

Race Placed: Special Education Identification and Placement of Black Students

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Abstract

This study investigates the overrepresentation of Black students in special education by looking at the association of race and related variables with referral, identification, and placement. Analyses were performed on a statewide sample of students and teachers to investigate relationships between student, teacher and school demographics, and special education identification and placement. The results find (1) black students assigned to black teachers are less likely to be identified for special services, (2) black students are less likely to be in inclusive placements with increases in white student enrollment, and (3) black students are more likely to be identified for special services and placed in more restrictive settings.

Keywords

disability, educational policy, evaluation and assessment, racial/ethnic data, equity, policy implementation

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Introduction

Whether more Black students than their numbers would justify are identified with disabilities and placed in restrictive classroom setting for special education services is one aspect of research investigating the role of racial bias in K-12 public schools. This research is generally categorized under the concepts of disproportionality and overrepresentation. Though these concepts are most often used interchangeably a subtle distinction can be made with “disproportionality” seen as a pattern that characterizes the process of referral, identification, and placement, and “overrepresentation” used as the term for the measurement of “disproportionality” at any given point in time (Cruz & Rodl, 2018; Ford, 2012; Oswald et al., 1989). Much like and akin to research investigating the achievement gaps that have plagued public education since *Brown v. Board of Education*, research investigating this imbalance in the distribution of racial/ethnic presence in the identification and placement of students with disabilities generally wrangles with whether it represents procedural flaws and professional biases of teachers and others involved in the referral, identification, and placement process or indicates legitimate consequences of deprived resources related to a student’s family status and income.

Recently, the publication of a series of studies concluding that Black students were under rather than over represented in the special education referral, identification, and placement processes renewed a debate that continues today (P. L. Morgan, et al., 2015; P. L. Morgan, Farkas, Cooke et al., 2017; Morgan, 2021). This research casts the study of special education disproportionality into the realm of cultural politics, and the broader impact of race in the American public-school experience (Samuels, 2016). Rebuttals from the educational research community challenged these studies (Cavendish et al., 2018; Connor et al., 2019; Skiba et al., 2016; Welner & Skiba, 2015). The conflicting positions in these rebuttals regarding special education overrepresentation may be categorized into two broad areas. For some the referral, identification, and placement of Black children in special education is the result of valid educational needs to address disabilities resulting from income disparity and associated environmental conditions detrimental to physical and emotional health issues, including disabilities, impacting educational outcomes. Others counter that the legacy of racial discrimination in the United States is reflected in disparate educational outcomes and special education services compromised by procedural biases.

Resolving the inconsistent and conflicting research findings concerning special education overrepresentation and the related issue of disproportionality in the assessment and identification of disabilities and the placement for

services is important because of fundamental concerns for ensuring the civil rights students are entitled to as they participate in the American system of public education. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination in education. Further, children with disabilities are guaranteed a free and appropriate education by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1400 (2004). Courts have determined that inclusion of students in the least restrictive placements (LRE) in determining where and how students will receive supportive services to be a civil right. Understanding the factors influencing decision-making processes for special education services could help ensure students with disabilities are accurately identified and receive the services and supports to which they are entitled.

However, accurate identification is but one aspect of the bigger problem represented by disparity in public school outcomes between Black students and those of color with others in America's public schools. The ideals of high expectations for all students and a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) for students with disabilities are not consistent with enduring achievement gaps for Black students and consistently lower academic proficiency levels for students with disabilities (Irwin et al., 2023). Because of these inequities, it is of vital importance to address the research impasse regarding overrepresentation so that sufficient attention can be devoted to disparate experiences of Black students in America's public schools.

Literature Review

Theoretical Explanations of Overrepresentation

Multiple theoretical frameworks are used to explain and investigate the occurrence of overrepresentation and disproportionality. Research justifying the identification of Black children with disabilities often uses a "risk hypothesis" to attribute the prevalence of disabilities in African American students to the more hazardous social, psychological, and physical health environment of their communities, neighborhoods, and homes. This rationale argues their experiences in these out of school environments lead to the learning, behavioral, developmental, and health characteristics requiring special education services (P. L. Morgan, Farkas, Cook, et al., 2017). This theorizing that the impact of their out of school life experiences compromises their development, preparation, and socialization is not new. The impact of differences in social and community environment upon racial health disparity is well documented.

Similarly, a report from the National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD, 2020) provides data on various aspects of special education

identification and states that poverty and associated conditions including low birth weight and lead exposure reflect the greater risk of children experiencing adverse childhood experiences. Critics terming this explanation for overrepresentation and disproportionality the Theory of Compromised Human Development point out that it relieves schools of any responsibility for disparate outcomes while blaming Black students, their families, and communities (O'Connor & DeLuca Fernandez, 2006; O'Connor et al., 2009). There is also research that finds even when controlling for poverty, Black and Hispanic students are more likely to be identified with disabilities (Schifter et al., 2019). The NCLD report acknowledges that evidence points to bias in special education identification that leads to the misidentification of students of color with disabilities more frequently.

The hereditarian, Critical Race Theory and Cultural Reproduction theories, in turn, attribute disparity in educational and life experiences to genetics rather than environmental causes, maintenance of privilege through the institutions and organizations of society, and the reproduction of racial and economic inequity to continue culture. For the latter, educational disparities between Black and White students, including overrepresentation and disproportionality, are products of historical and cultural aspects of race relations (Connor & Ferri, 2005; Connor et al., 2019).

Other frameworks include the socio-demographic framework that focuses upon the variables associated with student and school race, ethnicity, and income. The ecological rationale maintains that institutional characteristics of schools are responsible for the disproportionate identification of Black students and others of color and their placement in segregated settings. And stereotype theory hypothesizes that the biases of the professionals involved explain overrepresentation (Guttmann & Bar-Tal, 1982; Solorzano, 1997). Because in this debate, neither side has given ground, continued research on this critical issue is important. Clarifying the issues related to special education referral, identification, and placement can enable a substantive review of related school policies and practice. This review could help achieve accuracy in the identification of children with disabilities so that those in need of special education support receive it and others are not incorrectly labeled.

Conceptual Concerns of Overrepresentation Research Methodology

Connor et al., (2019) criticized special education research for conforming to a broader more political issue in its inclination to avoid questions of color, that is, the relationship of special education and race and ethnicity. These

concerns span both qualitative and quantitative and are related to concerns of the validity of research findings and bias in special education research (Cook, 2014). Schumm (2021) identifies several aspects of methodology to guide the research effort for it to be free of bias either in researcher predispositions or characteristics of the elements in the design. Choice of theory, sample size, reliability and validity of variable measurement, and the use of appropriate statistics are cited as critical in both qualitative and quantitative research. Differences in how variables are conceptualized and measured also impact results (Cruz & Rodl, 2018).

These concerns have been expressed in critiques of the research finding underrepresentation of Black students (Skiba, et al., 2016), while research critiquing research finding overrepresentation argues that bias and variables influencing outcomes are not sufficiently controlled for or measured in reliable and valid ways (P. L. Morgan, 2021). Additionally, the nature of qualitative research with its smaller samples is subject to limitations concerning its generalizability. Similarly, a review of findings in the quantitative literature cites differences across states in how policy is enacted leading to differences in the accuracy in which they collect, and report special education data (Gordon, 2017). Nevertheless, the importance of this topic for understanding special education procedural decisions warrants continued research to address these concerns.

Race and Special Education Overrepresentation

A recent review of special education overrepresentation and disproportionality research (H. Morgan, 2020) acknowledges that though not agreeing upon the causes, misidentification can exist and identifies a range of variables that influence decision-making in the referral, assessment, and placement of students for special education services. This review documents the over identification of students of color with subjective disabilities, that is, those relying upon professional judgment rather than objective indicators, across multiple aspects of the identification and placement process. Teacher perceptions, student poverty, racial biases, and the socio-historical context of schools and other institutions are identified as factors having an influence upon these processes (H. Morgan, 2020). The NCLD (2020) also reports that overrepresentation is more pronounced in the identification of students of color with “subjective” disabilities that depend upon and are biased by the judgment of educational teachers and other professionals.

America’s struggle with equality and discrimination in some ways defines its history. Given that the educator work force, that is, administrators, teachers, and support professionals, is overwhelmingly White it is possible that the

cultural disconnect between Black students, their schools, and teachers that happened through the elimination of de jure segregation and a generation of Black teachers is in some way related to the disparate outcomes and school experiences of Black students since desegregation. Unresolved biases in expectations, attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions of Black students that have defined the experiences of Black Americans, may also play a significant role in the nation's public schools. In its 2020 research brief on significant disproportionality in special education, the NCLD acknowledges the position of researchers and studies arguing that because Black children are more likely to experience Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE), they are more likely to have disabilities and be identified for special education placement and services. The report states that children experiencing these ACE's are also much more likely to be diagnosed with disabilities associated with academic and behavioral difficulty and that ACE's are also highly correlated with poverty and low income.

Referring to “. . . a large body of recent research demonstrating that income differences do not eliminate the role of race in the overrepresentation of students of color in special education” (NCLD 3), the report explains that as bias influences the special education decision-making process students from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds experience harsher discipline practices, and are at risk of being misidentified with having a disability and placed in more restrictive educational settings. Consistent with this assertion, research investigating biased attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions about Black students and others from diverse racial and ethnic background of teachers and their interactions with students finds that student characteristics including race and ethnicity influence teacher treatment of students (Inan-Kaya & Rubie-Davies, 2022). Further, the influence of biased attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions about Black students and others of color independent of income, have also been identified as factors that offer insight into the disparate educational experiences and outcomes for Black students (Assari & Caldwell, 2018; Assari et al., 2021; Bumpus et al., 2020; Burton-Douglas, 2017; Grindal et al., 2019; Leath et al., 2019; Papageorge et al., 2020; Scott et al., 2019). On the heels of research criticizing both the method and the interpretation of the findings of studies asserting under identification (Cavendish et al., 2018, Connor et al., 2019, Skiba et al., 2016; Welner & Skiba, 2015). P. L. Morgan, Fargas, Cook, et al. (2017) replicated previous research. The results were interpreted as confirmative of previous research by the authors and used to maintain their position that Black students and others from historically marginalized populations were underrepresented in special education. The research of others including Grindal et al. (2019) followed with an analysis of data across multiple states finding that racial disparity

existed for identification for special education even when controlling for income, and that these differences are seen in placement as well. And a more recent study concluded from its results that the confounding influence of unmeasured variables like many of those designated as ACE's do not explain the results of studies finding underrepresentation in their results (P. L. Morgan, 2021). In defending the findings of this study, previous research finding underrepresentation of Black students and students of color is cited as justification for a review of federal policy requirements concerning overrepresentation and the related concept of disproportionality (Farkas et al., 2020; P. L. Morgan et al., 2015, P. L. Morgan, Farkas, Cook, 2017; Odegard et al., 2020) While this research point counterpoint continues, special education school outcomes continue to reflect a less rewarding school experience that leads to a related and equally undesirable set of life experiences beyond schools.

Race and Student Placement for Services

Disproportionality in placement with Black students receiving services after identification with a disability in more restrictive settings and separate classrooms is a related dimension of the overrepresentation and disparate experiences in school discipline for Black students is a critical component of this research (Liu et al., 2023, 2024). This is a critical concern because research indicates that students receiving placements in more inclusive settings have better school outcomes (Cole et al., 2020, 2023). This research is also contradicted by research finding that this disproportionality in placement does not exist when controlling for demographic factors (P. L. Morgan et al., 2023). However, if implicit biases influence placement decision-making, Black students could be placed in settings not optimized for learning. Research that provides more understanding of the interplay of the many variables involved in the referral, identification, and placement of Black students in special education can be of use at all levels of legislation, policy, and practice in the implementation of special education programming.

Research finds that Black students receive more restrictive and less inclusive placements (Burton-Douglas, 2017; Cavendish et al., 2018; Cosier & Causton-Theoharis, 2010; Dever et al., 2016; Eitle, 2002). However, as with referral and identification, others attribute restrictive placement to the academic and behavioral needs of students (P. L. Morgan, Farkas, Cook, et al., 2017; 2023). This review of research also concludes that the bias of education professionals can result in the misidentification of students of color with a disability and their placement in separate classrooms with lower expectations where teachers have less expertise in core content subject matter and

concludes that racial bias is evidenced because students of color are more likely to come from low-income homes (H. Morgan, 2020; Schifter et al., 2019).

Student Teacher Racial Alignment and Special Education Referral and Identification

Among the explanations for the overrepresentation of Black students in special education is research finding that teacher and student racial alignment results in more favorable assessment of students (Amine, 2014; Fish, 2019). In a similar vein, as school characteristics change from less to more diverse the school experiences of Black students improve. For instance, Oswald et al. (1999) found that higher levels of school diversity were associated with lower levels of risk for identification as behavioral or emotionally disabled for African American and Latino males. Worth noting is that one can find support for each of these theoretical positions across the body of research in literature. Mixed results have also been found in studies that looked at behavior as well as academics (P. L. Morgan et al., 2023).

Teacher and student relationships, including those articulated through differences in race and culture would seem to be an important part of the equation with policy implications. However, some find no relation or mixed results between teacher and student race and school experiences and outcomes (P. L. Morgan et al., 2023). However, the interaction of race and ethnicity across teachers, students, classrooms, clinical personnel, and school composition to generate disparate outcomes between Black and White students continues to be found in research (Lindsay & Hart, 2017; Rasheed et al., 2019; Skiba et al., 2006; Sullivan et al., 2019).

A sizable body of research documents the positive impact having a Black teacher has upon Black student educational outcomes (Egalite et al., 2015). Ehrenberg et al., (1995) found favorable differences in Black high school student outcomes related to teacher race. Bacon et al. (2007) found that Black teachers place more importance on empathy for students and their families. Hong and Legette (2023) found that schools with majority Black composition and Black teacher assistants benefit Black students. Others find Black teachers have higher expectations for Black students, see Black student classroom behavior differently, refer Black students to the office less frequently, and are responsible for better academic outcomes (Gershenson et al., 2016, 2022).

This relationship between racial demographics of schools and staff and student experiences in school is also cited in research that finds

teacher judgment and stereotypical views of race, expectations, and behavior influence referral, the beginnings of the procedural processes leading to special education identification and placement (Burton-Douglas, 2017). Research finding that schools with majority Black composition have been found to be beneficial for Black students seems to validate this as an explanation (Hong & Legette, 2023). Further, Black students have lower rates of disciplinary referrals leading to fewer suspensions when they have Black teachers (Hayes et al., 2023). They also link these relationships to the decision making related to whether to suspend and the conditions associated with suspension including the length of time associated with the decision to suspend.

A body of qualitative research finds a predictive relationship between teacher and student race and referrals for special education evaluation (Alexander, 2009; Lindsay & Hart, 2017; Woodson & Harris, 2018). This finding that more subjective influences contribute to the overrepresentation of Black students in special education seem to align with research concluding that the influence of school composition is a contributing factor to the identification of Black students with a disability (Cartledge & Dukes, 2009; Dever et al., 2016; Fletcher et al., 2005). Ahran et al. (2021) affirm these findings and attribute overrepresentation of Black and Latino students to biased assumptions of teachers and clinicians resulting in inaccurate assessments, labeling, and placements.

Special education research including overrepresentation have been criticized for avoiding questions of race (Connor et al., 2019). Given the enduring existence of disparate educational outcomes for Black students and other students of color, there is a certain urgency in continued research to document and understand the nature of bias and its influence in the special education referral, identification, and placement process. Because these processes are influenced by and associated with disparate school outcomes in achievement, discipline, and graduation that lead to other undesirable life experiences including unemployment and incarceration (Togut, 2011), getting a clearer understanding of how they work to disadvantage Black students is critical.

Research Questions

This study replicated previous special education overrepresentation research with some important distinctions. It represents a more comprehensive look at the three benchmark events of referral, identification, and placement. It uses information that includes the students and education personnel in the districts and schools of a statewide database of students and faculty and their schools over multiple years. It uses secondary analyses to address the influence of

covariates identified in the research literature upon the placement process. It is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1. Are Black children more likely to be identified for special education than are children of other races?

RQ2. Are Black children less likely to be placed in a high inclusion setting than are children of other races?

RQ3. Are Black students more or less likely to be placed in special education if they had a Black teacher the prior year than if they had a White teacher?

Method

Sample and Variables

We begin with all data for attendance, discipline, standardized tests, and special education records from 2014 through 2022 for Indiana. From the attendance data, we calculate the school-level demographic variables, including school-level percentages of (1) White children; and (2) children receiving Free/reduced (FRL) versus Full priced lunches. Adding teacher race information allows for a district-level variable representing the total proportion of Black teachers in a district.

We limit the scope of our analysis to children in traditional public schools in special education with subjective Primary Exceptionality (PE) codes (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2020); that is, those with Mild/Moderate Intellectual disability (ID), Mild/Moderate Emotional disability (ED), or Mild/Moderate Learning disability (LD); and with Placement Types for more or less than 80% of the school day in general education classrooms as a measure of high and low inclusion. Lastly, we exclude students outside of 3rd through 12th grade because students do not participate in the state assessment (ISTEP) prior to third grade, and prior to third grade many students identified for Special Education have not yet been assigned a PE code.

Race is defined as Black, White, Hispanic, or Other. Other includes Asian or Pacific Islander, Multiracial, American Indian, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. “Full priced” or “free/reduced” designate socio-economic status. “Discipline” is designated as the most consequential disciplinary event, that is, in-school or out-of-school suspension, or expulsion, in order from least to most consequential; received by a child. The percentage of White students and those receiving free or reduced-price lunch are centered and scaled.

For the RQ2 and RQ3 analyses, we limit observations only to students either (a) in their first year of identification for Special Education with one of the subjective disability codes and a placement type of “high” or “low” inclusion, as described above, or (b) moving from 1 year of general education to the next. This eliminates all students continuing in Special Education who have PE codes other than those of interest or have placement types other than the school-based service continuum. We then link teacher demographics to student data. In total, we have 1.5 million student-teacher links representing 288,366 students. For the RQ2, we further require students to have prior year scores for English/Language Arts (ELA) testing, because students with ELA related learning disabilities represent the largest group in special education (Vaughn & Fletcher, 2021). Note that no statewide standardized tests were given in 2021, so that year is excluded. For RQ3, we do not require a prior year ELA test score, but we limit the dataset to only Black students with at least one Black or White teacher the prior year.

Design

To determine if Black students are overrepresented in subjective disability categories (RQ1), we perform a chi-square test of student race for mild/moderate LD, ID, or ED identification compared to the general education population. We present the composition index, risk index, and risk ratio for each race. In calculating risk ratios, we use all racial groups in the denominator rather than Whites only, as recommended by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP).

We repeat the chi-square test of student race on high versus low inclusion (RQ2), again presenting the composition index, risk index, and risk ratio. To address this, we use only students identified with a subjective disability. This means our results can show disproportionate placement even within these disabilities with typically more restrictive placement.

Further we conduct RQ2 supplementary analyses to determine the univariate impact of each demographic on inclusion, and the joint impacts of each demographic with race on inclusion. We then use Propensity Score Matching to test for differences in inclusion between Black and White students who are nearly “identical” in every way we find has a univariate impact. This process identifies pairs of students who have similar characteristics except for race, eliminating noise typically found in a model with many independent groups, and reducing the potential for selection bias.

We use only Black and White students in their first year of identification for special education with a disability code (i.e., mild/moderate LD, ID, or ED) and a placement type indicating either high or low inclusion. Furthermore,

Table 1. General Education Versus Disability Identification by Race.

Variables	General education	LD, ID, or ED	Total	Composition index (%)	Risk index (%)	Risk ratio
White	4,049,284	417,508	4,466,792	68	9	0.98
Black	649,767	93,524	743,291	15	13	1.33
Hispanic	718,879	66,413	785,292	11	8	0.89
Other	441,944	37,141	479,085	6	8	0.82
Total	5,859,874	614,586	6,474,460		9	

we restrict the sample to only students who have an ELA test score in the year prior to identification. To match students as identically as possible, we restructure the continuous school variables (the percentage of students in the school on Free/Reduced Lunch and the percentage of White students in the school) into deciles. To compare students across different years, ELA test scores are standardized by year and grade.

We require matched students to have the same FRL status and most consequential disciplinary event in the year prior to identification, be identified with the same disability, be in the same grade, and come from schools in the same decile for percentage of White students and percentage of students receiving FRL. Within these constraints, Black and White students are matched to have the closest possible prior year standardized ELA test score. We then perform a mixed method logistic regression for the matched students to test for differences in the probability of inclusion based on race. We also include covariates for the three variables allowed to vary in the matching process (school Whiteness and wealth, and standardized student ELA scores the prior year) in order to mitigate any remaining imbalance.

For our final research question (RQ3), we restrict our dataset to include only Black students either (a) moving from general education to general education or (b) moving from general education into special education with a subjective disability and a placement type of high or low inclusion, who (c) had either a Black or White teacher in the year prior. We then perform a chi-square test for differences in likelihood of disability identification for Black students based on the race of their teacher in the prior year.

Results

We find for Research Question 1 a statistically significant difference in the likelihood of subjective disability identification for students based on race ($\chi^2(3)=11039$, p -value $< .001$). We find that Black students are 33% more

Table 2. High Versus Low Inclusion for Students With Subjective Disabilities by Race.

Variables	Low inclusion	High inclusion	Total	Composition index (%)	Risk index (%)	Odds ratio
White	2,605	318,885	11,490	69	77	1.02
Black	7,071	64,140	91,211	14	70	0.92
Hispanic	4,788	50,934	65,722	11	77	1.02
Other	9,047	27,342	36,389	6	75	0.99
Total	143,511	461,301	604,812		76	

likely to be identified with a subjective disability than the average student (RQ1), while other races are significantly less likely to be identified with a subjective disability (Table 1).

We find for Research Question 2 a statistically significant difference in placement of students with subjective disabilities in high versus low inclusion classrooms based on race ($\chi^2(3)=2205.9$, p -value $< .001$). Furthermore, we find Black students are only 92% as likely to be placed in high inclusion as their peers of other races, whom have approximately equal likelihood of high inclusion (RQ2) (Table 2).

For our supplemental analysis, we use univariate and bivariate tests to understand the predictors of student inclusion for our Propensity Score Matching. Across all tests, Black students are least likely to be included, although FRL students, and those with more discipline incidents are included less. We verify that being Black leads to a higher probability of special education identification and a lower probability of inclusion, even when controlling for academic performance. Additionally, as percent Whiteness of students in the school increases, high inclusion for White students increases, and decreases for non-Whites. All p -values are significant at $< .001$.

Based on these analyses, we include significant predictors of inclusion in our Propensity Score Matching to ensure that differences in inclusion between Black and White students cannot be alternatively explained by the socio-economic status of the student, disciplinary concerns, or their ELA test score in the year prior to identification. By requiring an exact match between the Black and White students in terms of type of subjective disability identification, we eliminate this as a possible explanation for difference in inclusion. We further require both students to be in similar schools: the wealth and whiteness of the school must be in the same decile. This allows us to force close matches for these continuous school-level variables by specifying exact matches within deciles, allowing for similarity of ELA test scores to be of

Table 3. Results of Mixed Methods Logistic Regression on Propensity Score Matched Students.

Variables	Odds ratio	p-Value
Baseline - White student in a school of average Whiteness (54%) and wealth (58% on FRL), with an average (for SpEd students) prior year ELA score of 1.21 standard deviations below the mean of all students.	726.69	<.0001
Black	0.47	<.0001
Sch percentage White	0.84	0.4311
Sch percentage receiving free/reduced lunch	0.63	0.0346
Standardized ELA _{t-1}	1.15	0.3397
Control for random effects of pair		YES

Table 4. Identification of Black Students Based on Teacher Race.

Variable	Black teacher	White teacher	Total
Not identified	102,761	696,457	799,218
Identified	1,565	13,160	14,725
Total	104,326	709,617	813,943

primary importance in the matching procedure, since we believe this is likely to be the strongest argument for Black students' exclusion.

We then address any remaining imbalance between matched groups by performing a mixed method logistic regression with random effects for each pair and fixed effects for the percentages of White students and students on free/reduced lunch in each student's school as well as their standardized prior year ELA score. We find Black students are significantly less likely than their White matches to be in High Inclusion, holding all other student and school demographics constant. We find Black students are less than half as likely as their White matches to be in High Inclusion ($OR=0.47$, p -value $<.001$), holding all other student and school demographics constant (Table 3).

Regarding RQ3, we find that Black students are 23.6% more likely to be identified with a subjective disability if they had a White teacher rather than a Black teacher the year prior to identification ($\chi^2(1)=64.116$, p -value $<.001$) (Table 4).

Discussion and Conclusions

Overall, the results indicated that Black students are more likely to be referred for assessment and identified with a disability and are more likely to be

placed in more restrictive educational settings than other students. Additionally, the results indicate that having a Black teacher the year prior to being identified with a disability lessens the chances of this happening. The results of this study and others demonstrating the continuing existence of racial bias in special education referral, identification, and placement process is compelling evidence for the need to do more than tinker around the edges in a redesign of special education. The use of propensity matching to compare students with similar attributes rules out between student differences as an explanation for the disparity in special education placement experiences between Black and White students.

The finding that Black students having Black teachers are not as likely to be identified for special education as those having White teachers suggests that the influence of teacher bias is extant from the referrals shown by research to be confirmed in the resulting assessment and discussions that follow. The placement of Black students in more restrictive and segregated settings for services than similar White students suggests biased perceptions of their capabilities and needs. And the increase of identification with a disability and restrictive placements of Black students with an increase of White students in the school population suggests that the dominant culture's norms manifest themselves in disparate treatment attributable to their race.

Acknowledging the role of race in the referral, identification, and placement for special education presents a policy versus practice conundrum for translating research into school settings (Dever et al., 2016). Grappling with racial differences in teacher expectations and clinical judgment could have an impact upon school culture and climate. The findings that Black students are more likely to be identified for special education if they are placed in the classrooms of a White teacher suggest the need for schools and educational professionals to engage in an honest reflection regarding individual biases, behaviors, and expectations that is certain to create some discomfort. The increase of identification, and restrictive placements of Black students with a decrease in their percentage in the school population suggest that the dominant culture's norms manifest themselves in perceiving students differently because of race and ethnicity with differential expectations for their behavior and academic performance. This conflict between Black students and dominant culture norms could shape professional interactions in the decision-making process in a way that disadvantages Black students and students of color.

If the dominant culture's norms manifest themselves in students being perceived differently because of race, special education identification and placement reflects decision-making mechanisms that can inadvertently segregate students because of their race. More research into what happens at each step along the journey from academic failure and/or behavioral conflict to referral

and diagnosis, identification, and placement for special education support could be invaluable for intervening at different points along the continuum of referral to placement. Translating this research into policy and practice could change how Black students are treated and experience school.

Engaging in reflective analysis of these processes is not a new idea. Algozzine et al. (1982) posited just such an approach decades ago in a review of special education outcomes and processes and found as others that once a referral is made it dominates the decision-making process by psychologists and others who place more importance on the teacher referral data than data from assessment and evaluation that contradicts the referral information (O'Reilly et al., 1989; Ysseldyke et al., 1997). We suggest that the quality of instructional design and delivery in classrooms from which a referral is made be given the same level of scrutiny and evaluation as the student during the deliberations occurring in the decision-making process. In addition, research identifying with clarity and precision those characteristics of classrooms where there is teacher and student racial alignment, that is, Black students with Black teachers, should be undertaken to review and evaluate classroom instruction for training and learning in professional development in public schools and teacher preparation programs.

This systemic approach concerning how decisions are made also situates the review within the broader issue of how racial bias is manifested in institutional practices. For instance, literature looking at the impact of school resegregation upon Black and White student school experiences and outcomes attributes differences in outcomes and experiences, including special education decision-making, to a limited access to resources that is rectified with their enrollment in integrated schools and presence of White middle-income students. This is problematic because it seems to imply that Black and low-income students must leave their communities to be with White students to gain access to resources necessary for academic success, perpetrating the moral dilemma created by forced busing. While desegregation and integration offer benefits to students that go beyond academic outcomes, having to destroy or deconstruct Black communities and their schools for Black students to have access to teaching and resources that optimize learning creates an ethical dilemma and somewhat of an existential crisis for the community of neighborhoods that are the crucible of the Black experience. An analysis of decisions regarding school resource allocations should go beyond whether the neediest schools receive more than better situated schools to whether they are receiving enough to be effective.

Ignoring the impact of racism in special education research, as a practical matter, does nothing to reconfigure policies and practices of the system, reallocate resources for equity, or change expectations and relationships between

students and teachers. Further, attributing the gap to Black poverty and in the same breath asserting that culturally responsive teaching is the answer does not acknowledge the pervasive nature of racism experienced by all Black students. Shifting the focus from the student to the institution of schooling, its policies and practices may open the door for more equitable school experiences for Black students.

To rectify the dilemma of systemic racial bias influencing special education procedural decision-making evidenced by the results of this study, we recommend something more than the incremental change affected by the traditional tools of school improvement: professional development, equity initiatives and other local school and district policy and practice revisions that operate within current roles and organizational behavior. We suggest rethinking who belongs in special education and what constitutes a disability. Conceptualizing a service delivery system limited to students requiring intensive supports, or whose identification does not rely upon the more subjective assessments in the identification process could lessen the occurrence of overrepresentation. Supports and interventions for students typically diagnosed through more subjective assessment processes would be addressed within the context and resources of general education.

The practicality of this suggestion is limited by the complex relationships that schools have with special education policy, and any efforts of this scale to reimagine the current system would face the formidable task of replacing old legislation with new legislation, or at least new legislative guidance. Additionally, the difficulty in restructuring the roles for those responsible for the delivery of services that have become institutionalized in our education system would require the equally formidable undertaking of changing school culture. However, to reconceptualize who is disabled and what supports are needed for students who have historically struggled in our public schools will have to start somewhere. A compromise could be a reassessment of the standards for diagnosing a student with a disability as a step forward.

This is where the research findings, and interpretations that exonerate the “system” of any responsibility for changing policy and practice to achieve a more inclusive and equitable educational culture, become tools for maintaining the status quo and continuing the finger pointing that characterizes the debate of race and education in our American culture. Getting identification right so that more Black students are referred and identified with a disability may not be an answer for the inequity in how they experience school. Nor does it speak to appropriate placement. And given that being identified with a disability is associated with less desirable school academic outcomes and experiences beyond school, how referring more for identification and placement benefits their chances for leading successful remains to be demonstrated.

A movement that inspires us to evolve beyond the social constructs emanating from the politics of who belongs and who does not with a more open and accepting position for the diversity of history and experiences that define our schools and classrooms is long overdue.

This study looked at characteristics of teachers, students, and schools that define relationships, shape expectations, determine outcomes, and influence decision-making in special education processes. They are governed by legislation, policy, and procedure for providing an individual child's educational needs. However, their intent can be thwarted inadvertently by the individual and collective histories of all involved, that is, administrators, teachers, students, and parents, who define the enabling context of implementation. But they can be unacknowledged and not accounted for in the special education decision-making processes. The purpose of the study and the value of the findings is to encourage self-reflection by all involved in these processes and an evaluation of their design and implementation. Doing so will go a long way toward ensuring that those children needing special education support are identified and receive them as intended. It can also lead to the honest discussion needed to ensure that a child's right to a free and appropriate education happens. One thing is for sure; transforming Black students so that their behavior and interests are congruent with the norms of the current system is a failed experiment. By all indications, changing the system is a better way to proceed.

Limitations

Although many of the methodological concerns of existing special education research investigating disproportionality were addressed, there are important limitations. Looking back to the previous year's status was used to operationalize referrals leading to identification and placement because referral data was not a field in the database. Having actual referral data would enable a more definitive analysis of those involved in the referral process, including school staff other than teachers, parents, and clinical professionals. And though the small effect size associated with differences in group means for the research question concerning placement has no practical meaning or application some may consider this as a limitation. Additionally, the study identified that the ecology of the school has an impact upon special education decision-making, and a multitude of student, teacher, staff, school, and community variables influence these decisions.

Because school culture is unique, generalizing across all school demographics should be done with caution. Finally, even though "exact matching" was used in propensity score matching, it can only approximate a Randomized

Control Trial. No two students are exactly alike, and each has a unique school experience. As such, caution and restraint should be used in reacting to these findings and overgeneralizing cause and effect among the variables investigated in the research questions. However, because the labeling and placement of Black students in instructional settings away from their peers may lead to a developmental trajectory characterized by conflict with the institutions of their communities and confinement, it is imperative to disrupt this role of race in their school experiences. Poor children of any racial or ethnic background are more likely to live in toxic social and environmental circumstances. But not all poor children have these experiences. Nurturing relationships can mitigate the misfortune of poverty. Nor are all Black children poor. However, all are victimized by the low expectations created by this stereotype.

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