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Racial Profiling in Education: A Study of Teacher Perceptions of Students in Special Education

Cairen D. Ireland

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Racial Profiling in Education:
A Study of Teacher Perceptions of Students in Special Education

by

Cairen D. Ireland

A dissertation presented to the Faculty of the School of Education,

Loyola Marymount University,

In partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education

2020

Racial Profiling in Education:

A Study of Teacher Perceptions of Students in Special Education

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by

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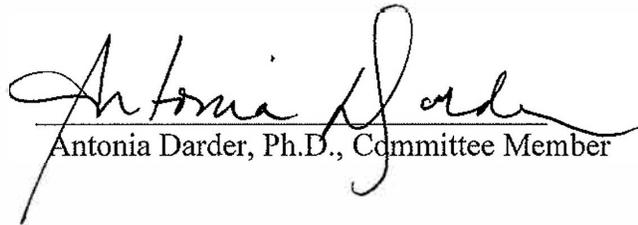
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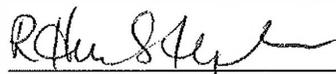
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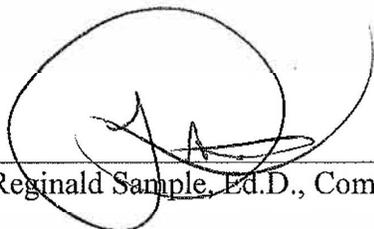
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I wear a ring on my finger that has one of my favorite scriptures etched in the metal. “Trust in the Lord with all your heart” (Proverbs 3:5). It serves as a constant reminder that my path and purpose are ordained. Even when I begin to encounter stony ground, I am to look for the light. And in those moments when I can see the light, but my body is frozen with fatigue or trepidation, He sends the wind. Thank you, Dad, Alexis, Auntie, Uncle Gabe, and Demiko for being that uplifting breeze. Your unconditional love, guidance, and encouragement have meant the world to me.

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I am dedicating this dissertation to my mother. I have carried you in my spirit, drawing strength from your memory, and holding steadfast to the hope that someday we will meet again.

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ABSTRACT

Racial Profiling in Education:

A Study of Teacher Perceptions of Students in Special Education

by

Cairen D. Ireland

African American males have performed near the bottom of the educational hierarchy in America for centuries. Though some improvements have been noted in the last several decades, educational statistics illustrate the achievement gap still persists between African American and White students (Hanushek, 2016). Disaggregated data show disparities in academic performance, high school drop-out rates, and college completion rates. African American males as early as kindergarten are also facing harsher discipline in schools and Black boys are often excluded from gifted and advanced placement courses and other educational opportunities (Howard, 2010). Yet, this population is over-referred and overrepresented in special education, particularly in eligibility categories like emotional disturbance and intellectual disability. Researchers state White, monolingual females make up the majority of the teacher workforce across the country. Theorists also posited the teacher is the single most important factor in school success and their beliefs about students have a tremendous impact on efficacy and outcomes (Noguera, 2012). These assertions are significant. If teachers have had very little exposure to students of other racial or ethnic backgrounds or have a negative attitude toward students of color based on the master narrative, it will inevitably show up in their discourse, pedagogical practice, and student outcomes.

Keywords: African American males, teacher perception, achievement gap, disproportionality

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I had grown tall enough to bump my head on the counter at home. I had affectionately earned the title of *big girl* and was officially allowed to go on the older kids' playground at recess and lunch. I was a first grader. I recall my inaugural parent-teacher conference. I was more than excited to show my parents where I sat in class, where we hung our coats, where we put our snacks, and, of course, brag over all the work I had completed so far. As I had already anticipated, Mrs. Cole had nothing but great things to say about me. My work and study habits were stellar. My reading and writing abilities were exemplar. My problem-solving skills and leadership potential exceeded her expectations. I was a pleasure to have in class. My mama and daddy were so proud. They knew I had something special and did not regret starting me in school a year early; the only four-year-old in the bunch, but already grouped with the top of the class.

The experience, however, was not the same for my older brother, Terrence. Dismal is the word he chose to describe his education. The same night I received my first compulsory education accolades was the same night he learned what *retention* meant. Ms. Lang threatened he would repeat the sixth grade if he did not improve by the end of the year. He left the schoolhouse deflated that evening. Terrence felt like the odds were against him—Black, male, and with a speech impediment. He loved the arts, creative writing, and history. He taught himself to play the piano, and he would draw and write poetry during his free time. Unfortunately, he believed his White teacher did not appreciate any of the talents he so valued.

She judged him on his reading fluency and oral participation—two tasks he avoided or escaped but seemed oblivious to his other talents. He did not refuse to participate because he was

a struggling reader or defiant like some of the social narratives might say. He stuttered. Ms. Lang knew, but rather than accommodate him and seek other ways to measure his giftedness, she shamed him by forcing him to read aloud and speak in front of the class. Terrence wrote a composition once, where he apparently repeated a word in one of his sentences. As all teachers should, Mrs. Lang provided feedback. Unfortunately, her comment was more dehumanizing than helpful. Adjacent to his failing grade, she wrote, “Wow, you’re even stuttering on paper.” It all makes sense now—ditching school in junior high, forging our parents’ signature on paperwork, and only passing courses in the arts. In hindsight, I clearly see the push and pull of the White-Black binary in urban education.

Ms. Lang pushed Terrence away from self-confidence. She pushed him away from opportunity. She pushed him out of the light and into the shadows of low expectations and failure. Terrence pulled away from engagement. He pulled himself away from the hurtful reach of her biases. But in doing so, he also pulled away from the norm. And when you pull away from the norm in education, you tend to get labeled. Ms. Lang wounded the spirit of another young Black male. Terrence had been broken and if other teachers were like her, exploiting children of color, then why even bother? This memory is still vivid in his mind; still gut-wrenching three decades later. So vivid is that memory that it now compels me to critically understand the manner in which teacher perceptions, knowing or unknowingly, are responsible for a form of racial profiling in education—similar to that which we find on the streets—that negatively impacts the lives of African American students each day.

Statement of the Problem

“All men are created equal” is a statement embedded in the United States Declaration of Independence. However, authors of many sophisticated history books argue it was not until after the Civil War, almost 90 years later, that any real progress toward some semblance of equality was evident in America. In 1865, the 13th Amendment to the United States Constitution was ratified and slavery was ended. Although the institution of slavery had ended, it was not so for subjugation of Black people in this country. Therefore, the persistent impact of racism on education of African American students continues to be tied to a long history of racialized oppression in the United States. For example, in 1936, University of Maryland School of Law denied entrance of Black applicants into their program, a decision based solely on race. Thurgood Marshall, affected by these racist practices, challenged the University in court in the *Murray v. Maryland* (1936) case. He contended Donald Gaines Murray was as equally qualified as his White peers to attend the University. The *Black* law schools he would otherwise have to attend were not at the same academic level as the University of Maryland and therefore denying him admittance violated the “separate but equal” principle. Baltimore City Court agreed with Marshall and so did Maryland Court of Appeals. University of Maryland was ordered to admit Donald Gaines Murray.

Similarly, at the heart of the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) legal case were deep concerns related to the manner in which schools designated for Black students and White students were unequal and had the potential of inadequately preparing Black children, compared to their White counterparts. Regardless of amendments to the U.S. Constitution, some state governments continued to reinforce laws that denied Black people access to public facilities

including, but not limited, to the same public schools. The 1954 ruling asserted segregation in schools was unconstitutional. The Supreme Court thought it to be in violation of the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment. However, the court did not offer immediate guidance on how this ruling should be implemented. It took another two years before the court provided a plan of action for desegregation with “all deliberate speed.”

This historical event should have clarified any lingering misunderstandings about the “separate but equal” debate for local governments and school districts across the country. For all intents and purposes, it should have marked the rebirth of the school system and been an opportunity to level the playing field for all students. Yet in early 2016, more than a half century later, a federal judge had to issue an order to integrate two segregated high schools in Cleveland, Mississippi. At the time, this was one of 44 active desegregation cases in Mississippi. The schools at the center of this case were once physically separated by a set of train tracks. Though they served as a natural boundary for residents to easily identify their community schools, the proverbial landmark also divided the communities by race and class. *This side* or *that side* of the tracks were directly associated with *this race* or *that race* and socioeconomic status. Separation in Mississippi was apropos of the racialized tone in America and illustrated how centuries of oppression has conditioned the way we think and act even now (Davis & Wright, 2018; United States Department of Justice, 2017; United States Courts, n.d.).

Racism is a deep-rooted part of American history. It is so inconspicuously woven into the fabric of society that sometimes we hardly recognize the thread of microaggressions in our day to day interactions. But even if we have become desensitized to some racialized behavior, possibly in those instances where it brings us no immediate harm, we cannot deny racism’s

pandemic effect. Irrespective of the social context, it is probable that civil liberties or even basic respect will be more often denied or limited disproportionately for people of color. Research and the experiential reality of the oppressed affirm racism are the culprits for many injustices. If not addressed, its legacy will continue to unravel our current democracy (Comey, 2015; Monroe, 2005). One of the most persistent ways in which racializing processes are expressed in institutions is through the racial profiling of those deemed other in American society. Although this phenomenon has been more often associated with racial profiling by police officers (Weir, 2016), an assumption of this study was racial profiling was at work in the education of Black children and this phenomenon was particularly at work in the special education labeling of Black children.

Racial Profiling

Statistically speaking, a Black person in America has or will likely experience some form of racism during their lifetime. In fact, Weir (2016) asserted an African American male in America will most likely experience some form of racism more than once in their life. Some of the most disturbing and irreconcilable casualties of the war on racism are the victims of racial profiling (i.e., the countless African Americans labeled, categorized by the color of their skin, persecuted for embracing their God-given Blackness). This racism occurs even before committing a crime, acting aggressively, or falling below educational benchmarks where it is assumed Black people are inherently guilty.

Research by the National Institute for Justice (2013) contended racial profiling was most commonly understood as a practice that targets people for suspicion of a crime based on their race, ethnicity, religion or national origin. Some law enforcement officers even created profiles

about different groups of people whom they believed were more likely to commit certain crimes or engage in particular deviant behaviors. Based on their false assumptions, generalizations are perpetuated that often lead to different and unfair treatment in our communities. Weir (2016) emphasized data that focused on White officers' treatment of Black citizens. Racialized disparities were identified in the frequency of traffic stops, the amount of drug-related arrests, and instances of excessive use of force.

The mindset that drives these acts of conscious and unconscious racialization is therefore widely prevalent in America. When one unpacks the definition of racial profiling, discrimination based on prejudices about a certain group of people is at the crux. This phenomenon arguably rears its head in social contexts other than law enforcement. In fact, examples of racial profiling in society are numerous. Priest et al. (2018) asserted negative racial attitudes were also linked to poorer quality of health and health services. Racism negatively impacted certain racial and ethnic groups during preconception, pregnancy, and through adolescence. Some connections were also made to mental health outcomes, cognition, and other aspects of development.

Priest et al. (2018) also described how differential treatment was shown by White adults working or volunteering with minorities across the country. High levels of negative attitudes were exhibited toward Black adults, teens, and some children younger than eight years old in every area the study measured. Some beliefs suggested Blacks are considered lazy, unintelligent, and have the proclivity to be more aggressive. Black children were almost three times more likely than White adults to be rated as lazy and twice as likely to be rated as unintelligent or violence prone than White children (Priest et al., 2018).

Another major finding that emerged from Priest et al. (2018) was some well-intentioned health professionals might not be aware of their biased attitudes or behavior, nor the potential impact racial profiling could have on the long-term health and wellness of minority patients. In other words, they were not consciously acting differently toward minorities. Rather, their discourse was influenced by other models in the environment or perhaps were the result of being immersed in a context where negative stereotypes prevail. Knowingly or unknowingly, racialized narratives often dictated their behavior toward minorities. Moreover, without actual experience or reason, the attitudes and actions of White people in positions of influence or authority functioned to profile those perceived as *other*.

Ladson-Billings (2004) argued unfair practices occur in schools too and race continued to be a major variable in identifying inequities. Though overall gains might be seen in historical trends, the achievement gap persisted for African Americans when disaggregated by race and compared to White students. Alarming differences are evident in national, statistical, and demographic data. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) published an article in 2017 showing 42% of Black students attended low-performing schools with inadequate resources. In these low-performing schools and broadly across public schools in the United States, Black students and Latino students made up 80% of the special education demographic (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017).

It is worth noting African American boys represented more than 20% of students labeled as intellectually disabled but made up only about 15% of the national student population ages three to 21 (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017). Equally unsettling is the statistic that African American males are two and a half times less likely to be enrolled in gifted and talented programs despite

successful academic experiences. Black males also tend to face harsher school discipline and more frequently than their White peers. They are three times more likely than White males to be suspended or expelled. Put plainly, our Black male students are in a crisis (Noguera, 2012).

In the early 1900s, psychometrists attempted to show African Americans had below average intelligence as a justification for segregating and mistreating them. Their stratagem included comparing cranium sizes with no consideration given to age or developmental conditions (Darder, 2012). They also gave intelligence tests that displayed pictures of things African Americans, at the time, had never seen. Then these tests were used to quantify their intelligence and behaviors. When African Americans did not achieve a certain aptitude, their seeming lack of knowledge was directly correlated to lower intelligence.

Menchaca (1997) described many slave owners were misguided by the craze. They agreed African Americans were suited to be slaves, believing they had greater tamable characteristics. In education, important variables (e.g., no prior exposure or significant experience with the testing items) were often not accounted for in their assessments. Rather, biased results served as justification for the criticism of Black intellect, morality, and social development (Connor, Ferri, & Annamma, 2016). Such tactics were used to erroneously draw parallels between ability and racial classification then, and similar techniques are still being employed today. However, the reification of scientific racism and other traditional ideology are so deeply embedded in educational practices that it is not openly identified nor engaged by White teachers, no matter how well-meaning they might be.

Since many of these White supremacist views and assumptions persist today and are deeply interlaced in social constructs like the educational system, they still influence perceptions

of bicultural students (Darder, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2004). The way we teach students of color, the ways in which we respond to academic and social differences and the lens by which we regard their intentions are connected to racializing beliefs. Hence, there is a cycle of oppression we must acknowledge. Racialized thinking continues to shape mainstream culture and affect people of color in unexpected ways. With all this in mind, a broader definition of racial profiling is used to ground this study. To better contextualize teacher perceptions that perpetuate racial profiling, it is defined here as the judging, suspecting, or targeting of an individual or group based on the color of their skin or the appearance of a specific ethnicity, despite the situation or circumstance.

Teacher Perceptions of Black Male Students

Researchers in the field assert that teacher perceptions shape classroom practices. It is likely one of the greatest influences on student efficacy. Some studies even argued that a teacher's attitude and beliefs were the most important variables in the overall success of students (Noguera, 2003a). This relationship suggests that teachers embody authority and a degree of control over aspects of the learning experience (Darder, 2012; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Skiba et al., 2011). Furthermore, the classroom teacher has a clear opportunity to affect the educational trajectory of students through her instruction, intervention and collaboration. If she has a deficit view of students, it will likely emerge in her discourse and practice.

It is not surprising then that Noguera (2003a) argued school was where students learn about race, norms, social values, power and positionality. Therefore, an essential consideration for any educator should be the meanings they are assigning to diverse learners, given the negative impact of racism in the educational setting. Important here is to recognize that if White

teachers enact racist practices or microaggressions in the classroom, even if unintended, they can influence students' core thinking and behavior (Ladson-Billings, 2004), having a disabling impact upon student participation, achievement, and personal empowerment (Darder, 2012).

African American students, especially Black males, are typically characterized as disruptive and argumentative. Accordingly, teachers may lower their expectations of African American students because they perceive them as less capable, lazy and unmotivated. These are the types of perceptions that contribute to lower efficacy and performance. Comey (2015) noted not all educators are aware that they carry these implicit biases. And even if so, Puchner and Markowitz (2015) said the biases are difficult to change. Individuals think their beliefs are a rational summation of logic and experience, but in many cases their default values are conditioned and often represent perspectives unconsciously honed in an institutionalized structure of racism and discrimination (Irvine, 1985; Jordan, 2005; Wright, 2015).

Consequently, the generational ripple effect of these types of beliefs is immeasurable. Deep suffering is already evident in centuries of physical and emotional abuse, glass ceilings, mass incarceration, isolation and missed opportunities of students of color. Without immediate and targeted attention, the traditional hegemonic structure of power and politics in schools and the larger society will be reproduced and perpetuated in the classroom. The cycle of racist, institutionalized values will then continue to serve as the model script by which students are judged, learn to judge themselves, and also engage others in the world.

Since African American males are especially vulnerable in educational settings, due to a history of racism and inequity, teachers' beliefs and practices may have a disproportionate impact on their education and their lives (Noguera, 2003a). Their plight, at least in part, can be

attributed to a lack of personal connection and the low expectations of teachers. Berry and Candis (2013) contended long-term, negative effects on the psychological well-being of African American males are exhibited given the hostile context in which they struggle to forge their cultural identity. Startling outcomes and injustices that a Black male may experience throughout his educational career include increased dropout rates, inequitable discipline practices, grade retention, unequal access to advanced coursework, overall lower engagement, contact with the juvenile system and ultimately limited career opportunities (Davis, 2003; Monroe, 2005).

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) posited Black students do not achieve at the same levels as their White peers. Furthermore, Davis (2003) argued that African American males have instances of disengagement and lower academic achievement as early as elementary school. The effects of lower engagement can be seen in the data from NCES (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017). Reports show that African American males are dropping out of high school at alarming rates. Less than 50% of African American males are completing high school on time and not all are completing alternative forms of certification such as a General education development test (GED) (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017). Some of the consequences of high school dropout rates are echoed by Noguera's (2012) research, which illustrated a national phenomenon where fewer African American males are attending college. In 2008, 4.6 million Black males attended college, but only half graduated. This translated to only about 11% of Black males completing a bachelor's degree, which was a symptom often associated with the overrepresentation of African American male students labeled with disabilities (Noguera, 2012).

African American Male Students and Disabilities

With all this in mind, this study examined the perceptions of White general education teacher perceptions of their instructional practices with African American male students receiving special education services. Furthermore, it analyzes gaps between how teachers perceive and discuss Black male students in special education and what is being enacted in the classroom. According to Bailey and Moore (2004) the educational system is failing African American males. From their early childhood years through higher-education, African American male students perform behind their White counterparts. They are most likely identified and placed in special education and research does not seem to support that disparities of race are due to socioeconomic status (Bailey & Moore, 2004).

Schools often use special education as a form of intervention (Harry, Klinger & Moore, 2000). Noguera (2003b) asserted race and socioeconomic class seem to be two great predictors of the educational pipeline. Outcomes for poor, Black males tend to be negative and consequently are gateways into special education. In contrast, Lynch (2015; 2016) stated African American males are two and a half times less likely to be represented in gifted and talented programs. Yet, they are amongst those most likely to be labeled as intellectually delayed (ID) or as having a specific learning disability (SLD) and put into special education (Harry et al., 2000). This alone has grave implications. According to a 2017 report published by NCES, only 16% of students with an ID eligibility spent 80% or more of their time in general education (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017). So, this means the majority of students with an intellectual disability are not meeting the targets for inclusive education.

Approximately 20,000 African American male students have been misclassified as developmentally delayed, translating into approximately a 300% over classification rate (Moore, Henfield, & Owens, 2008). Many others are misidentified as emotionally disturbed. Nevertheless, all suggest that Black males are assessed and placed in special education at disproportionate rates. This cycle has led to an astonishing overrepresentation of Black males in special education (Davis, 2003; Moore, Henfield, & Owens, 2008; Noguera, 2003b; Patton, 1998). Once they are labeled with a disability, they are likely to be placed in more restrictive, instructional settings. Change of placement also means that educational opportunities and access are limited.

Accordingly, Black male students have narrow or shallow exposure to general education instruction and meaningful social experiences with mainstreamed peers. These trends paint the picture of racial profiling and inequality present in public schools across the United States. Discrimination is imminent and its reach is undeniable, particularly when considering that African-Americans make up 15% of national, public school enrollment, but represent 16% of students served under the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA; 2004) (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Fierros & Conroy, 2002; Musu-Gillette et al., 2017; Patton, 1998). Across the nation, African American male students are failing, due to the impact of teacher perceptions and its influence on the performance and efficacy of African American students (Noguera, 2003b). Therefore, having a better understanding of the student-teacher relationship and the impact of this dynamic on Black male students are key insights for constructing a more just pedagogical experience for all African American students (Moore et al., 2008).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify how White teachers perceived their teaching practices and discourse with African American male students in special education. It also sought to explore how White teachers understood their influence on the educational experiences of African American, male students. The findings will help determine any gaps between teacher beliefs and their actual instruction and interactions at school. They will encourage meaningful reflection about core values and the processes we employ in education to identify and address diversity in our students. Considering the disproportionate rates of suspension, graduation, and dropout, as well as other educational inequities suffered by African American males and other races, more research is needed to narrow these inconsistencies.

Significance of the Study

This study has relevance in the field, in that teachers have been identified as one of the most significant factors in school success (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Noguera, 2003b). They guide the academic progression for students. Research, however, suggested a historical, hegemonic influence on institutional culture and many teachers' beliefs. An assumption of the literature was that some of the inequities in education were directly associated to teacher beliefs and their discourse with respect to Black male students. Therefore, it was important to explore the relationship between African American males and their teachers to better understand how those specific interactions contribute to discrepancies in their labeling and placement in special education. With this in mind, this study aimed to (1) raise awareness of unexamined biases teachers may possess that negatively impact students, particularly African-American males, (2) offered considerations for teachers as they reflect and refine their teaching practices, and (3)

informed the design of teacher preparation programs across the country to improve the scope and sequence of coursework around race and disability studies in the classroom.

Research Questions

There were two broad research questions and additional prompts that this critical narrative study sought to answer. The primary research questions were:

1. How do White teachers perceive their teaching practices with African American males receiving specialized instruction?
2. How do White teachers understand the influence of institutional racism on the academic experiences of African American male students?

Theoretical Framework

The two major theoretical lenses that informed the conceptual framework used to conduct this study included critical race theory (CRT) and disabilities studies (DS). According to Connor, Ferri, and Annamma (2016), when these ideologies are considered simultaneously, we are able to engage a perspective that unapologetically questions how society defines and responds to race and disability in education. The following discussion provides an overview of a body of research that supported pairing the concepts together. For it is at this intersection that we access a more comprehensive view of the impact of race and ability on teacher perceptions and student outcomes. This was particularly significant in the current study, as it explored the educational experience and trajectory for African American males receiving special education services.

Examining the research through this framework assisted me in identifying relationships between the various forms of racism and ableism that are enacted in the classroom and the impact of teacher perception on educational equity and access. Critical disabilities theory

(DisCrit) shed light on inferiority narratives and institutionalized notions of supremacy that may prevail in schools and how said beliefs negatively impact the degree of success of African American males in special education. DisCrit leveraged the analysis of the research topic by carefully filling any gaps that would emerge from viewing race or dis/ability, solely as objective constructs.

Critical Disabilities Theory

Critical disabilities theory (DisCrit) aimed to diminish racism and ableism in education by asking the important questions about racial inequity and opportunity gaps that many students of color endure. Once race is acknowledged, we can address discrimination and its correlation to persistent, widespread failure, particularly in African Americans (Howard, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2004). Likewise, when we reflect on how society has normalized ableism in education, we can begin to address issues of exclusion. The critical disabilities framework is grounded in work related to the labeling and mislabeling of individuals perceived as having a disability.

This phenomenon largely affects minorities; students perceived as other. In fact, research highlighted that some of the methods and standards used in the assessment process have their racializing roots in phrenology and racial anthropological physiognomy that reifies the legacy of slavery, segregation, and violence against people of color (Connor et al., 2016; Darder 2012). Very few theories, however, thoroughly investigated the nuances of how race and dis/ability interact. The relationship is complex in nature, however examining both concepts more effectively addresses issues of dis/ability and equity. Considering racial discrepancies in graduation rates, discipline referrals, the prison population, and the over-representation of

minorities in special education it was imperative to explore a range of factors that might contribute to disproportionate failure.

DisCrit contended that dis/ability categories are not real in and of themselves, as they emerge as social constructions. Their interpretation relies on the subjectivity of teachers, psychologists, and other school officials. Even in cases where it seems like dis/abilities are self-evident, we are still only able to distinguish them from other eligibilities, by subtle nuances (Connor et al., 2016). Dis/abilities are continually redefined according to the prevailing social climate. For example, over the last several decades, policymakers revisited the definition and language used to describe mental retardation (Intellectual Disability). The IQ score was lowered from 85 to 70 and many people who had been previously labeled were relieved of the title.

Though this change occurred, the over-representation of African American male students in more moderate/severe special education programs persists. Black male students are still three times more likely to be labeled as meeting the criteria for an intellectual disability, two times as likely to be labeled emotionally disturbed, and one and a half times more likely to be labeled as learning disabled compared to their White counterparts (Connor et al., 2016). Along the same lines, over-representation of students of color is less likely to occur in specialized categories related to sensory or physical impairments. This trend is further evidence that race and ability are inextricably linked in the practices of the educational system (Harry & Klingner, 2014).

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach. In general, qualitative data lends itself to thematic development, which strengthens the interpretation of findings (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2012). However, more specifically, the methodology elicited the narratives of White educators

who teach African American males in special education. This method provided an opportunity for six teachers to describe their interactions with Black students and allowed their perception and voice to be incorporated and considered in the interpretation of the data. During each of the narrative sessions, prompts were used to evoke dialogue about participant experiences and beliefs about their instruction with African American males.

The narrative sessions focused on topics such as teacher perception of race in the classroom, pedagogical practices with African American males and White teachers' views of their roles in the educational trajectory of their students. It was anticipated that there could be instances when the conversation might diverge and lead the narrative along a different (yet appropriate) path. This was one reason why this method was selected. Participants were encouraged to express their perspectives freely and in their own terms to facilitate a more reliable and dynamic dialogue. However, the prompts helped to keep the purpose of the narrative session at the forefront.

Critical narratives were an appropriate method of study here because of the ability to garner experiential details from participants, through their own manner of talking about the phenomenon. I was able to gain a deeper understanding of a specific phenomenon, through a rich process of inquiry and dialogue. Critical narratives allowed for the voice of participants to be heard yet offered some focus on the patterns and perceptions of participants related to the topic of interest (Gay et al., 2012).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations of the Study

Assumptions

This research was grounded in the assumption that teachers have a great influence on the educational experiences of their students. So, if they hold any unexamined biases, they could engage diverse learners differently and possibly promote inequity. African American males seem to be one of the subgroups significantly impacted by teacher attitude and practice. Unfortunately, teachers may not be aware of their personal belief systems nor how they influence outcomes for students. Therefore, this will likely be an opportunity to self-reflect, rethink, and develop new and more accurate associations. Likewise, it created opportunity to refine teacher practice.

Limitations

As previously mentioned, I engaged six White teachers of African American males in special education, through a critical narrative. Since I am a Black woman, my racial identity alone could have made participants hesitant to speak freely about interactions with Black students. Likewise, the charged topic of racial profiling could have deterred participants from exercising honesty during dialogue in an effort to appear favorable before the researcher. Another consideration was that the prompts and critical inquiry could have uncovered individual biases and highlight differences in the way teachers engage learners.

Delimitations

Given the time constraints, I chose to capture the voices of only one group—White teachers. The representation of only one group left many unrecorded perspectives and may not have provided an aggregate account of the research topic. The design of the study did not include other members of the school community who might also be able to share insights on how they

perceive or experience the teaching and learning relationship with African American males.

Although the collective voices of the school community could have deepened the understanding of the social phenomenon, these did not constitute part of this study.

Connection to Leadership and Social Justice

This study was inspired by the hope of improving the learning experience for all students, beginning with a dialogue with the group that has the most influence on their educational pipeline-their teachers. Teacher perceptions and attitudes have the greatest impact on classroom climate, student-teacher interaction, and ultimately student achievement because the teacher controls the pace and direction of learning experiences at school. The scope of positive teacher influences is sometimes unrealized, as is the effects where unconscious biases prevail (Kenyatta, 2012). By exposing attitudes and stereotypes that affect our understanding and by becoming more conscientious of the impact of our actions and decisions concerning students of color, we begin to eliminate invisible barriers. With this new or rediscovered knowledge about ourselves, we can create new associations that debunk myths about people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. A likely benefit of doing so would be improved performance for African American males, a subgroup that has endured tremendous educational hardship and social exploitation and who still struggle today to overcome.

Definition of Terms

Racial profiling is the act of judging, suspecting or targeting an individual or group, based on the color of their skin or the appearance of a specific ethnicity, despite the situation or circumstance (Weir, 2016).

Implicit/unconscious bias refers to personal attitudes, assumptions or stereotypes a person possesses that affect understanding and decisions in an unconscious manner (Puchner & Markowitz, 2015).

Teacher perceptions refer to the thoughts, attitudes and beliefs a teacher possesses about her students that may have been influenced by tradition, environment and life experiences (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Dis/ability is a term used in educational literature to challenge the ideology that a whole person is defined and has value based on what they can or cannot do; suggests to the reader that the concept of disabilities is not fixed (Connor, Ferri, & Annamma, 2016).

White privilege refers to the unmerited and unacknowledged social assets afforded to White people in America and protected by those who embody it (McIntosh, 1992).

Other health impairment (OHI) is one of 13 special education eligibility categories of *Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act* of 2004 (IDEA) that is characterized by limited strength, vitality, or alertness due to chronic health problems. It includes a variety of diagnoses (e.g., attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, asthma, diabetes, sickle cell anemia etc.) and negatively impacts academic performance.

Organization of Dissertation

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. The first chapter provided an introduction of the study, the theoretical lens that anchored the conceptual framework for the research, and some of the themes and assumptions regarding educational outcomes for Black males in special education. The second chapter emphasizes the literature in the field. It offers a review of data and information related to White teachers' perceptions and influence on the

outcomes for their African American male students. The third chapter outlines the critical narrative methodology that will be used to capture White teachers' perspectives related to Black male students identified with a disability. Chapter 4 presents the data collected through the critical narratives of participants, through the presentation of the major themes that surface across the narrative sessions. Lastly, Chapter 5 will provide an analysis of the data and share interpretations, new learnings, and recommendations for practitioners.

Conclusion

The study offers a beacon of hope. It highlights recommendations to support reform efforts that involve dialogue about implicit biases and identifies some of the steppingstones to reframing race in education (Delgado, 2000; Puchner & Markowitz, 2015). This study can engage the moral sense of educators by raising awareness of unexamined biases teachers may possess that can impact students, particularly African American males. The research can offer considerations for teachers as they strive to improve their understanding, instruction and teaching practices.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Racial Profiling and United States Education

Race is still a major factor when determining differences in education, particularly when we analyze the achievement gap. The unconscious biases that are often inherent in teacher perceptions can negatively impact academic performance and ultimately influence the educational pipeline, especially for students of color. Since the desegregation of schools propagated by *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the experience of White America has been the mainstream educational model and standard for all other Americans. Irrespective of the cultural, economic, and historical differences that have existed between White Americans and people of color, this perspective has persisted as the measure of educational success across society (Akom, 2000; Howard, 2010; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Noguera, 2003a).

Though groups of people may share cultural commonalities, we are also individually distinct from one another. But the White and Black binary casts a shadow over such uniqueness, ignoring the great beauty and strength in diversity. Assimilative language fans the flames of supremacy by privileging one worldview over all others. Moreover, for something to be called different, there must be a norm by which it is measured. According to Morris (2016) the White-centric norm was established and maintained by hegemonic perceptions and influences. People tend to categorize individuals or groups as different or inferior based on the meaning they ascribe to skin color or derive from their conditioned perceptions, relative to the hegemonic norm or what is perceived to be legitimate humanity. It is precisely this way of thinking and acting that

gives rise to racial profiling (Berry & Candis, 2013; Connor et al., 2016; Sample, 2009) and is responsible for teacher perceptions that perpetuate racializing inequalities in schools.

The Phenomenon of Racial Profiling

In general, beliefs and attitudes in society can be shaped and reshaped by our exposure to elements in the environment. If we consider the research of Martin and Clark (1990) on social cognition and some of the effects of human interaction, we might better understand how assimilation of ideologies is not uncommon. Often the process is spontaneous and unintended. It is most likely to occur when the individual is unaware that they are being primed. This supported the work of Moore, Michael, and Penick-Park (2018), who argued unconscious biases can stem from daily human functioning in the environment. To place this thinking in context, when teachers are immersed in systems governed by institutionalized values contrary to ideas of acceptance, belonging, and diversity, they inevitably take on attitudes of prejudice. As such, they can unknowingly, enact racializing behaviors that result in injustice toward students of color, particularly Black male students.

We must consider the broader definition of racial profiling to better understand its presence across settings. Racial profiling occurs when assumptions are made about an individual based on skin color or phenotypical differences that are then attributed or ascribed to a specific ethnic group. The literature described trends of racial profiling across major aspects of daily living. For example, we see evidence of racial profiling when we consider the overrepresentation of African American males in the US criminal justice system. According to Gramlich (2019), in his report issued by the Pew Research Center, Blacks represented 12% of the US adult population but 33% of the sentenced prison population in 2017. Another startling statistic is that

Black males aged 15-34 make up 2% of the population but accounted for 15% of all deaths at the hands of police officers in 2015, five times higher than the number for White males. This illustrated how biased perceptions can have a very real impact on the lives of those who are racialized.

Surprisingly, many teachers protest police brutality and other acts of violence in our society, but also employ racial profiling in their own classroom contexts. Data from Musu-Gillette et al. (2017) showed African Americans are more harshly disciplined in school. They are three times more likely to be suspended or expelled from school than their White peers (Noguera, 2012). Akom (2000) described racism as an invisible construct in education, in that it is part of the hegemonic belief system and thus, often goes unnoticed. It is commonly enacted as part of the everyday culture and climate of schools, rather than as blatant racialized discrimination.

Akom (2000) further contended that since racial profiling is not overt, there seems to be no reform efforts that directly focus on this phenomenon. Thus, the relationship between race, discipline, and achievement is generally not addressed properly or mediated effectively in classrooms and schools. For these reasons, it is necessary to explore the construct of race with respect to US education. Unfortunately, since the insidious process of racialization often goes undetected, many African American students find it difficult to develop and assert their voice in the classroom. Consequently, they often have minimal exposure or experience with collective action and can resort to individual resistance, which is typically perceived negatively by school officials.

Accordingly, the actions of Black students are often characterized as behavioral problems, rather than seen as their radical response to mistreatment or inequity. Thus, the cycle of frustration and marginalization continues. This has had significant implications for students of color, especially African American males who tend to find school less democratic for them and much more challenging to acclimate and navigate, given the manner in which racialized practices negatively impact their school experiences (Akom, 2000).

White Privilege

In examining the concept of education from the standpoint of racial profiling as discussed, it is useful to consider the question of White privilege. In her work, McIntosh (1992) characterized White privilege as unmerited, social assets that are protected by those who embody it. Her scholarship makes clear that having privilege alone is not racist. Acknowledging that one is the beneficiary of privilege is not racist either. However, a critical understanding is that its legacy exists because of racism. White privilege is both a provision and cause of racism and therefore cannot be fully explored without also discussing working definitions of racialization (McIntosh, 1992; Pearce, 2012). Moreover, when people are grouped based on perceived differences, like their skin, then bias is immortalized and becomes a means for explaining unfair and unjust treatment of minorities. McIntosh (1992) contended White people have an advantageous positionality that is not earned, and the perks of their White identity are not publicly unacknowledged. Because of this, White people possess a sense of power over people of other races through an invisible discourse. Its dominance has been preserved, in part, by its secrecy. Admitting it exists also means one has to be accountable.

Similarly, Morris (2016) exposed Whiteness as a normative function. In other words, White is at the center of racial categorization in the United States. This racializing phenomenon of Whiteness reflects then the acceptable human standard, by determining what behaviors and characteristics are considered to be acceptable, not necessarily superior. Every other race is judged by their deviation from what is put forth as typical and the differences then serve as proof that minorities are not normal or, thus, deficit or inferior. This tactic effectively camouflages the intentions and the reach of White privilege in society; in that it is able to blend into the background of the superiority debate because White normativity accounts for the frailties of White people, while continuing to uphold privileges for White people.

According to research, skin privilege manifests in many ways but is rarely enacted as overt discrimination. It can be found in typical daily activities and in White people's ability to navigate personal and professional environments more easily and successfully. These special rights are so subtle that they can be easily mistaken for the rewards of having a strong moral compass and mirror the benefits of achievement due to hard work and commitment to one's goals. This way of thinking negatively impacts the lives of minoritized students and their communities. Lack of transparency impedes opportunities to confront White-specific norms, beliefs and behaviors. Since society tends to consider Whiteness as neutral, the benefits are conceptualized as the way things are supposed to work, even if it abridges the rights of the majority. This can be much more dangerous than blatant racism (McIntosh, 1992; Morris, 2016).

In the educational context, research also affirmed that many White teachers do not intentionally analyze their own ideas and assumptions about issues of race, nor how their positionality affects their worldview and identity. In fact, some White educators downgrade

racial inequalities and promote meritocracy rhetoric. People that overcome issues of racial profiling, however, do not leave the situation unscathed, no matter how subtle. Some psychological effects have been noted. Conditions like post-traumatic stress disorder have long-term implications and potentially impact the individual as well as their friends, families, and communities who are also exposed to their own susceptibility.

Color-blindness

Color-blindness has been often associated with the perpetuation of White privilege (McIntosh, 1992). Atwater (2008) described color-blindness as the belief that race should not matter in how people are treated. The ideology has its roots in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) and has been used broadly since then to suggest skin color should not determine or influence a person's right to equal treatment. More specifically, the justice system should not deny equal rights or equal opportunities because of racial differences. Based on this history, the notion of color-blindness seemed to be a well-intentioned response to racism, at first. However, the philosophy behind it has evolved from "race should not matter" to "race does not matter" and is being applied in contexts where race clearly has an impact. For example, in educational settings, ignoring race actually contributes to disparities (Crenshaw, 1995; Schofield 1999). The use of color-blind principles in the classroom could impede critical thinking skills and stifle students' cognitive development (Atwater, 2008; Cose, 1997).

Wynne (1999) conducted a study focusing on improving the learning environment for African American students. It was found that teacher participants, who were mostly White individuals, often engaged an unconscious schema of low expectations for African American students. Research has shown that teachers perceived some of the students' cultural practices as

gaps in their learning. In other words, if students deviated from a typical habit or method of operation, it was anticipated that they would be less successful. In this way, color-blindness fosters racialization (Wynne, 1999).

Schofield (1986) found teachers believed they were treating all students the same. Superficially, color-blindness might mask circumstances. It seemingly reduces the potential for racial conflict by minimizing teacher and student discomfort around race related topics. Leading a classroom through this lens also make teacher decisions seem fair. However, over time, teacher assumptions about particular races surfaced. Favoritism and discrimination emerged. There were clear inequities in teacher beliefs about White students and Black students. Black students were not validated or sufficiently support, given color-blind assumptions held by teachers (Schofield, 1986).

Deficit Thinking

Deficit thinking is another notion that has been linked to the perpetuation of White privilege in the education of children of color (Darder, 2012). Scholarship, for example, asserted teachers carry implicit biases (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Gay, 2002). Often those beliefs manifest as deficit thinking and can affect teachers' interactions with students and student efficacy in the classroom. Deficit thinking is coined in the literature as a concept that implies that:

[S]tudents who fail in school do so because of inherent internal, cultural, social, and linguistic factors, which deflects the responsibility of education from systemic factors such as school segregation, inequalities in school financing, educational tracking, the increased use of standardized testing, shortage of highly-qualified educators and curriculum inconsistencies. (Chu, 2011, p. 6).

So, culturally and linguistically diverse students are most susceptible to its negative effects. Deficit thinking blames the victim and is often criticized because it changes according to the sociopolitical climate. It may happen because students' cultural norms are not always compatible with the standards and expectations of the dominant culture (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Gay, 2002; Sample, 2009).

According to Chu (2011), another layer of the research on deficit thinking, included the correlation between teacher's personal efficacy and referrals to special education. The more confident a teacher is in her ability to make a difference in student learning, the more willing she is to leverage her own skills and experience to support a student in the general education setting. Conversely, if a teacher does not believe her efforts will effect change in a student (consistent with deficit thinking), she is more likely to refer a child to special education. Put another way, if a teacher has a certain level of awareness of cultural differences and or instructional expertise, she is more likely to attempt interventions and innovation in the classroom. However, if a student demonstrates learning or behavior problems and a teacher lacks the cultural understanding and pedagogical experience to mediate these challenges, she is more likely to refer a child for evaluation. This point supports research that indicates teacher's attitude about self, the student, or environmental circumstances essentially drive teacher decisions on student referrals to special education (Chu, 2011).

Teacher Perceptions and Race

Educational research on teacher perceptions and race suggested teacher perceptions and attitudes have an impact on the efficacy and performance of students of color. Some scholars (Ishii-Jordan, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2004; Noguera, 2003b) argued it actually has the greatest

impact on their schooling experience. Teacher beliefs impact overall educational outcomes because they inform the tone of classroom climate and effectiveness of student-teacher interactions. It is therefore critical for teachers to be aware of their influence; specifically, how personal views about race and culture play a role in the teaching and learning process (Darling-Hammond, 1997).

Racialized perceptions then are major concerns when decades of research (Cecil, 1988; Crano & Mellon, 1978; Darder, 1991; Ishii-Jordan, 2000) have shown ethnicity and social class are demographics that frequently result in negative experiences and differential treatment for poor working-class students of color. Kenyatta (2012) and Obiakor (1999) asserted how negative perceptions, attitudes and traditional instructional approaches to teaching and learning exacerbate problematic issues related to social justice for African American students. In fact, their research argued that for decades the disparity has been looming and has long-term implications, particularly for African American students with disabilities. Teachers' reactions and inaccurate interpretations of Black student behavior has led to a lack of success in schools and society at large. Some student behaviors are considered to be culturally defined. And educators' punitive responses have been shown to incite undue classroom distress and poor academic achievement, particularly among Black students of color (Kenyatta, 2012; Obiakor, 1999).

Many racialized perceptions of the teacher are founded on racialized beliefs related to either genetics or environmental conditions (i.e., student's culture). In *Culture and Power in the Classroom*, Darder (2012) linked perceptions of inequality to the conservative, liberal debate in education, critiquing traditional pedagogy and practice in the U.S. Some conservative scholars over the years, have suggested that achievement is genetically fixed. While many liberal thinkers

believe potential can be developed when a learner is in the right conditions. This liberal argument is seen by some as the lesser of two evils. Yet, both perspectives place blame on the individual learner and his culture and fail to adequately address the social and political barriers or the importance of students' race and culture on learning preferences (Darder, 2012; Howard, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2004). But more importantly, given the power and agency teachers have over classroom dynamics, neither stance considers the influence of perhaps the main conduit of ideas—including the lesson design and implementation, creation of or lack of social opportunities, and forms of classroom discipline exercised by the teacher. Key questions, therefore, include: How do teachers enact their roles in the classroom? Is the teacher aware of the effect of teacher-student interactions and teacher recommendations on the educational trajectory of Black students with disabilities?

According to various scholars (Darder, 2012; Howard, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2004), the intention of conservative educational discourse is to preserve the conditions of the status quo. By imposing institutional values and systems, the dominant power structure remains intact and, in many ways, fortified, while opportunities for students of color diminish. Liberal approaches to educational discourse place an emphasis on validating the individual. However, also implied in this ideology is the assumption that the environment will be conducive to the students' being active in the mainstream learning process. The liberalist view presupposes, for example, that students who are regularly interacting with others in the world around them, are treated fairly by their teachers and administrators and are afforded equal access to resources and quality of instruction will thrive. In reality, this is not the case. About this, Moore et al. (2018) noted even the best-intentioned educators are not prepared to meet the needs of diverse learners.

It can be difficult to serve in an emancipatory role when the system in which teachers are prepared and eventually work has inherent constraints. Furthermore, without examining our own beliefs, we risk engaging with students as decontextualized individuals, thus allowing unconscious biases to misguide interpretation of, and responses to, students of a different race and culture than the teacher's own (Darder, 2012; Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson & Bridgest, 2003; Noguera, 2003; Puchner & Markowitz, 2015). Howard (2010) asserted most citizens, educators, and policymakers fail to even acknowledge the existence of racism in education. So, this unwillingness to call out discrimination and racial profiling in schools, coupled with the latent biases and ignorance of teachers on the origin of their own core values serve as a cornerstone of institutionalized racism in public education (Berry & Candis, 2013). To build capacity around this phenomenon then, educators must reflect on how race and culture impact students' responses to curriculum and instruction. As such, they must also be mindful of how their own biases manifest in the classroom in their treatment of students of color. By examining their own perceptions related to bias and privilege, educators can raise consciousness and foster classroom practices that address and challenge demeaning stereotypes that dehumanize students of color, while unjustly privileging others.

Since an educator's personal history and belief system frame their educational philosophy and influence their pedagogical approach, cultural competency and a deeper understanding of racial differences, are key considerations when exploring discrepancies in academic outcomes for students (Moore et al., 2018; Noguera, 2012). It is, therefore, extremely important for teachers to be conscious of their own biases and preconceived notions about race to begin transforming their perceptions and classroom practices.

African American Male Students

Historically, public education in America has been shaped by the political and economic influence of the dominant culture. The standards, policies, and curriculum used to govern education and measure student learning embody a conservative worldview. Traditional pedagogical practices evolved from these positivist constructs and, in this perspective, there was very little room for students of color to express themselves or dialogue about their personal values or their role in society. Individuals are shaped by the cultural values and traditions in their communities and, as such, traditions, practices, and language actually inform identity. So, it is no surprise race and culture are at the heart of learning. Yet, insufficient focus is placed on the unique cultural strengths and insights students of color bring to the classroom (Darder, 1991, 2012). This is of much concern, given that African American male students, in particular, tend to do better when they are educated by teachers who understand and value their cultural knowledge and incorporate those factors in the classroom instructional program (Ladson-Billings, 2004). Yet for the most part, schools still persist with assimilative practices, metrics and curriculum.

Howard (2010) noted African American students are one of those minoritized populations negatively affected by the inequities in educational outcomes. A learning experience void of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy can be detrimental to the academic success of students of color and can have a negative impact on their long-term performance. Howard (2010) further asserted this phenomenon grossly affects students of color and that the so-called “achievement gap” is widening among African American students and other students of color. Robinson (2000) posited in the African American community, specific cultural contributions tend to be common knowledge. In other contexts, those same contributions are less known, if

known at all, or can be perceived as having a very different meaning. This disconnect between the culture of Black students and the culture of schools often becomes an impediment to relatability, sense of belonging, and the ability to establish rapport. With over 80% of teachers being White and mostly female (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017), this phenomenon could mean even less engagement with the cultural values and identity of students of color will take place in public education.

Hence, it is no surprise to learn traditional American values are not designed to promote success of students of color. This was evidenced by the research on Black students that examined general academic performance, discipline procedures, high school and college completion rates, standardized test scores and the absence of cultural models and customs in school communities (Moore et al., 2008; Musu-Gillette et al., 2017; Pai, Alder, & Shadiow, 2006). Moreover, the damaging educational practice of the deficit model, communicate unjust racialized biases. It reinforces White privilege, which results in feelings of shame that cause a negative impact on self-image, self-worth, and efficacy (Noguera, 2003b). Despite this knowledge, many schools across the country are not engaging in critical conversations about racism and educational changes necessary to enact just classroom practices, particularly for African American male students with disabilities.

African American Male Students and Disabilities

There is ongoing concern on the over-identification of students of color in special education. Black male students in particular, are largely placed in more restrictive educational settings and at disproportionate rates (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017; Neal et al., 2003; Steward, 2016). It has been argued many schools fail to institutionalize culture, resulting in

misunderstandings and distortions about issues of race and racism among teachers. Their assumptions are most often based on cultural misperceptions and a lack of experience outside of the White mainstream. Consequently, some practitioners inconsistently or reluctantly adjust their pedagogical approach to meet the needs of students of color. Preconceived notions they possess about race can pose barriers to student success (Steele, 1997; Sue & Sue, 1990).

Monroe (2005) discussed empirical comparisons of cultural discourse patterns in special education. She argued that students' behavioral manifestations and learning preferences are related to race or culture yet are often misinterpreted and serve as the genesis for special education referrals. But instead of providing teachers opportunities for developing cultural competence and an understanding of how racializing perceptions might negatively impact students of color, schools tend to rely on generalizations that maintain racialized practices and influence key educational decisions—educational decisions like placement in a special education setting.

Harry and Klingner (2014) found there are many reasons why children are placed in special education that extend beyond gaps in their cognition and performance. They found inequities in all phases of the pre-referral process and volatile assessment practices, which have resulted in Black students being overrepresented in all disability categories. Their study pointed out how testing instruments used to establish a disability and administration procedures can be unfair and actually promote alternative educational settings more often for children of color.

Kenyatta (2012) noted several other factors contribute to over-identification and overrepresentation of African American students in special education, including poverty, lack of internal motivation, limited and inflexible school systems, and resistance to implementing

accommodations. Kenyatta (2012) also suggested individual perceptions and attitudes about race and culture influence how teachers engage with students and behavior and deficits in assessment. This is significant given the frequency of teachers criticizing the conduct of Black male students. Consequently, unnecessary limitations are placed on students that can negatively affect educational outcomes (Allen, 2014).

Formal testing does not always capture the full scope of what students can do and the partial data acquired from evaluations can sometimes be misinterpreted. Furthermore, if multiple measures were not used to establish students' present levels of performance, then their range of abilities is essentially not acknowledged or validated. So, when one encounters a working-class student of color, with minimal resources and experiences of exclusion, it is important to consider that although he or she may have fallen behind peers, this falsely presents intellectual gaps. It is in these cases, where it becomes increasingly important for teachers to reflect on the learning opportunities that have been provided. They should be responsive to the cultural histories, cultural knowledge, and lived experiences of these students (Darder, 2012); avoiding yet another label on the learner that may ultimately be used to marginalize them (Allen, 2014).

In reference to this phenomenon, Carby (1998), Gay (2010), and Howard (2010) suggested educators' lack of cultural awareness can compromise their ability to understand, relate to, and instruct diverse students in their classrooms. For example, the most common stereotypes White teachers hold about African Americans males, is that they are hostile, angry, and susceptible to violence. Scholars (Howard, 2010; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Neal et al., 2003) have argued that this mismatch, with respect to African American male students, has impacted the achievement gap. Bailey and Moore's (2004) research supported this correlation,

positing that students of color are not meeting the same educational milestones or performing at the same rates as students from the mainstream culture. There is often a loss of instructional time due to detentions, suspension and other forms of exclusion from school. According to Harry, Klingler, and Moore (2000), high-incidence disabilities were constructed based on speculative conclusions rather than actual data. Many variables that help to define a disability are intangible and therefore hard to measure. So, it is difficult to accept the statistics.

African American students make up about 15% of the population in public schools but comprise about 32% of students with mild-moderate disabilities, with little to no chance of reintegrating in the general education classroom (Kenyatta, 2012; Musu-Gillette et al., 2017). Black students are almost one and a half times more likely than all other racial groups combined, to receive specialized services and are far less likely to graduate from high school than their White peers (Felton, 2017). In American public schools, the general education class is considered the least restrictive environment on the continuum of placement options (Dragoo, 2018; Musu-Gillette et al., 2017). It is characterized as Tier 1 or the universal level, where students are supposed to be exposed to robust instruction and meaningful social experiences with nondisabled peers. Specific indicators for an effective instructional program are developed federally, by the State Departments of Education and local school districts. The implementation is monitored by school leaders. When one considers the tenets of multi-tiered systems of support and the purpose of implementing unified standards in the U.S., it is surprising that equity in classrooms is still a controversial topic (Moore et al., 2008).

Core curriculum standards are the basis for standardized metrics used by county, state and federal entities to measure students' skill acquisition and to gain a broad perspective of how

schools are performing across various regions. How well students demonstrate reasoning and application of those concepts should help teachers and administrators make sound educational decisions (California Department of Education, 2019). Teachers use this data to plan lessons, design intervention, guide course scheduling, and measure progress toward benchmarks—all in the name of preparing students to compete in a global society. But how well are these systems working, if their infrastructure is built on racism, inherent biases, and ineffective, racialized pedagogy? How fruitful are teacher practices if we still have an overrepresentation of certain ethnic groups in special education?

Students are more likely to be referred for initial assessment by the general education teacher (Martin, 2014). If the student has demonstrated difficulties in retaining and applying concepts on assignments and assessments over a period, and with a poor rate of response to intervention, a Student Study Team (SST) is recommended. This multidisciplinary team works to streamline resources and collaborate on more targeted practices for remediation. Likewise, if the student regularly exhibits behaviors that are considered by the teacher to be socially inappropriate, aggressive, or pose safety concerns, an SST may be conducted to memorialize a system of support to modify the behavior (California Department of Education, 2019).

Whereas it is best practice for school sites to have a framework for prevention and intervention as a safeguard to reduce the number of initial referrals, there are no legal mandates outlining a specific sequence of events. A parent or staff person may request an assessment and bypass these safety nets, at any time. This suggests that the pre-referral process lacks clarity and is inconsistently applied across schools. Depending on teacher interpretation of student data, behavior, and information, any member of the school community can refer a student for

assessment. There seems to be no real accountability measures in place to ensure equitable educational experiences for African American males. Moore, Henfield, and Owens (2008) asserted despite the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) ruling, inconsistencies in the assessment and intervention that Black students receive are still present across the country, which has resulted in the persistence of the Black-White achievement gap (see Figure 1). National data similarly show African American males have persistently underperformed historically (Noguera, 2003b). This inequity is exacerbated if these students must contend with a disability label. Dropout rates, graduation rates and completion rates of college degree programs all illustrate the significant disparity between African American students with disabilities (SWDs) and students from mainstream cultures, with similar labels (Connor et al., 2016; Harry et al., 2000). According to Musu-Gillette et al. (2017), in their Children and Youth with Disabilities Report maintained by the NCES, students ages 14–21 served under *IDEA* in 2014–2015, who graduated with a regular high school diploma, got an alternative certificate or dropped out differed by race and ethnicity. It also stated the percentage of exiting students who graduated with a regular high school diploma was lowest among Black students at 62%. The percentage of exiting students who received an alternative certificate was highest among Black students at 14%.

The data illustrated how African American males are often stifled by the racist ideologies and social structures inherent in hegemonic schooling. More specifically, the lack of cultural awareness, inconsistent implementation of appropriate instructional strategies, the absence of empathy for historical pain, and failure to acknowledge that ability and dis/ability are created

based on personal views of race perpetuate low expectations and underachievement in African-American males (Connor et al., 2016; Howard, 2010; Willie, Garibaldi, & Reed, 1991).

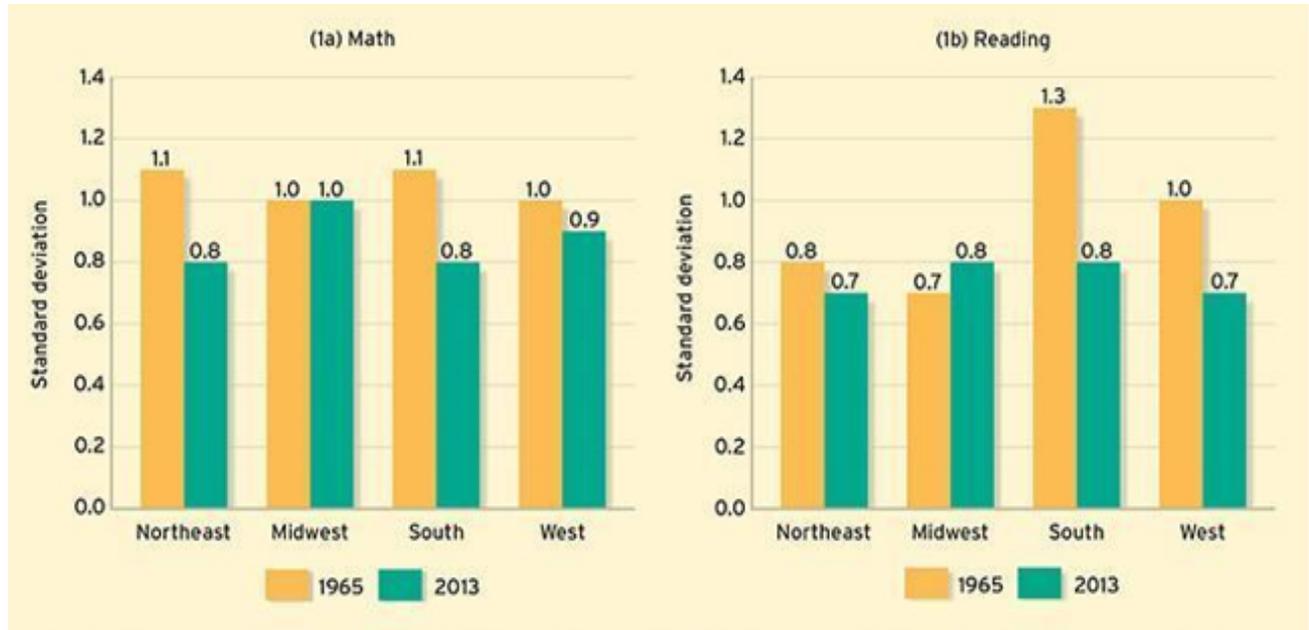


Figure 1: Depiction of the achievement gap between Black and White, high school seniors in math and reading, across major regions of the United States. From *What Matters for Student Achievement: Updating Coleman on the Influence of Families and Schools*, by E. Hanushek, 2016, p. 21, *Education Next*, 16(2). (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. EJ1092964). Copyright 2016 by Education Next Institute, Inc. Used with permission.

Efforts to enhance or change pedagogical approaches to be more culturally relevant can assist to narrow the gap. However, teaching strategies must appeal to diverse learners including those with cultural, social and linguistic differences (Howard, 2010). Schools, nevertheless, have the proclivity to express assumptions and respond to differences through the deficit notion of dis/ability. This practice is why some research characterized the educational system as yet another social structure perpetuating the current hierarchy of power (Connor et al., 2016). By design it upholds the current deficit narrative and tends to support the success of students from the dominant culture, while students who are seen as “other” or who deviate from the cultural abled norm, face disenfranchisement.

Moreover, Kenyatta (2012) repeatedly contended educators are often ill-prepared to effectively meet the needs of diverse populations. The teaching gap continues to widen as our society becomes more sophisticated. Those with power in society continue to disregard and discount people of color, while the beliefs and values of the dominant culture perpetuate an oppressive system of schooling. Sadly, many of the beliefs come from “unfounded and untested assumptions” (Puchner & Markowitz, 2015) and deep-rooted and unacknowledged racialized biases, derived from White teachers’ lived experiences.

Critical Disabilities Studies

The tenets of disability studies and those of critical race theory intersect to offer an inclusive framework to address both ableism and racism. The critical disabilities (DisCrit) lens provides a deeper understanding of how both variables interplay in the context of the school experience. Connor et al. (2016) illustrated how society tends to view cultural and individual differences as deficits. These perceived deficits serve as a rationale for placement in special education. Harry et al. (2000) asserted the special education system is used to maintain racial segregation and other social injustices. As such, DisCrit confronts this cycle of structural oppression.

Disaggregated data about the number of students from a particular race placed in certain disability categories, graduation and suspension rates, college completion rates etc. are all important indicators that race is still a major factor when determining inequity in education. When comparing the performance of students of color to their White counterparts, a disparate relationship exists that shows poorer outcomes for students of color (Connor et al., 2016; Musu-Gillette et al., 2017). For this reason, Howard (2010) purported that race be considered as a

major component of school reform and an important overlay to the dialogue on narrowing the achievement gap.

In terms of African American males, Steward (2016) noted they are referred for special education assessment more often. They are almost 1.5 times more likely than any other ethnicity to have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and are consequently overrepresented. DisCrit has served as a powerful analytical tool of study for this phenomenon (Connor et al., 2016; Moore et al., 2008; Steward, 2016). As a theoretical framework for my study, DisCrit allowed for a comprehensive analysis of the misdiagnosing of disabilities among African American male students, restrictive placement and cultural misunderstandings by grappling with important questions about inequity and injustice in education. Scholars contend we must begin then to address discrimination and its correlation to persistent and widespread failure to affect systemic change. When we are mindful of the impact of race, we tend to be more reflective of our responsibility to all, especially marginalized groups (Howard, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2004).

As noted earlier, African American males often endure significantly high rates of suspension, expulsion, decreased program completion rates and over referral for special education (Monroe, 2005). This is particularly disheartening because the latter has connotations of lower cognition or processing deficits that likely require specialized instruction, accommodations, modifications or alternative instructional settings. Not only might the label segregate students into smaller or isolated classes, there is an increased possibility of adverse, long-term effects on African American males (Monroe, 2005). While, this practice perpetuates the notion of inferiority, tenets of critical theory, in contrast, openly challenge commonly accepted notion about disabilities and Black male students.

Critical theorists suggested that White people are privileged with a degree of power that people of color cannot access. Whiteness is a property right that is valued and exalted over human rights. In the school context, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) illustrated how this idea is conceptualized, manifesting in the nuances of the system so subtly that it is hardly noticeable. Racism is normalized and often undetected until we draw attention to the impacts of it. Likewise, those that are “able” have privileges that people who are deemed disabled might not have. Therefore, disability is exploited. Servicing this group opens up a market in the economy. As such, the priorities of capitalism constitute the primary reason to maintain disablement (Oliver, 1999).

DisCrit provided a frame for analysis to highlight the economics and politics that were entangled in education. It evoked dialogue about how racism and ableism converge to compound the issue of “otherness.” DisCrit scholars explored the relationship between ableism and racism and revealed ways in which one reinforces and preserves the other (Connor et al., 2016). DisCrit also afforded the opportunity for alliance between disenfranchised populations in public education and society at large (Connor et al., 2016). With all this in mind, Connor et al. (2016) argued disability is another social construct that furthers marginalization, particularly of African American males. This phenomenon is evidenced by an overrepresentation of Black male students in special education and the gaps in educational opportunities.

Connor et al. (2016) stated that students are generally characterized as “good” or “bad,” according to teacher perception. Partiality is then employed based on student racial identities where issues of equity present more boldly (e.g., White female teachers often serve as the gatekeepers of “goodness”) (Connor et al., 2016). Their perceptions of students, as noted earlier,

can implicitly and simultaneously promote opportunities for some and create opportunity gaps for others. Therefore, Crenshaw (1995) argued being both a student of color and having an assigned a dis/ability is not the same experience for African American students, as it is for White students with a disability. Teacher perceptions lead to this disparity and are at the heart of this study.

Chapter Summary

Demographic data heighten concerns over inequitable experiences and disparate outcomes for African Americans male students who have been labeled with a disability. National reports consistently show lower high school graduation rates for African Americans as compared to most other groups, unequal access to advanced math and science courses, harsher discipline, and lower college completion and employment rates (Kenyatta, 2012; Musu-Gillette et al., 2017). This phenomenon is more severe for African American males who are disproportionately referred, identified, and placed in specialized classes (Erevelles, 2000; Ferri & Connor, 2006; Franklin, 1987). This study precisely sought to engage teacher perceptions about African American male students in special education to better analyze and understand disparities that exist to reap recommendations for transforming special education practices.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This study sought to identify how White teachers perceive their teaching practices and discourse with African American male students receiving special education. It also explored how White teachers understand their influence on the educational trajectory of African American, male students. Considering the disproportionate rates of achievement and the frequency and type of labels that are placed on African American males during their educational career, we need to hear from the teachers who teach them to better understand how educator beliefs might be impacting the data. Critical narrative methodology served as the qualitative vehicle to elicit ideas about some of the gaps in the research.

Research Questions

The following questions informed the development and execution of this study.

1. How do White teachers perceive their teaching practices and discourse with African American males receiving specialized instruction?
2. How do White teachers understand the influence of institutional racism on the academic experiences of African American male students?

Critical Narratives

Qualitative data lend to thematic development, which strengthens the interpretation of findings (Gay et al., 2012). Hence, this research study employed a qualitative approach. More specifically, critical narratives, a qualitative method, was selected as the most appropriate research approach for the collection of data for this study, given its ability to garner experiential details from participants through engaging their perspectives. Through the use of critical

narratives, I was able to identify key elements or themes of a specific phenomenon, through a process of dialogue and inquiry (Creswell, 2007; Kramp, 2004).

Critical narratives allow for participants to write their own script yet offer some focus on the patterns and perceptions of participants related to the topic of interest. In this way, critical narratives help to explain a social phenomenon and tease out important nuances to understand experiences of participants. Participants share personal encounters with the topic and organically begin to illustrate a picture of the whole experience. This helps deepen understanding about the behaviors that exist in that group. Since these detailed perspectives describe how others engage their environment and make meaning out of their experiences, the researcher is afforded an opportunity to make connections to the broader context (Creswell, 2007; Kramp, 2004).

Narratives themselves originated from the humanities discipline as a specific form of qualitative research that bypasses scientific rationale and explores how real-life experiences are situated in a certain event. Narratives, as a way of knowing and sharing knowledge through storytelling, is a natural activity for humankind and a more intuitive approach for researchers who want to tap into the raw emotion and rich interpretations of participants. As such, critical narratives have the ability to clarify subtle distinctions of conflated reality (Creswell, 2014; Kramp, 2004).

The Research Design

The research design for this study elicited the narratives of White educators who taught African American males receiving special education. It provided an opportunity for teachers to describe their interactions and pedagogical practices with Black students and give voice to their perception of events in their classrooms. Their “storied lives” (Creswell, 2014) were

incorporated and considered in the interpretation of the data for this study. The following discusses the specifics of the research design.

Participants

For this study, I engaged six White teachers, who held an active California teaching credential. Participants had to have experience teaching African American male students with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). All participants were educators in the K-12 public school system. Participants were identified from researcher's professional network of colleagues and notified about this study via telephone contact. Given that teachers are more likely available during the summer months, this season was used to acquire the lived experiences of participants.

Site

Audio-recorded, narrative sessions were conducted in a secluded space at a public library of participants' choice or via telephone conference.

Narrative Sessions

Narrative sessions were scheduled for 90 minutes and were audio-recorded. The sessions focused on topics such as teacher perceptions of race in the classroom, pedagogical practices with African American males and White teachers' views of their roles in the educational trajectory of their Black students. Participants were encouraged to express their perspectives freely and in their own terms to facilitate a more reliable and dynamic dialogue. To assist with this process, a list of predetermined prompts was used, when necessary, to evoke meaningful dialogue. The three prompts included the following:

1. How have you navigated the issue of race with your students?

2. Describe any challenges you have had with African American males and offer insight as to how you addressed or mediated the situation.
3. How do you describe your experiences (e.g., pedagogical practices) teaching African American males?

Coding Narratives

The critical narrative sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed. Transcriptions were completed by a professional online meeting software, GoToMeeting® (2019) online conferencing software by LogMeIn Inc. The audio-recording and transcription were analyzed for accuracy. Additionally, I carefully reviewed the content to identify patterns and common characteristics that emerged during the sessions. In preparation for the presentation of findings, analysis, and discussion, an online coding tool called Dedoose (Dedoose software tool version 8.3.17 [2020]), supported the tagging of themes. Through the use of color-coding and clear markers, Dedoose helped to distinguish overarching parent themes from subthemes. Transcriptions were analyzed individually, with close attention given to any commonalities in language across participants.

Limitations

As discussed earlier, since I am a Black woman, my racial identity alone might have made participants hesitant to speak freely about interactions with Black students. Likewise, the charged topic of racial profiling might have deterred participants from exercising honesty during dialogue in an effort to appear favorable before the researcher. Another consideration is that the prompts and critical inquiry could have uncovered individual biases and highlighted differences in the way teachers engaged learners.

Delimitations

Given time constraints, I chose to capture only the voices of White teachers for this study. The representation of only one group, left many unrecorded perspectives and might not have provided an aggregate account of the research topic. The design of the study did not include other members of the school community who might also have been able to share insights on how they perceived or experienced the teaching and learning relationship with African American males. Although the collective voices of the school community could have deepened the understanding of the social phenomenon, it was beyond the scope of this study.

Conclusion

This chapter focused on the key features of Critical Narratives as the research methodology. It provided a rationale for why engaging participants in dialogue, with the use of prompts, was the most appropriate method for this study. I highlighted the process for identifying, selecting and contacting participants. A description of the study was also provided, emphasizing the strategies and analysis for data collection. This research sought to capture the voices of White teachers, who teach African American males with IEPs—more specifically, it sought to gain further insight into their perception of classroom discourse and practices related to instruction, discipline and the pre-referral and special education assessment protocols. This research identified and attempted to explain how teachers and systems at their schools engage and respond to African American male students with a disability label. Critical Narratives as a methodology was an effective way to document said voices and experiences of the teacher demographic that makes up the majority of the workforce.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Perspectives of White Teachers

The purpose of this qualitative research was to listen to the perspective of White teachers, concerning their interactions with African American males with an IEP. The goal was to better understand how White teachers view the influence and effects of their attitudes and beliefs about their Black students in Special Education. Additionally, an underlying purpose of this study was to inspire reflective practice among educators and make recommendations on how to better meet the needs of this particular group of students. Critical narrative sessions were conducted with each of the participants. During each of the sessions, the six participants responded to a number of different prompts to address how participants in this study perceive their teaching practices and discourse with African American males receiving specialized instruction and how they understand the influence of institutional racism on the academic experiences of African American male students.

Participant Narratives

All of the participants in this study worked for the same large, urban school district located in southern California. The specific communities in which they taught spanned across several miles, but since each were agents in the same educational system, their narratives may echo general practices and frailties in implementation of the institution's policies. Conversely, their voices highlighted their individual experiences with respect to school-specific structures, local systems and problems of practice at their schools as related to the topic of this study. Table 1 includes information about each of the participants in the study. It is intended to offer a

contextual preview, to be used as a reference when reading the critical narratives. Each of the participants identified as White, not of Latinx origin. They all possessed active teaching credentials and have taught students with disabilities. They had varying years of experience. All have worked at sites centered in economically disadvantaged communities, where student enrollment at most schools was predominantly Latinx and African American.

Table 1
Participant Profiles

Participant Pseudonym	Active CA Teaching Credential	Ethnicity	Gender	Public School	Taught AA Males with IEPs	Years in Education
Morgan	Yes	White	Female	Yes	Yes	18
Jackson	Yes	White	Male	Yes	Yes	17
Ramona	Yes	White	Female	Yes	Yes	10
Marcus	Yes	White	Male	Yes	Yes	20
Tonya	Yes	White	Female	Yes	Yes	1
Fanny	Yes	White	Female	Yes	Yes	3

Morgan

Morgan has been an educator for nearly 20 years at the time of the study. All of her teaching experience was at the elementary school level, in several cities in Los Angeles County. The elementary site where she recalled most of her experience was made up of about 30% African American and 70% Latinx. All of the students at her school qualified for free or reduced lunch. This indicated a significantly high concentration of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. So, the school met eligibility criteria for government funding under Title I status. The elementary playground sat just a few short blocks from subsidized housing projects.

Morgan did not live in the community in which she taught. Rather, she commuted to work and on occasion would stay with friends who lived in the neighborhood. Morgan explained, in the first few years of her career, issues of race were very prominent in her classroom, and she believed some of the barriers to positive discourse were because she was from a different ethnic makeup than the students she served. In her classroom and in the community at large, she was the minority. Morgan reported issues of race were “very prominent in my classroom because I was an ethnic background that was not represented in the neighborhood.”

Morgan was raised in a small community in the Midwest. However, she considered her cultural upbringing to be very diverse. Her family history suggested her ancestors fled to the United States as refugees. This understanding of the impact of politics and persecution on a group of people is why her parents taught her to be conscientious. She was raised to believe there were no differences in race. So, she lived her life with this belief as one of her core values. About this, Morgan stated,

My family upbringing . . . my cultural upbringing was very diverse. I am from a small town in the Midwest, but we were refugees—Sudanese and Louv. So, my parents raised us to be very conscious that there’s no difference in race.

Morgan recalled a time when they read a story about Jackie Robinson in class. Despite his extraordinary talent, he faced significant challenges and criticism in major league baseball because he was Black. Morgan said she tried to soften the conversation with her students by saying America has moved past that sort of overt racism and discrimination. But her students were not convinced we live in a post-racism era. They knew this country had a long way to go. Deep down, Morgan knew too. Reflecting on this, Morgan, said,

I was trying to make a case that we moved past that. But in a way, we definitely hadn't because I was feeling that uncomfortableness from my coworkers, peers . . . for representing something that they had a lot of negative experiences with.

Some of her third graders directly or indirectly experienced the same injustices of 1947 themselves, now in the 21st century. Morgan recognized that she might have stood for equal opportunity but that did not mean the world did. In moments like these, she stated that she felt misrepresented. The inequality and unfair treatment happening to the people she was committed to supporting, were not her feelings nor her actions. Yet, she felt she was criticized for the mistakes of others.

Morgan stated that her academic studies had a social justice lens, which framed her graduate thesis. So, she was well aware of the historical background in the community. She was not oblivious to the fact that many of her students and their parents had minimal or negative interactions with White people. She knew that aural history probably taught students that her ancestors were the source of much of their oppression. Morgan read about the socioeconomic shift and the police brutality. But even with this degree of awareness and formal academic training, Morgan was not able to mediate the pain and frustration of her nine-year-old students. She, however, realized that they carried the weight of poverty, homelessness, gun violence, incarceration, hunger, culturally irrelevant and inaccurate curriculum, skewed narratives and biased assessments on their shoulders. Therefore, Morgan felt it was very important to begin providing a forum for open and honest conversation about racialization.

In so many ways, Morgan felt that her students examined her motives. They frequently questioned the value of what she was teaching, why they or their families continued to face social injustices and how the learning would help. They contested some of the information in their anthologies and expressed that many of the injustices around them were because of people that looked just like Morgan. She felt the tension every day. About this she said,

I was being misrepresented for past, you know, bad experiences that really had nothing to do with me.

Morgan commented her approach to planning and instruction were influenced by Vygotsky's research. Despite any challenges in her classroom, she tried to make caring connections using the tenets of the zone of proximal development to help students, rise to the bar that was set. She engaged in pre-teaching and re-teaching when needed. She leveraged her understanding of the rules of *Black English* to support acquisition of academic language for her African American students. Unfortunately, the behavior difficulties persisted, and African American males made up the majority of those instances. About this, she stated,

I think I can say that the majority of the behavior issues that I faced, were African American boys.

Morgan described the behaviors of her African American male students as impediments to the transfer of knowledge during instruction. Students were not able to access curriculum when their behaviors were really severe. However, she noted that students were only sent to the office when they were engaging in unsafe behavior, posing a danger to themselves or harming others. She tried to prevent problem behavior by engaging students with a loving, motherly approach. This approach was often unsuccessful. About this she explained,

Here I am, an outsider already in the community . . . not well received and then on top of that, I'm being criticized for behavioral issues that were really at times impeding my ability to you know, ensure that knowledge was being transferred.

Morgan explained that she quickly realized that how she learned growing up and the expectations she set, did not align with the context in which she was teaching. She saw herself as a clear outsider. So, she relied on her colleagues to help her navigate issues. She adopted some of the techniques they used, in the hopes of seeing change. In hindsight, she stated that this was probably not best practice but at the time those teachers were stronger and had more control.

Looking back over the last two decades, Morgan estimated that of the 50 or so individualized education plan (IEP) meetings she has been a part of for African American males, only one of the students had a diagnosis of Autism. The others had eligibilities that were associated with behavioral issues. She also noticed that labels such as Autism were perceived differently by colleagues than an eligibility like emotionally disturbed, other health impaired for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or others that have behavioral implications. More specifically, Morgan observed a distinction in the way colleagues engaged in conversation about students whose eligibilities were associated with behavioral manifestations. Morgan asserted that whereas teachers at her school appeared empathetic toward labels like Autism and perceived student needs as more sensory, they see students with other eligibilities as having a lack of discipline or internal control. These students, she noted, are predominantly Black. About this, she stated:

There's just one thing I wanted to add. Sorry. I know I keep bringing up the comparison to autism . . . if a student goes in and destroys a room, who has the category of Autism or

you know like the characteristics associated with autism; I notice that we immediately got to, “Oh there’s sensory issues here.” But when I deal with my African American males . . . they’re not afforded that same thing . . . you know what I mean? They just immediately go to, “they’re crazy. They don’t fit into our mold. They need to leave.”

Consequently, the dialogues in IEP meetings, Morgan explained, have been more about removing students from their general education setting as opposed to collaborating on accommodations and pedagogical strategies that might support academic and behavioral progress in the general education environment. Morgan explained,

It’s approached more like, well, this is just not the right environment. We need to get them out, you know.

Morgan felt this phenomenon needs to be addressed with staff because of its profound effect on the success of African American males. She believed that in the United States, or at least in the urban communities where she has served, the majority of families are facing social and economic situations that are challenging (e.g., single parent homes, lower incomes, limited access to healthcare, poor diet, unhealthy lifestyles). She also believed the impact of these family dynamics combined with rigid school expectations influence perceptions and outcomes for students. Some of the student behaviors are just not socially acceptable and needless to say affirm common stereotypes for most people.

Morgan stated there are clearer criteria in place for the pre-referral process for intervention, referral for special education assessment and placement when concerns are related to academics. Schools have intervention teachers and resource specialists on campus, offer tutoring or Saturday school, learning centers-sometimes they purchase additional curriculum and

technology for students to bridge gaps in reading or math. However, the steps to take toward intervention and support for behavioral concerns are more ambiguous and harder to navigate. Teachers also tended to have less tolerance for behavioral challenges because they felt it impeded their job and potentially impacted test scores. Morgan also referenced that teacher mindset was a prevailing factor.

Morgan emphasized the significance of making data-based decisions with her staff. She encouraged exploration of all possibilities to identify multi-tiered intervention opportunities at SST meetings, or the least restrictive environment, rather than deciding pathways impulsively and subjectively. Morgan, however, shared,

If there are some perceived behavioral challenges, then the process is expedited...there's times where the interventions have been more minimizing the school day; more kind of like home study.

Morgan has attempted to have more direct conversations and coach colleagues on how to examine personal biases. Though race is an uncomfortable topic to discuss, she repeated that it is a reality that needs to be addressed. There is still a lot of work to be done around behavioral strategies, better understanding language needs and overall relationship building with teachers. These considerations will support engagement and reduce the constant power struggles between the adults and the students. As we concluded our session, Morgan stated,

Yeah, I definitely think that you know there is a reality here that needs to be addressed because I feel that there are many factors that go into this that are layered that I do feel when you take those layers one by one, have a profound effect [in this case] on the outcome or success of quote unquote African American male.

Jackson

Jackson had worked for almost two decades in the teaching field. He has had various positions in the profession and has served in a few different communities, at more than nine school sites. During one particular assignment, Jackson lived just a few miles away from the location where he worked. Subsequent assignments required a longer commute. The majority of Jackson's assignments were in urban neighborhoods where students were eligible for free or reduced lunch. The student population at his last assignment was about 98% Latinx and the rest were African American and Asian.

Jackson's first teaching job was in a more affluent area. There was not much diversity there, but ironically, this is where he had the majority of his Black male students with IEPs. Apparently, there were a lot of group homes in the area and his school happened to be the school of residence for those youth. The Black males residing in the group homes were largely enrolled in Jackson's special day class.

According to Jackson, those students had a negative perception of themselves. They would speak down about themselves and sometimes were teased by other students. They often had conversations with their peers about the social pressures and shame they faced. They recognized that they had a lot of adversity to push through being Black, male, foster care and labeled with a disability. Jackson reported,

I know the male African American students would talk . . . speak negatively about themselves a lot or they would be teased by other students. And I think for them, it was their own perception of I'm African American already, male already and I've got this disability that I've got to deal with on top of the social pressures that exist because of the

way I look already.

Though Jackson heard about these discussions, he did not participate in them because he could not relate to their experiences. It was not likely that he would speak directly to them about what they were dealing with in those moments. However, to help them through their social-emotional woes, he would later give them more individualized time and care. In this way, African American students received differentiated treatment from students of other races. Jackson felt that other students did not have to deal with the same issues and therefore did not require similar consolation. About this, Jackson noted,

I didn't . . . I tried not to get caught up in those conversations because I don't know how to relate to that. . . . Maybe spend more individualized time with them or like having them come at lunchtime or recess time and just speak with them and have conversations with them.

Jackson stated that he always tried to connect with his students; not just at school, but within reason, outside of school as well. He made phone calls home and maintained clear communication with parents, especially at school wide events. From his perspective, the students just felt that he cared about them.

Jackson did not remember having any significant issues with African American males in his classes. However, he did explain that some of his students of color appeared apprehensive toward him initially. He attributed their reservations to past experiences with White people or negative discourse with other White teachers on campus, not necessarily because of any adverse interactions with him. Jackson described himself as tall and big. So, in hindsight, he also believed that perhaps it was his stature that made him seem unapproachable at first. Over time,

Jackson developed a really good rapport with most of his students. He was unable to forge a relationship with a few students, but he did not believe the causes were related to racial differences. Jackson recalled generally treating his students of color as he did any of his other students. He noted that he did not intentionally engage them differently except as mentioned previously.

I always tried to connect with my students. . . . I haven't really had that many issues with African American male students. I've had African American male students in my classes before but nothing significant. . . . I don't think I have [had challenging behaviors] in the sense of our differing races or colors impacting. . . . I don't think it had anything to do with race.

There were a few times when African American males were defiant. However, Jackson characterized those instances as typical cases of escape or avoidance; students not wanting to meet the cognitive demands placed on them. The only time one of his students went to the office was when unsafe behavior ensued, and the student was angry at a peer. In this instance, the student used profanity, was throwing objects, and refused to leave the classroom. Since he posed a danger to others, he had to be removed from the classroom to ensure safety and minimize damages. The dean escorted the student to the office.

The contrary was true for some of his colleagues. There were countless times when students would talk amongst themselves about some of the teachers on campus and disclosed to Jackson that a teacher had called them names or was pessimistic about their potential for success. The students even heard the teachers sharing these attitudes and beliefs publicly, with the teacher assistants. Then, as a novice teacher, Jackson did not know how to speak to the students to ease

their frustrations and begin to mediate those relationships. He would be honest with students about the inappropriateness of the other teachers' conduct, but he was not sure about how to help students reconcile. About this, he said,

I would hear students all the time or amongst themselves or they would come to me and say I have a problem with this teacher. They called me a name or talked about me behind my back to other teachers or assistants or things like that, I would hear from students all the time.

Jackson knew the stories he heard from students were true. When he first joined the staff at particular schools, teachers would openly share racialized sentiments about African American students with him. For example, they would say things alluding to African Americans being inherently different from people of other races. They believed African Americans should be treated differently and were not surprised that many of them had IEPs. Jackson said that these rants eventually waned because he addressed the teachers and called out the stereotypes. He informed them that he was an advocate for all students and would not tolerate invalidating insults. About this, Jackson asserted,

Plenty of teachers, not just Caucasian teachers, plenty of teachers would speak up a lot about African American students with disabilities and there would always be this underlying tone with them that African American students almost inherently are different and should be treated differently. There's no wonder that they have this disability or that they qualify for special education. I would get that sense a lot from a lot of teachers unfortunately.

Committed to improving student outcomes, Jackson found himself constantly reviewing class data to determine if his instruction was effective. Admittedly, he did not build in targeted pedagogical strategies, tailor direct instruction, or design lessons to appeal to a particular subgroup. He relied heavily on formative evaluations. He measured his goal attainment by the number of students who demonstrated proficiency at the end of a lesson or unit. Though Jackson employed this evaluation system, his analysis did not focus on trends and patterns in students' learning preferences or behavioral nuances. He mostly leveraged what he knew about their deficits at the time to design follow-up lessons for reteach. Therefore, during the narrative session, Jackson did not believe he could generalize about the African American males he taught. In terms of the instruction, Jackson noted,

African American males, maybe in my 17 years, I've had 20. So, it really hasn't been all that much. . . . I don't think that I've ever changed my teaching practices. When I assess myself and my own practices, it's always about how kids are receiving the instruction and whether they've retained it or not and I'll adjust based on that and try other styles to deliver the instruction. But never based on race.

Jackson also shared he was in the process of referring a first grade, African American male for special education assessment. Unfortunately, the student had a poorly written 504 plan by Jackson's predecessor, and the former classroom teacher did not implement interventions with fidelity. After another SST meeting, a classroom change, and targeted support the student still did not have a favorable rate of response to intervention. Due to his lack of progress, he was referred for assessment.

To determine the appropriateness of a special education evaluation for the student, Jackson reviewed his educational history from his kindergarten year. He found the student had a diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder by a clinician and was prescribed medication. Moreover, Jackson found that the student presented with large academic gaps on developmental assessments for the last two years, but none of the previous meetings addressed them. They only focused on behavior. No doubt this student suffered some injustices. Unpacking the underlying details helped Jackson to uncover some weaknesses in the school's system and identify specific areas for reform. However, despite system frailties, the team felt the student's mental health needs around focus and his poor academic performance warranted assessment. About this Jackson stated,

I looked at his cumulative record . . . all of that was behavioral actually. They never really focused on the academics which surprised me because he has always been very low academically . . . and so I ventured to update the 504 plan [A 504 plan is an outline of accommodations developed by school teams, for general education students with various impairments, to support success in the learning environment] with real, actual accommodations because what was there before didn't make sense to me. It was just a hatefully written 504 plan.

Jackson further asserted, at his school site, there was actually evidence of under and over-identification. Two years ago, the previous administrator would not document all requests made for special education evaluation. She would either verbally deny assessments without a thorough review of records or grant the assessment without first implementing interventions. There seemed to be a trend of students with academic needs being denied and students with behavior

challenges were almost always offered assessment. The previous administrator's subjectivity and haphazard decisions in the matter resulted in an over norm special day class. Here, Jackson explained,

Before I arrived there, they were either not assessing kids for whatever reason or. . . . So, what I've learned at this particular school is that sometimes teachers or parents would request assessment for their children and my predecessor would just make blanket statements and just say no there's nothing wrong with them. They don't need assessment and so, they wouldn't even document these instances of assessment requests for students. Or they would always go straight to assessment for those students with significant behavioral challenges. . . . So, there's either been over identification of students or an under-identification of students for the ones that have academic challenges. They were automatically turned down. There's a lot going on at this school.

Jackson noted the school culture around intervention and special education has been shaped by a history of unfair and inconsistent practices by the old regime. Some of the teachers at his school thought they could ask for assessment and have the IEP written, based solely on their opinion of a particular child's abilities. Concerned about this issue, Jackson spent a lot of time on a professional development series to educate staff on the school wide intervention process and special education law. About this, Jackson explained,

[T]o educate people about the whole entire process from start to finish. So, that's been a challenge, really reteaching all these teachers about the special ed. process. It's been tough because they don't like me. They think I'm just a hard-ass person. I think they see it as I don't want to support kids; that I don't want to do the work. When actually it is the

complete opposite. I want to make sure we're going to do all this work for the right reasons, not the wrong reasons and just say he has a learning disability because he can't read yet. So many factors could be at play.

Ramona

Ramona has been in the teaching profession for about 10 years. She has served in the capacity of resource teacher and specialist for the Division of Special Education in her district, where she supported special education programs in a network of schools. So, she has a solid understanding of processes and policies related to students with disabilities. She lived just 11 miles from the site where she gained her primary experience. The community surrounding Ramona's school was socioeconomically diverse. There were affluent neighbors, a large working class but also a transient population that occupied local homeless shelters and halfway houses. This variation in economics is also reflected in the student demographics. The racial makeup of the student population was about 60-70% Latinx, 10% African American, and the rest were a combination of Asian and Caucasian.

Ramona had not personally experienced negative issues of race as a classroom teacher. She recalled a time when her students had mistaken her for Latina and inquired why she did not know Spanish. After explaining some of her cultural background to students and acknowledging that her family carries similar phenotypic features, there was no further discussion. Her African American students were largely from military families. Most of them grew up in other cities or towns but attended her school because their parents were transferred to the base near the school site. Overall, her students seemed to navigate the school system well; acclimated to the culture. They engaged in positive discourse with their teachers and peers for the most part. The special

education enrollment was within average percentages and instruction and intervention seemed generally effective. At least this was how it seemed from the classroom level.

It was not until Ramona worked in a different capacity last year that she noticed the disparity of race in special education. She had a more global view of a network of schools in the area, including her former site. Some evidence of the disparity was the requests she received for nonpublic school placement. All were for African American students. Almost every behavioral consult she responded to, had been for African American students. Ramona stated that she could see issues of race more than she ever had to deal with in her own classroom. About this, Ramona explained,

This year, every referral I get for nonpublic has been for an African American student and almost every behavioral consult I have had this year has been for an African American student. I see it [issues of race] more in the teachings of others than I ever like had to deal with it within my own classroom.

From Ramona's perspective, it seemed as though teachers viewed the teaching and learning process as the same for all students and did not take into consideration cultural norms and expectations. Ramona did not believe that teachers were intending to be malicious with this way of thinking. In fact, they were doing what they thought was right and fair, to treat everyone equally.

From Ramona's vantage point, teachers' failure to consider students' racial and cultural identity could be why behavior is often misinterpreted and students are being overly referred. The geographic area that Ramona serviced was predominantly Latinx. So, she believed the teachers and staff either did not recognize the cultural heterogeneity or were not quite ready to

acknowledge the differences. Ramona also contended that teachers were not using valid and reliable data to measure student needs. Their concerns were expressed more subjectively and largely based on observation. Lack of work production was often equated with lack of ability. For these reasons and others, it is believed that referrals were made based on perception. Ramona felt teachers tended to view the learner as the problem and not their own instructional practices.

I hate to make like that judgment because I don't know what's going through teachers' minds, but in a way, I feel that they see students . . . as everyone is the same. Therefore, they don't take into ac maybe this is a cultural expectation or norm and that they [teachers] need to adjust.

Keeping this in mind, when Ramona supported teachers with lesson planning or offered feedback on their instructional practices, she leveraged what she knew about the students to guide educational decisions and recommendations. Though in her own classroom she said her interaction with African American students was similar to that of students of other races, cultural knowledge is a part of her considerations now. She intentionally modeled this for teachers because she noticed that cultural competence was an area of development for many educators at her school sites. Her approach included student learning preferences, high interest tasks whenever possible, teachers employing a multimodal approach to direct instruction, and allowing for multiple means of representation for student product.

A specific example of Ramona's strategies was teaching Tier 3 vocabulary during the introduction to a lesson. She noted that this helps to facilitate comprehension of text, particularly when language could be a barrier or students have limited context. Another technique was finding creative ways to tie in culturally relevant experiences for students. By providing rich

context, students find learning more meaningful. They tended to extend their critical thinking skills and innovatively problem solve, having lived it! They were also better able to make learning connections to other untrained settings. Ramona described this in the following way.

We used to do a lot . . . like I co-taught. We would select vocabulary that I knew would cause challenges or was uncommon . . . and we would pre-teach vocabulary. We would also try to use like schema and build the knowledge based on the things that the students came in knowing to what we were going to be teaching.

In addition to addressing instruction, Ramona spoke about how critical positive discourse was in the school setting. Discourse was multifaceted, but its basic level, hinged on communication patterns—both verbal and nonverbal communication. Ramona perceived her communication with African American students to be as intentional as her communication and interaction with other students. There were times when her approach was different, such as in her learning center. She noticed that African American students needed more support in mathematics and wanted to use technology more than other subgroups. So, she designed her group instruction and rotations around this knowledge to increase engagement. Ramona explained,

In my learning center . . . they [African Americans] needed a little bit more support in certain academic areas like math. They would be the ones to want to use technology more than like my other students. I would adjust. In my rotations, I would let them go first.

Ramona shared a lesson she learned about being more conscious of her body language. Even without uttering a word, her facial expression was misinterpreted and sent an unintended message of hate to one of her students. Several years ago, Ramona had to intervene between two students who had gotten into a physical altercation. An African American student took a Latino

student's cell phone to play a game and would not return it. They taunted one another until it elevated to the level of punches. When Ramona broke up the fight, the African American student was utterly offended and hurt. He exclaimed that his teacher glared at *him* like she did not know who he was; like she hated *him*. The African American student felt that Ramona's disappointment was one-sided. In his mind, there was a difference in the reprimand. From that point on, Ramona began to consider how she expressed her emotions. She saw how powerful perception is—not just how teachers perceive students, but also how students perceive teachers. Both can be an impediment to healthy discourse. For example, Ramona noted,

One of the boys was Latino and one of the boys was African American and the African-American student was very much like Ms. “Ramona” looked at me like she didn't know who I was and that she hated me . . . So, I thought it was interesting—his perception of what my feelings were, even though I never expressed my feelings. That made me consider like how I express my emotions on my face and like going forward what I want to do or not do . . . like how bad is the situation?

Marcus

Marcus started working in his district as a teacher's assistant in the mid-90s. Since then, he has served in a number of certificated roles in different parts of the city. He resided outside of his district's boundaries, but only about six miles from his site. In his present role, Marcus shared that he services a student population of 75% Latinx, 10% African American, 10% Caucasian, a little over 2% Asian, and the rest Other.

In terms of navigating issues of race in his career, Marcus could only remember a food fight rumored to be between Latinx students and African American students. After further

investigation, race was not the impetus for the commotion. Marcus further shared the key to his positive discourse with students is good listening skills, kindness, and respect. His students received it well, but also give it back. Thus, establishing a warm culture and climate. About this, Marcus said,

I'm very respectful toward the students and I think that was one of my positives. I think using that approach with respect to kindness you kind of . . . I didn't really have issues of race.

Marcus was in charge of school-wide positive behavior intervention support (SWPBIS) at one of his school sites. He stated it took some time to create a culture of "Be safe. Be responsible. Be respectful." Staff and students needed capacity building. All school community members worked to consistently employ tenets of positive behavior support and to develop a process for discipline using those same foundations. Due to the work put in to establishing behavioral expectations, Marcus was able to confidently diffuse high-tension situations. He specifically described success with resolving student issues. He believed when you gave students an opportunity to be heard, outcomes improved. Marcus's school was not completely free of behavioral challenges, but none were confrontational from his perspective. There were some calls for fights and so forth, but nothing out of the ordinary or extreme. There were expectations of dialogue and reflection during the discipline process. According to Marcus, this contributed to a culture of respect,

We took a minute to create a culture of be safe, be responsible, be respectful. So, what I mean by that is it took a lot of capacity building with staff and a lot of like consistent approaches to discipline, using those kinds of foundations. I remember walking into some

situations where there would be some high tension but again when you give students an opportunity to be heard, right. I think I was able to squash a lot of those tension moments if that makes sense.

Marcus provided an example of where he relied on the same approach to resolve a parent concern. The student and family at the heart of this incident were African American. The parent was upset because her son was not making adequate progress in class. The teacher was not meeting his needs and seemingly failing to make any instructional adjustments that would increase achievement. While the parent was expressing her dismay, she began snapping her fingers at Marcus. Marcus kindly brought up this notion of respect. He wanted what was best for the student as well and was committed to addressing the concern. However, to do so effectively, he asked the parent to be mindful of her tone and body language. Recognizing his sincerity, she obliged. Their relationship continued to be positive and collaborative until her child left the school. Marcus believed that people should listen and speak with respect whether the audience is a child or an adult, and irrespective of racial or ethnic background.

Marcus did not feel he was the most exciting teacher, but he was caring. He often modeled what he wanted his students to do. During planning, he tried to position himself as the learner and considered how he would like to learn if he were a student in his own class. He offered direct instruction, guided practice, and then allowed for independent practice for students. He did not focus too much on strategies tailored for specific racial groups. Instead, he employed strategies he thought were just good for all kids and encouraged students to help each other. About this, Marcus said,

Looking back at it again . . . I didn't highlight specific strategies for African Americans versus Latinos. I kind of looked at it like hey, this is what's good for all kids.

Historically, Marcus's school district had a disproportionate number of African American males labeled with emotional disturbance (ED). Recently, he noticed a rise in the number of African American males found eligible under the category of other health impairment (OHI) for characteristics associated with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. It is almost as if OHI is the new ED. Both special education labels suggest manifestations of challenging behavior. Marcus believed that IEP teams have found a new, less stigmatizing way to qualify students for special education based on behavior. However, underlying issues still remain. Family and academic histories are not being reviewed or considered. Sometimes, there is trauma in the home, a significant change in the student's environment, significant absences, minimal parent participation, and a lack of intervention prior to the label. Marcus noted these trends have sparked interest and are the impetus for new initiatives in his district, aimed at mitigating patterns in over-referrals and over identification.

We unfortunately have a disproportionate number of kiddos in . . . Unified labeled with an ED eligibility. Now I guess our new disproportionate eligibility is OHI. We were able to look at those with an ED eligibility a few years ago and ask ourselves what do we need to do and what's happening out there . . . if a kid was African American and assessed, unfortunately, we were seeing a lot of ED eligibilities based on behavior.

Some perceptions Marcus has heard from colleagues are students do not care; students are too lazy or too emotional. However, teachers and schools are not consistently providing interventions for these concerns, and they turn into labels. He found only 8% of students, out of

15,000 initially identified for special education had gone through the SST last year. This means only 1,200 students had documented intervention before being referred for special education evaluation. Marcus explained,

What we were seeing is that a lot of kids weren't getting the right interventions to begin with and then going straight to special ed and being labeled as ED or OHI. . . . A few years back we were able to put together an evaluation, checklist . . . checks and balances for students with disabilities. We would really go through each assessment and look to see was there evidence . . . unfortunately we have not done that for OHI and now people have found a loophole.

Some people have a skewed perception of African American males with a disability label, and it shows in student outcomes and in the school's accountability data. It is no secret that this phenomenon is more of an issue in some areas versus others. There was a specific example of a school near a large foster home. Most of those foster youth were African American and had an IEP. Marcus heard from school leadership that his students were lazy, disobedient, did not have what it took to attend his school and that they could not learn. He projected the belief and mindset that his school was not the place for this particular group of students. About this, Marcus recalled,

And because they were in the foster program, there were some challenges. I remember the perception of the special education leader at the school was like hey you know we have these kids. They won't be able to learn. They disobey. They're disobedient . . . They had this perception that the kids did not want to be there. And yes, there are a lot of challenges that kids go through. Situations can be tough, but unfortunately, we have some

people with that mindset. . . . We do have trends in our district where people think like that.

Marcus stated that the worst thing an educator could do is put a label on a kid. He understands and supports special education for students that need it, but students are identified way too easily, and criteria is subjective. Then, that student grows with a fixed mindset about himself. They move through life thinking that they cannot do things; and it takes a long time and a lot of people encouraging that student to change the way he perceives himself and build his confidence back up. Marcus felt that educators needed to continue to build teacher capacity around cultural competence and relationship building, with our students.

Let's shake off these perceptions and really get to what the kid needs . . . let's connect with the students before you start putting labels on them. . . . You know regardless of ethnicity, I'm a big believer in I really think special education can support some kiddos but it also can have some harmful effects.

Marcus felt strongly there are students in special education who do not need to be in special education. During IEP meetings, educators get into discussion about the least restrictive environment. They should know eligibility does not drive placement. A student's needs outlined in the data should influence the decision, not the opinion of one or two people. Where is the student going to get the most educational benefit? The purpose of special education, according to Marcus, was not to bring a student up to grade level. It was to provide them with skills and strategies to access educational opportunities and begin to make progress toward grade level expectations; to close the achievement gap. IEP teams should be implementing the least amount

of special education services as possible to support the student and over time, collaboratively move the student toward exiting special education altogether.

Tonya

Tonya was a brand new fourth grade teacher at the time of the narrative session. She began as a long-term substitute and passed her certification to become a full-time educator in an urban community. Her school is a Title I school, where 100% of the students qualify for free lunch. They were also a Title III school, which meant they had a significant English learner population and received government funding through grant programs to assist with students developing English language proficiency and meeting academic standards. Tonya did not live in the neighborhood where she worked but had familiarity with the community and adjacent areas because she had subbed in some of the surrounding schools.

Though this was Tonya's first year in her own classroom, she had a great deal of related experiences as a substitute teacher. Some of those experiences were instrumental in her professional growth and thus, have shaped her current practice. Tonya shared that she had to navigate the issue of race with students on a couple of occasions. She had to confront two African American male students who directed racial slurs toward students of other races in the class. At that time, Tonya requested out of classroom support to help mediate that situation. They employed Restorative Justice techniques to teach students that those words and phrases were inappropriate and hurtful, but also to talk about alternative ways to deal with anger or frustration toward an adult or peer. A key lesson for students was to call others by their actual name or nickname, whichever they preferred. Any other name would not be tolerated in class. Tonya noted,

I have [heard racial slurs] among my students and also involving myself. . . . So, I had some racial slurs said amongst different races in my class. I had to deal with that and bring in support to help deal with that as well.

Tonya stated,

I have had some students call me racist when I asked them to do simple things like sit down in their seats to do their work.

In this case, she chose to ignore their accusations completely. She did not respond or acknowledge anything they said at that moment. Rather she silently documented the incident in her anecdotal records and continued with her instructional program.

This year, Tonya found herself making special considerations during planning and instruction for a few of her African American male students. She had concerns about one of the student's academic skills. He did not have special education services at the time or any documented accommodations. Tonya monitored his work production and analyzed his progress against the remaining gaps in his skillset, compared to grade level expectations. His biggest area for development was reading comprehension, which was also one of the hardest reading pillars for Tonya to support with. Additionally, this particular student was shy. He often did not engage in partner talks and was very reluctant to answer when she used equity sticks and happened to call his name. Some follow-up actions Tonya said she took with him included offering the whole class 30 more seconds to talk to their partners, so as not to single him out. Sometimes, she went directly to the student and allowed him to share his responses with her quietly.

The second African American male student Tonya thought about as she planned lessons and activities had a very short attention span. He required frequent reminders and redirection

during lessons. The third African American student she identified for targeted support “loved to share many thoughts that came to his mind,” sometimes at inopportune times. She described her focus with him,

I’m working with him on when it’s time to ask the question and when it’s time to share. She looked to employ the use of a list of question words for his desk. Its purpose was to keep the student and ultimately the class on track by minimizing interruptions. His thought process wandered sometimes. The question words would help him discern a question from a statement and also help him reflect on whether or not it was an appropriate time in class to share what was on his mind. It may have been a relevant question. It could also have been an idea to save and share with his partner during a discussion protocol. Sometimes the idea might have been one that he could share with his teacher at a later time.

Tonya also shared an experience with an African American student with a disability label. The student had an IEP due to a speech impediment and attended language and speech therapy once a week. He stuttered but the issues Tonya had with him were seemingly not speech related. They were more behavioral. The student exhibited a lack of academic effort. Tonya acknowledged that it could be argued the speech impediment was at the heart of his behavioral challenges. Embarrassment and low confidence could have influenced his choices. Perhaps these behaviors were ways for him to overcompensate for his language disability. Tonya recalls handing out assignments and he would crumple them up and throw them on the floor. Tonya was still trying to identify triggers and interventions for this student at the time of the narrative session. Tonya described her experience saying,

I did have a student who was in speech therapy. He had a bit of a stutter. But the issues I

had with him I'm not sure . . . it's hard to say if they were directly . . . you know they were more behavioral; lack of academic effort. I mean it could be argued that it was directed toward his speech issue that maybe he felt embarrassed.

On occasion, Tonya had referred Black males to the office. The behavioral reasons ranged from the exchange of racially charged words and phrases between students to sexual harassment. As a new teacher, she was somewhat familiar with the process for referring students for special education assessment. She knew as a prereferral step, students were to go through intervention. Her school did have a SST in place, and she knew who her administrator over special education was, for any consultation that was needed.

When she did go into the student information system to make a referral for intervention, she noticed at least one of the students she was concerned about had multiple intervention referrals already. Her next step with this student was conferring with her administrator about his lack of progress and possible evaluation. She was still in the process of gathering data and monitoring the other students. One in particular who she described earlier as "shy," was a bit harder to diagnose. He rarely talked at all and had chronic absenteeism. She has yet to determine if his low performance was due to a lack of instruction related to absences or if there was an underpinning issue requiring specialized support. In a one to one circumstance, she was able to measure his fluency. His scores were very good, but he did not seem to comprehend what he read. In terms of the multiple referrals, Tonya stated,

I went to put in a few referrals and SST had already been put in; many of them actually. So, one of the things on my things to do is to get in touch with our AP and see what's going on with those referrals.

Generally speaking, Tonya perceived teachers and staff at her school as professionals. They did sometimes vent to one another about student issues, but she often heard a name and that was all. She was unaware of the students' ethnicity or race. One school-wide initiative specific to African American males was increasing their attendance. Local data suggested a disproportionate rate of absenteeism with this demographic. Lastly, Tonya commented on the professionalism of her school.

I perceive everyone's attitude at my school to be very professional. Teachers vent about student issues but often I hear a name and nothing else about that student. I don't know who the student is, or what the student looks like. Overall, I have a few new teacher friends and they all vent about behavior issues but they are just "students" in the conversation.

Fanny

Fanny has been in the teaching profession for a few years. She taught in another state before coming to California. She was nearing the end of her credential program and was in her second year at her school site. The student population was about 70% Latinx and about 30% Black. The school was a Title I school, where all students received free lunch. Fanny was aware the surrounding community endured a lot of trauma. Gang violence, poverty and marginalization were some of the issues they faced. Fanny described her school as "high needs" but she loved working there. She did not live in the community but saw so much potential in her school.

Over the years she has had to navigate the issues of race with students. She had to mediate conversations between her Latinx and African American students. There was a lot of aggression, name calling, and offensive comments exchanged. She had to identify the reasons behind the incident and help the students find healthier ways to communicate. Fanny

acknowledged a possible barrier to effective discourse is her being a White woman in a community where families are of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Messages can be received differently when coming from her. However, as Fanny reflected on her time at her site, she could not remember ever being called racist.

I have had to navigate some conversations between my Latino students and my Black students. Sometimes there is some aggression between those subgroups. Some name calling comes out or some comments. Specifically, at this school, I cannot really think of a time that I have personally, me being White and my students being of different backgrounds than myself, had to navigate that conversation. I don't recall being called racist or anything like that.

In another example, Fanny spoke of when she taught at a school that was predominantly Black and Haitian. She was one of three White teachers at the school. She was charged during Black History Month to teach kindergarten students about the terms Black and White and why people identify as a specific race. Her lesson went deeper to talk about the historic relationship between Black and White people. It was a difficult conversation to have but she felt it was a successful lesson. About this experience, Fanny shared,

I taught at another school that was completely . . . they were . . . Black and Haitian were the backgrounds at that school, and I was one of like three White people at the school. I taught kindergarten there . . . and I had to teach about race, specifically during Black History Month—what it means, the terms Black and White, and why we identify race. Having to teach my students about White and Black relations from the past was a very hard conversation to navigate.

In both scenarios, the hardest part about race to navigate with students was finding age appropriate ways to explain the details of race relations. Fanny also wanted to offer a general perspective as not to teach anything contrary to what their parents had already taught them or inadvertently impose her worldview. Fanny vocalized being a White woman in the community was already a potential barrier to establishing trust and rapport. Her students knew she was not from the community and this factor may have influenced how messages were received from her. However, at the same time, it was important for her to convey a message of community in the classroom. Regardless of their opinions of one another or other races, everyone had to work together, learn together and accept one another. Fanny referred to this in the following:

The hardest part was finding a way to speak about race with students, that is age appropriate and is also a general perspective if that makes sense. Because I don't want to go against students' families or what they learned in their families . . . I don't want them going home saying well my teacher said this about these people. I want to educate my students, but I don't want to overstep. I also know that me being a White person coming into the community is a barrier in a sense and may cause hesitation from some families.

When Fanny considered the number of office referrals at her school site, she was disheartened. She observed disproportionality firsthand. Students were sent to the office for things like physical fights and defiance. But she also believed many African Americans are automatically sent to the office because of preconceived notions. Admittedly though, she has had to send her share of African American students to the office as well. She wrote up referrals when student safety was at risk. She had students throw chairs and pose a danger to themselves and others. Fanny tried to mitigate such behavior with daily check-ins. She met with students

individually and briefly, who have exhibited a pattern of inappropriate behavior. Many of these students were African American. When asked about the type of referrals she saw, Fanny said,

One is like physical fights. Another is very defiant behavior or argumentative behaviors . . . some are like throwing things, some physically violent behavior. Strong emotional behaviors . . . but it's also a lot of stay in here and learn or get out of my class. Of course, they are going to get out of the class.

Fanny grew up in what she characterizes as a “sheltered White suburbia bubble.” She arrived at her school site with very little exposure to other cultures or cultural contexts. Most of her background knowledge comes from her teacher education courses, professional reading, and actual teaching experience. Consequently, she did not always know how to deal with student behaviors and desired to find solutions that were not punitive. She relied a lot on dialogue with her students through the “warm demander” approach—valuing their voice, while having high expectations and a structured environment. Fanny described all this as follows:

Let me go back to a question you asked me . . . another challenge for me is that I grew up in a very sheltered like White suburbia bubble and I did not have a lot of context or exposure to other cultures. So, I feel like I don't have a lot of background . . . it's not something I experienced growing up. Not having that background or experience, I sometimes feel like I don't have a background or context as to how to move forward in dealing with those behaviors. And I feel like so often it's the Black male students in our population, student population, that are identified as like the major behaviors and it's just combated with this punishment instead of trying to mentor and find other ways.

Fanny had an African American male in her class who struggled behaviorally, all last year. His mother was called to the school almost every day to assist with deescalating him. He did not respond well to his last teacher who employed a very in your face, my way or the highway approach. This made the student rebel time and time again. For this reason, she believed some of her colleagues were triggers for students. Knowing this particular student's history, Fanny engaged him differently in her class and did not have the same issues. One way she believed her technique was more effective was she addressed students privately rather than reprimand them in front of their peers. Of this, Fanny said,

In my class alone, I have a student who last year, his mom was at the school every day. He got into with his teacher every day. He was very defiant. He was very like combative. It got into this mode of like I don't care; send me to the office. He also got into a lot of physical altercations with other kids. I knew that. I also knew his family. So, I approached him differently this year . . . But I noticed the people that approach him with this very stern it's this way or the highway type of attitude . . . like these ultimatums are the ones he rebels against.

During her planning and instruction, Fanny did not consciously make decisions for racial groups in her classroom. However, when she reflected on who she made accommodations for, it was some of her African American students. One thing she called out was a group of her Black male students were all good friends. So, during some cooperative projects, unless she felt they would be productive together, she split them up because they tended to play wrestle. Some of her Black male students liked to move around a lot. So, she tried to implement high movement

activities whenever possible to keep them engaged. If her students had a documented disability, then she implemented the accommodations stated in their IEPs. Fanny shared,

I think when I look at the plan in my class, I don't necessarily look at it like my Latino students, my Black students or anything like that. But when I look at who I accommodate, it does end up being some of my Black males . . . A few of my Black males are the ones that are more antsy. They can't really sit still during an activity. So, I try to make it more hands-on or move around because those students have a hard time sitting for a long time.

Fanny advocated for one of her Black male students to get an IEP. When she spoke to him it was obvious he did not fully process the information or know what was going on in the class. He was well below in reading because as a third grader, he did not know all of his letters and sounds. He took one to two minutes to respond to questions and often responded with one-word answers. He also had really low work production and poor retention. So, to get the services he needed and prevent any further gaps in his learning, Fanny made a referral.

That student didn't have an IEP at first, but I fought for him to get one because I can tell in speaking with him that he wasn't fully processing what was going on in the class. So, just trying to help him get the services he needs.

Fanny worked with other teachers in the past who identified their Black males by their disability. They would very rarely speak about the children without attaching their label or their deficit. Fanny did not know if their actions were because they were White, and the students were Black or if it was because they were more seasoned teachers and were not fully educated on people first language. It was her observation and experience that veteran teachers used labels

more than those newer to the profession—who, like her were likely exposed more to tenets of social justice. Fanny believed the labels the teachers used define their expectations of students and their expectations, usually low expectations, which impacted the students' efficacy.

I think every person is different, but like at my old school the other White teachers were Pre-K. So, I got their kids. I don't know if . . . I mean I could see it being because they were White, or I could also see it being because they were veteran teachers. But it was kind of like they identified kids by their labels—that IEP kid or that kid is trouble because he has this . . . not letting that kid be his own person without that label . . . I do believe more veteran teachers identify their kids with a label.

To try to avoid over referral and overidentification, an intervention system was in place at Fanny's school. They employed a multitiered system of support that included in-class intervention, targeted support in academies or the learning lab and the SST. All decisions related to the intervention plan were supposed to be based on progress monitoring data, but she felt some of the African American students who were referred for special education were due to behavior. Lastly, Fanny expressed concern about the issue of labeling:

I did work at another school. It was an emerging charter school and I felt like there was definitely racial undertones or what not . . . the way that they talked about other students, especially Black students. They were immediately identified for IEPs—just because of this behavior or that behavior. I also do feel like possibly at our school [now], some of the students that have gotten IEPs, who have been identified for special ed, could have been related to that too . . . about six years ago, I worked in a high school . . . and the kids knew their labels, knew they were part of that class and it really changed their mentality

about what they could do and what they felt others believed in them or about them. It almost created this threat about them. Other kids were kind of like afraid of them and they just felt like, what's the point? Nobody cares about us.

Commonalities Among Participants

Based on the narrative sessions with participants, four commonalities or major themes were identified.

Color-blindness

All of the participants stated explicitly or alluded to a color-blindness phenomenon in their statements about their experience. Either they approached teaching and learning with no conscious consideration for racial diversity or they perceived their colleagues did not acknowledge race in their discourse with students.

White Privilege

Participants have heard about or have seen the institutional disparities in office referrals, referral procedures for special education assessment, the types and frequency of disability labels attached to African American males and placement of African American males in more restrictive settings. Though participants are aware of the Black boys' plight, participants could not fully understand or articulate the Black experience.

Deficit Thinking

Participants referred to their institution's model for intervention and the process for special education in ways that pointed to systemic ideologies stemming from deficit-thinking. Some even spoke about how their colleagues describe students as their label.

Cultural Competence

In general, participants did not feel comfortable or equipped in mediating issues related to race. Additionally, most participants suggested their colleagues lacked the awareness, sensitivity or capacity to build on the diverse cultural and community norms of their students.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the narratives from the lens of the participants and information about each of their professional contexts to help situate the topic of study. Thematic analysis was used to ascertain commonalities in the experiences and beliefs of the participants to help identify meaningful connections or ideas that might support understanding of the research. Based on the synthesis of codes, I noted four significant themes emerged. This chapter was structured around participant voices, which led to identifying the four major themes of color blindness, White privilege, deficit thinking, and cultural competence to be analyzed and further discussed in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The aim of this study was to elicit perceptions of White teachers, concerning their classroom engagement and influence on the educational experience of African American males with an IEP. The exploration occurred by use of critical narratives, a qualitative design, with six White male and female teachers. The study was guided by two research questions:

1. How do White teachers perceive their teaching practices with African American males receiving specialized instruction?
2. How do White teachers understand the influence of institutional racism on the academic experiences of African American male students?

It is believed by deepening our knowledge about teachers' perceptions of African American male students and how teachers enact their agency in the educational system, we might better understand and address the disparities we see in student outcomes. This concluding chapter provides: an analysis and discussion of the four major themes identified from the teacher narratives; the implications of the study; recommendations for teachers, administrators, and teacher education programs; considerations for future research; my conclusions; and some final thoughts.

Four Major Themes

The findings from this study indicated teachers generally perceive their teaching practices with African American males in special education as being fair and equal. All of the participants contended they treat everyone the same, thus promoting what they believe to be a climate of equality. In their minds, the absence of race eliminated the possibility of discrimination.

This finding links to Atwater (2008), who discussed an ethnographic study where teachers promoted the idea that race did not matter. Teachers in the study stated they did not notice race and believed they treated all students equally. However, over time, stereotypes still emerged. So, not speaking openly about race-related topics does not erase underlying perceptions. This shows colorblindness serves teachers not the students. And when colorblindness emerges, students of color are unable to see themselves as validated.

Schofield (1999) also outlined the behavior of educators who adopt the colorblind ideology. She stated teachers tend to avoid conversations about race altogether because they fear the passion it stirs up. So, teachers choose to promote race does not matter. As a result, students are pathologized and Whiteness is normalized. Unfortunately, espousing the color-blind approach only masks racialization. Doing so denies students a major part of their identity and could likely cause more discord. However, critically reflecting on race issues may help bring about awareness (Schofield, 1999).

Another finding from the current study was teachers' overall efficacy varied depending on their years of experience and in some cases, the types of experience. As newer teachers, they faced a steeper learning curve and their uncertainty influenced classroom discourse and the manner in which they chose to resolve behavioral or academic concerns. As novice teachers, most participants felt less confident about their pedagogy, unsure about how to mitigate behavior and more hesitant to engage students about issues of race. Participants who admitted to sending students to the office, who alluded to colleagues sending students to the office or who struggled with closing achievement gaps with their students of color, said they experienced the most challenges at the beginning of their careers.

These sentiments are supported by Gibson and Dembo (1984). They situated Bandura's theory of efficacy in the construct of education, defining efficacy in terms of teacher efficacy and personal teaching efficacy. Gibson and Dembo (1984) stated a teacher's perception about his or her capabilities is a significant factor in decision-making. If teachers believe they will have very little impact on student performance, he or she may quit attempts to manage student behavior and make recommendations for a different setting. On the contrary, teachers who feel they will have a positive influence on student performance, are more likely to engage their own innovation to try to mediate student issues. Put another way, as a teacher's beliefs in her own capabilities to organize and implement what is needed to achieve a particular goal or set of goals increases, she is less likely to refer students out. If a teacher does not feel they can make an impact, then students are more likely to be referred.

Participants in the current study expressed with time, they generally felt they had acquired the necessary knowledge or at least gained sufficient experience to know how students typically learn. So, they believed as long as they implemented curriculum and the student's accommodations with fidelity, they could optimize teaching and learning, irrespective of race. Participants offered blended learning strategies and helping students build schema through meaningful contexts, as their preferred methods of support. However, despite their efforts, not all students met the mainstream standard. In some cases, teachers still submitted referrals to SSTs. An interesting detail that emerged from these narratives was the majority of participants did not see how students' history and life circumstances play a part in shaping what is meaningful to the learner.

Only a third of participants actually mentioned the influence of race and culture on prior knowledge and learning preferences. Artiles, Trent, and Palmer (2004) outlined this problem and asserted many practitioners fail to consider the influence of cultural norms and the role of the environment on thinking and learning. Howard (2010) echoed race and culture are critical to creating optimal experiences for culturally and linguistically diverse students. He emphasized the importance of acquiring, building and maintaining cultural competence and racial awareness; characteristics that more than half of the participants in this study, admittedly, were still developing.

In general, participants disclosed they lacked exposure to other races and cultures. Consequently, they felt because they were in the outgroup; and as such, they risked saying or doing something offensive to their students of color could broaden the communication gap or damage rapport. Participants also added they were apprehensive about discussing race or race relations with their students out of fear of contradicting the narrative students learn at home or in their communities.

Throughout the narrative sessions, participants personified their skin privileges by expressing they could not relate to the experiences of their students of color. Five out of six participants brought to light they have colleagues who exploited systemic loopholes and leveraged social and cultural constraints, to label African American students with disabilities (SWDs). However, not one participant criticized the system itself. By virtue, however, of how student data is analyzed and compared to determine eligibility in their organization, teachers tend to focus on what students cannot do rather than students' assets. Teachers and IEP teams analyze gaps between the White normative standard and students' skill set. Then the differences are

viewed as deficits and these perceived areas of development are used to profile, label and place students. This cycle of deficit-thinking ultimately reifies stereotypes and low expectations. This is in line with Miller and Harris (2018), who concluded White educators can become so engrossed with the differences they see in students of color that they begin to categorize them as impediments to learning. When teachers perceive these difficulties in students, they may lower their expectations or decrease rigor.

Five of six participants indicated they have worked alongside colleagues who do not share their same compassion for African American male students. Participants have heard teachers at their respective school sites openly state their aversions to Black boys. Five participants also recalled specific conversations where IEP team members wanted students moved out of their classes to more restrictive environments—even off campus. Puchner and Markowitz (2015) noted there are accounts of White teachers who believe Black families generally do not place high value on education. This assumption is partly result of racial undertones in organizational policies and traditional practices. Puchner and Markowitz (2015) also posit negative beliefs held by staff at schools have very serious consequences for students of color. These beliefs are expressed often through implicit racist scripts, which impact teacher expectations and disciplinary reactions, school climate, and the overall experience for African American students. Even though teachers may not intentionally be racist, what they do not understand about the background of their organization or how racialized institutional policies are formed, leave room for rationalization of discriminatory behavior. Therefore, when teachers do not analyze their assumptions, they may act in ways that are harmful without realizing it, such as holding assumptions of low social trust in African American students (Bryk & Schneider, 2003).

Theme 1: Color-blindness

Despite research outlining the dehumanizing impact of colorblindness, it is widely used as the lens for classroom discourse. Color blindness is an aspect of White privilege and is defined as the idea or practice of overlooking race, in the hope it will promote equality and harmony (Atwater, 2008). Educators, and the school systems they uphold, are attempting to be fair in many cases. They try to mitigate social injustices by treating everyone the same. However, treating everyone the same belittles the concerns of all. This claim was supported by Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), where they described this phenomenon as a false sense of equality.

It is believed students are treated equally when race is removed. However, teachers in this situation tend to do so from a deficit perspective, particularly in urban communities. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) also asserted this ideology is often adopted as a result of White teachers avoiding the topic of race. A major concern with avoidance is teachers cannot see racial inequities if they view race as unimportant. Therefore, it was significant to discuss this theme explicitly and in addition to White privilege.

According to Levitan (2016), some people believe equity and equality are the same thing in the educational context. They use the words synonymously. However, Levitan (2016) argued knowing the difference is essential to any efforts to narrow the achievement gap. Equality suggests sameness. Equity means ensuring all students have what they need to experience success in school. Unfortunately, due to many social factors, some students do need more to obtain the high-quality education they deserve. As highlighted in earlier chapters of my research, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and students of color tend to be the furthest behind and most likely to be evaluated for specialized services. Therefore, to promote a more

just education- especially for African American males, teachers should reorient themselves to embrace tenets of color conscious pedagogy.

During each of the narrative sessions, participants were asked to describe how they consider race in their lesson planning, instruction and activities. Five out of six of the participants said they did not consciously consider race in their classroom. They viewed all of their students the same and therefore believed they also treated them all the same. Sometimes, they superficially, confronted race when there were racial tensions present. In some instances, race was an afterthought when an accommodation was needed to mitigate behavior. Milner and Laughter (2014) expressed this was a common theme amongst White teachers. In the case of one of the participants in this study, a colorblind mindset was part of her family's core values and instilled very early. This shaped her thinking growing up and had a lasting impact. Morgan shared,

My parents raised us to be very conscious that there's no difference in race. Jackson stated . . . I don't think that I've ever changed my teaching practices. When I assess myself and my own practices, it's always about how kids are receiving the instruction and whether they've retained it or not and I'll adjust based on that and try other styles to deliver the instruction. But never based on race.

Ramona echoed this finding by highlighting what she sees in her schools. She explained,

I hate to make like that judgment because I don't know what's going through teachers' minds, but in a way, I feel that they see students . . . as everyone is the same.

Marcus described a similar personal experience. Collectively, these examples begin to demonstrate what the literature described as pervasive colorblindness (Cooper, 2002).

Cooper (2002) argued ignoring race in classrooms perpetuates the cycle of oppression in education. In his narrative, Marcus explained his practice the same way many well-intentioned White teachers have—according to critical research. He stated, “I didn’t highlight specific strategies for African Americans versus Latinos. I kind of looked at it like hey, this is what’s good for all kids.”

Like other participants, Fanny did not plan lessons and activities through a lens of racial or cultural sensitivity. However, when she reflected, she noticed accommodations were mostly provided for her Black students. She unintentionally added provisions for her African American students. However, because it was not purposely factored in or based on specific data, it makes it hard to discern the origin and influence. Fanny noted,

I think when I look at the plan in my class, I don’t necessarily look at it like my Latino students, my Black students or anything like that. But when I look at who I accommodate, it does end up being some of my Black males.

Theme 2: White Privilege

White privilege refers to institutional advantages afforded to White people in America (McIntosh, 1992). McIntosh (1992) further contended it is an unspoken and often unconscious power that shapes the mindset of White people. Miller and Harris (2018) posited Whiteness can be a barrier between White teachers and students of color. White teachers often have limited experiences with people of other races, sometimes making them feel ill-equipped to engage their diverse student population about issues of race. In education, it can manifest as colorblindness, shallow multicultural education or deficits-based thinking (Miller & Harris, 2018).

All participants shared personal instances of this phenomenon at work or described how White privilege was enacted by their colleagues. Morgan, for example, stated the following regarding the issue of race

[It] was very prominent in my classroom because I was an ethnic background that was not represented in the neighborhood.

She also shared a specific example in her classroom where students were reading a story about Jackie Robinson from their anthology. The students called out discrimination from the text and made real life connections. About this Morgan said,

I was trying to make a case that we moved past that. But in a way, we definitely hadn't because I was feeling that uncomfortableness from my coworkers, peers . . . for representing something that they had a lot of negative experiences with.

Similarly, Jackson shared he "tried not to get caught up in those conversations [about race and social pressures] because I don't know how to relate to that." He is not alone. Milner and Laughter (2014) said that as student populations become more diverse, White teachers often acknowledge their low efficacy with discussing race with children of color. Ramona shared teachers

Don't take into account [race] . . . maybe it's a cultural expectation or norm and they need to adjust.

Marcus linked the issue to home conditions; in this case living in foster homes.

And because they were in the foster program, there were some challenges. I remember the perception of the special education leader at the school was like hey you know we have these kids. They won't be able to learn. They disobey. They're disobedient.

Marcus stated the school team “had this perception that the kids did not want to be there.”

He further described the scenario in this way,

And yes, there are a lot of challenges that kids go through. Situations can be tough, but unfortunately, we have some people with that mindset. . . . We do have trends in our district where people think like that.

To further illustrate the mindset of some educators, who perpetuate racialization and uphold the prevailing culture, Marcus explained,

A few years back we were able to put together an evaluation, checklist . . . checks and balances for students with disabilities. We would really go through each assessment and look to see was there evidence . . . unfortunately we have not done that for OHI and now people have found a loophole . . . we have to figure out a way to mitigate some of those data trends.

In her narrative session, Tonya noted she has had issues of race with her students. She shared a specific incident that occurred, and candidly agreed it needed to be confronted. So, she sought additional support to relieve the tensions in her class associated with the incident.

I have had issues of race among my students and also involving myself. . . . So, I had some racial slurs said amongst different races in my class. I had to deal with that and bring in support to help deal with that, as well.

While Fanny insisted on going back to the question, saying,

Let me go back to a question you asked me . . . another challenge for me is that I grew up in a very sheltered like White suburbia bubble and I did not have a lot of context or exposure to other cultures. So, I feel like I don’t have a lot of background.

These testimonies and anecdotes from participants offer a clearer picture of interactions that occur between White teachers and students of color. These encounters help to illustrate the far-reaching roots of Whiteness—a mindset Miller and Harris (2018) suggested was held by members of the prevailing culture. Since White teachers make up more than 80% of the teacher workforce this way of thinking could be problematic.

Theme 3: Deficit-thinking

Deficit-thinking could be used to describe a system's tendency to focus on students' limitations rather than identifying and leveraging their strengths (Annamma, Jackson & Morrison, 2017). Over time, agents in the system adopt institutionalized practices to point out gaps between students' home culture and the mainstream culture. Schofield (1986) noted a byproduct of race being removed (i.e., color-blindness) was deficit-thinking. Educators lose sight of the influence of race and culture on students' identity, efficacy, and success. When race is removed, it is expected for everyone to behave in the same way and meet the same mainstream standard.

When students do not conform to the uniform approach at schools or match the academic or behavioral expectations at school, they stand out. Differences are then perceived as deficits (Miller & Harris, 2018). Racialized terms such as “lack of effort” and “defiant” are commonly used to describe students of color who do not meet the mainstream standard. These terms have been used over time to enigmatize the phenomenon of racial profiling in education by masking policies and practices of White privilege that are at the root of the problem (Miller & Harris, 2018).

Some teachers in this study expressed, once they developed trust and rapport with their students, gained a deeper understanding of their students' history and showed compassion toward students, they felt more effective in the classroom. Teachers also stated all of their students were treated fairly and were provided equal access and opportunity at school. Only one alluded to implementation being inspired by students' diversity. The other participants unanimously exalted the notion race needed to be invisible to achieve fairness and equal access.

Also, teachers sometimes have racial biases toward students, which can manifest as low expectations. These beliefs are not usually based on the student's cognition or actual abilities, but rather often related to cultural and linguistic differences. Put more plainly, deficit-thinking can be characterized as a mindset or form of thought that suggests school failure is linked to internal cultural, social, and language differences rather than systemic constraints (Connor et al., 2016; Howard, 2010; Miller & Harris, 2018). Moreover, discourse enacted at home may not be considered acceptable discourse at school, and therefore perceived by teachers as barriers to success (Connor et al., 2016).

During the narrative sessions for this study, participants described their school, district's policy for intervention, and the referral process for special education. Educators primarily used a deficit framework to identify and label students. Participants described practices or systems rooted in the principles of deficit-thinking. About this, Morgan said,

That's why I brought up the whole issue of the behavior, you know. I noticed like in my working now with other teachers. They, you know, they just see it as a lack of discipline and you will hear me say this over and over. Behavior tends to be a very common theme with the cases that I'm thinking about.

Morgan continued to unpack negative teacher perceptions and to call out educator influence on African American males' learning trajectory:

Yeah, I definitely think that, you know, there is a reality here that needs to be addressed. I feel that there are many factors that go into this—that are layered. And I do feel that when you take those layers one by one, they have a profound effect in this case.

Jackson also made this same point. He recalled a case involving an African American student, who was referred to the SST due to a history of academic and behavioral difficulties. Jackson describes how case notes and an intervention plan absent of academic supports, revealed the negative attitude Jackson's predecessor held about the student. Jackson also highlighted since only the behavioral concerns were addressed at that meeting, the student fell further behind. The student's lack of academic progress could be attributed to insufficient and untimely intervention. Jackson said,

He was initially referred for behavioral reasons and not academic ones which surprised me because he's always been low academically all his test scores were low. So, I looked at all the scores from his testing. Then I looked at his cumulative record and I saw all the things that the teachers had put into his cum [cumulative folder] about him. All of that was behavioral. Actually, they never really focused on academics, which surprised me because he's always been very low academically.

Ramona similarly stated,

So, they weren't looking at the big picture of why the behavior might be occurring and then sending a student to the office.

She also described how teachers enact a deficit lens.

I think they [teachers] use classroom observations. So, they're saying like oh it looks like this child is super far behind or he or she is not producing any work in class. So, they're looking at lack of work production to equate with lack of ability and therefore making referrals based on that versus there's something that's happening within the instruction. I feel like they're viewing it as it's not me, it's them. So, therefore the student must need a BII [Behavior Intervention Implementation), or the student must need a referral for sped, or the student must need a more restrictive environment versus what they could be doing in the classroom to support that student.

In Marcus's narrative, he emphasized the assumptions of the literature. Many educators were referring African American students for assessment based on behavior and not cognitive difficulties (Connor et al., 2016; Howard, 2010; Miller & Harris, 2018). About this, he said,

Folks were just kind of you know. If a kid was African American and was assessed, you know unfortunately, we're seeing a lot of ED eligibility [labels] based on behavior. And a lot of that stuff that we were seeing was that kids weren't getting the right interventions to begin with and going directly to special ed and being labeled.

Marcus also outlined the preferred response to supporting students who present with deficits. He believed educators should consider effective intervention prior to special education. He also believed this process would reduce the number of referrals for special education assessment, lower the number of misplaced students in special education programs, and increase the number of students exited from services altogether. The type of progress and rate of progress students make during the intervention period is measured against grade level standards and some

comparisons are made to same age and grade peers along the bell curve, to show parents and staff how far the student is from the average.

Even though Marcus discussed prerequisite steps to special education assessment in his district could very well reduce referrals, his description still emphasized measuring students against the White normative standard as described in the work of Miller and Harris (2018). Marcus explained,

When we see students, who are not at grade level or not making significant progress toward meeting grade level standards, we have to really put out a yellow flag and say hey, wait a minute. Why isn't . . . not near grade level?

Furthermore, he asserted,

The purpose of special education is to support students with disabilities, not to get them to grade level, but to make sure they are progressing toward it. So, if we do see a kiddo in gen ed and not progressing at a rate that is comparable to the developmental age, we put up a yellow flag. This yellow flag means we need to put interventions in place. When those interventions are given with fidelity, for a period of time, but there is no movement or the success rate is not appropriate, then we need to look at if other things are going on.

These statements along with Tonya's experience aligned with Garcia and Ortiz (2004) particularly with respect to the question: "Are we identifying and serving the right students?" Tonya also talked about trying to navigate measure for analyzing the work her students were "doing and the progress [they're] showing." Despite being very well-meaning, she, unfortunately, embodied deficit-thinking when she described the area in which her students were expressing difficulty, ". . .where they're lacking—in particular, his comprehension is struggling."

Theme 4: Cultural Competence

Cultural competence is often conceptualized as a set of behaviors, attitudes, and policies coming together in a system or agency, or among professionals, to allow for effective work in cross-cultural situations (Howard, 2010). It is based on a framework, which consisted of five essential tenets: valuing diversity, conducting ongoing self-assessment, possessing the ability to manage the dynamics of difference, having the willingness to acquire and institutionalize cultural knowledge and demonstrate the ability to adapt to diversity in the cultural contexts of communities the individual serves (Cross, Bazron, Dennis, & Isaacs, 1989; Isaacs & Benjamin, 1991).

In relation to this concern of cultural competence, Morgan's words reflected some of the conditions at work:

I feel like a teacher who looks at a student who maybe has an eligibility of say Autism right, is going to approach that in a very empathetic way. But I'm thinking of kids right now, where there are a lot of factors. There definitely is eligibility qualification, but it's not approached in that way. It's approached more like this is just not the right environment. We need to get them out. . . . I just have more experiences with the [special education] categories ED would fall under. . . . Whereas when I deal with you know my African American males who...and knowing that all behavior is a form of communication right . . . that go and say destroy a [class]room. They're not afforded that . . . I mean it. Just immediately they're crazy. They're not fitting in our mold. They need to go.

Jackson reiterated the same point. He spoke about teachers at his schools expressing negative feelings specifically about African American students. Their perceptions and practices contradicted the recommendations in the research. According to Howard (2010), one primary aspect about developing cultural competence is developing deeper understanding of the complexities of culture. With this cultural knowledge comes more democracy in the learning setting. The diversity students bring to the classroom have equitable value and position in the learning process (Darder, 1991; Howard, 2010). About this, Jackson stated,

There would always be this underlying tone with them [teachers] that African American students almost inherently are different or should be treated differently. There's no wonder that they have this disability or that they have an IEP or special education. I would get that sense from a lot of teachers unfortunately.

Ramona shared her observations of colleagues. She described traditional thinking and rigid practices may lack cultural competence. Davis (1997) asserted culturally competent educators integrate and transform what they know about people into policies, standards and practices. In her account, it appears teachers were imposing their teaching and learning preferences on students. Ramona stated,

I feel that they are more prone to see a student as like hyperactive or their need for like physical movement as a quote, unquote bad thing or not normal thing instead of allowing it to happen . . . I feel like it bothers them because they like that traditional lecture. You sit there for 45 minutes to an hour. So, when their African American students can't do that or have difficulty with that, they could see that as this child is now being defiant to what I need him to do. I don't think that other people are considering, and it may also be

because the area that I service is overall mainly Hispanic and so they don't recognize the cultural differences between ethnic groups and they're not quite ready to deal with those cultural differences.

Marcus similarly recalled,

The perceptions that you hear right . . . like students don't care. Students are just too lazy. Students are too emotional. Those are the things that are perceived out there and I think because we don't provide them interventions, that turns into labels.

As a new teacher, Tonya expressed she was still learning the science of teaching and was still learning how to navigate the organizational system in which she works. She had a few African American students whom she was closely monitoring to determine if additional academic or behavioral support was needed. About one, Tonya stated, "I have another one who is just . . . his attention span is very short. So, I do a lot of reminding and redirecting with him during lessons."

To offer additional examples from her experience, Tonya said,

So, I did have a student who was in speech therapy. He had a bit of a stutter. But the issues I had with him, I'm not sure. It's hard to say if they were directed. It was more behavioral, lack of academic effort. Things like that. I don't know . . . I mean it could be argued that maybe it was directed toward his speech issue. Maybe you know that he felt embarrassed and so he felt like he didn't want to try. So, he had to act out to overcompensate for it. But yeah, I had issues with him. I would pass out assignments and he would crumple it up and throw it on the floor. So, it was mostly behavioral with him; not so much with the speech.

In their work. Miller and Harris (2018) expressed concern for the lack of sociocultural understanding among teachers in urban settings. About this, Fanny reflected on her experiences growing up. She alluded to feeling ill-prepared to mediate issues of race with students of color because she lacked sociocultural experiences.

I didn't have a lot of like context exposure to other cultures. So, I feel like I don't have a background. I've learned it in my work, like my work experience and in my classes and in coursework and stuff. But it is not something that I've experienced growing up.

Due to her lack of cultural experiences, Fanny also noted,

Sometimes I feel like I don't have a background or context as to how to move forward in dealing with those behaviors. And I feel like so often it is the Black male students in our student population that are identified as the major behaviors, but it is just combated with this punishment instead of like mentoring them or finding other ways.

Conclusion

This qualitative study explored White teacher perceptions about African American males with disabilities. The theoretical framework highlighted historical beliefs and current practices that contributed to the over-representation of children of color in special education (Connor et al., 2016). DisCrit acknowledges the privileges that espouse Whiteness and ability. It provides a platform for marginalized populations. With this conceptual lens in mind, four themes were identified: White privilege, colorblindness, deficit-thinking and cultural competence.

Collectively these themes explained a national epidemic in education. Schools and school systems are designed to hinder African American males and disproportionately label them as SWDs. The findings that emerged from the critical narrative sessions described the historical

implications of Whiteness, the institutional cultures that maintain racialization in schools, and how inherent beliefs and traditional practices impact African American students.

All students should be treated fairly and provided equal access and opportunity, but implementation of instructional strategies and lessons should be guided by democratic considerations associated with reinforcing inclusivity and cultural diversity. Ignoring race is not fruitful and actually has harmful effects to students of color. Teachers should understand and use students' cultural backgrounds to create meaningful and effective learning environments. More specifically, classrooms should be set up to include students' cultural histories, language, learning styles and community values. Cultural competence is an ongoing process, which calls for frequent reflection and shifts. Culturally responsive teaching supports the idea that an individual's culture is central to his or her learning. Nowhere is this more important than in the learning of African American males in special education, if racial profiling is to be effectively addressed in schools.

Recommendations

Based on this study, recommendations can be made about teacher education, classroom practices and school leadership with respect to teacher perceptions of African American male students in Special Education. One step educators can take to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how cultural knowledge is acquired, is to engage in frequent and intentional self-reflection about their own implicit biases and discourse patterns, which lead to the racial profiling of African American males, in particular. Howard (2010) insisted self-assessment is fundamental to this work because culture shapes who we are.

Additionally, teacher preparation programs need to enhance offerings and methodology content beyond superficial multicultural courses and diversity rhetoric. Dialogue should take place about the significance of student voice and how it can be leveraged to promote empathy and to tear down social strongholds. Teachers, especially White educators, can disrupt the master narrative perpetuating racial profiling in education by becoming more aware of the circumstances students face, as well as teacher tendencies to reproduce deficit perspectives.

Another important layer of teacher preparation is equipping teachers with the skills to identify and support students who have experienced trauma. Minero (2017) stated teachers may not always be aware of the emotional parts of teaching and can be caught off guard by the pain some of their students carry. Data illustrated more than half of the children in America have endured some form of trauma— abuse, neglect, violence, grief or other tough family circumstances (Minero, 2017). These adverse childhood experiences often present outwardly in youth, in the form of disruptive “acting out” behavior or subtly like failing to make eye contact or tapping a foot. Unfortunately, these signs and symptoms appear identical to some learning, attention, and behavioral disabilities. If teachers are not careful, perceptions and cultural misconceptions could lead to misdiagnosis and missed opportunities to provide students with the correct form of help.

The American Counseling Association reported teachers can also be at risk for vicarious trauma when exposed to large amounts of student trauma (Minero, 2017). In other words, secondary trauma can stem from hearing stories of trauma or witnessing its effects on others. Teachers are prone to have the same or similar biological responses as their students upon hearing of their students’ lives or family needs. Educator behavior could manifest as mental and

physical symptoms. Anger, avoiding certain students, or tardiness are just some ways in which we see it in the workplace. This information further substantiates the significance of teachers engaging in regular self-reflection to examine what might be happening internally that affects their discourse. Implicit bias continues to be a concern but now we know another consideration in research is the impact of vicarious trauma as well. Educators should know what, when, and where to seek the support and guidance they need around classroom practices, self-care, and mental health support (Minero, 2017).

Furthermore, school districts should be intentional about how they look at data. Data can be disaggregated by race, gender and eligibility to progress monitor the health of their organization related to this phenomenon of racial profiling and overrepresentation. Targeted professional development can be expanded to obliterate the persistent disenfranchisement of students of color. Part of the professional development efforts could be geared to include more democratic ways to analyze data, engaging with and deterring teachers' biases when making educational decisions related to governing policies and practices have tended to preserve the racialization and racial profiling of students of color, but in particular, African American males. Simply by using a different lens, data could be analyzed to learn more about racial assets, cultural assets, and student-level strengths.

Along the same lines, schools and school districts should revisit and transform intervention frameworks and practices as not to reproduce the racial profiling of the past. In addition to checking biases during data analysis, educators should also be effective at matching the appropriate intervention to students' needs. Intervention programs should be consistent, dynamic, and fluid in their approach. School teams should employ ongoing reflection and review

of school-wide intervention systems throughout the year as an additional safeguard. On-going teacher development on issues of race and classroom instruction and intervention are critical to creating a more just educational system for all students.

Teacher education programs and school districts can also build teacher capacity around the impact of race and ability on student achievement. By referring to the critical disability framework as a resource, university and school leaders can address the ways in which both racism and ableism are socially constructed and, in many ways, perpetuate oppression in the classroom. Often times they work together, in invisible ways, to limit access to marginalized populations. DisCrit sheds light on the legal and historical aspects of the phenomenon, which might not be widely known to pre-service or novice educators. This is one step I have already begun to introduce in my current context.

Future Research

This study focused on racial profiling in special education, a topic that currently has limited research. However, the number of scholars engaging the intersection of race and dis/ability is growing (Connor et al., 2016). Since identity can be multidimensional, it is important to analyze how these layers integrate, overlap and connect historically.

Moving forward, one area that needs to be addressed is how race and culture are conflated in dis/ability in the educational context. Race is an important topic to study because it helps us see who is facing injustice and how we might work to ameliorate it. However, the steps to mediate the issue involve systemic reform and also cultural understanding and culturally relevant and responsive strategies. A consideration might be to conduct the same study with

African American teachers to see how they perceive their classroom discourse and influence on Black male students with disabilities.

Furthermore, it would be helpful to learn how African American teachers and other teachers of color navigate the same oppressive system. Is there a difference in efficacy and student outcomes when the student and teacher are both people of color? A final area for future research would be to capture student perspectives. How do African American males see classroom discourse? How have they been influenced by their teachers? In what ways do they feel their educational trajectory has been impacted by their teachers?

Epilogue

I believe my positionality positively influenced my ability to get sincere accounts of what is happening in schools, in this large urban school district. Since participants were colleagues in my professional network, I believe they felt comfortable disclosing information. From their lived experiences, deeper insights were gained, which might explain some of the gaps we see in student outcomes. I have been a special educator for over 20 years. My commitment to improving teaching and learning for all members of the school community, particularly students with disabilities, helped me to analyze and interpret data from a place of experiential integrity. My African American heritage also influenced selection of my target group.

My history suggests I come from a long line of activists and social justice advocates. Like them, I am seeking ways to promote equity for all, especially the advancement of Black people who have suffered tremendous hardships for centuries. My experience and personal connection to the target group serves as motivation to continue doing this work, beyond my current dissertation study. I will seek opportunities to further develop this concept of racial profiling in

education through articles, books, and professional development programs that engage the question of racial profiling in education.

There is no question I have personally been changed by the research and findings. I am now more aware of my own beliefs and practices that add to poor outcomes for students—a disappointing realization. In reflecting, I have learned I have implemented practices, upheld policies, and held assumptions about students based on race, class or language differences as well. At least now, I know the opportunity to acknowledge it and the power as an educational leader of social justice to address the problem of racial profiling with the teachers with whom I work. It is my hope this research contributes to efforts to dismantle supremacist views that fuel racial profiling and, in so doing, increases opportunities for African American males in America.

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