ROOTS OF INCLUSION

Educational Disparities Faced by Black Students with Disabilities and Potentially Promising Practices

I. Introduction, Focus, and Methodology

One main focus of Washington's Inclusionary Practices Technical Assistance Network (IPTN) is to address disproportionality and reduce exclusionary practices, especially when it comes to the inclusion of Black students with disabilities. In the next grant cycle, the IPTN will concentrate its efforts to improve student outcomes for this population, as well as students with IDD. Accordingly, we conducted a literature review about the experiences of Black students with disabilities nationally.[1] Using JSTOR, we identified and scanned all entries of potential relevance from 2014 through 2024, and then narrowed the set and reviewed more than 70 relevant academic articles capturing the experiences of Black students with disabilities– from the barriers they face to promising practices. We then included perspectives and data from recent studies and articles from the National Education Association (NEA), Schott Foundation, Center for Education Data and Research (CEDR), and the Institute of Education Sciences (IES). This literature review captures the insights of those studies with the hopes of providing insights for the next grant year cycle and expediting efforts for continuous improvement toward equity.

[1] Washington State's 2023 submission to the U.S. Department of Education can be found here: https://sites.ed.gov/idea/state/washington/

II. Key Findings about Disparities from the Literature

A. Nature of the Disparities:

- Black students with disabilities experience academic and social barriers at school, as do low-income children. Low-income Black children experience the increased impacts of racism in schooling (Tatter, 2019).

- Racial and ethnic disparities exist in disability identification in public schools nationally. For example, Black students, particularly those low-income, are more often identified as eligible for special education in a “subjective disability category,” such as emotional disturbance (sometimes referred to as emotional behavioral disturbance or EBD) and intellectual disability, and are more often segregated in classrooms and away from general education settings than their peers (Morgan, 2020; Alvarez, 2024).

- Black students identified as having disabilities tend to be placed in classrooms with worse academic outcomes, lower academic expectations, and with the stigma of association with the special education system (Schifter, et al., 2019).

- Black students with disabilities’ teachers tend to have less experience in math, English, and science (Tatter, 2019).

- Black students in need of specially designed instruction in certain areas, such as reading in elementary school, are far less likely to receive these supports than their White peers (Morgan & Farkas, 2018).

- Enrollment in special education often results in poorer long-term career and educational opportunities (Bal et al., 2014).

- Being identified as a student receiving special education increases the student’s likelihood of experiencing more severe and frequent disciplinary action (Camera, 2017), especially if they are Black (Alvarez, 2024).

- Black students are often disproportionately underrepresented in special education across various disability conditions except emotional disturbance, intellectual disability, and some learning disabilities (Morgan & Farkas, 2018). Black students with ADHD are overrepresented in the school-to-prison pipeline (Moody, 2016).

- Black girls with disabilities face subjective evaluation and discipline disparities as well. They also experience barriers to re-enrollment and reengagement with school, particularly after dropping out (Morris & Perry, 2017; Hines-Datiri, 2017).

- Black students receiving special education services experience lower rates of high school completion and higher rates of depression, incarceration, and substance misuse (Morgan, 2020).

- These disparities have been exacerbated over the last four years because the special education identification rates spanning the time immediately after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and over the subsequent years suggests that over 8,000 fewer elementary students were identified for special education services during the pandemic in Washington than would have been expected based on prior trends. The data show that Black students were disproportionately impacted by this trend (Theobald et al., 2024.)

B. Drivers and Factors of the Disparities:

- Structural issues in the education system contribute to the underrepresentation and misidentification of Black students with disabilities (Morgan et al., 2015; Morgan et al., 2017).

- Poverty can cause or exacerbate disability, even prenatally, and present life-long barriers to healthcare which can lead to a disproportionate number of Black students being identified as having disabilities (Morgan & Farkas, 2018).

- Implicit biases and systemic racism may lead to disproportionate disciplinary actions against Black students, particularly those with disabilities (Nguyen et al., 2019; Quinn,

2017). Teacher perception can be a driving force behind referrals for special education and discipline (Morgan, 2020; Alvarez, 2024).

- Cultural and behavioral differences between students and school counselors can impact recommendations and support for Black students with disabilities (Shure et al., 2019).
- Students of color already experience greater educational inequities. The additional label of special education– especially where services are not effective enough to outweigh the negative association– leads to racial segregation, stigma, and group misrepresentation for Black students with disabilities (Skiba et al., 2016).
- Educators can read disability-related behavior as intentional misbehavior rather than a disability manifestation and not refer Black students for special education and related services (Weir, 2016; Franks, 2020). They also tend to label Black students as more emotionally disturbed than White students (Sullivan, 2017).
- The intersection of race, disability, and academic achievement incurs a “racial opportunity cost” for Black students who are performing well and/or highly capable (Tabron & Chambers, 2019; Gatlin, & Wilson 2016).
- Over-representation of Black children with ADHD in the school-to-prison pipeline indicates systemic failures in addressing their needs adequately (Adams & Meiners, 2014; Moody, 2016).
- Students of color with disabilities experience better outcomes when they have teachers of color, yet that is often not their experience (Morgan, 2020).
- Teacher training programs need more of a focus on being culturally responsive and humble, while also offering training and support for understanding disability and intersectionality (Ford & Russo, 2016).
- Schools often do not leverage the inherent wisdom and perspective of Black families, yet their engagement is critical to student success and they need greater support for understanding the complicated system of special education, including their rights to challenge placements (Morgan, 2020; Ford & Russo, 2016).

III. Promising Practices from the Literature for Addressing These Disparities

A. Addressing Disproportionality in Special Education

- Implementing universal screening approaches to identify students' needs effectively (Dever et al, 2016).
- Training teachers in the social model of disability (Alvarez, 2024).
- Reframing technical solutions to address systemic inequities in special education (Voulgarides et al., 2017).
- Unpacking the logic of compliance in special education to ensure fair treatment for all students (Morgan, 2020).

B. Culturally Responsive Interventions and Supports

- Implementing culturally responsive positive behavior interventions and supports (Cramer & Bennett, 2015)
- Meeting the mental health needs of Black students through tailored interventions (Cokley et al. 2014).
- Creating frameworks of agency and accountability to resist deficit depictions of Black students (Williams et al., 2020).
- Culturally responsive school leadership to promote inclusivity and understanding (Khalifa et al., 2016).

C. Supporting Academic Success and Equity

- Early-learning pre-kindergarten math and science curricula support language development and mathematical skills to encourage continued engagement and motivation and increased educational opportunities (Goldhaber et al, 2024)
- Enhancing student achievement through optimal resource theory frameworks (Anderson, 2015).
- Overcoming obstacles for African American students with disabilities to achieve academic success by providing expectations, organization, support, and teamwork between the school and family (Gatlin & Wilson, 2016).
- Shifting paradigms to better serve twice-exceptional African-American learners (Newton & Sandoval, 2015; Owens et al., 2016; Tabron & Chambers, 2019).
- Assessing and bridging the teacher quality gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students (Brown, 2015; Goldhaber et al., 2015; Iheoma & Morgan, 2014).

D. Advocating for Equity and Representation

- Advocating for a right to representation of students with disabilities in the Americans with Disabilities Act (Gowdey, 2015).
- Tackling racial opportunity costs in educational experiences to address disparities (Tabron & Chambers, 2019).
- Recruiting more teachers of color, especially using critical race perspectives and equity to address the shortages of Black men in teaching and school psychology positions (Beasley et al., 2015).
- Promoting BIPOC and disabled voice, leadership, and representation in addressing the racial and ethnic disparities in disability identification (Alvarez, 2024).

E. Advancing Systemic Changes for Equity and Inclusion

- Challenging disparities in disability identification through systemic changes (Alvarez, 2024).
- Investigating the relationship between school counselor recommendations and student cultural behavioral styles (Shure et al., 2019).
- Leveraging the expertise and wisdom of Black families, while supporting them in navigating complicated systems of support (Latunde 2016 & 2018; Pearson et al., 2020).
- Exploring issues and interventions for Black students at risk for emotional and behavioral disorders (once the risk of misidentification is addressed) (Kutash et al., 2015).
- Understanding and addressing the school-to-prison pipeline for Black children with ADHD (Adams & Meiners, 2014; Moody, 2016).
- Developing gender-informed policies and practices to address disparities for Black students (Morris & Perry, 2017; Hines-Datiri, 2017).
- Including peers in whole-class interventions to create a positive learning environment that decreases disruptive behavior and improves social skills and prosocial behaviors among all students rather than removing children from their learning environments (IES, 2023).

Conclusion

No education solution exists without a concomitant investment in the communities where students live– from health support to economic opportunities for their families. Children need to exist within “loving systems,” where policymakers, philanthropists, and government partner to improve neighbors and eco-systems, not just schools.[2]

[2] The May 2024 “Love is the Foundation for Life” report funded by the Schott Foundation for Public Education analyzed graduation rates in 15 U.S. School districts and the opportunities and barriers to Black student success, particularly for male-identifying youth. The full report is available here. It does not delve into special education as a system, but it does cover other areas from our literature review, such as health disparities, juvenile justice, and family advocacy: https://schottfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/schott-foundation-2024-black-males-report.pdf

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