Title

“LOOK AT US NOW! From Overlooked to Overachieving”: An Analysis of K-12 Educational Experiences and College Decision-making among Black Students with Dis/abilities

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Publication Date

2024

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

“LOOK AT US NOW! From Overlooked to Overachieving”: An Analysis of K-12 Educational Experiences and College Decision-making among Black Students with Dis/abilities

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Education

by

Cymone Mack

2024

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION:

"LOOK AT US NOW! From Overlooked to Overachieving":

An Analysis of K-12 Educational Experiences and College Decision-making among Black Students with Dis/abilities

by

Cymone Mack

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2024

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This study highlights the influence of K-12 classroom experiences on college decision-making processes among Black students with dis/abilities. Within this study, participants articulated how positive and negative educational experiences shaped the choice to pursue higher education, as well as factors prioritized during their decision-making journey.

This study had two primary objectives, first to move beyond research emphasizing the underrepresentation of Black students with dis/abilities in higher education and instead illuminate their presence. Second, and more critically, to amplify the voices of racially marginalized students with dis/abilities, whose perspectives are frequently overlooked in discussions surrounding K-12 experiences and college decision-making.

This study systematically analyzes narratives from nine current college students—one graduate and eight undergraduates—enrolled in the University of California (UC) system and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). This study elucidates four key findings: (1) a negative correlation was identified between the interactions of White staff, teachers, administrators and Black dis/abled students in the context of students' classroom experiences; (2) a positive correlation emerged from interactions among Black dis/abled students and Black educators, (3) the pursuit of higher education was an act of resistance for many participants; and (4) participants described the factors influencing their college decision-making as not only individualized, but also contextualized, and abstract in nature.

This study is significant as it provides insight into the K-12 and college going journey among Black dis/abled students while also proposing solutions to further assist Black dis/abled students throughout their K-12 journey and college decision-making process. Several recommendations such as cultural competence and sensitivity training along with holistic assessments and an altogether revamped K-12 curriculum are proposed to encourage teachers, staff, school administrators, and parents to rectify, redress, and redesign K-12 environments to better suit the needs of Black students with dis/abilities.

Key Words: college decision-making process, critical race theory, disability critical race studies, learning dis/ability, developmental dis/ability

The dissertation of Cymone Mack is approved.

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2024

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my friends, family, and most of all, to every Black individual who has a dream. To my friends and family, thank you for pushing me and for believing in me even when it was hard for me to see the light at the end of the tunnel. Your support is what got me across the finish line, and I am forever grateful. To every Black boy and every Black girl who has a dream, know that the sky is the limit, and nothing *is unattainable! Do all that you set out to do because you are more than capable!*

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

"I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord"- Jeremiah 29:11.

First and foremost I want to give thanks and honor to God for blessing me with such an incredible opportunity to pursue a Doctoral degree at the University of California, Los Angeles. Though this journey has been nothing short of an uphill battle, I am grateful for each and every individual that God saw fit to strategically place along my path.

I want to start by saying thank you to my friends, who are truly more like family. From the "Shady 7" to my UCLA Family to my UC Berkeley Family to my middle school family. To the Shady 7: Kiana, Daniela, Shan, Ashton, Tim, Bernard, you all were the support system I never knew I needed. I'm grateful to not only be able to call you all colleagues but also family! Thank you for not only pushing me academically but also for helping me find the balance between life and academia. To my UCLA family, I would not be where I am without you all. So, a special shout out to Lila, Passion, Zeyna, Brianna, Kourtney, Harmeet, Kathy, Lynette, Lena, Xiong, Michael, and Cameron. I also want to say thank you to my Berkeley family for the constant support and for never allowing me to quit, no matter how many times the thought crossed my mind: Janai, Nerelyn, Oluchi, Ana, Taylor, Judith, and Kristin- thank you! Lastly, to my View Park middle school family, Ryane, and Genieva, thank you for lending me a shoulder to cry on when things got difficult and for remaining consistent throughout this entire journey.

To my amazing, brilliant, patient, compassionate committee members: I'm sure I could write you all another dissertation expressing my gratitude, but this dissertation will have to suffice. Dr. Teranishi, thank you for all of your guidance and insight throughout this entire process. You truly have been an amazing addition to the committee and I will forever be appreciative of your willingness to serve on my committee. Dr. Anesi, from our periodic check-in

meetings to your all-around thoughtfulness, I am truly appreciative of you and the capacity in which you served on my committee, thank you. Dr. Harris thank you for always carving out space for me to merely exist! I've appreciated your patience, support, feedback, and altogether presence throughout this entire process. Last but not least- DR. ALLEN! Thank you for being the greatest advisor a student could ever ask for. Thank you for seeing in me – things that I did not see in myself. Thank you for taking a chance on me and for choosing to function as my advisor for the past four years. Your support, check-in calls/ meetings, and continuous belief in me were more than I could've ever asked for. Thank you all!

I'd also like to say thank you to my immediate and biological family for their constant support throughout this journey. But a special thank you to my aunt Gail, for allowing me the space to process school and life -out loud.

Last but not least, I want to say thank you to the Gates Millennium Foundation. It is an honor to be able to call myself a Gates Millennium Scholar and I am most grateful for the significant contributions your organization has made towards academic achievements. To graduate from Undergrad, Grad school, and now a Doctoral program – debt-free – is truly a blessing. Thank you!

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Reynoso, N. M., Foxx, K., Tadesse, A., & **Mack, C.** (2022). Patching the Pipeline: Reimagining the Roadmap to Higher Education. In *African American Leadership and Mentoring Through Purpose, Preparation, and Preceptors* (pp. 266-289). Book Chapter. IGI Global.

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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

Background

Existing literature surrounding student demographics and enrollment in higher education has found that rates of enrollment among racial minorities and other marginalized students have increased over the years (Amechi, 2023; Baker et al., 2018; Flores & Park, 2013; Perna, 2000). More specifically Hanson (2024) found from 1976 to 2010, the enrollment of Black/African American students in higher education increased by 125.5%. Similarly, from 1999 to 2012, the "proportion of college undergraduates with disabilities increased from approximately 6% to 11%" (Briefing Paper: Reauthorization of HEA, 2015, para. 1). The rates of enrollment among Black/African American students and students with dis/abilities in higher education are considerably lower than non-Black/African American students and non-dis/abled students (College Enrollment Rates, 2024; Goodwin, 2024). Despite this, I posit that when discussing patterns of matriculation, it is imperative to acknowledge the increased enrollment rates and presence of Black/African American students with dis/abilities in spaces of higher education.

The current study expands the literature on higher education matriculation, which often emphasizes the indisputable fact racial minorities and other marginalized groups have been and remain underrepresented in higher education (Ashkenas et al., 2017; Baum et al., 2013; Carter, 2018; Ellsworth et al., 2022; Monarrez & Washington, 2020, Teranishi et al., 2004). I argue for the contribution of the under-exploration of marginalized students in such spaces. By shifting the focus from "underrepresentation" in higher education to illuminating the experiences of marginalized students who have successfully matriculated into spaces of higher education, the current study supplies an alternative perspective to the conversation around matriculation.

Finally, it creates room to explore the factors that contribute to successful matriculation rates among particular groups. Thus, this study centers on the narratives of Black dis/abled students in higher education.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to disentangle the K-12 educational experiences of Black students with learning dis/abilities and their college decision-making process. Though it is necessary to recognize the inherent diversity apparent within students' K-12 educational experiences and the individualized nature of the college decision-making process, I argue it is still important to examine the broader ramifications of K-12 education on college decision-making, particularly when accounting for Black dis/abled students. I addressed this inquiry by posing the following research questions.

Research Questions

1. How do Black students with learning dis/abilities describe their educational experiences throughout K-12 education?
2. How do K-12 experiences inform Black students with learning dis/abilities college decision-making process?

Study Significance

Minority students, particularly Black, dis/abled, and more specifically Black dis/abled students, remain underrepresented in institutions of higher education (Allen et al., 2018; Ford & Whiting, 2016; Karkouti, 2016). However, a growing body of research has expanded upon the collegiate experiences of Black dis/abled students (Banks & Simone, 2016; Brown & Brodio, 2020; Jacklin et al., 2007). Although literature often separates the experiences of Black students from students with dis/ability, I posit that a distinction inherently results in the under-exploration

of the voices of Black dis/abled students in higher education. Thus, this study aims to add to the literary canon concerning the relationship between Black dis/abled students and higher education by primarily highlighting the fact that Black dis/abled students are indeed in pursuit of collegiate degrees. By prioritizing the voices of Black students with learning dis/abilities, this study seeks to understand two phenomena: (a) how Black students with learning dis/abilities describe their K-12 educational experiences and (b) the extent to which their K-12 experiences informed their college decision-making process (See Appendix A).

Beginning with an examination of the historical relationship Black and dis/abled students have shared with systems of education in the past, I anticipate it will provide greater insight into the contemporary experiences of Black dis/abled students within K-12 education. I hope such insight will elucidate the degree to which K-12 experiences inform students' college decision-making processes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Review of Literature on the Educational Experiences and College Decision-making among Black Students with Dis/abilities

A historical overview of the relationship between Black students, disability models, and systems of education lays the foundation for exploring their K-12 educational experiences and college decision-making processes. The following literature review begins by tracing seismic shifts in access to education for Black and dis/abled students, intersecting Black civil rights evolution with Americans with Disabilities Act legislation. Monumental policies highlight how the United States (U.S.) education system was shaped and redressed over a hundred-year period between 1890 and 1990. Dis/ability and race are then operationalized and historically mapped in the literature within the context of education. This review concludes with the factors and theoretical underpinnings which contribute to the college decision-making process for Black students with dis/abilities in the U.S. education system. Unpacking these contributing factors extends how dis/ability and race are often operationalized within existing education literature, which is how I will address the above research questions.

Higher Education: Early Legal Beginnings

Although present-day collegiate institutions appear to have *diverse* student populations, *diversity* and *accessibility* were never included in the initial inception of collegiate institutions. In fact, since its early beginnings, institutions of higher education have only aimed to educate White Protestant men to prepare them for clergy roles (Thelin, 2019; Thelin et al., 2003). As institutions chose to only educate white Protestant males, all other groups were inherently excluded from higher education. It took *years* of policy reformation and establishment before access to

education *for all* would be allowed. The following section historically traces what access to (higher) education resembled for Black and dis/abled students for many years.

In the book *A History of American Higher Education*, Thelin (2019) articulated how often institutions of higher education would explicitly discriminate against individuals on account of gender and race. Thelin observed how certain institutions enacted discriminatory practices and "restrictions facing women and African Americans" exclusively (p. 12). In discussing admissions practices pertaining to women, Thelin (2019) noted, "Women were excluded from the colleges by statute. There are occasional accounts of young women who were considered for entrance examinations [but] there would never have been any intention to allow the woman to matriculate" (p.58). Traditional institutions of higher education were merely performative in their practices of equity. In other words, many institutions only sought to appear *equitable* by allowing both men and women the opportunity to *submit* an entrance exam. Yet, the reality was, institutions of higher education operated autonomously, which ultimately afforded them the discretion to implement discriminatory admissions policies in their admissions process. Such policies usually resulted in the denial of admissions among women and African American students. While institutions could freely and explicitly exclude groups from accessing education, I argue federal legislation contributed to the institutional complacency of continued exclusionary practices.

In certain instances, legislation deemed discrimination acceptable, but it did not provide particular groups protection against discriminatory practices. Noltemeyer et al. (2012) and Clewell and Anderson (1995) recorded that African Americans were denied access to education because of state laws. Noltemeyer et al. found, "the 1800s ushered in an increasing number of state laws that made it illegal for Black students to be taught to read and write in the South"

(p.5). Similarly, Clewell and Anderson found, "before the abolition of slavery…by 1840, nearly every slave state had a statute forbidding slave instruction" (p.56). Furthermore, as outlined in the 1847 Virginia Criminal Code, "any white person who shall assemble with slaves [or] free negroes… for the purpose of instructing them to read or write shall be punished by confinement in the jail" (Library of Congress, n.d.). Naturally, institutions of higher education aligned with state-wide statutes which forbade African Americans from being educated.

As women and African Americans experienced continual exclusion from institutions of higher education, individuals with dis/abilities were also met with similar issues of exclusion. When discussing issues of power and the role of labeling individuals as having a dis/ability, Anesi refers to dis/ability as being used to legally impose limitations on rights and power dynamics (2016). In other words, labeling individuals as dis/abled has given room to individuals in positions of power to limit the rights of the individuals being categorized. In the context of education, for individuals with dis/abilities, a limitation on rights was equivalent to discrimination and total exclusion. Pryor (2007) and Dray (2008) found, "up until the mid-twentieth century, individuals with disabilities were excluded from mainstream society [and] it was not until the 1900s that schools began to open their doors to individuals with disabilities" (p.744). Despite being allowed to enter education's doors in the 1900s, individuals with dis/abilities continued to be ostracized. Dolmage (2017) noted "disability has always been constructed as the inverse or opposite of higher education [where] higher education has needed to create a series of versions of 'lower education' to justify its work" (p3). It was assumed because individuals with disabilities were deemed *abnormal*, they would "disrupt mainstream society" (Dray, 2008, p.744). Hence, the initial exclusion of individuals with dis/abilities from spaces of education. As time progressed, individuals with dis/abilities were educated in separate

spaces altogether from their non-disabled counterparts (Dolmage, 2017). To further illustrate the educational exclusion Black and dis/abled students experienced, the following section highlights monumental court cases and policies that ultimately shaped and reformed the U.S. education system. The following section will begin with an overview of the Second Morrill Act of 1890.

Second Morrill Act of 1890

To understand the significance of the Second Morrill Act of 1890, it is important to first make note of the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862. The Morrill Act of 1862 was enacted as an attempt to expand access to higher education for all. The Morrill Act of 1862 established the federal government's role in providing states with public land to create colleges (i.e., land grant institutions) emphasizing agricultural and mechanical arts. Despite the effort to expand access to education, since the Morrill Act was established during a period when several southern states maintained racial discrimination policies, Black students were not allowed to enroll in the newly established land grant institutions (Duemer, 2007; Lee & Keys, 2013; Rose, 2017). Hence, the enactment of the Second Morrill Act of 1890.

Not only did the Second Morrill Act play a significant role in establishing Black Land Grant institutions, it also expanded access to higher education for Black students themselves. The Second Morrill Act "mandated that funds for education be distributed annually on a "just and equitable" basis to African Americans in seventeen states (Harper et al., 2009, p.395; Steiner, 2022). However, as several states acquired funding to support these Black Land Grant institutions further, U.S. legislation underwent a major shift in access, equity, and equality. After getting past the hurdle of obtaining land and funding to educate Black students, shortly after the Second Morrill Act of 1890 was passed, U.S. legislation constitutionalized the clause *separate but equal*. In 1896, institutions, businesses, and other entities were legally justified in making

claims which would state- providing *separate* facilities for individuals on the basis of race was considered *equal*.

Plessy V Ferguson - 1896

In the years leading up to 1896, particular groups (i.e., African Americans and dis/abled individuals) were explicitly discriminated against when attempting to access education and other institutions. Legislation shifted from outright denying particular groups institutional admissions, to later justifying the implementation of separate educational institutions altogether. In the 1896 court case, *Plessy v Ferguson*, the United States upheld the constitutionality of racial segregation under the 'separate but equal' doctrine (*Plessy v. Ferguson,* 2022*)*.

The *Plessy v Ferguson* court case came about after an incident Homer Plessy experienced while on a Louisiana train. In his travel, Homer Plessy was asked to vacate a Whites only section and in taking the case to trial, Plessy's lawyer argued separate cars "was a violation of the thirteenth and fourteenth amendments (Kelley, 2010, p.79). However, the Supreme Court then ruled that separate but equal facilities were constitutional, and subsequently, educational institutions were impacted because Black/African American students were mandated to receive education in separate facilities from their non-Black/African American counterparts (Hoffer, 2012). Nonetheless, due to clear disparities such as differences in the quality of education received and discrepancies in educational facilities, the clause of separate institutions on the basis of race was later recognized as unequal. Thus, after arguing *separate* was not *equal* in 1954, the courts overturned the initial ruling of *Plessy v Ferguson*.

Brown v Board of Education of Topeka - 1954

Oliver Brown, the plaintiff in *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka*, argued while the implementation of the ruling in Plessy v Ferguson was separate but equal, schools for African

American children were never considered equal. The means of segregating children based on race was inherently unequal, especially in a classroom setting (*Brown v Board of Education*, 2009). In fact, Rothstein (2014) argued, African Americans were never afforded access to the same resources as their counterparts during the period of *Plessy v Ferguson*. As a result of not having access to adequate resources and not truly being categorized as equal, Brown argued, separation alone did not guarantee a similar quality of education for all children.

Following the final verdict in the *Brown v Board of Education* case, the ruling of separate but equal was overturned and later deemed unconstitutional. This ruling was pivotal in that it marked the onset of a period in which increased enrollment and admissions for African Americans in institutions of higher education was potentially achievable. However, as the separate but equal clause was overturned in 1954, issues of racism and ableism persisted in the U.S. Although the fight for dis/ability rights had been ongoing since the 1930s, the 1960s is when most scholars argue the Dis/ability Rights Movement gained traction.

Disability Rights Movement 1930s-1960s

The history of dis/ability rights activism in America dates back to the 1930s (Rembis et al., 2018). Rembis et al. begin by expressing the fact that there were several phases of disability rights activism throughout the 1930s. As time progressed and the fight for dis/ability rights persisted, during the period nearing the 1960's, the disability rights movement underwent another shift. Wright documented, "The civil rights movement inspired individuals with disabilities to fight against segregation and for full inclusion under the law" (2023, para. 2). Thus, although the fight for dis/ability rights began well before the civil rights era, many activists and scholars attribute a large part of the shaping of the dis/ability rights movements to the Civil Rights Movement. As a result, the 1960s ushered in the fight for equity and rights among

marginalized groups in various spaces, leading to the establishment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Higher Education: The Fight for Equity After the Civil Rights Movement

Civil Rights Act of 1964

In their article Civil Rights in Education: Law and History, the FindLaw Staff state, "Title IV of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination in public schools and educational programs based on race, color, religion, sex or national origin" (2023, para. 1). The Civil Rights Act was intended to protect individuals against discrimination based on their presenting identities in the workforce, public facilities, and spaces of education. The enactment of the Civil Rights Act served as a monumental legislation, as it aimed to remove the historical barriers which previously prevented minorities from accessing the workplace, public facilities, and education.

However, while most legislative policies protecting against discrimination are well intended, the execution of such policies tends to fall short. In order for the individuals being protected to fully reap the benefits of these legislations, there is more that is required than the simple *enactment* of a policy. Hence, following the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, President Lyndon B Johnson issued Executive Order 11246 in 1965. This order required action to ensure equal opportunities for marginalized groups in various sectors.

Executive Order 11246 of 1965

As previously stated, though various legislative policies aimed to provide protections and additional opportunities for marginalized groups, these policies never required the implementation of actionable measures to ensure additional protections. Thus, in 1965, President Lyndon B Johnson ushered in Executive Order 11246. Due to the historical exclusion of People of Color and Black students, especially in institutions of higher education, the new order noted,

"special systematic corrective actions were required to compensate for the accumulated disadvantage" (Allen et al., 2002, p.443). Where the "accumulated disadvantage" refers to exclusionary practices apparent within education. The *order* also "called for vigorous, proactive steps – affirmative action- to broaden and increase access to previously excluded, underrepresented groups" (Allen et al., 2002, p.443). As opposed to instituting a policy that would emptily state People of Color could access certain spaces, Order 11246 required entities to take measures to increase access actively and in the case of education, to increase enrollment. Thus, Affirmative Action Programs and other Equal Opportunity Programs were created.

As progress for Black/African Americans began to expand, the fact remained, legislation did not account for the dis/abled body. In fact, persons with dis/abilities were not *specifically* accounted for in any of the previously mentioned acts or policies. It was not until 1971 that legislation would explicitly account for individuals with dis/abilities. Although this act did not consider all forms of dis/ability, the Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children was created in 1971 to advocate for the education rights of *all* children and, more specifically, children with mental retardation.

Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania of 1971

The *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children (PARC) versus the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* was the first lawsuit to reverse and establish the right to education for children with mental retardation. Prior to the 1971 lawsuit, the state of Pennsylvania allowed public schools to deny services to children with intellectual dis/abilities (Frost & Kersten, 2011; Ross, 2022).

PARC v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania was monumental, as it not only protected the rights to education for all children, but it specified the rights to education for children with

mental retardation. The final ruling states, "[T]he more desirable place for these disabled students was in an educational setting with their non-disabled peers, not in segregated classrooms, programs, or schools" (Santos & Kupczynski, 2019, p.4). Thus, individuals with dis/abilities were allotted the opportunity to be educated in the same spaces as their non dis/abled peers. Following the *PARC v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* ruling, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 expanded upon the protections allotted to persons with dis/abilities.

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 - Section 504

Although the ruling in *PARC v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* pushed for shared education spaces between dis/abled and non-dis/abled students, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 - Section 504 was the first clause to mention anti-discrimination policies as it pertains to persons with dis/abilities beyond the scope of education. It is important to note- prior to its passing in 1973, the Rehabilitation Act received two vetoes from President Nixon, once in October 1972 and again in March 1973. Nixon "believed the legislation, though well intended would lead to unintended consequences both for government and people with disabilities it was intended to assist" (Williams, 2016, para. 2). So, following the initiatives taken by dis/ability rights activists, in 1973, the Rehabilitation Act was finally passed. The Act spoke specifically to the antidiscrimination policies set in place to protect persons with dis/abilities in spaces of education, employment, public services, etc. (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006). Preceding the enactment of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, in 1975, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was passed. As the Rehabilitation Act protected individuals with dis/abilities from anti-discrimination policies in education, employment, and public services, the IDEA Act "codified the right of all American children to a free and appropriate education regardless of disability status" (Ross, 2022, p.1).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1975

In tandem with the progress and redress *PARC v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* made along with the passing of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Individuals with Disabilities Act of 1975 provided additional services and resources to individuals with dis/abilities in spaces of education. Various scholars have argued that before 1975, individuals with dis/abilities were either excluded from spaces of education altogether or did not receive appropriate educational accommodations. So much so that Ross outlines how IDEA "requires all public schools that accept federal funds to provide education that meets the needs of students with disabilities at the public expense" (Ross, 2022, p.1). In other words, the intention behind establishing IDEA was to afford individuals with dis/abilities an equal opportunity at education while also ensuring equity in their educational experience by catering to their individual needs.

As U.S. legislation slowly began to expand its protections for persons with dis/abilities, African Americans experienced a reversal of progress, specifically in the realm of education. The 1978 *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* case attacked the one initiative aimed to afford African Americans an "equal opportunity" to pursue higher education. The final ruling in the *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* case challenged the notion and progress that affirmative action was designed to provide marginalized students (Allen et al., 2018).

Regents of the University of California v Bakke - 1978

The *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978) came as a response to the University of California Davis's (UC Davis) Medical Schools admissions process. A student by the name of Bakke argued he was "wrongfully denied admission" to UC Davis Medical School as he believed "less academically qualified Black and other applicants" were selected over him. In response to his claim, the courts ruled that race could not be the *sole* determining factor in

admissions decisions, but instead, it could be *one* of the factors considered in admissions processes (Allen & Jewell, 2002, p.250).

Contrary to Bakke's argument, "Black and other applicants" were not granted admission to institutions *solely* on the basis of race. However, one of the major benefits of Affirmative Action programs was, they required institutions to give racial minority students a *fair* chance at educational opportunities, which included the consideration of race in admissions. As Affirmative Action programs were under attack (in cases such as *Grutter v. Bollinger* and *Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin;* Allen et al., 2018), additional protections for persons with dis/abilities were being redressed, and new legislation came about. This led to the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990.

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990

The most notable change from the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 to the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 was the amendment pertaining to the types of institutions required to abide by the new legislation. The Rehabilitation Act explicitly states institutions receiving federal assistance and/or funding could not exclude or discriminate against persons with dis/abilities (Your Rights under 504, 2006; Wegner, 1984). However, the ADA of 1990 declared under no circumstance could an institution discriminate against persons with dis/abilities. In fact, the ADA was so specific that the Act was divided into five specific titles: Employment, State and Local Government Activities, Public Transportation, Public Accommodations, and Telecommunications Relay Services (Guide to Disability Rights Law, 2020). So, while the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 initially provided individuals with dis/abilities protection against discrimination from *federally funded entities*, the ADA of 1990 ensured no institution, under any circumstance, could discriminate against individuals with dis/abilities.

Bridge Across Literature and Policy

To contextualize the contemporary K-12 educational experiences of Black students with learning dis/abilities and examine their college decision-making processes, I thought it necessary to begin with a historical overview of U.S. legislation and educational policy. Hence, the above literature review began by documenting the following court cases and policies: the Second Morrill Act, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Civil Rights Act, Executive Order 11246, *PARC v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania*, the Rehabilitation Act, *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, and the Americans with Disabilities Act. The Second Morrill Act of 1890 expanded access to higher education for Black students, as it not only generated governmental funding for higher education institutions to be created for Black students, but it also provided funding for Black Land Grant institutions.

Plessy v. Ferguson 1896 marked a moment in history where Black students were forced to receive an education in separate facilities from their counterparts. As a result of the final ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, Powell (2021) notes, Black students did not have access to similar *qualities* of education, nor did they have access to the same resources as their counterparts. This ultimately placed them at a disadvantage academically. However, in *Brown v. Board of Education* 1954, the original ruling of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which constitutionalized the clause *separate but equal*, was overturned. Under the law, institutions could no longer *legally* justify educating Black and other marginalized students in separate spaces from their counterparts.

Following *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, the Civil Rights Act was passed a decade later. It declared that institutions of education, for example, could not discriminate against individuals on account of identity. Despite instituting a policy prohibiting discrimination, institutions were not required to take actionable steps in redressing past discriminatory policies.

Thus, following the passing of the Civil Rights Acts, Executive Order 11246 of 1965 required institutions to take actionable measures to ensure access and opportunities for Black and other minority students. While *Brown v. Board of Education* and the Civil Rights Act encouraged inclusion in spaces of education and provided protections to individuals on account of race, religion, and sex, individuals with dis/abilities were not officially considered in the law or any other policy prior to 1971. In fact, there were no laws providing *explicit* protections for individuals with dis/abilities within education until 1971. In 1971, the *PARC v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* case ruled individuals with dis/abilities and, more specifically, those with mental retardation, could no longer be discriminated against in classroom settings. Thus, leading up to 1971, individuals with dis/abilities were forced to receive an education in institutions separate from individuals without dis/abilities (Ferri & Connor, 2005).

In 1973, the Rehabilitation Act was passed to extend certain protections to individuals with dis/abilities. In doing so, the Act specified, institutions receiving federal funding/assistance were prohibited from discriminating against individuals with dis/abilities.

However, amidst the progress on behalf of both Black and dis/abled individuals, in 1978, the *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* ruling challenged that very progress by questioning the validity of Affirmative Action programs. It ultimately posed a threat to the opportunities afforded to Black students in accessing higher education. Before 1965, institutions and other workplace environments were not required to take any actionable steps to provide opportunities for Black and other racial minorities. However, beginning in 1965, under

Executive Order 11246, concrete action was required of institutions and the workplace to ensure additional opportunities were afforded to Black and other racial minorities. However, the final ruling in the Regents of the University of California v. Bakke case which stated, institutions

could not solely consider race in admissions decisions, not only challenged the progress being made but also spearheaded the reversal of Affirmative Action programs. Succeeding the final ruling of *PARC v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* and the amendment of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the ADA was passed in 1990. The ADA granted additional protections and opportunities to individuals with dis/abilities in several areas: employment, public services, public accommodations and services by private entities, miscellaneous provisions and telegraphs, telephones, and radiotelegraphs. This goes without saying, the following court rulings and final legislations contribute to the understanding of how Black and Dis/abled students experienced education within the U.S.

Despite numerous laws and legislation passed to protect the rights of Black and dis/abled individuals, it is necessary to consider how these policies impacted the experiences of Black dis/abled students in spaces of education. On the one hand, as there were particular moments when Black students were being afforded access to education (i.e., Executive Order 11246*),* persons with dis/abilities were not (i.e., the first two vetoes of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973). On the other hand, as individuals with dis/abilities were being afforded expanded access to education (i.e., *PARC v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania of 1971),* the opportunities afforded to Black students were being challenged (i.e., *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke)*. Given the historical account of the relationship between Black and dis/abled students and systems of education, the following section outlines the ways in which dis/ability is often conceptualized and operationalized both in society and within literature.

Models of Dis/ability

In the book *Disability in Higher Education: A Social Justice Approach,* Evans et al. (2017) noted the following when describing the concept of *dis/ability models*. They stated,

"disability models are closer to paradigms than they are theories in that they present a certain way of viewing disability based on people's perceptions, beliefs, and experiences…" (p.54). As various models of dis/ability have emerged, each model has been used as a means to categorize the preconceived beliefs and perceptions individuals have held and currently hold towards dis/ability. Although the following is not the *only* existing models of dis/ability, in their article, "Conceptualizing disability: Three models of disability," Olkin (2022) noted three overarching models of dis/ability which point to society's viewpoints towards dis/ability: Moral, Medical, and Social. In essence, the Moral, Medical, and Social Models of Dis/ability encapsulate society's sentiments towards dis/ability and their understanding or lack thereof. Thus, the following section begins by outlining the three most prominent models of dis/ability. The section then introduces the Social Justice Model of Dis/ability.

As previously stated, the Moral Model of Disability is one of the three overarching models in which society tends to perceive disability. The Moral Model posits the dis/ability or impairment label is directly correlated with an individual's character. In their article "Models of Disability: Types and Definitions", Langtree states the moral model of dis/ability is "the attitude that people are morally responsible for their own dis/ability" (2022, para. 9). This means for individuals who subscribe to the Moral Model, the belief is that any dis/ability or impairment of an individual is a direct result of the individual's doing. The Moral Model of Disability contends that individuals who have a dis/ability or an impairment are reaping the consequences of their actions (often defined as poor choices made by the individual).

Similar to the Moral Model, the Medical Model of Disability also places the onus on the individual for their dis/ability and/or impairment. However, the key difference is the Medical Model asserts a biological perspective. The Medical Model of Disability emerged during the

mid-1800s. Evans et al. (2017) defined the Medical Model as "a medical problem that resides in the individual…a defect or failure of a bodily system and as such is inherently abnormal and pathological" (p.57). It includes Minaire's (1992) linear explanation of the Medical Model where "disabilities are caused by diseases, illness, traumas, or internal biological conditions" (1992, p.58). Wasserman and Aas also explain how the Medical Model asserts "the limitations faced by people with disabilities…result primarily from their bodily differences" (2022; para.4). Essentially, the Medical Model of Disability asserts that disability is solely linked to biology. And because disability is viewed as *abnormal* through a medical lens, disability and the individual are often viewed as needing to be *cured* or *fixed*. As the Medical Model places the limitations experienced on the individual themself due to differences in biology, it fails to consider how society and systemic issues contribute to dis/abling and impairing individuals. Hence, the origins of the Social Model emphasize the role society plays in impairing an individual.

According to Evans et al. (2017), the Social Model of Disability originated in the United Kingdom. They note, "…proponents of the Social Model argue that disability is located in the social environment…" (p.62). Thus, contrary to the Moral and Medical Models which argue dis/ability is the fault of the individual and is strictly biological, the Social Model argues, society is responsible for further impairing individuals. Langtree notes, "although a person's disability poses some limitations in an able-bodied society, oftentimes the surrounding society and environment are more limiting than the disability itself" (2022, para. 13). In a society where the infrastructure is often designed in an inaccessible manner or with able-bodied individuals in mind, a lack of consideration and accommodations further limits individuals who are *differently abled.* Similarly, in academic settings, when individuals do not have access to the proper

supports which would allow them to perform in the classroom (i.e., Sign Language interpreters, accessible formatting, extended time, etc.), it becomes clear how the design of the classroom environments becomes limiting.

Unlike the Moral, Medical, and Social Models of Disability, the Social Justice Model of dis/ability accounts for systems of power and their influence on an individual's experience. Evans et al. note the Social Justice Model "borrowed ideas from separate civil rights, women's and New Left Movements of the 1960s and 1970s" (p.71). They go on to express:

[T]hree major components unique to the social justice model of disability are its focus on privilege and oppression as major influences in shaping how disability is viewed and experienced in U.S. society, its emphasis on diversity and intersectionality of the disabled individuals' experiences, roles and identities, and its educational mission. (p.72) The Social Justice Model of Disability considers the intersectional experiences of individuals by examining the impacts oppression and power structures have on dis/abled individuals. Thus, as opposed to solely examining dis/ability through a lens of individuality (i.e., the Moral Model), biology (i.e., the Medical Model), or only by considering the role society contributes to further impairing an individual (i.e., the Social Model), the Social Justice Model examines how power and oppression operate simultaneously. Thus, I argue in order to fully encapsulate the academic experiences of Black dis/abled students, it is necessary to consider a Social Justice Model framework, as it leaves room to examine the influence systems of power and oppression have on Black dis/abled student experiences.

The following section discusses previous accounts of how Black, dis/abled, and Black dis/abled students conceptualize K-12 education.

K-12 Education: An Overview of Black and dis/abled students' Educational Experiences

Taking into consideration the aforementioned educational policies and the relationship Black and dis/abled students have historically shared with systems of education, the following section describes how Black and dis/abled students experience K-12 education in the present day. While the following may be applicable to many, students in spaces of education, authors such as Douglas et al. (2008), Ezikwelu (2020), Jackson (2018), and Ojuola (2020), found that the K-12 experiences of Black students are often dictated and informed by: (a) teacher and counselors perceptions, biases, and predispositions towards students and (b) campus climate. The following two areas are explored in the subsequent section.

Black Students and K-12 Education

In discussing K-12 classroom experiences among Black students, Douglas et al. (2008) first described the demographic statistics of teachers within the U.S. education system. They found "almost 87% of the United States elementary and secondary teachers are White, while only 8% of those teachers are Black" (p.48). The incorporation of these statistics offers a glimpse into the influential factors on how Black students perceive their classroom experiences. These factors are of scholarly interest in light of the demographics of the individuals responsible for educating them. As their study emphasized, "The impact of White teachers on the Academic Achievement of Black Students," Douglas et al. (2008) and others (i.e., Jackson, 2018) found, a huge contributor to Black student experiences was teachers' predispositions and beliefs toward their students. In sum, Douglas et al. characterized their findings into four categories: respect, stereotypes, administrators' call to check themselves, and the environment. What was significant was that they found Black students often expressed feeling treated "differently" by their teachers and by other students, given "their cultural background" (p.60). Since students were made aware

of such differences, students would often articulate how their teachers (and peers') attitudes towards them contributed to their overarching classroom experience. Douglas et al. summarized their findings with the following statement, "the classroom environment should be free of biases and prejudices of all types" (p.60). These findings reveal how prejudice and biases persist in K-12 classrooms to the present day, ultimately impeding upon Black students' experiences in the classroom.

When examining how Black students describe their K-12 experiences, some researchers have emphasized the significance campus climate has on student experiences. In their article "Institutional Racism and Campus Climate: Struggles for Sense of Belonging and Academic Success Among Black Students in K-12 Public Schools," Ezikwelu (2020) found *racial climate* contributed heavily to students' experiences. They noted:

> "positive campus racial climate is vital for the success of Black students (Smith, 2004), and the negative campus racial climate remains detrimental to the academic success of students of color in predominantly White schools (Bush & Bush, 2010; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Worthington et al., 2008)" (p.3).

In other words, when Black students experienced a positive campus climate, they reported positive/successful experiences in K-12 education. Conversely, when Black students reported negative campus climates, students would often report negative K-12 experiences as well. As teacher perceptions and campus climates contribute to Black students' K-12 experiences, it is important also to consider the elements contributing to dis/abled students' K-12 experiences. Thus, the following section will detail K-12 experiences from the perspectives of dis/abled students.

Dis/abled Students and K-12 Education

Much like the documented influence teacher perceptions and campus climate have on the K-12 experiences of Black students, various scholars have found, students with dis/abilities share similar experiences. Factors such as teacher perceptions, inclusion and exclusion, and peer perceptions tend to contribute most to dis/abled students' K-12 experiences. In their piece, "'If They Could See Me Now!!:' College Students Reflect on Their Experiences as Special Education Students in the K-12 System," Kellner and Freden (2014) found, teachers' preconceived notions about students' abilities were what contributed most to students' classroom experiences (Daniels et al., 2012). Essentially, Keller and Freden found, students placed in special education classes were not only perceived as different but in being placed in separate, less challenging classes, it often confirmed and perpetuated the ideal that individuals with dis/abilities were "less able" (2014). Thus, teachers' perceptions of students with dis/abilities as either less able or fully able, either contributed negatively or positively to their K-12 experience.

Similar to the impact *campus climate* has on K-12 Black students, students with dis/abilities have expressed how notions of inclusion and exclusion contribute to their experiences. The more included students felt in their K-12 environment, the more positive experiences they reported having. Conversely, in instances where students reported feeling excluded in K-12 spaces, particularly among their peers, they often reported negative experiences (Balogun, 2014; Daniels et al., 2012). In addition to examining key components of Black and dis/abled students' K-12 education, various authors have explored the intersectional experiences of Black dis/abled students in K-12 education.

Intersectional Experiences of Black Dis/abled Students in K-12 Education

As the previous sections outlined the impacts of teachers' perceptions, student perceptions, school climate, inclusivity, and exclusion on Black and disabled students' K-12 experiences, other authors have examined how Black dis/abled students describe their K-12 journey. Where classroom placement, projected perceptions, and self-perception were found to be the most significant factors contributing to Black dis/abled students' K-12 educational experiences.

In their article "These People Are Never Going to Stop Labeling Me: Educational Experiences of African American Male Students Labeled with Learning Disabilities," Banks (2017) asserted that the placement of Black dis/abled students in *self-contained* vs. *inclusive* classrooms contributed heavily to the ways in which students expressed their K-12 education experiences. To the extent that certain students began to view self-contained classrooms as either "a necessary benefit" or as "stigmatizing" (p. 100). For some students, separate classroom placement led to advantageous academic outcomes, resulting in a heightened sense of ostracization and stigma within the K-12 sphere. In addition to the effects of classroom placement, Holmes found, the perceptions often projected onto students' capabilities contributed heavily to their experiences. Holmes states the "limitations imposed upon them required them to prove themselves…[resulting in] students success both in-school and postschool" (2018, p.38). In essence, as students were made privy to teachers' perceptions regarding their academic abilities, students were often met with the involuntary need to *prove* themselves further. This ultimately impacted their classroom performance and degree of engagement with teachers and the larger classroom setting.

In understanding the greatest impacts on their K-12 experiences, Holmes (2018) and

Banks (2017) advanced scholarly literature by exploring the intersectional K-12 experiences of Black dis/abled students. In addition to campus climate, peer perceptions, inclusivity, and exclusivity, Holmes and Banks highlighted the extent to which teacher perceptions and classroom placement impact Black dis/abled students' K-12 experiences. Such areas contribute to students' perceptions about self, which ultimately inform their academic performance and educational/classroom experiences. With these factors as the background, the following section foregrounds the college decision-making process.

College Decision-Making

Fujita defines college decision-making as "encompass[ing] the decision of whether or not to attend college" (2021, p.1). Current literature on college decision-making often emphasizes the role the following factors play in students' decision-making processes, though they may vary: finances, parental guidance, and geography (Kinzie et al., 2004). Essentially, when making the decision to attend college, students tend to consider (a) the financial cost associated with attending college, (b) the influence of parents, and (c) geography and relative proximity of institutions to home. However, authors such as Holladay (2019), Perna (2000), and McDonough et al. (1997) found that such factors tend to vary and slightly deviate for college decision-making among students of color. I argue- such factors vary even further when accounting for Black dis/abled students, as the factors for this population consider throughout their decision-making process yields more nuance and specificity in ways that *traditional college choice models* do not (Holladay, 2019).

Various authors found that Black students tend to consider the following factors when making the decision to go to college: perceived benefits, barriers to college admissions, familial influence, familiarity, etc. (Hines et al., 2020; Horvat, 1996; Smith, 2008). Among students with

dis/abilities, the following factors are often considered: quality of disability-related services, parental support, and cost of attendance (Bettencourt et al., 2022; Fujita, 2021). Needless to say, given their multidimensionality, the factors often considered by Black and dis/abled students not only become narrower but also assume a particular level of specificity. For example, in the context of familiarity, Horvat found "that the students chose colleges where they could see themselves in the form of other students like themselves who already attend the college" (1996, p.1). In the context of services, Bettencourt et al. found for students with dis/abilities, dis/ability-related support alone on college campuses was not enough, as the *quality* of support is most important to students.

The college decision-making process is by no means a one-size-fits-all process. Many researchers have found concrete factors such as geography, cost, programs, parental influence, etc., to be most influential in the students' decision-making process (Chapman, 1981; Hossler et al., 1999; Long, 2003; Workman, 2015), while other scholars have found that among Black and dis/abled students, the approach to college decision-making differs vastly. Students often prioritize their identity throughout the entirety of their process, ultimately contributing to the factors they consider when deciding to attend college. Factors such as familiarity, relatability with other students on campus, and the quality of support are considered paramount.

Considering the following literature, the next section delineates the two theoretical frameworks guiding this study: Critical Race Theory and Disability Critical Race Theory.

Theoretical Frameworks

Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) allow researchers to deeply investigate Black students with learning dis/abilities, K-12 educational experiences, and college decision-making processes. CRT provides a lens to examine how issues

of racism are made apparent within spaces of education and allows insight into the extent to which racism impacts student educational experiences and college decision-making processes. Similarly, DisCrit provides an intersectional lens to evaluate how racism and ableism coexist in educational spaces and the extent to which they inform students' K-12 experiences and college decision-making processes. Both theories are used in tandem to dissect the educational experiences of the demographic under investigation.

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

The early beginnings of Critical Race Theory are rooted in Critical Legal Studies. CRT emerged as several scholars such as Derrick Bell, Charles Lawrence, Richard Delgado, Lani Guinier, and Kimberlè Crenshaw catechized the legal upholding of racially based oppression (Taylor et al., 2023). Recognizing how the law often adopted a *colorblind* approach, Critical Legal Scholars developed CRT to examine how race and racism were deeply entrenched in societal structures and shaped both individual and collective experiences. Although CRT does not subscribe to one set of principles, core tenets of the theory have emerged (Harris, 2015). The following section outlines six core tenets of CRT: (a) *the permanence of racism*, (b) *revisionist history*, (c) *intersectionality*, (d) *interest convergence*, (e) *whiteness as property*, and (f) *structural determinism* (Crenshaw 2001; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Harris, 2015; Magdeleno, 2021; Taylor et al., 2023).

The *permanence of racism* is defined as the acceptance of issues of racism which are intrinsically threaded within the foundation of America. In other words, issues of racism and white supremacy have become so normalized, they are easy to overlook due to their covert saturation in various structures (i.e., education, work, housing, etc.). Some examples include: students of color being underrepresented in institutions of higher education; People of Color

reaching the glass ceiling in the workplace (i.e., when upward mobility for minorities is capped after a certain point); or making the process of home ownership difficult for People of Color (i.e., denying individuals loan requests, or simply making certain areas unaffordable altogether). For White people, the advantages remain unrecognizable to them, whereas the disadvantages are more apparent to the non-white constituents. The second tenet, *revisionist history*, challenges the idea that historical accounts and stories about People of Color should continue being told by White people. Given that People of Color have distinct experiences separate from those of White people, it is essential that these experiences are captured and shared from their own perspective. Thus, revisionist history suggests, stories and experiences of People of Color be told largely by People of Color.

The third core tenet of CRT is *intersectionality.* Although complex in definition, upon initially coining the framework, Kimberlé Crenshaw denoted "the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women's employment experiences" (1991, p.1244). Crenshaw explained, in order capture the employment experiences of Black women fully and accurately, it was necessary to examine the conflation of sexism and racism, as opposed to viewing the two as separate. As the concept began to evolve, Crenshaw expanded on the framework by dissecting the ways racism and sexism intersected to contribute to structural, political, and representational aspects of violence against women of color. In addition to explaining the different levels of violence experienced against women of color, intersectionality aids in examining how systems of hegemony and power interact with one another to inform individual and group experiences. As the initial coining of the framework interrogated the work experiences of Black women at the crux of racism and sexism, it has since been used to examine the complex experiences of individuals and groups. In doing so,

intersectionality considers how power and oppression contribute to the experiences of individuals and groups, specifically considering the conflation of multiple marginalizing identities.

The fourth tenet, *interest convergence,* coined by Derrick Bell, refers to the instance(s) in which decision-making that leads to the advancement of People of Color is solely contingent upon White people benefitting as much, if not more. As Taylor et al. wrote, interest convergence is rooted in Marxist theory, which states, "the bourgeoisie will tolerate advances for the proletariat if these advances benefit the bourgeoisie even more" (2023, p.4). Essentially, interest convergence is the idea that People of Color are restricted to advancement in society if and only if their white counterparts stand to gain benefits in return.

The remaining two tenets of Critical Race Theory are whiteness as property and structural determinism. *Whiteness as property* is the process by which whiteness translates into both tangible and intangible forms of property and privilege (Harris, 1993). Harris described whiteness as property as a means of legitimating white racial dominance through the materiality of property; through slavery, segregation, and the naturalization of whiteness and its connection to citizenship. Here, whiteness is viewed as and can manifest itself in the form of privilege. Lastly, *structural determinism*, as defined by Delgado and Stefancic is "the idea that our system, by reason of structure and vocabulary, cannot redress certain types of wrong" (2001, p.26). In other words, larger structures (i.e., social and political) determine social outcomes. As a result, certain issues within society cannot be redressed if the structure or system itself does not intend to redress them.

Since its initial inception, several scholars have integrated CRT into various disciplines. For purposes of this study, I also introduce CRT's application in education. CRT is used to critically examine the inequities present within the realm of education through a racialized lens

by explicitly concentrating on educational opportunities, school climate, representation, and pedagogy (Ledesma & Calderon, 2015; Taylor et al., 2009). Researchers Ladson-Billings, Tate, and Solórzano are the innovators in applying CRT to K-12 and higher education, respectively (Ledesma & Calderon, 2015). In their seminal piece "Toward a Critical Race Theory in Education," Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) first expanded the tenets of CRT to the realm of education. They begin by first discussing the permeance of racism in the U.S. While some argue, children who experience poverty, regardless of race, "do worse in school," Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) contend, the combined impacts of poverty and school conditions contribute to the performance of African American students, ultimately lending itself to both institutional and structural forms of racism. In other words, due to systemic racism, poverty, and institutional differences in schooling, African American students continue to be placed at a disadvantage in comparison to their White counterparts. In explaining the role of *revisionist history* within the context of education, Ladson-Billings and Tate explained the necessity of incorporating the voices of People of Color to gain a "complete analysis of the educational system" (p.58). To fully encapsulate the perspectives and experiences of People of Color within the academy, it is necessary to create opportunities for them to share their experiences.

Lastly, Ladson-Billings and Tate described the correlation between Whiteness and Property and education. Cheryl Harris' explication of *whiteness as property* includes four property functions of whiteness: (a) rights of disposition, (b) rights to use and enjoyment, (c) reputation and status property, and (d) the absolute right to exclude (Harris, 1993). Ladson-Billings and Tate extrapolated that whiteness is often deemed alienable or transferable in the instance that students conform to what is considered *white-norms*. This means that when students of color conform to what is considered white norms, the *right to disposition* becomes

transferable. The *rights to use and enjoyment* become apparent in education when assessing the stark differences in the use of school property. Ladson-Billings and Tate referenced Kozol's examination of New York City's schools where "white schools served 825 students (K-6)" versus Black schools, which consisted of "1500 children to fill a space intended for 1,000 children" (p.59). So, while White students were allowed to enjoy the fullness of their campuses without concerns of overcrowding, the schools catered to serving Black students were over-populated.

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) explained further that when certain aspects of education do not uphold or maintain whiteness, it impedes upon *reputation and status property*. They gave the example of bilingual education, where learning a second language as a "non-white form for second language learning, has lower status" (p.60). This means, as schools teach languages outside of English or any other European language, the languages being taught are often viewed as having lower status. Lastly, *the absolute right to exclude* can be traced to the exclusionary history of most institutions of education. Ladson-Billings and Tate exclaimed, the right to exclude has manifested itself similarly, with subtle differences across time. Initially, Black students and other students of color were excluded from spaces of education altogether, but as policies changed, students of color were later placed in separate facilities of education from their counterparts. Although Black students and other students of color may not currently receive education in separate facilities, there remain stark differences in current scholastic mapping (i.e., gifted programs, honors programs, Special Education classes, etc.). Needless to say, though times have changed, the means of excluding Black students and other students of color in spaces of education remains the same.

Given the theoretical landscape of CRT, along with its application in education, this study considers the following tenets: *the permeance of race* and *revisionist history*. By

incorporating the permanence of racism, I aim to examine how the issues of entrenched racism within America and education contribute to students' K-12 educational experiences and their college decision-making processes. Revisionist history provides space for Black dis/abled students to expand upon their academic and personal journeys and what leads them to pursue higher education. As various scholars have incorporated CRT into different disciplines, this study also focuses on the incorporation of CRT within Disability Studies.

Disability Critical Race Theory

Just as CRT has found its place in education, it has also been interwoven in Disability Studies. Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) "examine[s] the connections between the interdependent constructions of race and dis/ability" (Annamma et al., 2013, p.1). DisCrit considers how race and ability, though independent of each other, inform one another, whether that be in spaces of education, the law, the workplace, etc. Similar to CRT, DisCrit was established upon seven tenets. The first tenet speaks to the ways in which racism and ableism operate in tandem with one another to maintain and prioritize what is considered normal or notions of normalcy. The second tenet values the idea of multidimensional/multifaceted identities and the intersections of multiple identities. The third tenet calls attention to the social constructions of race and ability while recognizing the impacts race and ability have on individuals and their experiences. The fourth tenet privileges and prioritizes the stories and voices of historically disenfranchised groups, particularly those whose voices are often left out of research. The fifth tenet examines the legal parameters, the historical implications of race and ability, and how those implications aid in further oppressing and denying the rights of both People of Color as well as individuals with disabilities. The remaining two tenets include an examination of how the labeling of persons with disabilities is a direct result of interest

convergence relative to whiteness as property and is a call to action for activism and support from all persons (Annamma et al., 2013, p.11).

Of its seven tenets, the second and fourth principles are the most relevant to the current study. The second tenet, which values multidimensionality, illuminates the intersectional experiences of Black students with dis/abilities. Rather than separating their identities and focusing on either race *or* dis/ability, this study examines the interconnectedness of both the racialized and dis/abled experiences of students in tandem. Similar to the tenet of revisionist history within CRT, tenet four of DisCrit privileges the voices of individuals who have been historically disenfranchised, and in this case this study prioritizes the voices of Black dis/abled students.

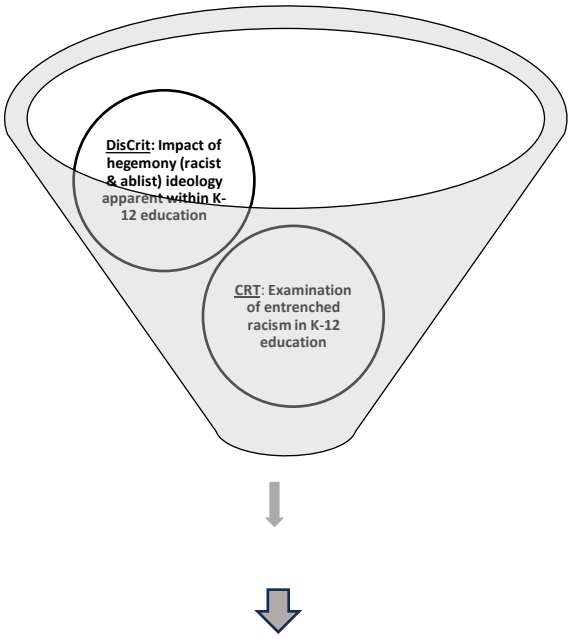
Connection Between Theories

The purpose of this study was to shift away from reproducing literature which solely focuses on how Black and dis/abled students are underrepresented in higher education and instead illuminate the experiences of students who have successfully matriculated into institutions of higher education. CRT and DisCrit independently allow researchers to explore the narratives of Black students with learning dis/abilities by considering their K-12 educational journeys and college decision-making processes from their own perspective. Critical Race Theory serves as a tool to critique systems and institutions of power while bearing in mind the role and impacts race/racism has on students' educational experiences. Disability Critical Race Theory encourages an interrogation of how issues of racism and ableism impede upon the lived experiences of individuals with dis/abilities. Since systems and institutions were established without regard for individuals with dis/abilities, Disability Critical Race Theory asserts the need to consider the dis/abled body in various spaces.

As depicted in Figure 1, both CRT and DisCrit inform my analysis of students' K-12 experiences and their college decision-making process, as it allows researchers to consider how racism and ableism inform both areas. This study utilizes CRT to investigate how issues of racism inform K-12 educational experiences and students' college decision-making process.

Figure 1

Interconnectedness of Theoretical Frameworks



Additionally, CRT will be used to emphasize the tenet of revisionist history, whereby the voices and experiences of Black dis/abled students are prioritized. DisCrit examines how the multidimensionality of identity informs students' K-12 educational experiences and college decision-making process. By utilizing CRT and DisCrit to deepen the current understanding of students' K-12 educational experiences and college decision-making processes, I anticipate I will illuminate the experiences of Black dis/abled students who are in pursuit of collegiate degrees.

In seeking clarity on how racism and ableism impact students' K-12 experiences and their college decision-making process, it is necessary to note how CRT and DisCrit were used to inform the methods utilized in this study. Since CRT provides a lens to analyze the impact of race/racism on experiences and DisCrit provides an intersectional lens to analyze the impact of race/racism/ableism on experiences, it was necessary to incorporate firsthand interviews and target a particular audience.

Problem Statement

While existing literature on student matriculation into higher education duly recognizes the growing presence of minority students in such settings, prevailing discourse often emphasizes their persistent underrepresentation (Ashkenas et al., 2017; Baum et al., 2013; Ellsworth et al., 2022; Monarrez & Washington, 2020). Although there is extant literature on Black students' matriculation into higher education (Allen et al., 2018; Hughes, 1987) and separately dis/abled students' matriculation into higher education (Barnes, 2006; Evans et al., 2017), scant literature has explored Black dis/abled students matriculation into higher education (Banks, 2019; Waitoller, 2020).

The fixation on the narratives around minority underrepresentation inadvertently overlooks the experiences and voices of Black dis/abled students who have successfully matriculated into spaces of higher education. For instance, the path of matriculation among Black dis/abled students into higher education is discussed far less within literature than in literature surrounding underrepresentation. Therefore, in an effort to reframe the discourse surrounding matriculation, the primary objective of this study was to amplify the narratives of Black dis/abled students as they discuss their K-12 educational experiences and how such experiences influenced their college decision-making process.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to provide both historical and literary context behind race and dis/ability within the context of education. This chapter began by discussing the early beginnings of higher education. It then provided an overview of policy and legislation within the U.S., particularly in educational spaces, concerning Black and dis/abled students, although often separate from one another. Although the final rulings in court cases such as Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) and the Regents of the University of California v. Bakke (1978) temporarily hindered educational access and progress for Black students especially, the following Acts were later enacted with the aims of providing protections and greater access to education for Black and Dis/abled folks: the Second Morrill Act (1890), Brown v Board of Education of Topeka (1954), Civil Rights Act (1964), Executive Order 11246 (1965), PARC V Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (1971), Rehabilitation Act – Section 504 (1973), IDEA (1975), Americans with Disabilities Act (1990). Succeeding the mention of various court cases and policy enactments, this section then goes on to introduce various Models of Dis/ability, often employed to conceptualize dis/ability within society and in spaces of education. In addition to the Models of Dis/ability discussed, this section goes on to provide an overview of the K-12 experiences described by Black and dis/abled students in tandem with their college choice-process as often articulated within current literature. Given the parallels that I draw between the incessant natures of race(ism), ableism, and education, this chapter concluded by introducing the theoretical frameworks grounding the current study: Critical Race Theory and Disability Critical Race Theory.

Chapter 3: RESEARCH METHODS & METHODOLOGY

Purpose for Qualitative Methods & Methodological Approach

Grossoehme defined qualitative research as "the systematic collection, organization, and interpretation of textual material derived from talk or conversation. It is used in the exploration of meanings of social phenomena as experienced by individuals themselves, in their natural context" (2014, para. 1). Similarly, Gog refers to qualitative methods as a method used to investigate and understand an individual's interpretation regarding their social world (2015). In other words, qualitative research records individualized experiences by way of conversation in the context of an individual's natural and social world while finding meaning behind a larger social phenomenon. In illustrating the intent behind qualitative research, Akyildiz and Ahmed wrote: "--qualitative research focuses on understanding complex human issues rather than generalizing the results to large populations" (2021, p.3). Qualitative research is not meant to be generalized but instead used to interpret the context of one's social world. To better understand Black dis/abled students' experiences in K-12 education coupled with their college decision-making processes, qualitative methods were employed to carry out this study. The execution of this study consisted of in-depth interviews. Such that in-depth interviews were used to elicit the firsthand narratives of participants.

Study Components

Study Sites

The inclusion of the subsequent study sites were primarily driven by the institutions that participants were currently attending. As opposed to pre-selecting study sites to recruit from, which I initially aimed to do, I sought recruitment at various institutions across the U.S by reaching out to various campus departments in addition to circulating my recruitment flyer on

social media. In doing so, this study was then opened up to current college students across the U.S. However as a result of the participants who expressed interest and also met all of the outlined eligibility requirements, this study consisted of seven sites, five of which were a part of the University of California (UC) school system, and the remaining two which were Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). The following UC institutions were included in this study: UC Berkeley, UC Davis, UC Irvine, UC Los Angeles (UCLA), and UC Merced. The following HBCUs were included in this study: Morehouse College and Howard University. Considering this study's targeted population, the following section outlines the student demographics on each campus.

UC Berkeley. The University of California Berkeley, located in Northern California, has an undergraduate population of 33,078 students. 35% of the undergraduate population report having some form of dis/ability, and 3.8% of the undergraduate population identify as Black/African American.

UC Davis. The University of California Davis, located in Northern California, with an undergraduate population of over 31,000 students, 27% of their student population identify as Underrepresented Minorities (URM). Though Asian and Pacific Islanders comprise a vast majority of the student population (at 58%), Black/African American students comprise 4.7% of the undergraduate population.

UC Irvine. The University of California Irvine, located in Southern California, has an undergraduate population of 35,937 students, where 28.8% of their student population identify as URM. Though a vast majority of the student population at UC Irvine identify as Asian and Pacific Islander (at 37%), Black/African American students comprise 2% of the student

population. Across their undergraduate population, 10% of its students report having some form of a dis/ability.

UCLA. The University of California Los Angeles, located in Southern California has an undergraduate population of 33,040 students. While Asian and Pacific Islanders comprise a majority of the student population (at 35%), Black/African American students comprise 6% of the student population. Of the undergraduate population, 15% of students report having some form of a dis/ability.

UC Merced. The University of California Merced, located in Central California, has an undergraduate population size of 8,321 students. As Hispanic students comprise a vast majority of the student population (at 58%), Black/African American students comprise 4% of the undergraduate population.

Morehouse College. Morehouse College, an all-male HBCU, is located in the Southern region of the U.S. in Atlanta, GA. With an undergraduate population size of 2,567, Black/African Americans comprise 98% of the student population.

Howard University. Howard University, an HBCU located in the Eastern Region of the U.S. in Washington, D.C., is "ranked among the highest producers of Black professionals." With an undergraduate population size of 9,689 students, Black/African American students comprise 78% of the student population.

Recruitment

As this study sought to recruit an arguably specific group of participants, I relied heavily on two methods of recruitment: first, cold emailing, second, snowball sampling. During the initial phases of participant recruitment, I contacted specific departments, clubs, and other campus organizations at several colleges and universities across the U.S. I began by distributing

my recruitment flyer to department major advisors along with most of the faculty members in various departments, i.e., African American Studies, Sociology, Psychology, American Studies, etc. (see Appendix D). I initially set about my recruitment search by solely reaching out to faculty and department administrators in the Humanities department at each recruitment site. But later expanded my reach to include faculty and department administrators in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM).

Following the initial contact between myself, faculty, and department administrators, I emailed staff members in various programs, such as, but not limited to, the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP), Black Student Resource Centers, and Disability Resource Offices. I chose to begin recruitment with the Educational Opportunity Program as the EOP program is designed to provide various types of assistance to students from marginalized backgrounds (University of California, n.d.). Seeing as though I sought to recruit Black students who identified as dis/abled, I assumed EOP would be an ideal program to initiate contact with for recruitment. Additionally, I sought recruitment from Black Resource Centers and Disability Resource Centers, as this study centered on Black dis/abled students. Although every recruitment site did not have each of the previous programs on campus, most campuses offered some variation of at least one of the above programs. Thus, after various staff members, faculty, and other campus administrators agreed to aid in circulating my recruitment flyer, interested participants were then prompted to complete a preliminary survey (see Appendix B).

Preliminary surveys were distributed and used solely to determine participant eligibility. Surveys were used to gather basic demographic information about participants, such as ethnicity, year in college, and disability status. After reviewing each participant survey for participants who met all of the study eligibility criteria (i.e., African American/Black, learning dis/abled, current

graduate or undergraduate student), participants were then asked to participate in a 1.5-hour long, life history style, in-depth, semi-structured interview (see Appendix C). Borrowed from the field of health sciences (Hagemaster, 1992; Payne & Payne, 2004), Ssali and Theobald described life history interviewing as "a qualitative method of data collection where people are asked to document their life over a period of time. It is a personal account by the respondent of the respondents' life, in the respondent's own words" (2016, p. 83). Thus, to fully encapsulate the K12 educational experiences as described by participants while also accounting for their college decision-making process, I chose to incorporate a life history style interview method. This allowed participants the opportunity to recollect moments they deemed relevant to their K-12 journey and college decision-making process which were not necessarily captured via the initial interview questions posed. Additionally, I categorized each interview as semi-structured, as they included questions beyond those that were originally delineated in the initial interview protocol. In other words, based on the experiences and stories participants shared, additional questions would arise, thus lending to a semi-structured style of interviewing. Following the completion of the interviews, I encouraged participants to circulate my recruitment flyer among their peers and general social networks, which served as the secondary method of recruiting.

In addition to cold emailing faculty, staff, and other department administrators, the second method of recruitment consisted of snowball sampling. Chan defined snowball sampling as "a structure [that] collects samples through the network connections from previous samples" (2020, p.62). Naderifar et al. (2017) asserted, snowball sampling is when study participants assist in recruiting additional participants who are deemed difficult to recruit – due to their specificity in characteristics. In other words, qualitative snowball sampling utilizes in-network connections to recruit additional participants, particularly when aiming to recruit participants who are

difficult to reach. Seeing as though this study highlights Black students with learning dis/abilities exclusively, snowball sampling was employed as a secondary method.

Each of the previously outlined research methods served a unique purpose within the current study. Preliminary surveys were used to screen participants prior to the interview phase. Individual interviews provided participants with a personal yet curated space to share their stories with the help of guiding questions. Although the aforementioned measures served distinct purposes, both methods were utilized to acquire data intended to contribute to the analysis of the overarching study.

Participants

In the initial study design, I aimed to recruit a maximum of 20 participants. The assumption behind limiting the participant pool was by conducting in-depth, life history-style interviews, I would elicit rich and exhaustive data from each participant, which would ultimately be sufficient for this study. However, as the recruitment process began, it proved to be more difficult than I anticipated. To the extent that during the first month of recruitment, I was not successful in recruiting participants who identified as Black *and* learning dis/abled. This led me to shift the focus of my study from solely investigating the narratives of dis/abled students to also including non-disabled students. Thus, 17 participants were recruited and interviewed for this study.

However, after nearly 2.5 months of recruitment and eventually receiving interest from participants who identified as Black and dis/abled, to maintain fidelity to the initial focus of my study, I opted only to include nine out of the seventeen interviews in the final analysis. The nine interviews included participants who identified as Black *and* dis/abled. In addition, given that the initial aim of this study was to exclusively recruit individuals with learning dis/abilities, upon

analyzing the survey responses, I later discovered students who identified as developmentally dis/abled had shown interest in the study. Thus, in seeking to better gauge and further encapsulate how Black dis/abled students described experiencing K-12 education and the extent to which such experiences impacted their college choice process, I chose to broaden the participant pool to also include those with developmental dis/abilities. Additionally, I decided to include students with developmental dis/abilities in tandem with students with learning dis/abilities as I later realized, that both dis/ability types had the capacity to impede upon one's educational and learning process,

While there are many nuances across dis/ability, the primary difference between both dis/ability types is that a) learning dis/abilities tend to primarily affect a specific area in one's learning process, whereas b) developmental dis/abilities not only affect one's learning but also, their altogether intellectual and developmental process. Thus leading me to include participants who identified as having either form of dis/ability.

Table 1 (see below) provides a snapshot of the participants included in the final analysis of this study ($N = 9$).

Table 1

Participant Demographics

	A	B	C	D	E	F
1	Participant Pseudonym	Student Status	Gender	Ethnicity	Institution/ Type	Dis/ability
2	Evelyn	Undergraduate	F	Black/ African American	UC Merced	Hearing Impaired
3	Felicia	Undergraduate	F	Black/ African American	UC Davis	ADHD
4	Fae	Undergraduate	GF	Black/ African American/White	Howard University (HBCU)	ADHD
5	Kenneth	Undergraduate	M	Black/ African American	Morehouse (HBCU)	Dyslexia
6	Layla	Undergraduate	F	Black/ African American	UCI	ADHD
7	Londyn	Graduate	F	Black/ African American	UC Berkeley	ASD
8	Nicole	Undergraduate	F	Black/ African American	UCLA	ADHD
9	Nyla	Undergraduate	F	Black/ African American	UCI	ADHD
10	Tate	Undergraduate	M	Black/ African American	Morehouse (HBCU)	ASD
11						
12	M: Male					
13	F: Female					
14	GF: Gender Fluid					
15	ASD: Autism Spectrum Disorder					
16	ADHD: Attention Deficit/ Hyperactivity-Disorder					
17	HBCU: Historically Black College and Univiersity					

Of the nine participants, five were enrolled in a UC system school and four were attending an HBCU. Though at the time of this study, the graduate student involved was attending an HBCU, the table above documents their undergraduate institution which was, in fact, an institution from the University of California school system.

Participant Bios

As Table 1 briefly depicts basic participant demographics such as gender, ethnicity, institution, and dis/ability type, the following section details a biography of each participant. In order to maintain participant anonymity, pseudonyms were used in place of participants' actual names.

Evelyn

Evelyn is a first-year undergraduate student at UC Merced studying Business Management and Economics. Evelyn was born in Oakland, CA, to a household that fluctuated in size, ranging from four to six people at a given time. Evelyn's mother was a teacher, and her grandma, as she frames it, "had so many like – occupations." For a huge portion of her life, Evelyn's primary hobby was swimming.

Throughout K-12 education, Evelyn attended both public and private schools, which often varied across student and teacher demographics. The elementary school she attended was predominantly White, the first middle school she attended was predominantly Black, the second middle school she attended was predominantly White, and the high school she attended was predominantly Asian and Latinx. Evelyn recalls her elementary school teachers being predominantly White, her middle school teachers being predominantly Black, and her high school teachers being predominantly Black, followed by mostly White and a few Latinx teachers.

Felicia

Felicia is a second-year undergraduate student at UC Davis studying Biotechnology. She was born in Oakland, CA, and was raised in foster care until the age of 13. At 13, Felicia was adopted by her grandparents, and she was then raised in a household of four. A few of Felicia's hobbies, particularly while in high school, consisted of dance, track, crocheting, and cooking.

For much of her K-12 education, Felicia attended schools which were predominantly composed of students of color. Both of the elementary schools and the middle schools Felicia attended were predominantly Latinx and Black. However, the private high school Felicia attended was predominantly White. In contrast to the student demographics Felicia was exposed to throughout her K-8th schooling, from K-12, Felicia noted her teachers were majority White. The exception was one Black teacher in middle school and a few Latinx teachers in high school.

Fae

Fae is a second-year undergraduate student at Howard University studying Art. Fae was born in Seattle, WA, and was raised in a household of two. Growing up, Fae played basketball, tennis, soccer, and ran track. At the beginning of Fae's educational journey, both the elementary and middle schools they attended were predominantly White. However, as Fae attended high school in a predominantly Black neighborhood, the high school they attended was reflective of the community, which was predominantly Black. Contrastingly, throughout her K-12 journey, Faes' teachers were majority White, with the exception of one Black and one Mixed-race teacher in high school.

Kenneth

Kenneth is a third-year undergraduate student at Morehouse College studying Political Science. Kenneth was born in Toledo, OH, and was raised in a household that fluctuated in size,

ranging from four to six people at a given time. Throughout the course of his high school career, Kenneth found himself involved in numerous clubs and organizations. Kenneth played tennis, ran track, participated in Boy Scouts, Jack & Jill, Books 4 Buddies, and was also a lifeguard and assistant aquatics director. Kenneth attended predominantly White schools from elementary school through high school, and his teachers throughout K-12 were all White. The exception was one Black substitute teacher in high school.

Layla

Layla is a second-year undergraduate student at UC Irvine studying Psychology. Layla was born in Hesperia, CA, to a household of five. Layla spent much of elementary, middle, and high school in the band. While in high school, Layla was in the karaoke club, cultural club, and broadcast journalism club. Much of Layla's K-12 education consisted of schools that were predominantly comprised of students of color. The elementary school she attended was predominantly Asian, and the middle and high school she attended was predominantly Latinx. From K-12, Layla's teachers were majority White, with the exception of a few Mixed-raced teachers.

Londyn

Londyn is a second-year graduate student at Charles Drew University studying Public Health. Londyn was born in the San Fernando Valley, CA, and was raised in a household of five. While in high school, Londyn spent most of her time cheerleading. The elementary school Londyn attended was predominantly White. However, Londyn's middle and high schools were predominantly made of students of color. The middle school she attended was predominantly Black and Latinx, and the high school she attended was predominantly Latinx. Aside from

Londyn's Kindergarten teacher being Black, from 1st-12th grade, Londyn's teachers were predominantly White and Asian.

Nicole

Nicole is a fourth-year undergraduate student at UCLA studying Theater with an Acting emphasis. Nicole was born in Houston, TX, and was raised in a household of four. From the time she could remember, Nicole was strongly involved in the arts, ranging from choir to speech to theater. In addition to being involved in theater in high school, Nicole played basketball and ran track. From Kindergarten to Third grade, Nicole attended schools that were predominantly made of students of color. Though still diverse in terms of ethnic and racial composition, where Asians were the largest minority group, from 4th-12th grade, the schools Nicole attended were majority White. With the exception of her Kindergarten teacher, who was Black, from 1st-12th grade, the majority of Nicole's teachers were White.

Nyla

Nyla is a second-year undergraduate student at UC Irvine studying Psychology. Nyla was born in Sacramento, CA, and was raised in a household of four. While in high school, Nyla was heavily involved in community clubs such as the Blanket Club, Lassalian Youth, and the senior leader retreat group. At the beginning of her educational journey, Nyla attended schools that were predominantly made of students of color. The elementary school she attended was predominantly Asian, and the middle school she attended was predominantly Black and Latinx. Nyla then transferred to a private school for high school where the student demographics were predominantly White and Latinx. Ranging from elementary and high school, Nyla expressed that the majority of her teachers were White. However, in middle school, Nyla's teachers were predominantly Black.

Tate

Tate is a third-year undergraduate student at Morehouse College studying Political Science. Tate was born in Middletown, DE, and was raised in a household of five. In high school, Tate was involved in marching band and junior ROTC and obtained a pilot license. For much of his K-12 education, Tate attended predominantly White schools, with the exception of one of his elementary schools. The first elementary school Tate attended was predominantly White, and the second elementary school he attended was predominantly White and Asian. Contrastingly, both the middle and high schools Tate attended were predominantly White. Aside from two Black teachers, throughout Tate's K-12 education, all of his teachers were White.

Interview Process

As previously mentioned, although this study consisted of 17 interviews, the final data analysis consisted of 9 of the 17 interviews. After completing the initial survey to determine eligibility, participants were then invited to participate in an hour-and-a-half-long virtual interview which was conducted via Zoom. However, as each interview was intended to be carried out as a life history style interview, the majority of interviews ended up ranging from two to two and a half hours in length. Each interview wound up lasting nearly two hours, as a) additional questions arose throughout the interview process and b) participants found it necessary to share about additional experiences that were not previously captured via my initial interview questions. Additionally, in order to ensure participant validity, several participants were contacted via email succeeding their initial interview to clarify particular points made throughout their interview. Lastly, following the completion of all interviews, each participant was compensated a $20 payment for participation.

Limitations in methods

In conducting this study, there were a few presenting limitations which are necessary to identify: restrictions around participant eligibility requirements, participant representation, the size of the participant pool, participants' age and education status, and institutional representation.

In naming restrictions around participant eligibility requirements, this study solely sought to recruit participants who identified as (a) Black/African American and (b) as having a learning dis/ability exclusively. The following criteria could be seen as a limitation, as they did not leave room for participants who may have otherwise identified as dis/abled to be a part of this study. In light of such a constraint, it could be argued, the restrictions around eligibility criteria preclude the opportunity to gather additional narratives and perspectives from students with varying dis/abilities. Additionally, although this study did not specifically seek to explore the gendered experiences of Black dis/abled students, I recognize the majority of the participants reflected in this study were female-identifying. Although male-identifying participants were accounted for in this study, they were not equally represented throughout the data, which could present an additional limitation. Furthermore, the voices of female-identifying participants were predominantly highlighted throughout this study, which has the potential to raise concerns about biased perspectives on K-12 experiences and the college decision-making process.

Another presenting limitation worth noting is the possible concern about the size of the participant pool. As outlined earlier, though this study initially consisted of 17 participants, upon conducting the final analysis, it only drew from nine of the 17 interviews. Acknowledging the fact that this was a qualitative study, it becomes evident that a participant pool consisting of nine

students is not sufficient to make generalizable assertions about the K-12 experiences and college decision-making across all Black dis/abled students.

Another limitation this study had the potential to present was the age and education status of the participants included. Given the study's aim to explore the K-12 educational experiences and college decision-making processes of Black dis/abled students, it could be argued, interviewing current high school students would have been the most feasible approach. This rationale holds validity, as current high school students would likely offer more immediate and perhaps more vivid accounts of their K-12 educational experiences and their college decision-making process compared to that of the current undergraduate and graduate students included in this study. Thus, interviewing current undergraduate and graduate students who were slightly more removed from their K-12 education had the potential to pose challenges in recalling their K-12 experiences and college decision-making processes.

The final limitation I present is that of institutional representation and perhaps the lack thereof. While I would classify this study as a national study as recruitment was open to students attending colleges and universities across the U.S., majority of the participants who expressed interest in this study attended one of two types of institutions. Either a University of California school institution or a Historically Black College and University. And because this study emphasized college decision-making, interviewing students who only attended one of two institution types could perhaps provide a limited perspective when discussing the process behind students' college decision-making process.

In addition to identifying the following limitations, it is also necessary to acknowledge my position within this research.

Positionality

As a Black student who is currently in higher education, I've found it helpful and necessary to reflect upon the educational experiences that led me to this point in my academic career. Although I had positive experiences with teachers, counselors, and school administrators from Kindergarten to Twelfth grade, for much of what I recall, I recognize that not all students, namely Black students, share the same experiences throughout their K-12 journey. I attribute much of my positive experiences throughout K-12 education to the fact that I attended predominantly Black schools where the students, staff, teachers, and school administrators were majority Black. Given the identities of my teachers, counselors, and school administrators, I experienced an immense level of support not only throughout K-12 but also as it pertained to my college admission process. As a result of my experience in K-12 education and in journeying further along in my education, I grew interested in learning about how other Black students experienced K-12 education and how such experiences perhaps informed their college decision-making process.

While my K-12 educational experiences and overarching college decision-making process may differ vastly from other Black students, in conducting research that centers the narratives of Black dis/abled students, it is important to acknowledge the possible overlap and apparent differences across our experiences. Although my participants and I will share similar identities, e.g., ethnicity, I posit that it is necessary to recognize my position as an outsider in this research as I do not identify as dis/abled. Thus, in sharing similar identities with my participants, it is necessary for me to remain reflexive throughout the research process to the extent that I do not allow my personal biases and experiences to impede upon my research tactics and analysis.

In contrast, by sharing similar identities with my participants, I may contribute to my ability to interpret and analyze my participant's experiences effectively and more accurately.

Data Analysis

To accurately capture and convey participant experiences while also denoting patterns, commonalities, and differences within the data, the data analysis process consisted of three key elements: interview transcriptions, participant transcription review, and three rounds of coding (Bernard et al., 2017). As this study consisted of interviews ranging from 1.5 hours to 2.5 hours in length, upon the initial transcription phase, *otter.ai* was used to transcribe participant interviews. As no transcription service is 100% accurate, following the initial transcription, all interviews were reviewed manually for further accuracy. The objective in reviewing transcriptions manually, following the use of a transcription service, was twofold: to accurately document participants' voices and to ensure additional filler words, such as "um" and "uh," for example, were not erroneously included throughout the transcript.

As a researcher who was not initially familiar with my participants, I identified as an outsider when I went into the study design. Bearing in mind my identity as an outsider in the context of this study, it was imperative my participants' voices and narratives be captured and conveyed precisely. To ensure I documented each participant's story without modifying their responses to any degree, following the interview transcription process, participants had the opportunity to review the transcripts from their individual interviews (Rowlands, 2021). During this process, participants had the opportunity to clarify any information, have information omitted, or simply approve of the interview transcript altogether. Following the participants' review of their interview transcription, the next step in the data analysis phase entailed three rounds of coding.

The coding process took place in three stages: open, axial, and in-vivo coding (Saldana, 2013; Williams & Moser, 2019). The first round of coding consisted of *open coding*, which identified larger yet broader themes within the data. For example, in thinking about research question 1 (How do Black students with learning dis/abilities describe their educational experiences throughout K-12 education?), an example of an open code was the reoccurring feeling of being invalidated. This code came about as the majority of the participants expressed sentiments of feeling invalidated in the classroom from elementary school all throughout high school. Following the first round of coding, the second round of coding consisted of *axial* coding. Axial coding groups together themes emerging in the open coding phase. Following the previous example where the open code was the reoccurring feeling of being invalidated, an additional code from the open code phase was invisibility, thus yielding identity conflict as an axial code. By experiencing invalidation in the classroom while simultaneously feeling invisible, I categorized students' sentiments as identity conflict. The final round of coding consisted of *in-vivo* coding. In-vivo coding was used to capture participants' language verbatim, as derived from their interviews. For example, in answering RQ1, one participant expressed the following: "I felt pretty ignored by my teachers…" Thus, the in-vivo code generated was "I felt ignored."

Though each round of coding often generated new codes, I was able to determine themes and subcategories based on the frequency with which certain codes emerged within the data. For example, as one participant explicitly noted "feeling ignored" in the classroom, I found that many participants expressed similar experiences and feelings. Thus, after documenting how often participants either explicitly or inexplicitly expressed "feeling ignored" in the classroom while also noting the number of participants this was evident among, I was able to create specific codes. After generating various codes, I was able to construct larger themes apparent throughout

the data, i.e., “messages received,” and given the feelings recalled when participants described the messages they received in the classroom, I was able to further parse the theme into two subcategories, “harmful messages” and “positive messages.” The purpose of including multiple rounds of coding was not only to identify larger themes and concepts emerging from the data, but also to decipher potential overlaps and similarities within the data and across participant narratives.

Chapter Summary

The previous chapter began by outlining the methods employed to conduct this study. As this study aimed to gather the first-hand narratives of Black dis/abled students in regard to their K-12 educational experiences and how K-12 experiences informed their college decision-making process, this study took on a qualitative approach. The main sources of data collection were one-on-one, in-depth, semi-structured, life history style interviews, accompanied by an initial preliminary survey. I began the recruitment process by disseminating my recruitment flyer to faculty, staff, and department administrators at various colleges and universities across the U.S. From there, faculty, staff, and other administrators circulated my recruitment flyer to students who were then prompted to complete the preliminary survey. The survey distributed was used strictly to gather basic demographic information about participants and to determine participant eligibility. Following the completion of the surveys, participants were then asked to complete a virtual, 1.5-hour-long interview. However, prior to beginning the process of conducting interviews, it was necessary to note potential study limitations.

The following limitations were acknowledged: restrictions in participant eligibility, participant representation, study size, and institutional representation. Following the acknowledgment of study limitations, the section proceeds to discuss data analysis, where ottr.ai

was employed to transcribe each interview following their completion. However, to guarantee participant voices were being relayed authentically, I reviewed each transcript manually. Succeeding the transcription phase, this study then underwent three rounds of coding, which consisted of open, axial, and in-vivo coding. The purpose of having multiple rounds of coding was to identify broader yet specific themes that emerged from the data. The following chapter outlines the initial findings from this study.

Chapter 4: FINDINGS

The primary objective of this study was to elucidate the experiences and perspectives of Black dis/abled students. In aims of achieving this, this study commenced with an examination of the historical evolution of education in the United States. By scrutinizing legislative policies and pivotal court cases that have either impeded or facilitated educational opportunities for Black and Dis/abled individuals, this study provides a nuanced understanding of the current educational experiences of Black Dis/abled students. Moving beyond the prevailing narrative that Black dis/abled students are underrepresented in higher education, this study intended to explore the K-12 experiences of nine students while also assessing how such experiences influenced their college decision-making process. Thus, this chapter presents a detailed analysis of the findings obtained through in-depth interviews with the nine participants. The findings presented address the following research questions:

RQ1. How do Black students with learning dis/abilities describe their educational experiences throughout K-12 education?

RQ2. How do K-12 experiences inform Black students with learning dis/abilities' college decision-making process?

Prior to outlining the key findings of this study, it is important to note, although this study intended to center the experiences of Black students with *learning* dis/abilities specifically, as recruitment continued, Black students who identified as having *developmental* dis/abilities were also included in the final analysis. The major findings from this study revealed four key insights: (a) Black students with dis/abilities often described harmful experiences with their White teachers, school administrators, and other campus staff throughout K-12 education; (b) Black students with dis/abilities often described positive and nurturing experiences with Black teachers

throughout K-12 education; (c) the decision to pursue college was ultimately an act of resistance for the majority of participants included in this study, and (d) the factors participants considered throughout their college decision-making process were individually contextualized and abstract in nature.

Before delving into the major findings elicited from this study, there are subtle patterns across the narratives of participants with learning dis/abilities compared to those with developmental dis/abilities. While many participants shared similar experiences about classrooms and college decision-making, a notable difference among participants with developmental disabilities was the messages they received about themselves. Despite only two of the nine participants identifying as having a developmental dis/ability, many of the messages they received pertaining to themselves, their ability, and their capabilities revolved around behavior rectification. Both participants expressed, at some point, they were told to either adjust or correct their behaviors altogether. In all other cases, the messages received by the remaining participants and their experiences throughout K-12 education exhibited considerable uniformity.

Research Question 1

How do Black students with learning dis/abilities describe their educational experiences throughout K-12 education?

The first research question explored the nuanced experiences of Black dis/abled students within spaces of primary and secondary education. In answering RQ1, the following results were categorized: (a) Black students with learning and developmental dis/abilities often described harmful classroom experiences, particularly with White teachers, school administrators, and other campus staff, and (b) of the positive and nurturing interactions participants describe, such interactions almost exclusively transpired between participants and their Black teachers. Both the

harmful and positive/nurturing experiences are further explored in three subcategories: (a) via messages participants received about themselves, (b) coursework and academic preparation, and (c) rhetoric participants received and heard surrounding college and college choice.

Overview of Themes and Subcategories

As outlined in the preceding section, two primary findings emerged in response to research question one, which was accompanied by three additional subcategories. Subcategory one, *messages participants received about themselves*, explores both the harmful and positive messages participants received from teachers, staff, and other school administrators about their academic abilities and their identity as Black and dis/abled. Subcategory two, *coursework and academic preparation* explores both the harmful and supportive educational practices made apparent within K-12 education and as experienced by participants. Lastly, subcategory three, *rhetoric participants received and heard surrounding college and college choice*, explores the conversations and messages participants received or heard (in)directly as they pertain to college broadly, as well as their college decision-making process more specifically.

Subcategory 1: Harmful Rhetoric and Experiences Throughout K-12 Education

Messages Received

As previously noted, many participants recalled more harmful than positive interactions and experiences with their White teachers, school administrators, and other campus staff. Thus, in recalling their K-12 experiences, the majority of the participants in this study noted the messages they received pertaining to themselves and/or their academic capabilities. Participants were also able to precisely identify who conveyed particular messages to them while also pinpointing when those messages were received along their academic journey. In recollecting her K-12 experiences, ranging from in-class experiences to broader school experiences, Felicia

began her interview by contextualizing her identity and background. When asked to reflect upon her K-12 experiences, particularly the classes she enjoyed and those which were more challenging, she expressed the following:

> I feel like a lot of the things that I struggled with when I was younger – I don't think it was intentional, but a lot of people just kind of hinted to try harder.

Here, Felicia shared that although it may not have been intentional when she found herself struggling with "a lot of things when [she] was younger," it was often written off in a manner implying she simply needed to try harder.

Similarly, prior to recollecting their K-12 experiences, Fae began by discussing the context in which they grew up. Born and raised in Seattle, WA, Fae attended predominantly White schools up until high school. They shared, although their household consisted of themself and their mother, their father was most understanding of their identity, particularly their dis/ability. When prompted to recollect their experiences in the classroom throughout K-12, Fae pinpointed the following:

> At the same time, I was not able to focus in class…I remember this one teacher, like, was very rude to me, and like, basically called me stupid in front of the whole class [um] because I wasn't paying attention -I think- to something, and then I asked a clarifying question, and they're just like "okay." And so that just like really put me off for a long time.

> For ADHD, I got diagnosed later in my senior year of high school…my dad was understanding… but my mom is like, the complete opposite. She – it took her so long to understand, I don't think she really does still, and she thinks that if I like, I do something,

> like I'm forgetful, for example, like, it's just laziness or something like that… It's hard to explain that I'm not doing these things on purpose.

For Fae, they experienced the notion of having multiple labels ascribed to their identity, both of which carried negative connotations: "stupid" and "lazy." They explained, in asking for clarity on instructions or, in some instances, forgetting to complete certain tasks, e.g., their teacher [inexplicitly] called them stupid, or their mom assumed they were lazy.

In line with being ascribed certain labels, Tate shared a similar experience as Fae. Born in Middletown, DE, Tate provided background information about the schools he attended from elementary school all throughout high school. As Tate attended predominantly White schools from K-12, he recalled the following as it pertained to his experiences in the classroom as well as the conversations he heard around dis/ability:

> I had a lot of energy in a lot of classes and some teachers viewed that as like, "oh, he has behavioral issues"...Mind you, this was during the time where, having a disability was seen as a bad thing… it was just interesting, though, like, that's kind of like – how they talked about disability. I never really had a positive conversation about disability or having disabilities. That sounds sad, but I've never literally like – yeah. But I never thought about *people* having disabilities as a bad thing. Now, however, I'll say this again, I always thought *me* having a disability would be a bad thing.

Here, Tate explained how his energy in the classroom was often (mis)interpreted by his teachers as "behavioral issues." He also noted how he initially perceived the idea of being labeled with having a dis/ability as "bad."

Lastly, Londyn, born in San Fernando Valley, CA, to a household of five, began her interview by describing how she recalled socializing as a child. Londyn recounted her childhood

experiences, emphasizing the challenges she faced in socializing with other children, where she often recalled feeling "different" from her peers. Over time, it was recommended that she consult with a specialist who could conduct an assessment to better understand her struggles with social interaction. However, leading up to her official diagnosis, Londyn recalled a particular instance where she was being observed by her mom and another clinician:

> [in elementary school] I remember going into, just like these playrooms, and then like, the professional and my mom would just be in the same room or in a different room, maybe just like, watching me, observing me … I was like making these like faces, like where I would like put my lip up to my nose. And our mom was like, "what – why does she keep doing that?"... And they told me to stop doing that.

Here, Londyn recalls being observed by her mother and a clinician and was often told to "stop" doing certain gestures which, to her knowledge, were involuntary. In addition to the harmful messages participants received surrounding either their capability and/or dis/ability more broadly, the next section outlines the harmful practices apparent throughout participants' K-12 experiences.

Subcategory 2: Coursework and Academic Preparation

This section outlines the harmful practices participants experienced regarding coursework, course scheduling, and overall college preparation and the lack thereof throughout K-12. Nicole, from Houston, TX, recollected her elementary school classes. She began by outlining the demographics of the neighborhood in which she grew up compared to that of the schools she attended. Though Nicole was extremely decorated in the realm of theater and performing arts, she was also devoted to performing well academically. However, dating back to elementary school, Nicole recalled her academic abilities being questioned:

> I started off being automatically placed in the quote-unquote lowest or dumbest elementary class. Unfortunately, they associate dumb and low with special needs so I wasn't in a special needs class, but I was in the homeroom with the special needs students....The security guards were racist and shit. So they were like "Oh, like what are you doing in this hallway. You're not supposed to be here, you need to get back to your class," – because it's the AP hallway – and they're like, where's-what's this Black girl doing in the AP hallway?

Here, Nicole states in elementary school, the "lower" and "dumbest" classes were often comprised of students with special needs. Unfortunately, her school would often conflate "low and dumb" with "special needs." She then goes on to note, once she got to high school, she recalls being questioned for being in the "AP hallways" by her high school's campus security, as she notes majority of the AP students were non-Black students.

Similar to Nicole, Kenneth shared a comparable experience concerning course placements throughout K-12. Kenneth, from Toledo, OH, also provided background on the neighborhood in which he grew up compared to the schools he attended. Despite demonstrating natural aptitude in extracurricular activities, as evidenced by his extensive involvement in sports, school clubs, and community organizations, Kenneth articulated encountering academic difficulties with specific subjects during his elementary school years. Kenneth said:

> When you're younger it's a lot of, you know, reading and writing and–the English language and I just, you know, I was struggling with that… it got to a point where I was starting to get put in, like remedial reading classes and things like that... [and] that frustrated my parents because they were like "my child is not dumb."

> Then there were two instances in which my IEP did interfere with the courses I could take. Like, for instance, I wasn't able to take Chemistry at the same time my class took Chemistry, like my class of '21 class took Chemistry. Which I thought was – and everybody thought was strange. But they kind of – to me, it was a disconnect between the guidance counselor and the special services, kind of side of the school. Because when I would talk to my intervention specialist, she was like, "no, that should not happen"…So it was – that was weird.

Here, Kenneth explained how he struggled with certain subjects for much of his elementary schooling. Yet, prior to receiving an official diagnosis for his dis/ability, he was placed in remedial classes. He then explained how once he arrived at high school, there were instances in which his Individualized Education Plan (IEP) interfered with his ability to take certain classes with his grade level.

Nyla, who attended a predominantly White and Latinx high school, along with Tate, who attended a predominantly White high school, shared comparable experiences. Nyla, born in Sacramento, CA, began her interview by describing the demographics of the elementary and middle school she attended compared to the high school she attended. Nyla shared, both the elementary and middle schools she attended were mostly students of color. However, the student demographics shifted once Nyla attended a private high school. With shifts in demographic compositions, Nyla encountered changes in both the academic rigor and course placement, which she was previously accustomed to:

> There was no science placement test. I ended up placing in…I guess beginner's science course…it was African American and – and Hispanic. Yeah. It was just a mix of both. Most of my friends that were White were definitely in the higher placed classes.

Tate echoed the same sentiments:

> College Prep (CP) is our lowest level of a class, which sounds weird, like, a college prep class was the lowest class? Because then there were honors classes – honors classes were higher than college prep, but they still were college prep classes – of course. Um freshman year...I did take a CP. Our demographics were not a lot of Black people to begin with, but the minorities were definitely placed in CP.

Here, Nyla expressed that although she did not take an exam which would ultimately determine her placement in her science course, upon entering high school, she was automatically placed in beginner's science. This was ultimately considered a "lower placed class." Similarly, Tate shared, during his freshmen year, he was enrolled in a College Prep class, which was essentially the "lowest class" students at his high school could take. Both participants acknowledged that the demographic composition of their classes primarily consisted of individuals from Black, Hispanic, and other minoritized backgrounds. The final section below describes the harmful messages students receive specific to college and college choice.

Subcategory 3: College Choice

The following section outlines the harmful experiences and rhetoric students received when discussing college and college choices with teachers, school administrators, and other campus staff, particularly on their high school campuses. This section begins with Nicole's account of an encounter she had with several staff members from her high school. Although Nicole attended a predominantly White high school, it is important to note that students of color still comprised a large percentage of the school population. However, her school's administration and general staff were predominantly White. At the time the conversation between Nicole and her school office staff transpired, Nicole had just submitted the last of her applications to different colleges and universities. She was excited about her decision to apply to UCLA,

especially since it had been a topic of conversation in her household. However, in sharing the news of applying to UCLA with her school's office staff, Nicole was not met with enthusiasm.

She shared the following:

> …some like front desk ladies and different staff like that, who – kind of shit on me for applying to UCLA or to even mention it. And they were like, "oh, we see – aim lower."

Here, Nicole noted how the front desk staff explicitly told her to "aim lower" during her college application process. Similar to Nicole, Layla attended a high school where the majority of students were students of color, specifically Latinx students. However, the teachers, counselors, and other staff at her high school were mostly White. Thus, in discussing her college list with her Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) teacher, which essentially was the list of schools she was considering applying to at the time, Layla expressed receiving the following feedback:

> Like I was a bit discouraged from going to like the – to some colleges. Like the more, I guess prestigious ones…they'd have us all of us pick out like safety schools and what not…and then my avid teacher would be like, "Oh, but like what happens if you don't get these, your top schools? It's always good to have a backup." And I'd be like, "Oh well, this is my backup." And he'd be like, "Well, you maybe should go for something a little bit easier to get into, just in case…" They didn't flat out say like, don't go to prestigious school or schools that are hard to get into but like, be realistic.

Here, Nicole and Layla express how when they shared their plans of applying to certain schools, some school administrators, campus staff, and teachers told them to either "aim lower" or "go for something easier – just in case."

Lastly, Kenneth and Tate, both of whom attended a predominantly White high school where teachers and school administrators were also predominantly White, shared similar experiences. As the college application season came to an end and students were discussing the schools they committed to when speaking with staff and other students around campus about their plans to attend a Historically Black College and University (HBCU), Kenneth and Tate shared the following:

> Kenneth: I said, "Oh, I'm going to Morehouse," they were like, "Where's that again?" Or, you know, I would hear people say "Morehead."

> Tate: I had a white college advisor. She told me that going to Morehouse was a very bad decision because…Morehouse was *only* a college.

Here, Kenneth and Tate note, when expressing their plans to attend Morehouse College, staff would either intentionally mispronounce the name of the institution or they were explicitly told that going to Morehouse was a bad decision.

Although most of the participants in this study expressed hearing detrimental narratives about themselves from White teachers, administrators, and other campus staff, along with enduring adverse classroom practices like being placed in lower-tiered classes, some participants noted the positive messages they received. Interestingly, this almost exclusively occurred with their Black teachers. The following section outlines the positive and nurturing messages and experiences participants recalled throughout K-12 education.

Positive and Nurturing Experiences

Unspoken, Yet Well-Received Messages

As previously noted, from elementary through middle school, Nyla attended schools where the student population was primarily People of Color. Conversely, Nyla noted, all of her teachers in elementary school were White; it was not until she transferred to her middle school that she first had Black teachers. When asked to recall her classroom room experiences and relationships throughout K-12 education, Nyla described the relationships she shared with her Black teachers:

> It was really nice. Like, the teachers even found ways to relate to me as well. They wouldn't like push off anything that like – any problems…I feel they really cared about their students and their educational outcomes.

Here, Nyla captured the dynamics of the relationships she established between herself and her Black teachers while in middle school.

Coursework and Academic Preparation

In regard to coursework and academic preparation, participants shared the support they recalled receiving from counselors and teachers along their K-12 journey. When asked to define "support" and "how that translated" in the classroom setting, Nyla shared her interpretation of support:

> Like, I did have some teachers know that I was struggling. They looked at my grades, they saw how I was in class, and they came up to me themselves and said, "Hey, I can help you out with this."

Here, Nyla described how her teachers would often offer her one-on-one support whenever they noticed she was struggling.

Similarly, when asked to define support and how that translated in the classroom context, Tate and Evelyn spoke about the influence their teachers had on their K-12 coursework and overall academic preparation:

> Tate: When I had classes with Black teachers like – I had – those classes were 10 times easier.

> Evelyn: So it was like, everybody was in teams to make sure that I was on track. I talked to my counselor, he's like, "Okay, like, you take these classes they're gonna get you into there like-- where do you want to go?"

> Before the first year, AVID was optional. After the first year it was mandatory…he [my IEP teacher] had a whole goal already set… He was like, "I'm gonna talk to you about school, what classes you want to take with your major…"

Here, Tate described the level of rigor he experienced in the classrooms with his Black teachers, where he perceived his classes as comparatively "easier." Evelyn shared how both her counselor and IEP teacher ensured she took certain classes to be prepared for college. Evelyn's IEP teacher sought to ensure her preparedness, so much so, he set up a postsecondary plan for her prior to their first meeting. She also shared that although the college readiness class (AVID) started off as optional for her during her freshmen year of high school, it was later made mandatory. In addition to the coursework and academic preparation students received, it is important to note the nurturing and positive messages participants received around college and college choice.

College Choice

The following section outlines the positive and nurturing messages participants received, along with general sentiments around college and college choice. At the start of her senior year, Evelyn recalled an exchange between herself and her academic counselor. Although Evelyn was certain college would be an immediate next step succeeding graduation, she was not entirely sure where she would attend college. Thus, in further discussing college with her counselor,

Evelyn noted the following conversation:

> [her counselor asked] "Where do you want to go? Like, in terms of like weather conditions? Like, we're like, just making sure like, down to super specifics. Like, okay, based on your grades, based on this, based on the weather that you decided that you wanted to be in, like, where do you want to go?" And he came up with Merced. Merced was his choice.

Here, Evelyn expressed that in discussing potential colleges to attend, her counselor was responsible for encouraging her to apply and ultimately attend UC Merced.

Although this aspect may be perceived as less overtly nurturing due to participants having limited say in the matter, many participants expressed the fact that attending college was a non-negotiable in their household. Therefore, I contend that the assumption made by participants' parents that they would attend college carries a nurturing yet supportive undertone. Thus, when asked to recollect whether college was discussed in their household and the extent to which it was being discussed, Nicole, Kenneth, Tate, and Londyn noted that college was automatically assumed for them:

Nicole: I have to go to college. That was a thing in my family…Yeah, it (college) was always impressed upon me at a very young age… I'm from the south and I feel like that says a lot. So, in other words, we're going to college.

Kenneth: I always knew from like a young age I was gonna have to go to college.

Tate: I'm pretty sure college was a requirement growing up.

Londyn: I always knew I wanted to go to college… again… that's just the way that my family worked.

Here, all four participants exclaim their families had preset expectations for them to attend college. In tandem with the preset expectations to attend college, the final findings from this research provide an answer to research question number two.

Research Question 2

How did K-12 experiences inform Black students with learning dis/abilities' college decision-making process?

Resistance

In answering the question of *how* K-12 experiences informed participants' college decision-making process, the major findings revealed two patterns: (a) the decision to pursue college and the overarching college decision-making process was an act of resistance for the majority of participants, and (b) the factors participants considered throughout their college decision-making process were individually contextualized and abstract in nature. As many participants were either explicitly or implicitly discouraged from attending college, i.e., by

teachers, staff, or other school administrators, those particular messages and encounters led participants to consider and ultimately apply for college primarily as a means of resistance. Given the combination of both negative and positive messages and encounters participants described experiencing throughout K-12 education, participants expressed the extent to which such experiences informed the factors they considered and prioritized during their college decision-making process. When prompted to discuss their decision to apply to college, Fae shared the following statement:

> ...I feel like it was also like– an affirming thing because I had been so like, insecure academically for so long. So I wanted to see, can I really get into the school and can I really do this and so yeah.

Here, Fae shared their decision to apply to certain schools was primarily to affirm themself and see whether they could actually gain admission into college. Similarly, when asked to describe why he chose to apply to the schools he did, Tate echoed the following:

> "Well, I feel like the Ivy Leagues…just so I could say I got into an Ivy."

Here, Tate expressed his rationale behind applying to the Ivy Leagues, which was to say that he gained admission to the coveted schools.

When Felicia was asked to describe her college decision-making process, she began by highlighting her upbringing and the context in which she grew up. Felicia disclosed, she grew up in foster care but was later adopted by her grandparents. On several occasions, Felicia articulated that college was often emphasized in her grandparents' home. And thus, she states the following:

> "I think it just meant a lot to like myself - that I could do it…I could do it myself."

Here, Felicia explained that a huge part of her decision to apply to certain schools had much to do with personal meaning while also proving that she could do it. In addition to outlining how the college decision-making process served as a form of resistance for some participants, other participants described how their K-12 experiences influenced the factors they prioritized when applying to and selecting the school they would attend. The following section dives into the factors participants considered when applying to and selecting the college they ultimately attended and the extent to which K-12 experiences informed such factors.

College Decision-Making Factors

In answering the question of *how* K-12 educational experiences informed participants' college decision-making process, several factors emerged. The K-12 experiences participants described not only prompted participants to individually contextualize the factors they considered throughout their process but also introduced more abstract factors into their consideration process. The combination of both harmful and positive experiences with messages received were strong factors of consideration throughout their college decision-making process. When asked to describe the factors considered throughout their college decision-making process, the majority of participants noted factors such as "safety" and "community" as being key. For example, Nyla shared:

> I looked at demographics. And even though UCI only had 2% Black, I still ended up coming here. The Black community seemed really close and we even have a Black Resource Center.

Similar to Nyla, Londyn noted:

> If I had to go to a PWI, I definitely needed to know that there was at least the existence of Black people on campus and that the community was nice to each other, close, or something.

Along the same lines as Londyn, Tate shared how the factors he considered were heavily influenced by elements of community and safety. Tate notes the following:

> brotherhood was a factor and another big one was safety. [the] President at the GBA meeting said, "You guys can develop yourself and who you choose to be here, without anyone judging you."

Similarly, Evelyn, Kenneth, and Felicia shared how the element of community and, more specifically, being surrounded by Black students was a key factor in their college decision-making process:

> Evelyn: I wanted to go to an HBCU because I'm not around a lot of Black people- like really, I'm not.

> Kenneth: It being an HBCU was important to me.

> Felicia: Apart from the Seattle one, Howard was the only campus I'd actually been to, and it was an HBCU.

Although Evelyn did not end up attending an HBCU, Kenneth and Felicia did. However, across all three interviews, each participant emphasized the significance of attending an HBCU and the general desire to be surrounded by Black students while in college.

Chapter Summary

The overall findings from this study yielded four larger themes: (a) Black students with dis/abilities experienced more harm than good in K-12 education, particularly when interacting with White school personnel; (b) Black students with dis/abilities had more positive and nurturing experiences when engaging with other Black teachers; (c) the decision to pursue college and the overarching college decision-making process was considered an act of resistance among many participants; and (d) the factors participants considered throughout their college decision-making process were not only individually contextualized but, to an extent, were also abstract in nature.

Within the larger themes, three subcategories emerged surrounding messages received and classroom experiences, coursework and academic preparation, and college choice. In discussing their educational experiences spanning from Kindergarten to Twelfth grade, most participants in this study noted the messages they received concerning their own identities and academic capabilities. The messages received from White teachers, school administrators, and other campus staff were often negatively categorized.

When prompted to describe their experience navigating each grade level and what they could recall regarding their coursework, many participants discussed involuntarily being placed in lower-tiered classes. They refer to lower-tiered classes as special education or remedial classes. Participants shared instances where they were often automatically placed in lower-tiered classes without ever undergoing assessment or testing for grade-level placement. They concluded by sharing the messages they received surrounding their decision to pursue college and college choice, which in many instances were rather discouraging.

Certain participants expressed instances where they were encouraged to lower their aim or aim for less prestigious institutions, thereby transforming their college decision-making process into an act of resistance. For the majority of participants, submitting applications to schools where they were explicitly advised against applying to or discouraged from applying to was an act of resistance. Resistance emerged in the sense that students chose to challenge the narrative that they were not capable enough to apply to or attend certain types of institutions. Additionally, when accounting for the positive and negative messages and encounters participants experienced with teachers, staff, and school administrators throughout K-12, it prompted them to prioritize the elements of safety and community throughout their college decision-making process.

On the contrary, there were a few participants who highlighted the positive and nurturing messages and encounters they experienced while in K-12 education. They did, however, note that the positive/nurturing encounters that occurred were almost exclusively limited to interactions with their Black teachers. The majority of the positive messages participants received were considerably more implicit rather than explicitly articulated. Considering the dynamics present between participants, their teachers, and their counselors, participants expressed internalizing the *unspoken messages* communicated by these individuals. This concept often materialized as teachers relating to participants or simply offering participants additional support – *unprompted*. Regarding support, students delineated between the direct one-on-one support their teachers offered and their counselors who ensured their course scheduling consisted of college readiness courses, i.e., AVID. Finally, in regard to college and college choice, participants shed light on the conversations and expectations held both at home and within their school milieu. In the at-home context, participants expressed the general sentiment that college

was, in fact, an expectation. Within the context of school, one instance stood out where a participant's counselor exhibited exceptional supportiveness towards her collegiate aspirations. In addition to the support and positive experiences participants recalled between themselves, their counselors, teachers, and parents, participants expressed the extent to which those experiences informed the factors of their college decision-making process. More specifically, in having positive encounters with Black teachers, participants shared the emphasis they placed on community, especially the Black community, apparent on various campuses, as they determined which colleges they would apply to and ultimately attend.

The subsequent chapter outlines the significance of the findings and connects them back to the research questions. It also details future implications and recommendations to advance practice, policy, and research.

Chapter 5: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, CONCLUSION

Discussion

In exploring the previously outlined findings in a comprehensive manner, it is necessary to consider two key elements: (a) the research questions that guided this study and (b) the theoretical frameworks upon which this research was grounded. The research questions guiding this study are as follows:

1. How do Black students with learning dis/abilities describe their educational experiences throughout K-12 education?
2. How do K-12 experiences inform Black students with learning dis/abilities' college decision-making process?

The theoretical frameworks guiding this study are Critical Race Theory and Disability Critical Race Theory. Reiterating the foundational frameworks apparent within this study is essential, as they shape the subsequent analysis and conclusions.

RQ 1

How do Black students with learning dis/abilities describe their educational experiences throughout K-12 education?

When answering the question of how Black students with learning dis/abilities describe their educational experiences throughout K-12 education, I found that they often characterized their experiences in one of two ways. First, when recollecting K-12 experiences, participants recalled being met with harm via the messages they received and pervasive academic practices, which were often attributed to interactions with White teachers, administrators, and other campus staff. Second, they described subtle moments of positivity and nurturing, which were often facilitated by Black teachers. The harmful messages students received were often linked to their

academic abilities and effort, notions around dis/ability, and altogether pursuit of college. The pervasive practices described by participants centered on classroom displacement, where participants were continuously confined to "special education" classes and/or "remedial" classes."

Harmful Messages Received:

Given the negative messages participants received directly along with the secondhand information participants were exposed to regarding race and dis/ability, this study elucidates the persistence of issues related to racism and ableism within contemporary K-12 educational environments. These issues contribute to and ultimately inform students' college decision-making processes. Though various policies have been implemented over time within the U.S. education system to expand access to education for both Black students and to separate students with dis/abilities, I assert that discriminatory rhetoric and practices are still apparent within K-12 education today and thus require rectifying. The findings from this study will further CRT's assertion that racism is not only permanent in American society but it is also endemic to K-12 education. Using tenets from DisCrit, I will examine the extent to which society and systems of education not only uphold notions of normalcy but simultaneously neglect to acknowledge the multidimensionality of dis/abled students.

The Center for Disability Rights defines ableism as "a set of beliefs or practices that devalue and discriminate against people with disabilities" (Smith, para. 1). Given this definition, I assert that issues of ableism not only persist within K-12 education but became more evident as participants described how teachers and parents often responded to these students' challenges or behaviors. For instance, Felicia recalls being told to "try harder" whenever she expressed difficulties in certain areas and in particular classes. However, the issue in assuming the position

that Felicia simply needed to try harder not only overlooked the apparent efforts she made in the classroom but also disregarded the nuanced factors that could have possibly impacted her performance, in this case, her dis/ability. Although Felicia was unable to articulate it at the time, nor had she received an *official* diagnosis for her disability, nonetheless, she was able to recognize the impact her dis/ability had on her academic performance. She expressed the dichotomy between enjoying school and having a passion for learning while simultaneously struggling academically. Instead of teachers and other school administrators taking the time to assess the origins of her challenges properly, there was a prevailing assumption that she was not trying enough and was expected to solve her problems with more effort.

To a similar extent, Fae recounts a particular instance in which their academic efforts were questioned and minimized in middle school. Fae recalled asking for clarity on a set of instructions that had been previously given. However, as opposed to being met with clarity, Fae conveyed that they were "basically called stupid" by their teacher, as they put it. Their teacher's response to their inquiry becomes particularly significant given the context in which Fae attended school. The student body was made up of students of color, yet all of Fae's teachers were White. The inherent harm in labeling a student as "stupid" extends beyond the power dynamics between teacher and student and encompasses both racist and ableist undertones. Particularly as the message originated from a White male who comes from a place of authority, and the message was targeted toward a Black dis/abled student. In addition to the following classroom experience, Fae also expressed the harm found in the assumptions their mother made about their behavior, which was often misinterpreted as "lazy." Fae explained that when prompted to complete a task, there were instances where they would lose sight of their task and fail to complete it. Similar to Felicia, although Fae did not possess an official diagnosis for their disability at the time, they

recognized that the difficulties encountered in an attempt to complete a task or an assignment were not due to intentional evasion but rather were symptomatic of their disability.

Thus, based on the assertions made and lack of attentiveness demonstrated by their teachers it becomes somewhat evident how issues of racism and ableism persist in K-12 spaces. From a CRT perspective, the assumption that participants simply needed to try harder not only challenges their effort but it further perpetuates the stereotypes that in the context of education, Black students are often deemed "lazy" (Lightfoot, 1976 and Reyna, 2000). Additionally, from a DisCrit perspective, such an assertion reflects a deficiency in "valuing multidimensionality" of identity, especially within K-12 education. As participants struggled in the classroom or sought additional clarity, there was never any consideration of the possibility of their dis/ability contributing to their performance. Instead, Felicia and Fae expressed their teachers' contempt and utter disregard for their experiences.

Conversely, Tate recalls particular moments throughout K-12 where his performance and presence in the classroom were often conflated with "behavioral issues," and thus, he was labeled as such. He explained that in the early stages of his educational journey, there were points when he exhibited heightened levels of energy in the classroom. And as a consequence, his teachers later labeled him as having behavioral issues. From a CRT and DisCrit perspective, in instances where Black boys in systems of education – both with and without dis/abilities – exhibit behaviors that "deviate" from the perceived classroom norms, not only are they found to be inaccurately and negatively characterized, but the multidimensionality of their identity remains overlooked. Authors such as Clark, 2007; Proffitt, 2022; Wint et al., 2022 find that Black boys especially tend to be inaccurately labeled as having behavioral issues when the reality is, they have underlying dis/abilities. And as opposed to being provided the proper resources and

support needed to assist Tate in the classroom, he was simply labeled and written off as behaviorally challenged.

In addition to his behaviors being misperceived and miscategorized, from the time he was in elementary school up until the end of middle school, Tate expressed being exposed to particularly harmful language surrounding dis/ability. He exclaimed that the message he heard most about dis/ability was that it was "a bad thing." Although he did not initially perceive dis/ability to be inherently negative, constant exposure to such rhetoric both inside and outside the classroom led Tate to later internalize the belief that his dis/ability was inherently bad. As a result, after coming to understand that he was not behaviorally challenged and instead was both developmentally and learning dis/abled, his conceptualization of dis/ability was negatively skewed.

Lastly, in reflecting on her initial exposure to dis/ability and her perceptions of dis/ability, Londyn recalled a particular instance in which her facial expressions and gestures were pointed out in an effort to be corrected. Prior to receiving a diagnosis for her dis/ability, while in elementary school, Londyn shared how she would often make certain facial expressions involuntarily. However, in doing so, her family would often tell her "to stop," as if to imply whatever expressions she made were abnormal and left to her to control. Drawing upon the medical model of dis/ability, which posits that dis/ability is a result of an individual's physical or mental limitations that need to be fixed and/or cured, it becomes evident that in instructing Londyn to correct certain gestures, the assumption was that her dis/ability required rectification. However, neither her family nor the designated clinician responsible for her observations initially identified her actions as a symptomatic manifestation of her disability.

In essence, by being conditioned to believe that dis/ability was a "bad thing" and ultimately required correction, coupled with being mislabeled in the classroom, I argue that this further perpetuates the hegemonic ideologies apparent within K-12 education. In Tate's case, as a Black male who would later come to identify with having a dis/ability, he was initially made to believe that he had behavioral issues rather than having undergone any proper assessments to determine potential dis/abilities. Such a phenomenon not only perpetuates mislabeling within educational settings but also highlights the systemic shortcomings in providing adequate support and attention to Black males throughout their K-12 educational experiences. Additionally, Londyn was made to feel like her dis/ability was abnormal and that she required fixing. In addition to the harmful messages received regarding themselves and dis/ability in the broader context, the subsequent section provides an analysis of the harmful educational practices participants recount enduring.

Coursework and Academic Preparation

When discussing the courses participants recalled taking throughout K-12 education, several participants noted being placed in either "lower classes," "remedial classes," or "special education classes" without ever undergoing any formal assessment of their academic abilities. They conscientiously emphasized that the remedial and special education classes were typically comprised of students of color. Nicole, Nyla, Tate, and Kenneth shared their experiences across K-12 by recollecting the classrooms they were involuntarily placed in. For instance, Nicole recounted that she was placed in what she referred to as the "lowest and dumbest" class, which she stated was often associated with "students with special needs." As the majority of students in her class identified as having "special needs," her class was assigned the label of "low and

dumb." The label her class received suggests disparities in the academic rigor and curriculum presented in her class compared to other classrooms. Such an observation raises concerns as to whether students of color, dis/abled students, and particularly Black dis/abled students receive adequate academic preparation throughout their K-12 education. So much so that authors such as Alvarez (2024) and Hingstman et al. (2022) note the detrimental effects of lackadaisically placing students in Special Education without careful and deliberate consideration. Alvarez says, as a result of being funneled into Special Education classes either mistakenly or under the guise of misidentification, many students do not receive "the services needed to help develop academic and social skills to improve their well-being" (2024, para. 1). Although Nicole, Nyla, Tate, and Kenneth would later identify as having a learning and/or developmental dis/ability during their secondary education, their experiences highlight a significant issue in K-12 education. The mere placement of participants in Special Education classes without adequate support and resources led each participant to fall behind academically to some extent.

In addition to falling behind academically, I suggest that the conflation of "low and dumb" with "special needs" further perpetuates ableist ideologies within K-12 education. From a DisCrit perspective, such rhetoric implies that students who identify as having special needs are inherently perceived as dumb. Therefore reinforcing ableist stereotypes about what constitutes *normalcy* and what deviates from it. In this context, special needs was synonymous with lower intelligence, contrasting with non-special needs students who were often associated with higher level classes and presumed academic prowess.

Similarly, Nyla recalls being placed in "beginner's science," "not having tested for it," which was one class below the standard grade-level science. She also made a note of the fact that the "African American and Hispanic" students were often in the beginners' classes, whereas her

"White friends" were in "higher placed classes." Similar to Nicole, as Nylas' abilities were never assessed prior to her placement in the beginner's class. Since these classes are often comprised of Black and Hispanic students, it illuminates the perpetual issue of racism apparent in K-12 education. Particularly as Black and Hispanic students are not only funneled into less academically challenging classes but are often placed in entirely separate classrooms from their non-Black and Hispanic peers. Nyla underscores this by also asserting that her White peers were frequently enrolled in the higher placed classes. Such a practice implicitly communicates to students of color that academically advanced courses are, to an extent, reserved for White students, while beginner classes, which were often one grade level below students' current grade level, were designated for students of color.

Similar to Nyla's experience, Tate expressed taking a College Prep (CP) class his freshman year of high school, which was his school's "lowest level of a class." Tate noted that though his schools' demographics "were not a lot of Black people to begin with, the minorities were definitely placed in CP." Therefore, the practice of funneling students of color into specific classes, particularly those perceived as the lowest level, intensifies systemic inequalities within the educational system. Such a practice extends to dis/abled students of color, who may be placed in the least academically challenging classes, as they are not the recipients of adequate academic preparation compared to their non-dis/abled, non-student of color counterparts. In line with the experiences Nicole, Nyla, and Tate shared regarding their placement in various classes, Kenneth shared a similar yet somewhat unique experience.

When prompted to recall his coursework from K-12 education, Kenneth expressed being placed in "remedial classes" in elementary school due to demonstrating academic challenges. He states once his teachers realized "they couldn't teach him…and he wasn't doing well." he was

then “placed in remedial classes.” This is similar to how Nicole, Nyla, and Tate, Kenneth were placed in remedial classes before ever being administered a formal academic assessment. Although placing students who struggle academically in controlled environments is a good idea in theory, the act of placing students in separate classes on the basis of ability is a modern-day form of segregated education. Furthermore, it does students a disservice by not tending to their individual yet specific needs. The practice of funneling students into classrooms based solely on academic struggles, without additional assessments, deprives students of the tailored support and resources they may require.

Upon entering high school, Kenneth expressed, “There were two instances in which my IEP interfered with the courses I could take.” He went on to explain how he was unable to take certain classes at the same time as his graduating class because of his IEP, or so he was told. The issue apparent here is that despite having received accommodations based on his dis/ability status, Kenneth was still met with academic barriers, e.g., the inability to take the proper classes at the allotted time with his high school cohort and miscommunication between his advisors and himself. Initially, Kenneth was informed that he could not enroll in certain classes due to his IEP; however, Kenneth later discovered that was not the case. Unfortunately, due to miscommunication between his advisors and the messages conveyed to him, Kenneth fell behind his peers academically as he was required to take certain classes later in his high school career, which ultimately affected his academic progress. Such an experience is a testament to Buckles & Rublee (2022) and Pottiger’s (2022) findings that state Black dis/abled students are often less supported throughout K-12 in comparison to their non-Black dis/abled counterparts.

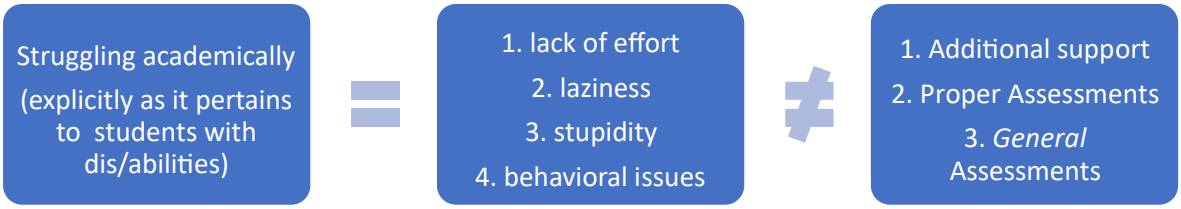
Given the aforementioned experiences participants shared, the decision to place students in lower, remedial, and special education classes without properly assessing their academic

abilities while also being seemingly driven by teachers' frustration exemplifies the presence of both ableist and racist practices within the K-12 education system. The *ableist* undertones become evident when the placement of participants in particular classes appears to be a default response stemming primarily from teachers' frustrations and lack of attentiveness. The *racist* undertones, I argue, are evident as specific racial groups, specifically Black and Hispanic students, continue to be disproportionately concentrated in remedial, lower, and special education classes. In the cases of Nicole, Nyla, and Tate, all three participants noted being automatically placed in lower-level classes at some point during their K-12 journey without ever undergoing any academic assessment. Similarly, yet slightly contrasting, in Kenneth's case, although he was challenged when grasping certain concepts in the classroom, rather than formally assessing the root causes of his struggles, his teachers resorted to placing him in remedial classes.

I argue that such experiences and practices illustrate the incessant nature of racism and ableism entrenched within society and in the context of education. These experiences furthermore confirm that the legacy of discrimination experienced by Black and dis/abled students historically persists within present-day educational spaces. However, such discriminatory practices are not as overt as the outright denial of access to education; instead, they manifest in the form of academic under-preparation, often exemplified by the placement of students in certain classes. Additionally, although the intention behind providing students with dis/abilities separate classroom spaces is not inherently ableist, the notion of segregating children based on their dis/ability is – especially when students express the rigor, material, and curriculum differ vastly from that of general education spaces (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Harmful Rhetoric/ Messages Received



In conjunction with the harmful messages participants received regarding themselves and their abilities, along with the injurious practice of being placed and displaced in specific classes, participants expanded upon their experiences when discussing college and college choices throughout their K-12 journey.

College Choice

The last and final sub-theme that emerged from the larger theme of harmful rhetoric and experiences pertained to college choice. Participants were asked to recall the conversations they had about college, with whom they had such conversations, and to what extent these conversations transpired throughout K-12 education. Nicole, Layla, Kenneth, and Tate all expressed having negative conversations surrounding college, particularly within the confines of their high schools.

When sharing their college list with teachers and staff on their high school campuses, Nicole and Layla expressed that they were immediately told to either "aim lower" or "have a backup just in case." Nicole expressed that she shared her plan to attend UCLA with the office staff at her high school, all of whom were White. As opposed to being met with enthusiasm, Nicole shared that the staff members told her to "aim lower" because even the "highest achieving student from her high school was going to the state school." Similar to the encounter Fae

recollected with their middle school teacher, Nicole's account of the conversation she had with her school's office staff becomes evidently harmful given (a) the power dynamic between the office staff and Nicole and (b) the racist implications of White staff telling Black students to aim lower in their collegiate pursuits. In a similar vein, Layla expressed sharing her college list with her AVID teacher, which consisted partially of "safety" schools. Safety schools are categorized as guaranteed admissions to certain institutions, given that a student exceeds the minimum requirements. However, in sharing her college list with her AVID teacher, Layla was told to pick a different set of safety schools "just in case," as her teacher felt that what she defined as safety schools was out of her reach.

Authors Croghan et al. (2024), Easterbrook (2020), and Janiga & Costenbader (2002) discuss the harm in discouraging marginalized groups from pursuing higher education, along with commonly used rhetoric around the pursuit of college particularly among racial minorities and dis/abled students. Similarly, findings from this study reveal the persistent nature of harmful rhetoric around the pursuit of college particularly among Black and dis/abled students in K-12 education. In both Nicole and Laylas' experiences, the perpetuation of racism and ableism become apparent, as both participants expressed being discouraged from applying to certain institutions and having their academic abilities questioned. In Nicole's case, she was told by White staff members that she should aim lower in her collegiate pursuit, insinuating that she was not capable enough to get into UCLA. The same staff members went on to assert the irrelevant fact that even the highest-ranked student from Nicole's high school was not going to a University of California institution; because he was attending a state school, they suggested that Nicole consider a similar option. Layla, on the other hand, expressed similar discouragement when her AVID teacher suggested that the safety schools she was applying to were beyond her reach. His

advice to have a backup *just in case*, subtly and overtly conveyed his doubts about her ability to gain acceptance to her safety schools. Ultimately, this led to his suggestion that Layla should apply to less competitive institutions.

In a comparable manner, when discussing the colleges they planned to attend with their school counselors and advisors, Kenneth and Tate also expressed that they received questionable feedback. Kenneth recalls that whenever he mentioned attending an HBCU (Morehouse College) to students and staff at his high school – more specifically his counselors – they would often mispronounce the name of the school or pose belittling questions about the school. He mentioned, "They'd say things like… Morehead," or they'd ask questions such as "Where is that again?" Similarly, Tate recalls explicitly being told by his White college advisor that "going to Morehouse was a *very* bad decision….Because compared to the Naval Academy [another institution on Tate's college list], Morehouse was *only* a college." Here, both participants' counselors/advisors made it clear that not only did they look down upon HBCUs, specifically Morehouse College, but they were also not supportive of students' decision to attend the college altogether. In Kenneth's case, it was subtle when his counselors appeared to mispronounce the name of the college deliberately and would constantly ask where the school was located. It was as if to imply Morehouse was so insignificant that no one knew where it was nor how to pronounce it. Tate, on the other hand, experienced blatant commentary that reduced Morehouse College, as his counselor referred to it as just a college. However, in disseminating such messages, counselors and advisors overlook – or perhaps intentionally disregard – the potential impact their messages could have on their students. While the harm incurred from discouraging students from applying to college is significant in and of itself, the additional layer of minimizing schools, particularly within the Black community, to Black students further

exacerbates such harm. The message being conveyed is that students are encouraged to aim for admissions to more "prestigious" institutions, and in these particular instances, Historically Black Colleges and Universities were not associated with prestige.

Just as participants expressed harmful messaging and experiences throughout K-12 education, others shared the significance of the positive and nurturing experiences they had.

Nurturing (Unspoken) Messages/ Encounters

While participants did not explicitly recall positive messages they received pertaining to themselves, their identity, or their capabilities during K-12 education, the absence of such explicit sharing does not negate the fact that they received the unspoken messages. Nyla specifically noted her interpretation of the dynamics apparent between herself, her peers, and her Black teachers while in middle school. She said the following: "…teachers even found ways to relate to me as well. They wouldn't like push off anything that like – any problems…I feel they really cared about their students and their educational outcomes." Nyla made this statement after recalling the apparent relationships, and the lack thereof, between herself and her elementary school teachers, who were predominantly White. Although she did not directly articulate neglect nor a lack of relatability on the part of her White teachers, her acknowledgment of the familiarity she felt with her Black teachers suggests a contrasting dynamic and relational experience. In other words, explicitly stating that her Black teachers found ways to relate to her while never *pushing anything off* implies that while in elementary school, Nyla may have experienced the exact opposite with her non- Black teachers. As authors Branch (2001), Gershenson et al. (2021), and Marrun et al. (2019) find that racial representation in K-12 is critical in students of color experiences and altogether success, Nyla's encounters with her Black teachers throughout K-12 further such assertions. Such encounters with her black teachers signal the significance of

representation in both primary and secondary education, where Black dis/abled students expressed feelings of safety and security when cultivating relationships with their Black teachers.

In a similar vein, Evelyn, Tate, and Nyla articulated their experiences interacting with their Black teachers throughout K-12 education. However, all their experiences were specific to coursework and academic preparation.

Coursework and Academic Preparation

Evelyn and Tate echoed similar sentiments when referencing the positive experiences they had in the classroom, especially as they pertained to coursework. Evelyn shared, "They [her teachers] knew I was struggling…and they'd come up to me themselves and said, 'Hey, I can help you?'" Here, it becomes clear that there was a certain level of care and attentiveness that Black teachers showed their Black students, even more so their students with dis/abilities since Evelyn was hard of hearing. Tate emphasized the ease of being in the classroom with Black teachers:

> [M]ade classes ten times easier because she just taught differently. And she didn't view me as like a – so oh yeah – I had a lot of energy in a lot of classes and some teachers view that as like, "Oh, he has behavioral issues." And she'd be like, "No, he just, he just need to be- he just need extra work."

Tate was referring to the navigation of the classroom environment being made easier in terms of his academics; he suggests that being understood and listened to by his Black teachers ultimately contributed to making his academic experience ten times easier. In his other classes, Tate found that he was constantly written off and characterized as having *behavioral issues*. However, in spaces with his Black teachers, Tate received grace, understanding, and advocacy. For instance,

his Black teachers would often explain to other teachers that he did not have behavioral issues and instead, he required extra work, which in this case was synonymous with extra attention. This observation underscores the intersectionality of both ableist and racist ideologies perpetuated in K-12 education as Tate's White teachers witnessed his behavior in the classroom and hastily [mis]labeled him as having behavioral issues. In addition to the support Tate describes receiving from his Black teachers, Evelyn shared the support she received from her counselor by being placed in a college readiness class involuntarily.

During her freshman year of high school, Evelyn recalls taking AVID in her first year of high school, a college readiness course initially presented as optional. However, as she progressed throughout high school, she later realized her counselor and IEP advisor required that she enroll in AVID for the remainder of her high school career. Contrary to Nicole, Nyla, Kenneth, and Tate's' experiences, where they found themselves placed in classes that were a grade level or more below their current grade, Evelyn highlights a vastly different experience. She articulates her counselor advocating on her behalf to ensure that she was enrolled in courses that would equip her for college.

The final area participants expressed receiving positive and nurturing reinforcement around was college choice. However, it is necessary to emphasize that in most instances, these messages were enforced in the home as opposed to in the classroom setting, which I argue attests to the endemic racist and ableist ideologies apparent within K-12 education. Black dis/abled students rarely, if ever, received encouragement around college and their college decision-making process throughout K-12 education, especially in spaces where their schools' teachers, administrators, and other school staff were predominantly White. As such, the following section

highlights the positive messages participants received regarding college and college decision-making at home.

College Choice

Contrary to the implicit and explicit messages participants received at school, where they were either told they were aiming too high in their collegiate pursuits or were advised to have backup options, at home, participants' parents diligently emphasized the pursuit of college. Nicole, Kenneth, Tate, Fae, and Londyn all expressed the unanimous consensus that college was not necessarily considered an option in their household; rather, it was an expectation. Evelyn, on the other hand, was encouraged to pursue college per her counselor's recommendation. Contrary to casting shadows of doubt regarding their suitability for college, as reported by other participants, Evelyn noted how invested her counselor was in her journey leading up to college. In addition to engaging in discussions around college with her counselor, Evelyn named her counselor as being instrumental in her college decision-making process, as he provided significant support throughout the entirety of her process. He not only assisted with curating an initial college list but also discovered that UC Merced would be a perfect fit for her, given the previous conversations they had about college. While some participants received positive reinforcement concerning college and college choice, others decided to pursue higher education as a symbol of resistance where they were strategically and personally informed. The following section disentangles the answers to research question 2.

RQ 2

How do K-12 experiences inform Black students with learning dis/abilities' college decision-making process?

In answering the question of *how* K-12 experiences inform Black dis/abled students' college decision-making process, I found that such experiences played a significant role in influencing how students perceived and ultimately approached their college decision-making process. This means that, based on the messages participants received, coupled with their classroom experiences and academic preparation, many students grew to identify their college decision-making process as an act of resistance. Some even exclaimed about applying to certain institutions solely because they believed they had to prove their worth, be it to others or perhaps themselves. In addition, for many participants, their K-12 experiences informed the individually contextualized and abstract factors they considered throughout their college decision-making process. Tate, Fae, Felicia, and Londyn all express their approach to their college decision-making process with one common pattern in the data. The following section depicts how the findings from RQ1 informed students' college decision-making process.

As previously mentioned, Tate, Fae, Felicia, and Londyn all expressed approaching their college decision-making process with the common pattern of *proving they could do it*, where "it" refers to two tasks: (a) applying to college altogether and (b) proving to themselves they were capable of gaining admission into certain schools. When asked to explain their rationale behind the schools they chose to apply to during high school, each participant stated the following:

> Tate: …Well, I feel like the Ivy Leagues just so I could say I got into an Ivy.
>
> Fae: ...I feel like it was also like– an affirming thing because I had been so like, insecure academically for so long. So, I wanted to see, can I really get into the school and can I really do this and so yeah–.
>
> Felicia: I think it just meant a lot to like myself, that I could do it…I could do it myself.
>
> Londyn: I applied to Stanford because I wanted to see if I could get in.

Tate revealed that his decision to apply to Ivy League institutions was driven solely by the desire to say he got in. Taking into account Tate's K-12 experiences, where he was characterized as behaviorally challenged, felt overlooked by teachers, and was initially placed in lower-level classes upon entering high school, it can be inferred that these formative experiences had a (in)direct influence on his perspective towards higher education. Perhaps the underlying need to be seen, heard, and affirmed by others may have contributed to Tate's desire to apply to certain institutions simply for the sake of saying he got in.

Similarly, Fae expressed approaching their college decision-making process in a manner that mirrored Tate's approach. When asked why they applied to certain schools, their response was "to see if I could get in." Early on in their interview, when Fae was asked to recall their K12 educational experiences, both in the classroom and at home, Fae mentioned two instances in particular. The first was being called lazy and stupid, and the second was being overlooked and dismissed by their teachers. It appears that Tate and Fae's decision to apply to certain schools to see if they could get in was a direct response to the messaging they received early on in their K12 journey. I assert that, for Tate, achieving admission to a prestigious institution would subconsciously validate that he was not categorized as a low achiever, contrary to his placement in the lowest academic track during high school. Additionally, gaining admission into the institutions they set out to apply to would affirm that Fae was neither perceived as stupid nor lazy. Ultimately, it rendered their decision to apply to college an act of resistance.

Lastly, Felicia and Londyn discuss how their decision to apply to college was heavily shaped by personal considerations, particularly given their classroom experiences. Although in Felicia's case, I'd argue that her decision-making may have been influenced by the negative messages she received regarding her academic capabilities. When asked why she decided to

apply to college, Felicia's response was, "I think it just meant a lot to like myself, that I could do it…I could do it myself." In the previous quote, Felicia noted applying to college would not only mean that she could *do it* but even more so that she could "do it by herself." I contend that the repeated messages to "try harder" during Felicia's childhood, coupled with a lack of academic support from teachers during difficult challenges, may have inadvertently fostered a self-sufficient mindset within Felicia as she approached the college decision-making process. Hence her statement, "it meant that I could do it… I could do it myself."

Lastly, when asked why she applied to certain schools, Londyn expressed that she was applying to Stanford to see if she could get in. Although she did not receive negative messaging about her academic abilities per se, early on in her K-12 journey, Londyn was conditioned to believe that her dis/ability required correction to be perceived as normal. While Londyn's decision to apply to Stanford may have been primarily driven by the personal desire to tout that she got in, the data reveal that her decision to apply to Stanford may have also been influenced – subconsciously – by societal norms and perceptions around Blackness and dis/ability. Despite being encouraged to conform to certain expectations given her identity as a Black dis/abled woman, applying to and potentially gaining admission to one of the nation's most prestigious institutions would challenge both societal expectations of what was considered normal and what was considered academically attainable for Black dis/abled students. Therefore, akin to Tate's experience, gaining admission to an Ivy League institution would not only validate her intellectual capabilities but also serve to demonstrate that Ivy League institutions were indeed attainable for Black dis/abled students.

Given the combination of negative messages participants received with a layer of inadequate academic preparation throughout K-12 education, it becomes apparent how such

experiences informed participants' college decision-making process. In the current study, participants alluded to their decision-making as a form of resistance since the rationale behind applying to many institutions was to prove that they could do it or that they could gain admission. In reflecting upon the negative experiences they had with White staff, teachers, and other school administrators, as well as the positive encounters participants shared with their Black teachers, participants expressed the extent to which such encounters further informed their college decision-making process. Additionally, the majority of participants suggested that due to a combination of both detrimental and supportive interactions with teachers, staff, and other school administrators, considerations of safety and community emerged as pivotal factors in their college decision-making process.

Though several authors such as Hossler & Gallagher (1987) and Spies (1978), among others have provided invaluable research surrounding the factors that students often consider throughout their college decision-making process more broadly, other authors have examined the stark differences in college decision-making among Black and dis/abled students. Authors such as Clayton et al. (2023) and Contreras et al. (2018) examine college choice as described by Black students and Bettencourt et al. (2022) and Carroll et al. (2023) examine college choice as described by dis/abled students. Clayton et al. found that Black students often consider "racial climate and cultural support systems" throughout their college choice process (2023, p.750). Additionally, Contreras et al. (2018) found Black students often prioritize "racial diversity" and "the feeling of 'home'" amidst their college choice process (2018, p.44). Bettencourt et al. found that dis/abled students often considered "the quality of disability services and accessibility of the campus" throughout their college choice process (2022, p. 150). Carroll on the other hand found that dis/abled students considered "whether the school provided disability services" altogether

(2023, p. 136). As the findings from previous literature suggest differences in college choice/ decision-making among Black and dis/abled students, given the intersectional identities of the participants in this study, this study revealed the similarities and differences across participants' college decision-making process.

As Nyla recalled the support she received from her Black teachers in middle school, without ever having to articulate the help she required, she explained how her teachers "really cared" about students and how their support extended beyond the scope of academia. Nyla explained that her Black teachers would go out of their way to check in on students while also offering unprompted support. Similarly, Tate expressed receiving the most support from his Black teachers throughout middle school as they made navigating the classroom and overall-academics "ten times easier." Nyla and Tate recognized the level of attentiveness, care, and support received from their Black teachers along their K-12 journey compared to what was received from their non-Black teachers. As such, both participants articulated the importance of safety and community as they began to consider the college or university they would later attend. For both participants, the element of community was prioritized as participants expressed feeling thoroughly and exclusively supported by their Black teachers in middle school. Similarly, the sense of safety students experienced from Black teachers stems from the level of care and attention teachers provided in regard to participants' personal and academic needs. In other words, Nyla and Tate grew to associate community and safety with Blackness by experiencing a sense of community and safety in the classroom environment. This results in their prioritizing both elements during their decision-making process. For instance, Tate considered attending an HBCU because he understood that he would be surrounded by students, staff, and faculty that mirrored his identity. Although she did not attend an HBCU, Nyla expressed her interest in UC

Irvine as she recalled witnessing a genuine sense of "togetherness" amongst the Black community upon her initial campus visit.

In a similar vein, Londyn, Evelyn, Kenneth, and Felicia noted the extent to which the absence of Black teachers and Black students throughout their K-12 journey influenced their college decision-making process. In instances where participants were scarcely exposed to Black teachers and students throughout K-12, they embarked upon their college decision-making process. Participants sought college campuses that had a Black community. Each participant expressed either wanting to attend an HBCU or explicitly seeking colleges where the Black community was not only "present" but also appeared to be "close-knit." Of the four participants, Kenneth was the only one who attended an HBCU. Similar to the sentiments Tate echoed, Kenneth sought to attend an HBCU as he emphasized the importance of being surrounded by individuals who looked like him. Londyn, Evelyn, and Felicia, on the other hand, considered both the presence of and kinship between Black students on campus throughout their decision-making process. In reflecting on their K-12 journey, participants acknowledged the impact limited exposure to Black teachers and peers had on their overarching educational experiences. This led participants to prioritize community and safety throughout their decision-making processes.

As CRT asserts that racism is permanent in American society, it also urges readers and scholars to re-envision the lens through which history is told. One where racial and dis/abled minorities are encouraged to share their narratives and personal accounts of experiences-firsthand. The findings from this study revealed that within K-12 education, Black dis/abled students continue to be funneled into particular types of classrooms (i.e., lower, remedial, and Special Education), further exacerbating racial inequity in K-12 education. Furthermore, the

messages participants received about themselves, their academic abilities, and their college decision-making process were often found to be harmful, particularly when coming from White teachers, staff, and other school administrators. Thus, by incorporating elements of revisionist history, this study carved out space for participants to share and reflect upon the entirety of their K-12 educational journey- recapping both the harmful and positive experiences they underwent.

While CRT considers how race/racism contributes to the lived experiences of minoritized individuals, DisCrit examines the intersectional experiences of individuals with dis/abilities. Hence why the current study sought to (a) examine how issues of ableism persisted in K-12 spaces and (b) to also highlight the voices and experiences of Black dis/abled- a population who is severely overlooked. Issues of ableism and racism in tandem were made apparent via the messages participants heard about themselves, their academic abilities, and the classrooms students found themselves placed in. Some participants found that they were often mislabeled if they ever expressed academic difficulties, posed questions in the classroom, or simply performed in ways that deviated from what was often deemed normal in the classroom setting. In other instances, participants found that they were placed in remedial or Special Education classes whenever they struggled, academically. For participants who did not demonstrate difficulty yet still identified as dis/abled, they expressed also being funneled into particular classrooms without ever receiving any prior assessment. On the other hand, other participants expressed the positive encounters they shared with teachers, namely their Black teachers, and how such encounters informed the factors they considered during their college decision-making process.

Given the findings from RQ 1 and RQ 2, the following section infers the implications that stem from the current investigation for practitioners, researchers, and policymakers alike. In the realm of practice, this study underscores the importance for parents, teachers, and academic staff

to critically assess how their perceptions of Black dis/abled students significantly impact students' educational journeys. In academic research, there is a compelling call for future scholars to investigate further methods for replicating the supportive environments that Black dis/abled students describe experiencing within K-12 settings, particularly in classrooms where teachers may not share similar racial identities. In terms of policy, this study emphasizes the urgent need for K-12 education systems to reevaluate assessment tools used to determine students' needs and to reconsider the K-12 curriculum fundamentally.

Implications for Practice

According to scholars such as Kaihoi (2022), Lee and Shute (2010), and Shah (2007), teachers, parents, and peers exert considerable influence over the academic trajectories of dis/abled students. Within the context of K-12 education and especially concerning college decision-making, it is imperative that teachers, parents, and staff are acutely aware of how they communicate their perceptions of dis/ability to their dis/abled students. As evidenced by findings from this study, such awareness holds particular significance for many marginalized student groups, particularly Black dis/abled students, as perceptions not only shape theoretical understandings but also exert substantial influence on practical educational experiences. The perceptions held and maintained by teachers, parents, staff, and other school personnel surrounding race, dis/ability, and the intersections thereof play a pivotal role in shaping the educational trajectories of Black dis/abled students. Not only do such perceptions influence the quality of education Black dis/abled receive, but they also contribute to the overall quality of their experiences within K-12 settings. Therefore, by rectifying perceptions regarding race and dis/ability, teachers, parents, and staff can significantly enhance the K-12 educational experience

for Black dis/abled students while also providing more effective support throughout their college decision-making process.

Implications for Research

Given the findings and methodological limitations (see Chapter 3) from this study, there are additional avenues for future research to explore. This study suggests the need to investigate how the positive and nurturing interactions experienced by Black dis/abled students and their Black teachers in K-12 settings *can* be replicated in classrooms where teachers are not Black. As Black dis/abled students' progress through K-12 education, it becomes crucial that Black dis/abled students encounter positive and nurturing environments with their Black teachers and within a broader context that includes non-Black, particularly White, teachers and staff. This research direction holds promise for improving educational outcomes for Black dis/abled students, as it aims to develop strategies to support students throughout their K-12 journey effectively and has the potential to foster positive college decision-making processes among Black dis/abled students.

Implications for Policy

Lastly, in addition to practice and research-based implications, this study suggests policy related implications. In the current study, Black dis/abled students were constantly funneled into lower-tiered educational spaces, even more so without ever having undergone an academic assessment, which underscores profound policy implications at both state and K-12 system-wide levels. It becomes evident that despite the apparent geographical diversity among the participants included in this study, they all expressed similar experiences throughout K-12 education. Thus, it presents a call for systemic reform in both state and federal K-12 education policies. As participants expressed either their inability to take certain courses throughout K-12 or were

limited in the courses they could take on a statewide level, it becomes apparent that educational curriculum policy needs to be revamped to remove course selection barriers, especially those that would best prepare them for college. On a K-12 system-wide level, it becomes apparent that certain assessments need to be set in place to (a) accurately assess students' academic capabilities and needs and (b) properly determine classroom placement. Addressing these issues is critical for advancing educational equity and dismantling barriers that sustain inequitable educational outcomes among marginalized student populations, Black dis/abled students especially.

Summary of Findings

Based on the findings of this study, several implications emerge for teachers, parents, and staff to reassess their conceptualizations of race and dis/ability and, even more so, their perceptions of Black dis/abled students. Future research endeavors should delve further into the positive encounters Black dis/abled students describe sharing with Black teachers in K-12 education and assess ways to potentially replicate such environments among this special population with White teachers and staff. Furthermore, there is a clear call for state and K-12 system-wide policy reforms aimed at fostering more equitable K-12 educational experiences. The subsequent section proposes recommendations pertaining to practice, research, and policy implications derived from this study.

Recommendations

Given the findings and implications gathered from this study, I'm led to make the following recommendations: (a) the need for cultural competence and sensitivity training among teachers, staff, and parents, (b) the implementation of holistic academic assessments, and (c) a revamped school curriculum. I contend that the following recommendations will afford teachers, staff, and parents the opportunity to broaden their understanding of the intersectional realities

faced by Black dis/abled students, as well as allow space for each individual to influence the educational journeys and collegiate decision-making processes among Black dis/abled students within K-12 settings. By considering systemic and institutional beliefs and attitudes around race, dis/ability, and the conflation of both, the following recommendations adopt a Social Justice Model approach to prioritize the intersectional element of identity.

Cultural Competence & Sensitivity Training/ Workshop

To eliminate the perpetual harm Black dis/abled students experience both within and throughout K-12 education while also ensuring they are able to make well-informed decisions around college choice, it is imperative that teachers, staff, and parents are exposed to cultural competence and sensitivity training. Though "more a part of medical education than anywhere else" (Kachur & Altschuler, 2009, p.101), Eddey and Robey define cultural competence as health care providers who are aware of the importance of the values, beliefs, traditions, parenting styles, and other aspects of one's culture (2005). Sorensen et al. add that cultural competence "among health professionals is viewed as one strategy to ensure equal access to healthcare across diverse groups and to ensure that patients receive care by their needs" (2017, para. 1). According to the authors, cultural competence requires providers to recognize their own sets of beliefs, values, etc., in order to provide the best possible care to their patients based on their patient's individual needs. In the context of education, Eden et al. found that "cultural competence in education has emerged as a critical focus…aiming to create inclusive learning environments" (2024, p. 383). Given its application in both health care and education, I posit that teachers and staff could benefit greatly from cultural competence training. Such training would contribute to creating an inclusive learning environment while simultaneously taking into account the individualized needs of students. In other words, in working with marginalized populations,

particularly Black dis/abled students, it is imperative that teachers and staff critically examine their beliefs around race and dis/ability as well as their beliefs about students with conflating identities. In doing so, teachers and staff would cultivate a more supportive classroom environment and an inclusive campus climate.

In their article "Special or mainstream? The views of disabled students" Shah references Burgess' study where Burgess found "that their (students with disabilities) curriculum choices were severely curtailed…[as] young disabled people she talked to could not study subjects of their choice …due to attitudes of teachers" (2007, p.429). Furthermore, in their article, Shah suggested that teachers who maintained negative attitudes towards students with dis/abilities adversely impacted their academic coursework and, consequently, their overall academic progress. This is especially relevant for students with dis/abilities who were unable to take certain classes throughout their K-12 education. Similar to the findings of this study, I discovered several instances where teacher perceptions of students hindered their academic progress in a strikingly similar vein. This leads me to suggest the need for teachers and staff to engage in cultural competence trainings to adequately prepare students academically.

On one hand, I believe that such a training would ensure any preconceived biases teachers and staff held about students with multiple marginalizing identities and, more specifically, Black dis/abled students were acknowledged and corrected early on in a student's academic career. On the other hand, I believe that engaging in such training would require teachers and staff to correct their attitudes and perceptions about (a) students with dis/abilities more broadly, (b) students with multiple marginalizing identities, and (c) the academic capabilities of students with multiple marginalizing identities. While cultural competence training cannot guarantee a transformation in the beliefs and attitudes of teachers and staff

towards Black dis/abled students, it does offer the opportunity for a deliberate reevaluation of these beliefs. This process can lead to more informed and conscientious decision-making concerning the academic trajectories of students. In the long run, I believe that this can inform students' college decision-making processes. Potentially and ideally, teachers and staff will be properly trained to best support and cater to the needs of students with multiple marginalizing intersecting identities throughout the entirety of their K-12 education.

In addition to proposing mandatory cultural competence training for teachers and staff, I recommend that they, along with parents, participate in sensitivity training workshops. This recommendation aims to enhance teachers, staff, and parents' ability to more effectively support the educational needs of Black dis/abled students throughout K-12 education. Lasch-Quinn (2001) defined sensitivity training as "an approach toward changing individual attitudes through small group activity" (p. xiii). Within this study, there were multiple instances where participants disclosed apparent disconnects in perceptions around dis/ability between themselves, their parents, and their teachers in both personal contexts and in broader discussions about dis/ability. Such a disconnect often led to harmful practices perpetuated throughout their K-12 journey, which have already been expanded upon throughout this paper. Therefore, I suggest that participating in sensitivity training and workshops has the potential to shift the attitudes toward Black dis/abled students held by teachers, parents, and staff. Additionally, I presume that teachers and other school administrators can benefit from sensitivity training, as it would educate them on ways to effectively interact with students with multiple intersecting identities and, more specifically, Black students with dis/abilities. For example, as seen within this study, participants would often note whenever they struggled academically, they were either mislabeled or automatically placed in lower-level classes. The incorporation of sensitivity training, I believe,

would allow teachers to be more adept when tending to the academic needs of Black dis/abled students and urge them to take inventory of their internal beliefs about Black dis/abled students.

Similarly, I recommend that parents engage in sensitivity workshops, as there were many instances where participants noted the impact their parent's perceptions around dis/ability had on them. For some, such perceptions resulted in parents' misunderstandings of their child's behaviors, and for others, their parents resorted to medical assistance as they sought to "fix" their child. Hence, I believe enhancing parental awareness around dis/ability could potentially lead students to adopt more positive discourse surrounding dis/ability, therefore counteracting the ableist and biased rhetoric they frequently encountered. In addition to workshop-centered recommendations, the following recommendations contribute to the logistical element of improved K-12 educational experiences. The following recommendation invites teachers and other school administrators to consider (re)evaluating their assessment tools when working with students with dis/abilities.

Holistic Academic Assessments

In addition to the aforementioned trainings and workshops, I propose the implementation of a holistic academic assessment, particularly when gauging the academic needs of Black students with dis/abilities. As previously mentioned, the participants in this study often recalled one of two scenarios as it pertained to their coursework while in K-12 education. The first is their placement in remedial classes early on in K-12 education without being assessed for a dis/ability or academic aptitude. The second scenario is that participants report being dismissed whenever they expressed academic challenges. As such, I argue it is imperative that teachers, staff, and other school administrators implement an initial holistic review assessment prior to placing students in certain classrooms or dismissing their academic struggles as a mere lack of effort.

I emphasize the implementation of a holistic assessment as opposed to a strict academic assessment since I found that participants often expressed struggling academically at certain points in their K-12 career due to the comorbid impacts of their social environment. Just as students did not have the language to articulate that their dis/ability contributed to their performance, they could also not articulate that their environment simultaneously affected their academic outcomes. Neglecting to assess dis/ability, environmental factors, and academic needs while placing students in remedial classes on the mere basis of observation was more harmful than beneficial. Students were neither properly accommodated nor were their needs truly addressed. Thus, I suggest implementing an initial holistic assessment, which may aid in more effectively determining student needs. Finally, in addition to workshop recommendations and the need to reconsider academic assessments, the last recommendation underscores the necessity of overhauling the current K-12 curriculum, particularly in California.

Education Curriculum: Revamp

Currently, the California Department of Education requires high school students to complete the following course requirements to graduate:

Three years of English

Three years of Social Science

Two years of Science

Two years of Mathematics

Two years of Physical Education

One year of Foreign Language/visual or performing arts/ career technical education (cde.ca.gov)

While the courses outlined above cater to different academic disciplines, there are no mandated courses around college or college readiness. Similar to the course AVID, which a few participants expressed taking while in high school, I suggest that all high schools across the U.S. implement a required course relative to college exploration or preparation. While many participants expressed familial encouragement to pursue a college education, they also reported insufficient support from their schools during the college decision-making process. Presumably, being required to take a college-related course may better prepare participants for the college-going and decision-making process.

As previously noted, while several participants were steered into lower-tiered classes during K-12 education, which ultimately placed them at an academic disadvantage, some participants found themselves in circumstances that might have deemed them ineligible to apply for certain schools, had they fallen significantly behind. In other words, being required to take classes below their grade level had the potential to jeopardize participants' eligibility for admission into certain schools. For instance, to be considered eligible for admission to the University of California school system, students must satisfy each of the following requirements:

Two years of College Preparatory History

- *world history, cultures or historical geography and U.S. history or one-half year of U.S. history and one-half year of civics or American government*

Three years of College Preparatory Mathematics

- *including the topics covered in elementary and advanced algebra and two- and three-dimensional geometry*

Two years of College Preparatory Science

- *including or integrating topics that provide fundamental knowledge in two of these three subjects: biology, chemistry, or physics*

Four years of College Preparatory English

Two years of language other than English

One year of visual and performing arts

One year of College Preparatory elective ("Subject Requirements (A-G)", n.d)

While much of the CA high school general education course requirements closely align with the A-G requirements outlined in the UC system, the apparent discrepancy lies in the types of courses students take in addition to the length in which they are required to take them while in high school. Nyla, for example, expressed being placed in "beginner science," which was ultimately one level below her actual grade. Though she wound up attending a University of California school (seeing that the UC system requires two years of college preparatory science in two of the three subjects: biology, chemistry, and physics), for a student who may have been placed more than one grade level behind in science, there is no guarantee that they would meet the stipulation in two of the three listed subjects. Additionally, the final A-G requirement, as outlined by the University of California, is a college preparatory elective. However, as previously noted, college preparatory electives are not mandated by the CA Department of Education, and many of the participants in this study expressed never having taken a college prep/related course while in high school. Though every K-12 system may not redress its curriculum to meet that of the UC A-G requirements, it is important to establish a standard curriculum that all K-12 systems mirror in order to ensure students' eligibility for admissions to various institutions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research study had two major aims: (a) to move away from the propelling narrative that Black dis/abled students are underrepresented in spaces of higher education and instead, highlight the voices and experiences of Black dis/abled students who have successfully matriculated into higher education; and (b) to highlight the K-12 educational experiences of Black dis/abled students while recognizing the extent to which K-12 experiences informed college decision-making processes. Thus, this research study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do Black students with learning dis/abilities describe their educational experiences throughout K-12 education?
2. How do K-12 experiences inform Black students with learning dis/abilities' college decision-making process?

By conducting in-depth, semi-structured, life history style interviews with nine participants, the findings from this study revealed four insights: (a) Black dis/abled students experienced more harm than good when interacting with White teachers, staff, and administrators, (b) Black dis/abled students expressed having more positive experiences interacting with their Black teachers, (c) given findings one and two, the majority of participants expressed how such experiences contributed to their approach to the college decision-making process which was ultimately an act of resistance, and (d) the factors participants considered throughout their college decision-making process were individually contextualized and abstract. The findings from this study reveal the continual perpetuation of racist and ableist ideologies apparent within K-12 education and the extent to which such ideologies informed students' college decision-making processes.

In further examining the data, this study executed multiple cycles of coding (Saldana, 2013). Incorporating several rounds of coding allowed me to extract larger themes for data analysis and interpretation. Interview transcriptions relied on open, axial, and in-vivo coding. Each coding method provided a different lens to analyze the data: open coding was used to identify broader themes throughout the data, axial coding was used to identify connections across open codes, and in-vivo coding was used to highlight participant language verbatim. Following the completion of coding, I provided final recommendations based on the findings from this study.

I posit the incessant need for the following: the implementation of cultural competence and sensitivity training and workshops, initial holistic academic assessments, and a revamping of K-12 curricula. I believe the following recommendations will positively and steadily contribute to increased matriculation rates among Black dis/abled students into institutions of higher education: cultural competence training and sensitivity training that would better inform parents, teachers, staff, and other school administrators on ways to properly engage with and best support marginalized students; and the distribution of an initial holistic review assessment that would allow teachers and other school administrators to accurately assess the needs of their students as opposed to defaulting them into special education, remedial, or lower-tiered classes. Lastly, I posit the need to revamp the education curriculum to ensure all students have an equal chance at being considered eligible to apply to various institutions.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: TERMINOLOGY

Ableism: The discrimination and social prejudice against individuals with dis/abilities

Axial Coding: Qualitative coding method used to identify connections between "open codes"

College decision making: The process which students consider the colleges or institution in which they hope to attend, coupled with the final decision students make in selecting a college or university to attend

Critical Race Theory (CRT): Derived from Critical Legal Studies, CRT is *a theoretical framework* that encourages the interrogation of racism in the everyday lived experiences of People of Color, and more specifically, Black people

Developmental Dis/ability: a group of conditions that begin during a child's developmental period and are due to an impairment in physical, learning, language, or behavior

Disability Critical Race Theory: A theoretical framework that examines how racism, ableism, and other means of hegemony contribute to the lived experiences of dis/abled individuals ***In-Vivo Coding:*** Qualitative coding method that captures participants' language verbatim when identifying themes

Learning Dis/ability: A group of conditions having an effect on one's acquisition of knowledge or ability to perform in a classroom setting. It may impede one's ability to read, write, or comprehend/ execute mathematics

Medical Model of Disability: A model of dis/ability that suggests that dis/ability is an issue that is inherently biological and thus should be *fixed* or *cured*

Mislabeling: An inaccurate assessment of one's academic ability, resulting in the incorrect labeling of a dis/ability

***Open Coding*:** Qualitative coding method that extrapolates larger/ broader themes within the data.

Racism: Discrimination and prejudice against individuals based on race and/ or ethnicity ***Social Model of Dis/ability:*** Model of dis/ability that suggests society and societal infrastructure play a major role in further exacerbating dis/ability (where certain dis/abilities would not be apparent if society's infrastructures were built differently)

Social Justice Model of Dis/ability: Model of Dis/ability which examines how systems of power and oppression contribute to the lived experiences of individuals with dis/abilities

4- year institution: A selective or slightly more competitive institution awarding a Baccalaureate Degree

APPENDIX B: PRELIMINARY SURVEY FORM

1. Email
2. Name (first and last)
3. Preferred method of contact: Please check all that apply
    - o Email
    - o Phone (call/text)
    - o Other
4. If you selected “phone number”, please input your phone number below. Otherwise, input “n/a”
    a. Fill in the blank
5. If you selected “other”, please express your preferred method of communication. Otherwise, input “n/a”
    a. Fill in the blank
6. Ethnicity
    a. Fill in the blank
7. Gender
    a. Fill in the blank
8. College that you currently attend
    a. Fill in the blank
9. Year in college
    a. Freshman
    b. Sophomore
    c. Junior
    d. Senior
    e. 5th year or above
    f. Graduate Student
    g. Transfer student
10. Do you identify as dis/abled or as having a dis/ability?
    a. Y/N
11. Have you ever been assessed to determine whether you have any form of a dis/ability? a. Y/N
12. If you answered yes to the above question, please specify when and where you were assessed (ex: I was assessed in 9th grade at school). If you answered no, please input “n/a”
13. If you answered no to being previously assessed with having a dis/ability, would you say that you “self-identify” with having a disability?
    a. Y/ N
14. While in high school do you recall ever having an IEP (Individual Education Plan) or a 504 Plan?
    a. Y/N

15. Do you identify with having any of the following dis/abilities? Please check all that apply.
    a. Learning
    b. Developmental
    c. Cognitive
    d. Physical
    e. N/A
    f. Other
        i. Fill in the blank
16. Please elaborate on the above answer by specifying the dis/ability you identify as having. (ex: Learning- Dyslexia)

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Background questions:

Personal:

1. Tell me about yourself
    - Where are you from? Household size?
    - Where did you go to high school? Demographic makeup of high school?
        - Teachers, staff, students?
            - type of school you attended (public/ private/ charter)

Section 1:

Primary -Secondary Education: General

2. What classes did you take *up until* high school?
    - Think back as far as you can (elementary school/ middle school)
3. What classes did you take *in* high school?
    - AP? Honors? IB?

Coursework:

1. Were you involved in the decision to choose your classes or were they predetermined for you?
2. As much as you can recall, walk me through your academic/personal journey up until senior year of high school.
    - Level of difficulty:
    - Were there any grade levels that you felt were *easier* than others?
        - Which grade(s)? Why?
    - Were there any grade levels that you found to be *more difficult* than others?
        - Which grade(s)? Why?

Academic Interest:

1. Were there any classes in particular that you *enjoyed* between Kindergarten and 12th grade?
2. Were there any classes that you *didn't particularly favor* between Kindergarten and 12th grade?

Extracurricular Involvement:

1. Were you involved in any extracurricular activities between K-12?
    - How long did you participate in each activity?
2. Were you involved in any programs outside of school? In school? If so
    - What programs?
        - Why did you get involved in each activity?

Disability:

1. At what point (grade) in your academic career did you discover that you had a dis/ability?
    - How did you discover it?
2. (As much as you can remember) What were your initial thoughts upon receiving your diagnosis?

3. Do you recall ever being placed in classes either: a. specific to your disability? Or b. specifically because of your dis/ability?

Academic Support:

1. Define support (in an academic context).
2. Given your definition of support, would you say that you received support (at any level) throughout your academic journey?
3. *Describe* the support that you received at each tier:
    - Elementary School (primary education)
    - Middle School (intermediate education)
    - High School (secondary education)
4. Did you work closely with anyone **on your campus(es)** as it pertained to your academics?
    - If so, who?
    - In what capacity? *(i.e.: Counselor assisted with course planning)*
5. Were there any points in your academic career where you felt as though you received the "*most*" support? If so:
    - What grade level did you receive this support?
    - Who was this support from?
    - What did this support entail?
6. Similarly, were there any points in your academic career where you felt as though you received the *least* amount of support? If so,
    - What grade level would you say this occurred?
7. Were there any support systems and services in place on your campuses that catered to Black students? Dis/abled students?
    - What did that support entail?
    - How often did you have access to those support services/ resources?
    - Was it made available to everyone on campus? Or did you have to be "recommended" to utilize those support systems/ resources?
8. Did your school (elementary/middle/ high school) offer any college readiness or prep courses? If so,
    - Were you informed about them?
        - *How* were you informed about them? *When* were you informed about them? *Who* informed you about them?
    - Did you take any of the college prep courses offered?
        - Why/ Why not?

Section 2

Post-Secondary Education:

1. Thinking back to all things *leading up* to high school, what were your postsecondary goals? (College, work, community organizing?)
2. Upon *entering* high- school, what were your postsecondary goals?
    - If your goals changed leading up to high school to the time you were in high school, *when* did they change and *why*?

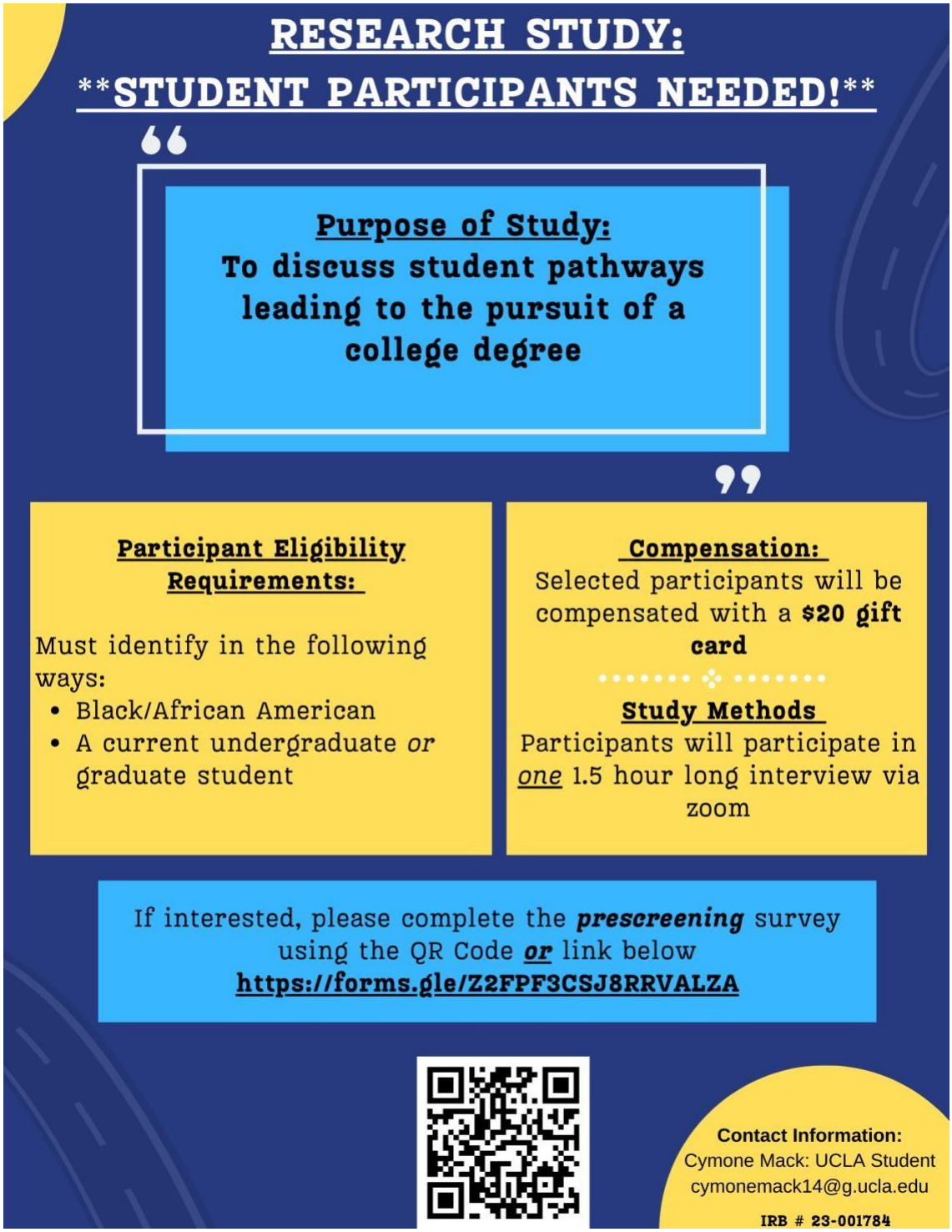
- *How* did you arrive at the decision to pursue the above?

3. As far back as you can remember, *when* do you recall beginning to have conversations about college?
    - How did those conversations transpire?
    - What aspects of college were being discussed?
4. How "*often*" did you find yourself having conversations about college? (between Kindergarten and senior year of high school?)
5. Who did you have the above conversations with?
    - What were the specific messages you received from each person/ group? Etc.
        - Friends/ Peers
        - Family
        - School personnel (counselor, teacher, principal)
        - Affinity group (church, tutoring program, after-school club) 6. At any point in your academic journey, were you encouraged/discouraged from applying to certain [types] of institutions?
    - If so:
        - Which schools were you *encouraged* to apply to?
        - Which schools were you *discouraged* from applying to? 7. Was there anyone or people in particular that influenced your answer to the above question?
    - In what sense?
8. What were your initial thoughts after being encouraged or discouraged to apply to certain schools?
9. How many schools did you ultimately apply to? • Why did you apply to "each" school?
    - Was there any particular reason behind applying to the *number* of schools you applied to?
10. What influenced your *final decision* to attend college?
    - What factors did you take into consideration?
        - Of those factors which held the *most* amount of weight in the final decision-making?
        - Alternatively, which held the *least* amount of weight in the final decision-making?

Post-Secondary Pathways:

1. If you did not have conversations about college leading up to high school and also while in high school, did you have conversations regarding postsecondary *pathways/plans*? If so:
    - What did those conversations entail? Who did you have the above conversations with?

APPENDIX D: RECRUITMENT FLYER



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