by in-service Black educators in the areas of preservice preparation, ancillary in service expectations, and structural and institutional factors (Mawhinney et al., 2012; Milner, 2012; Wysienska-DiCarlo et al., 2016) have been connected to

the underrepresentation of Black educators in America. In response, Monica asks, "where are the

Black educators? Is no one qualified?"

Summary and Thematic Analysis of Research Question Three

For the third research question, participants identified the following external and internal

structures that sustain the policies, practices, and procedures that perpetuate disproportionality in

their schools: (a) structural racism, (b) White dominant culture, (c) school funding mechanisms,

(d) parent engagement, (e) district resource allocation, (f) intervention practices, (g) professional

development priorities, (h) staffing patterns/recruitment practices and (i) instructional practices.

Fifty percent of participants mentioned the need for school staff to receive more professional

development on a variety of topics including best practices in general education, special

education training for general educators, trauma informed practices, training on

disproportionality and training for preservice educators. However, when asked how they might

volunteer to meet some of the diversity and sensitivity training needs they identified in their own

schools, participants pushed back on the notion that Black educators should be expected to help

train their coworkers.

Training White Coworkers: "Not Our Responsibility". Ahmad clearly placed all

responsibility for professional development on the shoulders of school leadership. "There's

training out there but administrators have to be the ones to tell their teachers to go get it." Nicole

acknowledged that Black educators may be uniquely qualified to lead professional development

but resisted the idea that they should be asked to implement it.

> I will take the onus off us, first. Because I think too often the onus of addressing
>
> the needs of the Black community fall on the Black community. That doesn't
>
> make sense to me. You know where you're going to work. Educate yourself.

Read. There's a ton of stuff. There are so many podcasts: Nice White Parents,

White Picket Fences. Really try to get another perspective on the world other than

your own. So, I kind of reject the premise that Black teachers must do our jobs

and do their (White teachers') jobs too. We have got to stop taking responsibility

for the racism of White people. They have to do the work.

Tamara offered a more measured response. "It's a double-edged sword for me because a

part of me says it's not our responsibility to fix a problem that we didn't create. That's a heavy

burden to carry." However, she went on to reflect, "It comes down to if you have the capacity,

the knowledge and the skill set, then bring that information forward."

Overall, the results presented in this chapter both validate and further inform conclusions

reached in previous studies that have focused on the work of Black special educators (Scott, et

al., 2020). New insights were gathered on specific roles that these educators voluntarily assume

as they stand in the gap on behalf of their students. While participants indicate that improvement

has been noted since the publication of Dunn's 1968 seminal piece, they also identified several

remaining areas of significant concern. The discussion in Chapter Five will further contextualize

the data gleaned from these participants and will offer their reflections on how remaining

challenges continue to represent opportunities for much-needed change.

V. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to interrogate the ways in which eight Black American educators define and describe their professional experiences with Black K-12 students who receive special education services. Two semi-structured interviews elicited information about these educators' life histories, their professional interactions with students and staff, and their understandings of the social and organizational structures that contribute to disproportionality in special education. My goal was to inform three specific research questions: (1) How do Black educators characterize their agency working with Black K-12 students? (2) How do Black educators describe their professional experiences with several variables related to disproportionality? and (3) What specific structures do these educators identify as factors that contribute to the presence or persistence of disproportionality? Through analyses of 16 interviews, I identified a major emergent theme of the Black educator "standing in the gap" for Black students. Other themes emerged regarding the ways in which participants navigate working in racialized contexts, their perceptions on providing professional development for their White coworkers, and their ideas on improving Black students' educational experiences and outcomes. Implications for research and practice will now be reviewed.

Implications for Research and Practice

As a group, the voices of Black educators have remained largely silent in many important discourses in educational settings (Delpit, 2006; Michie, 2007). Although there is a body of research focused on the experiences of teachers of color, more scholarship is needed to provide a deeper understanding of the experiences of Black teachers as an underrepresented teaching population and the unique challenges they help Black students navigate in general and special education contexts.

According to Tyson (2011), schools often focus on the symptoms of racism (underperformance of students of color) rather than the disease (practices that sustain underperformance of students of color). This deficit-based approach severely limits the ability of schools to generate and implement asset-based solutions. Black educators' lived experiences inform the basis of their professional expertise. Centering their voices in discussions on the educational experiences of Black students can positively contribute to ongoing discussions on equity and equality in public schools. To that end, a version of this study conducted with a larger participant pool could yield more robust and impactful data. An increase in male participants or the inclusion of a comparison group of non-Black educators would also enrich data analysis and interpretation.

In addition to implications for further research, collected data also indicated that several changes in policy and practice are in order. Recommendations include increasing efforts to safeguard special education eligibility and identification processes from racial and cultural bias, increasing efforts to recruit and retain Black educators, increasing engagement of Black parents in schools, improving school disciplinary practices, expanding preservice and in-service educator training, and targeted recruitment of both Black educators and special education teachers for school leadership positions. Specific recommendations follow.

Reconsidering Recruitment

There have been many calls to recruit a more diverse teacher workforce and the ensuing efforts have often been met with mixed success. While teachers of color currently comprise approximately 18% of American teachers, Black teachers represent about 7% (Griffin & Tackie, 2017; Taie & Goldring, 2017; USDOE, 2016) and were shown to have the slowest growth of all teacher subgroups from 1987 to 2007 (Villegas et al., 2012). Black special educators have been

found to face unique retention challenges, and research suggests that many who remain in the field do so because they are motivated to help change the system for their students of color (Scott et al., 2020).

States need to take bold, targeted steps to increase Black teacher recruitment and retention. Unnecessary obstacles on the path to initial teacher certification need to be removed, as many Black teacher candidates continue to encounter unnecessary roadblocks that prematurely end their hopes of a teaching career. Illinois is one state seeking to address this issue by repealing the basic skills test requirement in the form of Illinois Public Act 101-0220; other states should consider taking similar steps. As one Illinois college official explained: "What became apparent over the years since its implementation as a requirement to receive a teaching license in Illinois, is that the test was not at all basic relative to the content prospective teachers would eventually be teaching" (Wells, 2019). This changed law went into effect in August of 2019, instantly clearing the path for 1300 backlogged teaching candidates to accept employment. This purposeful and strategic action demonstrates a simple way to simultaneously streamline the path to certification, address teaching shortages, and potentially diversify school staff.

Employment barriers beyond initial teaching certification also need to be dismantled. Black educators are often confronted with hiring and evaluation practices that do not fairly acknowledge the value of their unique pedagogical potential (Bailey et al., 2016; D'Amico et al., 2017). Black educators often experience structural racism in the workplace (Roberts & Carter Andrews, 2013), routinely have their professional credentials challenged or questioned, report feeling like outsiders with their majority White coworkers (Scott et al., 2020), and are more likely to be dismissed based on unfairly low performance ratings (Bailey et al., 2016). These are all issues that need to be addressed if retention rates of Black educators are to be improved. In

addition, schools and districts committed to hiring more Black educators should consider direct recruitment from teacher preparation programs at HBCUs, where a larger selection of Black preservice teacher candidates might be found.

Reestablishing Community Partnerships

Several participants mentioned the need for Black educators to directly partner with parents for the benefit of Black students. Parental engagement is a key component of the student achievement dynamic, and although some research suggests that Black mothers avoid actively participating in their children's schooling due to a lack of trust or feeling unwelcome and unvalued (Griffin, 2012), it is critical to acknowledge that disparate practices are more likely to proliferate in schools in which Black parents are neither visibly represented nor meaningfully engaged.

When educators build relationships with parents and offer to share their professional expertise in the larger community, the ensuing benefits can ripple far beyond school walls. Research supports the potential efficacy of community partnerships, defined as "a shared responsibility and reciprocal process whereby schools and other community agencies and organizations engage families in meaningful and culturally appropriate ways" (NCSLE, 2019, para.1). Such alliances have been found to be particularly beneficial for students who reside in districts with limited resources (Epstein, 2018). Black educators who are committed to helping beyond the classroom may make themselves available to offer resources, information, special education advocacy tips, and training to parents who need it. Black churches have historically served as local gathering places for advocacy and community involvement (Logan, 2018), and these faith-based organizations may be ideal settings in which to establish targeted partnerships

where Black educators can offer the benefit of their professional expertise to families who need it most.

Reexamining Discipline Practices

At least once participant invited Black educators to reexamine their own roles as agents working within established school structures. When asked how Black educators can be leveraged to protect Black children from disparate disciplinary practices, Tamara replied, "we can all be catalysts and drivers of White supremacy even if we're not White. There are ways we've internalized White supremacy and the way that Whiteness polices bodies, beings, experiences, and perpetuates that trauma and those experiences onto children." The conversation circled back to the need for more training when Tamara referenced the necessity of "providing some professional development to make sure that we are not utilizing the same strategies that led to our own trauma on other children and then creating more people who carry this pain." Her comments reflect yet another example of the power Black educators hold to interrupt the cycle of "bias-based spirit-murdering" (Williams, 2018, p. 4) experienced by Black children in schools.

School leadership teams also need to take seriously the need to train staff and monitor data collection practices to ensure that disciplinary data remains clean and bias free. Nicole echoes several researchers when she advocates for increased educator awareness of the connection between exclusionary discipline practices and juvenile incarceration rates for children of color (Behnken et al., 2014; Losen, 2015; Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2009; Skiba et al., 2014). "There are systems set up to be punitive and they are often more punitive to students of color. You can improve disciplinary practices by not criminalizing school-based misconduct." Nicole further suggested that schools rethink their responses to relatively minor disciplinary infractions. "Talking out in class is not disorderly conduct. We don't need to get the police involved. He is

not adhering to the behavior code, but he is not a criminal." Decriminalizing student misbehavior is an important first step to take in reducing disparate disciplinary practices for Black students.

Restructuring Preservice Educator Training

Another important step towards reducing disproportionality is building schools that are more inclusive of and responsive to the needs of rapidly diversifying student populations. In addition to the general lack of focus on teaching the historical role of race and culture in many K-12 schools, preservice teachers of color also report that they learn little about these topics in their teacher preparation programs (Brown, 2014). Training instead tends to focus on pedagogy and instructional techniques without much emphasis on cultural relevance or responsivity (Jackson, 2015). Preservice programs offer the best opportunity to teach future groups of educators about the ways in which cultural systems and racial structures influence educational equity. If outcomes are to be improved, teacher candidates need to be explicitly taught how to teach in more culturally responsive ways (Villegas & Davis, 2008). Many HBCUs tailor their teaching programs to meet the unique needs of Black teachers, and other universities may consider looking to these educator preparation models for ideas and inspiration (Gasman et al., 2016; Scott et al., 2020).

An encouraging development on this front was noted in a February 28, 2021, front page article by Cherney et al., (2021) in the Chicago Tribune. "Flashpoint for teachers in training: Are new rules 'culturally responsive teaching' or 'woke indoctrination'?" This article highlighted the Illinois School Board of Education's new requirements for state teacher training programs to cover concepts including student advocacy, social-emotional development, historical inequities, and implicit bias. While not focused directly on disproportionality or overrepresentation, Illinois' implementation of these new culturally responsive teaching and learning standards is very much aligned with the type of diversity training several participants

are calling for. More states should consider implementing such changes. While these changes alone will not reduce disproportionality, welcoming a new generation of well-trained educators into the field increases the potential for more culturally sensitive instructional and disciplinary practices in the future. That, in turn, could result in fewer inappropriate special education referrals.

Rethinking Teacher Leadership

Efforts to reduce disproportionality must be a school wide endeavor, and administrators who are committed to building more inclusive schools must invest time and energy cultivating the leadership skills of all faculty, including special education teachers (Maggin & Hughes, 2021). Special educators have directly transferable leadership skills such as knowledge of behavioral supports, strategies for differentiation, and problem- solving skills. They also have practice gathering and displaying data needed for progress monitoring. Administrators who position special educators as teacher leaders could leverage special educators' skill set for the benefit of the entire school community (Passmore et. al, 2020). In so doing, these administrators would cultivate a more inclusive and responsive atmosphere that can better accommodate students with diverse needs. When school and district leaders position Black special education teachers to serve in teacher leadership roles, the school community would also reap the benefits of having input from educators who share cultural, ethnic, and/or racial heritages with diverse student populations. This may also help to reduce disparate practices for Black schoolchildren.

Limitations

There are limitations in this narrative study of the personal and professional lived experiences of Black educators. Even though I used a semi-structured interview format, the responses provided were largely influenced by the questions on my interview protocol. I did

attempt to address this limitation at the end of each interview by providing each participant an open opportunity to share anything else they deemed important to the topic of inquiry. While not all of the participants chose to offer additional ideas, the points they raised were appropriately incorporated.

This study also had a relatively small sample size (n=8). Of those, fifty percent were engaged in doctoral level coursework, which is unlikely to be representative of most Black educators who work directly with K-12 students. Given that Black educators are underrepresented in the teaching population, I considered myself fortunate to find two representatives from each of the needed four roles. However, I acknowledge that my recruitment pool of eligible participants may have been impacted due to social restrictions in place during the pandemic.

Eight participants from three different states representing six different school districts were interviewed. Of these, seventy-five percent hailed from a single Midwestern state. Although I had hoped that my recruitment efforts might have yielded a more geographically diverse sample, qualitative findings have so-called "face generalizability", and there is no apparent reason to assume that findings cannot apply more generally (Maxwell, 2013). As is always true of qualitative research, the consumer reserves the right to determine if, whether, and how findings are transferable to other settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Conclusions

There exists a unique nexus between Black educators and Black students who receive special education services. The historic loss of the former directly led to the proliferation of the latter. The fact that Black educators have successfully navigated their way through a school system rarely optimized for the success of Black Americans renders them uniquely qualified to

relate to Black students in a manner that many of their colleagues may not. Research has found that although many Black special educators face challenges that lead them to exit the field prior to retirement age, those who remain are often dedicated to effecting systems change on behalf of students of color (Scott et al., 2020).

In initiating this academic inquiry, I went on a quest to understand more about the experiences of Black educators. I wanted to understand how they identify and navigate structural and institutional factors that contribute to disproportionality in their professional settings. I was also curious to hear stories chronicling their individual efforts to effect change for Black students. In seeking to understand their professional experiences, I sought to better contextualize my own, as well as to learn more about the systems and structures that we work within as we endeavor to help Black students succeed.

The stories entrusted to me by my participants reinforced the unique strengths that Black educators bring to their jobs. These educators also acknowledged that when it comes to disproportionality, there are no quick, simple solutions. America has a long history of talking about racial equality and educational equity but has yet to produce either one. Racial inequities are firmly interwoven into the very fabric of our society, and the contributing threads are intricately intertwined. Yet there are changes we can make to take steps in the right direction, and our nation's Black educators are doing this work every day on behalf of Black students, daring to believe that things can change, one student at a time.

I hope that I have aptly shared the lessons these educators have taught me, and that their stories might inspire others. I took a small measure of satisfaction in the fact that two of my participants told me that the items on my interview protocol made them reflect more deeply on their own professional experiences. I am grateful to each of these eight individuals who granted

me the gift of their time, who spoke from the wealth of their experiences, and who offered me the benefit of their expertise. May their truths resonate in some way with individuals actively seeking to eradicate disproportionate special education identification and placement practices that have been impacting Black students in America for far too long.

APPENDICES

Appendix A
Recruitment Document   **UIC IRB Number (2019-0853)**

Participants being sought for a dissertation study:

An Investigation of African American Educators' Perspectives on Disproportionality and How it Influences Their Professional Practice

 Licensed and employed African American K-12 special educators, general educators, school administrators or school psychologists willing to participate in two remotely conducted interviews, each lasting approximately 45 minutes or less are invited to click on the link below to be considered for participation.

https://forms.office.com/Pages/ResponsePage.aspx?id=1da03ER2MkeFRUcOV2D_scVnf1XpN V5Oq9NRhXOXWDRUNkJFTkFZNEk3VkwzMTJGNE00TlNaQTBMMC4u

At the conclusion of each interview, chosen participants will receive $25 cash, for a total of $50 cash if both interviews are completed.

Recruitment Document for a Research Study Entitled: An Investigation of African American Educators' Perspectives on Disproportionality and How it Influences Their Professional Practice

This study is being conducted by Catrina Dorsey, M.Ed., under the supervision of Dr. Daniel Maggin of the Special Education Department at the University of Illinois at Chicago, in hopes of gaining a greater understanding of how African American educators perceive and respond to disproportionality in the K-12 school setting.

You are being invited to participate in a research study investigating how African American educators experience and respond to disproportionality in the K-12 school setting. You are being selected as a possible participant because you are licensed and employed as either a special educator, general educator, school administrator or school psychologist in the K-12 school setting. As a participant, you will be asked to participate in two remote interviews, each lasting 45 minutes or less. At the conclusion of each interview, you will receive $25 cash for your time.

Your participation in this project is entirely voluntary. There will be no negative consequences if you decide not to participate. You have the right to discontinue participation at any time without penalty, or to skip any questions you might be uncomfortable answering.

Any information collected through your participation in this project may be used to fulfill educational requirements. Shared information might possibly be used in professional presentations and/or publications. If information is used, no personal identifiers will be connected to individual responses. Shared results will only be reported in aggregate form or presented as group averages.

If you have questions or concerns about participation in this research, please contact Catrina Dorsey at cdorse3@uic.edu or Dr. Daniel Maggin at dmaggin@uic.edu. For further information regarding rights as a research participant, please contact a representative of the University of Illinois at Chicago Institutional Review Board at 1-866-789-6215 (toll free) or at uicirb@uic.edu.

Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a narrative study on African American Educators' Perspectives Disproportionality and How it Influences Their Professional Practice. This is a research project being conducted by Catrina Dorsey, a PhD student at the University of Illinois at Chicago. The interviews will be conducted remotely and should take approximately two 45 minutes sessions to complete.

 PARTICIPATION
Your participation in this survey is completely voluntary. You may refuse to take part in the research or exit the study at any time without penalty. You are free to decline to answer any particular question you do not wish to answer.

BENEFITS
Your responses may help us learn more about whether and how African American educators work in K-12 school settings to address disproportionate and discriminatory policies, procedures, and practices against African American students.

RISKS

By participating in this narrative study, you assume minimal risks related to being recorded on an audio file.

CONFIDENTIALITY
The interview audio files will be transcribed with 14 days of recording. Audio files will be deleted after transcription has occurred. No names or identifying information will be included on the transcription. The working audio file and transcript will both be stored separately in a secure online portal. No names or personal identifiers will be included in any publications or presentations based on these data.

CONTACT
If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the primary researcher Catrina Dorsey at cdorse3@uic.edu , 630-308-9980 or the research supervisor, Professor Daniel Maggin at 312-413-1978; dmaggin@uic.edu.

If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or that your rights as a participant in research have not been honored during the course of this project, or you have any questions, concerns, or complaints that you wish to address to someone other than the investigator, you may contact the University of Illinois at Chicago Institutional Review Board at 1-866-789-6215 (toll free) or at uicirb@uic.edu.

Appendix B
Exempt Research UIC Amendment #1

October 20, 2020
Catrina Dorsey
Special Education

RE: **Protocol # 2019-0853**
        "An Investigation of African American Educators' Perspectives on
        Disproportionality and How It Influences Their Professional Practice"

Dear Catrina Dorsey:
The amendment to your exempt research was reviewed on **October 20, 2020** and it was
determined that your amended research continues to meet the criteria for exemption as defined in
the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Regulations for the Protection of Human
Subjects [45 CFR 46.104(d)]. You may now begin your research.

Summary: UIC Amendment #1: At the request of the dissertation committee:
1. Change of the number of participants to no more than 10;
2. Removal of the survey component of the protocol; and
3. Update of the recruitment and protocol documents to indicate data will only be collected
   via interview. The narrative interviews will only be conducted remotely and should take
   each participant approximately two 45 minutes sessions to complete.
   Amendment Approval Date: October 20, 2020
   Funding Source: None
   The specific exemption category under 45 CFR 46.104(d) is: 2
        You are reminded that investigators whose research involving human subjects is
determined to be exempt from the federal regulations for the protection of human subjects still
have responsibilities for the ethical conduct of the research under state law and UIC policy.
Please remember to:
→   Use your research protocol number (2019-0853) on any documents or correspondence
        with the IRB concerning your research protocol.
→   Review and comply with the policies of the UIC Human Subjects Protection Program
        (HSPP) and the guidance *Investigator Responsibilities*.

We wish you the best as you conduct your research. If you have any questions or need further
help, please contact me at choehne@uic.edu or the OPRS office at (312) 996-1711. Please send
any correspondence about this protocol to OPRS via OPRS Live.

                                        Sincerely,
                                        Charles W. Hoehne, B.S., C.I.P.
                                        Assistant Director, IRB #7
                                        Office for the Protection of Research Subjects

cc: Norma Lopez-Reyna
        Daniel Maggin

Appendix C
Semi-Structured Interview Questions Disaggregate by Section

Researcher: I am interested in learning more about the current generation of Black educators. In particular I would like to understand how they perceive issues related to disproportionality and how they perceive their work with Black students. This interview protocol includes excerpts from an article written in 1968 by Lloyd Dunn, a former president of the Council for Exceptional Children who is commonly accepted as the first researcher to introduce the topic of disproportionality into the literature.

I will invite you to listen and respond to several abbreviated excerpts from Dunn's 1968 article. I am particularly interested in hearing your perceptions regarding the reality Dunn describes from 1968 and how it compares to what you experience as an educator today. I would like your perceptions on if and how progress has been made, the structures that have enabled and maintained disproportionality in American schools, and I would also like to know how you, as a Black educator, conceptualize your role and your agency, particularly with the Black students that you work with. Are there any questions so far?

Interview Questions to Inform Life History Section

1a. What was your K-12 schooling experience like?

1b. Did you have any Black educators?

1c. Did you attend segregated or integrated schools?

1d. What led to your choice to become an educator?

1e. What was your preservice training like?

1f. Did you feel your training adequately prepared you to become an educator for the population of students you currently serve?

1g. In what specific capacity do you currently work with Black students in special education?

1h. What is one of your favorite or most memorable school moments?

2c.   Knowing that many Black children today do not have any Black educators, how do you hope to be remembered by your Black students?

13.   What are your foundational beliefs about education?

18.   In a world that has never been optimized for the success of Black students, to what do you owe your own academic success?

19.   Do you have any words of wisdom on how Black educators can work to reduce disproportionality in our workplaces?

Interview Questions to inform RQ1

2a.   Do you feel that your presence as a Black educator specifically impacts the Black students in your professional settings?

2b.   Do you feel that having a shared racial/ethnic background with these students matters in their educational experience?

2d.   Can you share of any specific incidents when you feel you made a difference (or failed to make a difference in an individual child's life?

2e.   Can you share a memory of a particularly meaningful moment you have experienced as an educator?

3b.   Can you share any specific examples of times you felt a Black special education student or referral was being treated unfairly but you felt powerless or unable to intervene?

3c.   Are there any specific ways in which you personally work to minimize disproportionate representation of Black students in special education?

20.   Are there ways in which you have served as a cultural mediator between Black students/parents and White staff in your workplace?

Interview Questions to inform RQ2

4. Dunn on the Effectiveness of Special Education: "In my view, much of our past and present practices are morally and educationally wrong. We have been living at the mercy of general educators who have referred their problem children to us. And we (special education) have been generally ill prepared and ineffective in educating these children. Let us stop being pressured into continuing and expanding a special education program that we know now to be

undesirable for many of the children we are dedicated to serve." How do you think this compares with the plight of special education today? Can you share how your experiences provide further insight on your opinion?

5. Dunn On Labeling: "Our past and present diagnostic procedures have probably been doing more harm than good in that they have resulted in disability labels and homogeneous groupings in school based on these labels." Do you agree or disagree? Can you share how your experiences provide further insight on your opinion?

6. Dunn On Teacher Attitudes and Expectations: "We must examine the effects of these disability labels on the attitudes and expectancies of teachers…we must expect that labeling a child reduces the teacher's expectancy for him to succeed." Do you agree or disagree? Can you share how your experiences provide further insight on your opinion?

7. Dunn On Student Attitudes and Expectations: "We must examine the effects of disability labels on the pupils themselves. …While much more research is needed, we cannot ignore the evidence that removing a handicapped child from the regular grades for special education probably contributes significantly to his feelings of inferiority and problems of acceptance." Do you agree or disagree? Can you share how your experiences provide further insight on your opinion?

8. Dunn On Placement/Least Restrictive Environment: "Regular teachers and administrators have sincerely felt they were doing these pupils a favor by removing them from the pressures of an unrealistic and inappropriate program of studies. Special educators have also fully believed that the children involved would make greater progress in special schools and classes. However, the overwhelming evidence is that our present and past practices have their major justification in removing pressures on regular teachers and pupils, at the expense of the

special education pupils themselves." How do you think this compares with the plight of special

education today? Can you share how your experiences provide further insight on your opinion?

9. Are there any examples of experiences you have had personally with disproportionality

that you can share about?

Interview Question to inform RQ3

10.   In your experience, what would you say are specific structures or systems that contribute

to either the presence or the persistence of disproportionality?

Interview Questions to inform the Discussion Section

11.   What changes do you think might be made at the local level that could reduce

disproportionality within your workplace or school district?

12.   What changes do you think might be made at the state or federal level that could reduce
disproportionality within your workplace or school district?

14.   How can African American educators meet professional development needs in our
schools and district?

15.   How can African American educators provide for support for Black families and parents
to reduce disproportionality?

16.   How can African American educators improve school discipline practices for our
students?

17.   How can African American educators improve school discipline practices for our
students?

Appendix D

Participant Interview Data						
Participant #	Date of Interview 1	Length of Interview 1	Member Check Sent	Date of Interview 2	Length of Interview 2	Member Check Sent
8	10/28/20	55:51	11/8/20	11/13/20	35:16	11/23/20
13	10/30/20	43:26	11/8/20	11/16/20	32:17	11/23/20
15	11/8/20	39:00	11/8/20	11/18/20	39:05	11/23/20
17	11/1/20	64:21	11/8/20	11/13/20	31:20	11/23/20
19	11/7/20	31:07	11/11/20	12/31/20	31:07	12/31/20
20	11/9/20	44:49	11/11/20	11/13/20	26:02	11/23/20
21	11/6/20	53:25	11/16/20	11/25/20	19:52	11/25/20
22	11/10/20	39:13	11/13/20	11/16/20	19:17	11/23/20

Appendix E
Code Book

Codes for RQ 1	Description	Examples
Advocating	times participants positioned themselves to intercede on behalf of their Black students. This may take the form of engaging in acts of individual advocacy for students in situations when consequences or outcomes may be perceived as unfair. It also includes engaging in systems advocacy to effect change.	"I knew there were certain things that needed to be put in place in her IEP, so I met with the sped teacher…and I was able to get her to see a behavior specialist" 8 "our goal is to make sure that we are curbing that disproportionality and making sure that we are increasing folks' socio-political consciousness so we're not continuing to police Black children, and ultimately referring them for special education and then long-term leading them into incarceration" 13 "he is one of the kids that I was willing to put everything on the line for, because I kept advocating making sure that he would get what he needed." 13 "so, I was like, we can't make this kid special ed, this child needs to be in school. We need to focus on him staying right where he is" 17 "I've had several instances where a child was being referred and the teachers had not gathered in my opinion enough information about a child and the child's family to make decisions that would warrant a referral for possible special education" 19 "there have been lots of times I've had to speak up on behalf of Black parents and help them" 20 "I've been working on getting them in gifted ed. These kids are gifted and talented and it shouldn't be a surprise just because someone comes from a rough background, or they transferred from the city" 20 "So there have been lots of times I've had to speak up on behalf of black parents, and also step in when it's time to deal with Black boys. That's not working for us. I've had to say those words: that's not gonna work!" 20 "I just tried to run interference with the kids. I became the behavior management person in the classroom because I was more equipped. I took that upon myself, and she was very happy to let me do it" 21 "I always advocate for my students." 21

Cultural Mediating	a complex social process that may refer to intrinsic psychological traits, the accretion of cultural elements or the process of social interaction (Teo, 2013). Cultural mediation may be used as a tool to resolve situations that occur between parents and staff as well as to facilitate interactions between students and staff. Cultural mediation is also useful for establishing relationships with Black students that allow for the successful transmission of social, educational, and institutional norms.	"she had the nerve to call kids 'animals' because of their behavior, this little blonde...I said they're not necessarily 'animals'. You know Black kids they may be a little bit louder or more demonstrative, but it really doesn't mean they're getting ready to attack you or anything" 21 (blacksplaining)
Subcodes:		
Blacksplaining is a contrived term which describes an attempt to provide cultural context for misunderstood urban parlance, gestures, or behavior.		
Bridging describes actions taken to promote understanding, or to bridge gaps between individuals in a specific social context.		"I've been playing that monkey in the middle role for most of my career" 13 (bridging) "sharing some of the uniqueness of my experiences as an African American by having discussions with others often brings insight to our teachers that will help them to be more accepting of our students so that the teachers will be more effective when educating African American students who they encounter year after year" 19 (bridging) "The White teachers would recoil. I'm like, what? He's coming from work. He has a job! We better accommodate him! And he's here! He literally has worked from 8:00 pm to 8:00 am and then he is here at 9:00 am for a meeting!" 15 (bridging) "I've had to speak up on behalf of Black parents who are resistant to put their kids in sped. White teachers judge those parents and I say, 'you don't understand where this is coming from. It's a legitimate concern historically!' 20 (bridging) "I gave them pointers; I've done scenarios with them. I've actually sat in meetings with them. I've tried to help them with dialogue, even comments on report cards" 8 (bridging)
Endorsing describes the efforts of Black		

| staff to throw support behind White coworkers in specific situations. | | "and I told him, you're going to respect Mr. D the same way you respect me!" 8 (endorsing)

"You're going to a history class being taught by a White woman, and now she's wondering why she's being called the devil and she's asking ME?! She also handles your grade and can call your mom! Stop calling her the devil! I had to do a little bit of teaching them." 13 (endorsing) |
| **Liaising** is serving as an informal liaison between staff and families, was demonstrated when educators offered cultural insight, communication tips or coaching strategies to improve interactions between families and staff. | | "honestly, customer relations are what I'm teaching and that it applies to Black people, or that Black people have a right to be upset as well" 15 (liaising)

"So, I would model for them an appropriate way to talk to a Black parent or any parent who is frustrated with their child's academic development which is; listen, shut your mouth, don't tell them they're wrong and let them finish saying what they have to say. And then acknowledging what they said" 15 (liaising) |
| **Protecting** describes staff engaged in direct interventions to protect students. | | "I try to leave communication open, and I let them know if you have any questions about certain situations, feel free to ask me" 22 (liaising)

As a Black educator your eyes go to the Black kids. You want to see how they're being handled, if they're being treated fairly, if their deficits really are deficits or if a White educator just has a stuck scope that they can't see outside of. 20 (protecting)

"This woman she just stuck him in the back of the classroom and didn't even really try to teach him anything…she wasn't ashamed to admit it…she just didn't want to be bothered. So, I sat next to him during class and would walk him through most of the assignments and he could learn." 21 (protecting) |

Role Models	A person considered an example to follow, in possession of qualities to be emulated.	"I think the intersections of my identify also play a huge part in that…all of those things come together to create something that then gives them an idea of what is possible" 13 "you could tell they were like, oh, it's a Black woman! Like they were almost thirsty to connect with a Black woman, and one who may have been a little bit different from the mother they had at home" 21
Culturally Responsive Practitioner	Culturally responsive teaching practices include the incorporation of attitudes, practices and strategies which assist the learning process by helping children make connections to that which is personally meaningful and relevant, based on their cultural frame of reference (Jackson, 2011).	"I know certain songs; I know certain moves and the way I teach I may incorporate some things. When I do my Go Noodles, I get up and do The Whip with my kids and do things that they're interested in" 8 "you have to understand when you get in the real world, you're going to have jobs. You still need to have the same level of respect." 8 "there was a child who came into my AP English language class, and she was really behind in writing and reading, but she was strong in her ability to verbalize (in spoken word) ... knowing what I knew about her and her skill set and her passion, I knew that there was a way that we could channel that" 13 "I think that having that shared understanding provides a level of nuance, empathy and understanding that otherwise may not exist…there's a level just like ancestral and spiritual connection that you can only have if there's that shared, which sounds horrible but, shared generational trauma" 13 "it's like we're decentering Whiteness and decentering empirical evidence in the ways that we traditionally see it and utilize it" 13 "I had to do a little bit of teaching them how their skills are transferable and how they can utilize that passion, that drive, that fire to also re-examine that lens and the language that they are choosing to use especially with the desired outcome of achieving personal and collective liberation" 13 "I used to do a lesson where we talked about what's normal or what's regular, because White people tend to think that White is regular. And I tell them it depends on what your household is. For me, people with brown skin, that's my norm, that's the regular. And that kind of shifts their focus like, oh, everyone doesn't look like me or see things like me or it's not all about me at all" 20

		"I have in the past had sit downs with students and kind of explained, give them that real world talk, try to explain to them that different people"22
Limitations Encountered/ "The ones who got away"	Limitations are defined as factors/forces that may exert a prohibitive force on educators as they seek to support students' academic or social emotional needs.	"I can't have that conversation because there's that 'angry Black woman', there's an African American who thinks they know all this" 8 "if parents are not there to help change the behaviors of the student, what we can do becomes more limited to effect a change" 19 "You can't say he can't do anything. He may not be on the same level, but you can't say that he cannot do it. And the special ed teacher was like we're going to give him services. I was like, OK, cool. I'll just dissent. And I just had to do a dissenting opinion… I kind of felt powerless" 17 "there is one child that I feel like I just could not get through to...I just could not find that thread of connectedness with her…I feel like so much more could've been done, and it just did not turn out well for her...I just wish that I had maybe tried one more thing or one more time with her to see if I could get through" 15
Codes for RQ 2	**Description**	**Examples**
Special education is ineffective due to **policing**	The practice of Black children being specifically targeted for interactions with staff that are more likely to lead to disciplinary action and may result in involvement with the criminal justice system.	"folks just really try to police things and police bodies and then use that as a way to say well, this is why this person needs to be referred" 13 "I am working with the disproportionality of SROs (school resource officers) and how they are more likely to target black students" 15 "Disproportionately 86% of Black students are the ones who are being arrested at school" 15
Special education is ineffective due to **othering**	Children with special needs being regarded as "outsiders" based on their special education needs or status.	"We should rethink the need to 'find something inherently wrong' with the child and just work diligently to make sure each child is successful no matter who they are or what they have been through" 19 "Our educational system should look to teach our gen ed teachers to be more willing to educate ALL students and not

		to think of the more challenging students as being someone else's responsibility to educate" 19
		"I do see an issue with our perceptions of special ed. We have to stop thinking of special ed as them and start thinking as we" 17
		"I as a coach attempted to fix… how we even do pull outs or push ins and who gets supported in what way, and how othering that also can be" 13
		"When I was in training, a lot of the teachers didn't like me coming in and bringing my students in for their gen ed lessons…I said its very important the kids really wanted those connections with the other kids. It was really sad to see the other teachers not pay attention to them"22
		"Just throw them aside like they're a piece of trash or dirt" 8
		"We tend to dispose of people who we consider a problem or who we consider unworthy or undeserving" 13
		"When they are in the general population you see the comments, "you're dumb" and it others them. " 21
Special education is ineffective due to **masking**	Masking is a term used to describe what happens when the special education process is used to solve the wrong problem. It can result in a child being saddled with the stigma that accompanies a disability label without the benefit of having their actual needs met at all	"To be honest, it doesn't appear to be as effective as one would hope….working with kids who maybe are not necessarily learning disabled but have behavior disorders" 21
		"It does more harm than good when kids who don't need sped are identified. Look at their history. They've been traumatized, have anxiety, but no one's addressing the trauma. We're slapping a label on a kid that doesn't need it" 17
		"It may not be a disability of any sort, it just might be a trauma, some experience that we need to help them to overcome or to deal with" 13
		"The more harm than good comes in with kids that should never be there in the first place" 17
		"A lot of the kids are traumatized, have experienced trauma and trauma brain is not the most ideal setting for learning, but we don't address that. We just put all this academic stuff

		on top of all that trauma and say, 'Here! Get it! We'll just change it around!' It's not effective."21
Special education is effective due to **Increased focus on inclusive practices**	Children spending more time in the general education environment has reduced some of the ineffective components of special education in the Dunn article.	"More is put on the general education classroom to accommodate students and be aware of their needs. It's not just all the bad kids over there anymore. They're all in the classroom; good, bad, low ability, high, they're all here." 20

"MTSS and RtI do work when we actually do it." 20

"I had experience with that my first year being an inclusion teacher for gen ed students. It actually was a great experience they don't get removed the teachers come into my room and they have their own area" 8 |
| **Positive benefits of labeling** | Special education labels can be helpful as they are a means to the desired end of getting specialized supports for children who need them. | "It can be helpful because it can tell you what kinds of supports you can provide." 13

"But if the child is getting the support that they need to close the gap to catch up then I kind of talk to parents in that way. Let's not talk about what we call it, let's talk about what he needs" 15

"If you want the services, you've got to have a label" 17

"With the label, you know what's up. We found out a name for what's going on." 17

"We've got parents who want their kids to have a label because then they can get extra time for testing…So right now it's cool or have a label" 20

"I have changed my vernacular. So, I don't put labels on students, I identify areas of need." 15

"If that's what's going to accommodate them and help them succeed, that's what they need to do" 8 |

| Positive Benefits of Labeling **Potential to challenge ableist structures and attitudes** | Labels present both parents and educators with needed opportunities to challenge the reality of existing ableist structures and attitudes | "The other students in the class would be better served being exposed to students to are struggling. That way, these students will be in a position to offer assistance to these struggling students" 19

"It teaches tolerance and inclusion. Those special ed kids, they learn. They learn from the other kids and the kids learn from them!" 20

"Having a heterogeneous group would actually support the development in a different way…(exclusion) leaves children that have IEPs at a severe disadvantage" 13

"We have to teach them about that. Educate our students about acceptance and not being ableist. The fact that everybody has a learning disability" 15

"I grew up with this one young girl who was born with polio…". It was communicated to her that she is no better or no less than any other person. That can be done with all students 19

"I think if it's explained to them, they would understand a little bit more and be a bit more confident and be able to advocate for themselves" 22 |
| Negative impact of labeling **Stigmatization** | Labels resulting in removal from gen ed can result in feelings of inferiority, learned helplessness and lack of academic perseverance/resilience in excluded children | "The higher kids were like why are they getting pulled out? And then the kids will try and explain it to them and then the kids were like oh you can't read. So that's where the confidence comes down and the self-esteem and everything" 8

"They said well, this is the retarded class. We've been together since we were in 6th grade…and they were in 10th grade by the time that I got them" 13

"One of the groups actually said to me that they were the group that gave me the biggest headache. I think a big part of it was their internalization of what they perceived that people perceived about them, and that led to their misbehavior." 13

"For our students, being different means being less than" 19 |

		"But it may do more harm because then people consider 'Ok, well this child has' ooh, and I hate this word, I hate this label specifically, 'this child is emotionally disturbed', I hate it." 13
		"By the time they get to the upper grades, these children have been treated like they are the low kids for so long, they already know it. So, they are prepared to give you exactly that" 20
		"This separation really does cause our students to feel inferior and it may also have the effect of causing the other students not to accept these "labelled" students because of viewing them as different, less than and/or inferior" 19
		"I will hear like; I don't want to go to the dumb room" 15
		"Fights getting started because somebody called somebody else LD" 15
		"I have dealt with that in the past, 'oh, the sped kids aren't gonna get it'" 22
Negative impact of labeling **Learned helplessness**		"I get to go and do the easy work they're doing that hard work. So what's the point of trying to? I've got this easy work." 17
		"When they're so used to being helped, kids tend not to try hard…that's where the learned helplessness comes in" 17
		"They already know the bar is set low and they're ready to be at that low bar" 20
		"Special-needs teachers need to challenge their kids until that learned helplessness and feeling of inferiority is gone" 17
		"She labels them, and she has such low expectations of them…the kids are like, you think I'm dumb, I think I'm dumb too. You don't expect anything of me, I'm going to show you" 21
Negative impact of labeling **Lowered expectations**		"Labels tend to make it easy for us in education to conclude that the entire problem lies within the student" 19

		"'oh, well. You know they did try some of the 10 problems, so I guess that's okay, but if the expectation was 10, how did you support them to get those 10 done instead of just giving up because they did five?" 13
Experiences with Disproportionality **"Disproportionality of lowered expectations"**	Disproportionality in many areas has become psychologically accepted as a byproduct of life in a racist society	"We really weren't expecting these kids to do well so just figure out how we can get some Cs on this report card and move on" 15 "this is more of a psychological issue than anything where people mentally have been programmed to where disproportionality is a way of life" 19
Experiences with Disproportionality **Disproportionate staffing patterns/recruitment practices**		"In my career I have seen a limited amount of African American School Psychologists. This means that an understanding of the ethnicity and economics of the African American school population is not represented or explained well enough or often enough" 19 "Very few Black teachers" 19 "This is a district that's never had any Black admin. Not only the building level, not in the district office" 19
Experiences with Disproportionality **Disparate Disciplinary practices**	Patterns which suggest that Black children are at higher risk of being engaged in disciplinary interactions than similarly disposed children from other racial groups in the school and/or district	"We're suspending beyond the 10th day…Black students to a significant degree…80%" 15 "there's horrible disproportionality where African Americans are being singled out, Hispanics are being singled out white privilege is being supported and embraced" 17 "So many black and Latino children there and they are not doing any justice for them to just kind of let the misbehavior go and not address it. You say, oh, well, they come from this type of household and now you're feeling sorry for them. That's absolutely the wrong thing to do…because if you don't learn how to tone that behavior down now when you're big and blacker and people are more scared of you, it's called jail" 19
Structures External to Schools **Structural Racism**	"A condition that both affects and is perpetuated by social institutions such as schools", focusing not on the motivations of individuals but instead examining racism embedded within	"segregation. Good old-fashioned segregation" 17 "somewhere along the line there's that repetitive messaging to the teachers, to the admin, to the students that these Black and Latino kids, they're not important" 20

	institutional practices, policies, and procedures (Blaisdell, 2016, p. 249).	
Structures External to Schools **White Dominant Culture**	The practice of privileging policies that blindly reflect the social values and norms of White middle-class Americans.	"punitive discipline practices, or upholding of White dominant culture, as a way of determining, measuring or examining what it means to be a successful scholar" 13
Structures External to Schools **School Funding Mechanisms**	The way communities funnel funds into and allocate monies for public education.	"We have a large percentage of African American students. I don't know if that's the reason why we don't get a lot of money, but I would like state and federal to make it fair across-the-board".8 "financial inequities are number one" 15 "we focus too much on compliance and money and not enough on the fact that these are children and human beings. Like, this isn't just about money, a child isn't getting what they need" 13 "I would say having conversations, nuanced conversations, dialogues and trainings around disproportionality specifically and special education practices and what is considered best practice outside of talking about how much money we get per child" 13
Structures Internal to Schools **Parent Engagement**	The self-structured activities of parents who have actual agency in school settings (Reynolds, 2010). This is different than parent involvement, in which parent activities in the school are largely designed and dictated by school staff.	"a lot of parents don't know or they're too busy they don't really understand and it just goes the wrong way for that student" 22 "if you're in a district where the parents are not involved and the don't participate or they don't question things or push for things…parents are way more powerful than teachers. No one listens to teachers, but you get a bunch of parents blowing up the admin's phone and email, oh my gosh" 20 "if we don't have that parent support it's kind of hard to cause a different result to happen. As far as some of our children because the behavior has to be addressed somehow and so when that family is not there to support their child it makes it difficult." 19

Structures Internal to Schools **Resource Allocation**	The way individual school districts choose to allocate their available financial and human resources among buildings, programs, and student populations.	"if it's a magnet school, also known as a choice school or gifted and talented school, doesn't matter what level, they get more money" 8 "I think about abolition and what it looks like to engage in community care that is effective and liberatory, that looks like re-distributing funding and resources to the folks who need it most." 13 "across our district there are glaring examples of schools that are in the same district that are worlds apart. Schools and neighborhoods that are predominantly White, they have music programs, they have art every day- our kids on the west side maybe have it one day a week, maybe!" 15 "the funding, the lack of fine arts" 15 "I went to one high school and I heard ten people on the cello! I'm like ok, our kids, some of them haven't even seen a cello, much less are there ten kids proficient at it playing together!" 15
Structures Internal to Schools **Intervention Practices**	The way that schools use intervention programs which are designed to help children successfully remain in the general education environment.	"MTSS and really implementing them with fidelity in the ways in which they were intended. I think that will go a long way to making Black students feel connected to their schools when they don't. 15 "We need to help them first of all. Find out what they are dealing with. Not judge them because of it, but help them through it and be determined to do that before we look at trying to give them label for services" 19 "the lack of a system wide PBIS so that we are not using SROs because that's another problem within the district" 15
Structures Internal to Schools **Professional Development Priorities**	The topics and trainings that schools and district select for their staff to receive so that their priorities may be implemented.	"there are things we can really train our staff on that will not cost any additional money these are just common sense social emotional evidence-based practices that will work" 15 "There's training out there but administrators have to be the ones to tell their teachers to go get it" 17 "sensitivity training, hiring, making it- recognizing that there's an issue, maybe bringing in outside expertise to do some in-service training on it" 21

		"teacher preparation so that general education teachers are also receiving the kind of educational supports that they need to be able to provide children who receive special education services with the services that they need and then to be able to see that as general practice" 13
		"School leader development is also another piece. Making sure that school leaders also have the content knowledge the legal and accommodations, modifications and understanding all of these pieces" 13
		"teachers need more training in diversity" 21
Structures Internal to Schools **Staffing Patterns/Teacher Recruitment Practices**	The way schools and districts attempt to recruit needed educators of color.	"the Black children and even the Hispanic children are not getting people like them, they're not getting that" 22
		"hire more teachers. How about more African American teachers. And males at that" 8
		"In my career I have seen a limited amount of African American School Psychologists. This means that an understanding of the ethnicity and economics of the African American school population is not represented or explained well enough or often enough" 19
		"Very few Black teachers" 19
		"This is a district that's never had any Black admin. Not only the building level, not in the district office" 19
		"if you sincerely wanted to help the progress of your Black and brown students, you would do things such as hiring more diverse staff, hiring more diverse administration, have actual diversity plans, not just oh, we read literature where there are Black characters" 20
		"being intentional about hiring Black teachers" 21
		"Where are the Black teachers? Is no one qualified?" 21
Structures Internal to Schools **Instructional Policies**	Policies and practices enacted by educational administrators and school boards that impact children's instructional and academic experiences at school.	"one of the gaps I've noticed in instruction is that folks don't necessarily break the standards down to the bite-size chunks that are woven into these very big standards"13

		"What do you need to be able to do to make an inference? You need to spiral that and bring it right back down to the bare bones and then build back up so you can teach that standard." 13
		"working better to make sure our students master the basic skills…our schools need to find a way to meet the emotional, educational and academic needs of our students. And be determined that every child will learn what is taught" 19
		"a lot of our children who struggle with academic classes find their voices in other ways. .we got rid of shop, we got rid of home ec, we got rid of music and painting and sculpture. Those were the first things that got cut when we started thinking that parts of education were expendable. I think we lost a lot of students in the process" 15

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VITA

Catrina Nichols Dorsey

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Education

- **University of Illinois at Chicago**
  Ph.D. in Special Education
- **National Louis University**
  M.Ed. in Educational Leadership
- **University of Illinois at Chicago**
  M.Ed. in Special Education
- **University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign**
  B.S. in Elementary Education

Professional Experience

- **Special Education Coordinator,** August 2014-Present
- **Extended School Year Supervisor,** Summers 2013; 2015; 2016; 2017; 2019
- **K-3 LD Resource Teacher,** August 2009 -August 2014
- **First Grade Teacher,** August 2007-June 2009
- **Fifth Grade Teacher,** August 1995-June 1999
- **Second Grade Teacher,** August 1994-June 1995

Publications

Maggin, D., Collins, T., Foster, J., Scott, M., Mossing, K. & **Dorsey, C**. (in review)
Faculty Perspectives on the recruitment, retention, and preparation of special education doctoral students of color.

Dorsey, C., & Zarate, K. (2020). Advocacy. In D. M. Maggin, & M. T. Hughes, (Eds.), *Developing teacher leaders in special education: An administrator's guide to building inclusive schools.* Routledge.

Passmore, A., Salvador, C., & **Dorsey, C.** (2020). Teacher leadership. In D. M. Maggin, & M. T. Hughes, (Eds.), *Developing teacher leaders in special education: An administrator's guide to building inclusive schools.* Routledge.

Funding

Dorsey, C. (2020). University of Illinois Chicago College of Education Graduate Student Council Travel Award. $400.

Dorsey, C. (2017-2021) Special Education Leaders for Urban Centers of Tomorrow (SELECT) - Doctoral Fellowship with support from the Office of Special Education Programs, $24,000 yearly.

Grants

Dorsey, C., (2020).*"What Comes Next?": Supporting Self-Advocates on the Autism Spectrum Beyond IDEA's Boundaries.* University of Illinois at Chicago College of Education Dean's Office Collaborative Community Engagement Grant. $5000.

Dorsey, C., (2019). *Partnering with Parents: Helping Children with Autism and their Families Put the Pieces Together.* University of Illinois at Chicago College of Education Dean's Office Collaborative Community Engagement Grant. $5000.

Awards

Dorsey, C. (2021). University of Illinois at Chicago College of Education Research Day, Certificate of Recognition for Outstanding Presentation.

Dorsey, C. (2019). Chicagoland Autism Connection, Community Advocate Award.

Presentations

Dorsey, C. (2021, March). *Discourse on Dunn: A dozen African American educators weigh in on more than half of century of disproportionality.* Virtual presentation at the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) Annual Conference.

Dorsey, C. (2021, February). *Standing in the gap. Black educators reflect on their agency with Black special education students.* Virtual presentation at the UIC College of Education Research Day, Chicago, Il.

Dorsey, C. (2020, February). Advocacy for ALL! A Literature review on parent advocacy and the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse families. Poster Presentation at the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) Annual Conference, Portland, OR.

Dorsey, C. (2020, February). Educating, empowering, and engaging parents through a university partnership with a community-based organization. Poster Presentation at Council of Exceptional Children (CEC) Annual Conference, Portland, OR.

Dorsey, C. (2019, January). Increasing parent engagement in IEP meetings. Presentation at the annual meeting of the Council for Exceptional Children. Indianapolis, IN.

Dorsey, C. (2019, January). Engaging parents in the effort to reduce disproportionality. Poster Presentation at the annual meeting of the Council for Exceptional Children. Indianapolis, IN.

Dorsey, C. (2019, November). Effective parent engagement in the IEP process. Presentation at the annual conference of the Illinois Council for Exceptional Children. Naperville, IL.

Dorsey, C. (2019, November). Engaging culturally and linguistically diverse families in the effort to reduce disproportionality. Poster Presentation at the annual conference of the Illinois Council for Exceptional Children. Naperville, IL.

Research Experience

- "Standing in the Gap": Black Educators Speak on Black students, Disproportionality, and Special Education. Dissertation, Principal Investigator, University of Illinois at Chicago.

- "Discourse on Dunn": A Dozen Black Educators Weigh in on a Half-Century of Progress in Disproportionality and their Work with Black Special Education Students. Pilot Study, Principal Investigator, University of Illinois at Chicago.

Certifications

- Professional Educator License with endorsements in:

  - General Education Teacher
  - Learning Behavior Specialist 1 (LBS1)
  - General Administration
  - Director of Special Education

Memberships

- Chicagoland Autism Community Board Member

- Council for Exceptional Children (CEC)

- Council for Exceptional Children – Council of Administrators of Special Education (CASE)

- Council for Exceptional Children – Division for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Exceptional Learners (DDEL)