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Summary and Highlights

There is a growing awareness among some in the K-12 educational community of the ways in which race and disability are deeply interconnected in our public schools. Many scholars, policymakers, and educators acknowledge the troubling outcomes of marginalized youth of color¹ with disabilities as they are tracked through general and special education classrooms. This brief provides: 1) an introduction to the historical connection between racism and ableism, and 2) an overview of the claims made by a few preeminent education scholars about the inequitable treatment of marginalized students of color and the disproportionate placement of these students into special education classrooms. Finally, this brief identifies some recommended action steps that may lead to greater equity and inclusion for these disabled and marginalized students of color in the U.S. education system.

Disability and Race in United States History

According to some disability studies scholars, the injustices of ableism² and racism have historically been mutually constitutive and enabling (Baynton, 2001; Erevelles and Minear, 2010). According to these scholars, the ascription of disabling characteristics to marginalized populations, such as Black people and nonwhite immigrants, justified their oppressive treatment in the form of exclusionary laws, segregation, and brutal forms of exploitation such as slavery (Baynton, 2001; Nielsen, 2012). In the late 19th and early 20th century, scientific racism led to the harmful social theory and practice of eugenics, which advocated for "selective breeding" (Barnes, 2010; Stubblefield, 2007). The eugenics movement

called for the use of forced sterilization upon populations seen as "unfit" to reproduce, including those with disabilities, Black people, and immigrants of color (Barnes, 2010; Stubblefield, 2007; Nielsen, 2012). These historical periods show how the notion of disability cannot be extricated from its racialized roots and how these ideological frameworks leverage one another as they live on in our current institutions.

¹ In this brief, I use the terms *marginalized youth of color*, *marginalized students of color*, *Black and Brown students or youth*, and *Black and Latino students or youth* interchangeably to signify youth of color who have been underserved, underrepresented, and historically oppressed in U.S. society.

² See Bahl (2020)

Intersectionality of Race and Disability in the U.S. Education System

Drawing from Baynton's work on race and disability, Annamma, Connor and Ferri (2013) note that "a disproportionate number of non-dominant racial, ethnic, and linguistic [students] continue to be referred, labeled and placed in special education, particularly in the categories of learning disability, intellectual disability, and emotional disturbance or behavior disorders." These authors point to the problematic nature of assigning these categories in such significant numbers to Black and Brown students, given that the assignments "rely on the subjective judgment of the school personnel rather than biological facts." (2013) In other words, it would be helpful to examine the disproportionate assignment of Black and Brown students into special education classrooms with awareness of the potential implicit racial biases of staff who may inadvertently reproduce historically-reinforced standards of white supremacy in their subjective pejorative labelling of Black and Brown students³. In addition, Annamma (and others) argue that the factors that determine the definition of disability are themselves subjective and often changing based on social context (Annamma, 2013; Cavendish et al., 2018), necessitating a critical examination of how these categories are used to perpetuate inequality, segregation, and a culture of low expectations for these marginalized students of color.

Recent research has complicated these earlier claims about disproportionate and subjective racialized tracking into special education classrooms, showing instead that Black and Brown students may be less likely to receive necessary special education services, especially if they attend under-resourced schools with majority Black and Latino⁴ students (Morgan et al., 2017; Ramey, 2015). Instead of receiving a legitimate medical determination of need, Black students in particular may be more likely to receive the label of

"unruly," "behaviorally at risk," and "poor in character," leading to hyper-surveillance, excessive discipline and punishment, and criminalization (Ramey, 2015; Annamma, 2018; Migliarini and Annamma, 2019). White students, in contrast, may be referred more often for beneficial behavioral and medical supports, often in better-resourced schools (Ramey, 2015; Annamma, 2013).

Ultimately, the same behaviors that may elicit swift, punitive responses, such as suspension or expulsion, for Black and Brown students may be more likely to be met with care and concern if seen in white students (Annamma, 2018; Migliarini and Annamma, 2019b). This said, many scholars continue to refute the relatively novel claims of the underrepresentation of youth of color in special education classrooms made by Morgan and his colleagues, emphasizing instead the many decades of research indicating that Black and Brown youth are indeed overrepresented in special education (Connor et al., 2019). In doing so, opposing scholars such as Connor, Cavendish, and others are able to highlight the gross failures of the special education system in meeting the needs of these youth of color and closing the longstanding equity and achievement gap (Connor et al., 2019; Cavendish et al., 2018).

Ultimately, these disparities have dire implications for the future of Black and Brown students. As noted by Annamma,

"...links between how a student is positioned racially and how that student is expected to perform have always been clear. Students of color experience lower graduation rates, test scores, and higher rates of discipline and incarceration. Many of these outcomes have been linked to both explicit and implicit bias, which results in low expectations from adults in schools about the abilities of Black and Brown students." (Annamma, 2018)

³Note that the assignment of students to special education classrooms does not automatically signify racially motivated pejorative labelling of the student; rather, it is the implicit assumption that these students are not culturally, behaviorally, or intellectually equipped to handle mainstream education, or put differently, the "presumption of incompetence" that can be attributed to implicit racial biases.

⁴Latino refers to non-white populations with Latin American ancestry. Some references use the term Hispanic interchangeably with Latino. Some instead now prefer to use the gender-neutral term Latinx.

Policy Implications and Actionable Items⁵ :

In order to ensure fully equitable, inclusive, and empowering education for marginalized students of color in the United States, teachers and school administration could start with the following steps:

1. Commit to an understanding of the severe ramifications of perpetuating what Subini Annamma calls “the pedagogy of pathology” (2018), wherein Black and Brown disabled students are hyper-surveilled, hyper-labeled and hyper-punished by teachers and school staff, due to prevailing implicit biases and legacies of racism and ableism (Migliarini and Annamma, 2019a). Intensive training in antiracism and anti-ableism in pedagogy could be instituted in order to start dismantling these highly damaging biases.
2. Implement an explicitly antiracist and anti-ableist set of standards in the classroom that would center the experiences of Black and Brown disabled students, including expanding curriculum to incorporate the histories and triumphs of disabled leaders of color fighting for racial justice and disability justice, such as Harriet Tubman, Fannie Lou Hammer, and Brad Lomax (Annamma, 2018; Thomson, 2018).
3. Resist the low standards of engagement, excessive surveillance, and lack of creativity that dominate special education classrooms occupied disproportionately by disabled students of color (Annamma, 2018). Encourage creativity, movement, and joy among disabled students of color, knowing that implicit biases are constantly working to undermine race and disability equity in classrooms. Center and honor students of color – pay attention and celebrate their personal and family histories, their stories, and their unique struggles.

“...the injustices of ableism and racism have historically been mutually constitutive and enabling.”

4. Solidarity - Annamma (2018) advocates for teachers to demonstrate solidarity with the struggles of Black and Brown disabled students in their K-12 journeys. Disabled students of color are full of resourceful brilliance and are able to resist the many ways in which they are marginalized and oppressed, both in and out of U.S. classrooms (Annamma, 2018). For multiply-marginalized⁶ disabled students, knowing that teachers, counselors, and school staff are supportive and sympathetic of their personal journeys, and that they are authentically seen, heard, and valued, can make all of the difference as we start to actively dismantle systems of racism and ableism in our schools with the aim of achieving true inclusion for all students.

⁵Adapted from Annamma, Connor and Ferri (2013) and Annamma (2018).

⁶See Bahl (2020) for discussion of this term.

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