

Overrepresentation of Minorities in Special Education:
An Exploration of External Factors

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Abstract

Historically, minority students have been overrepresented in special education programming in the United States (Fletcher, 2014; Wright & Wright, 2021). This study describes how several external historical, theoretical, and practical factors beyond academic challenges impact special education qualification rates for minority students compared to their non-minority counterparts. It also considers these factors through the lens of implicit bias, cultural misunderstandings, and misinterpretations of disability categories, like emotional disturbance.

The study outlines these contexts by exploring Disability Critical Race (DisCrit) Theory, Cultural Ecological Theory, and Social Learning Theory to understand the social and cultural influences that further lead to the issue of overrepresentation. Prior research suggests that lack of cultural awareness, potential implicit bias mindsets, and other issues beyond students' development and control contribute to the disproportionate representation of minority students in special education (Breese et al., 2023; Kreskow, 2013).

This mixed-methods study utilizes Q-methodology and a questionnaire to examine external root causes and systemic issues related to influences regarding the special education evaluative process for minority groups, specifically Black students and emotional disturbance. By examining the perspectives of education professionals, this study aims to recognize the need for considerations of cultural responsiveness, effective self-reflective practices, ongoing professional development, and innovative systems that address the whole child before the special education evaluative process begins.

The results of the study reveal significant concerns related to the special education evaluative processes regarding consideration of external factors, overall consistency, procedural misunderstanding, and issues related to cultural differences. These findings from a theoretical context indicate a need for understanding the overrepresentation of minorities in special education from a historical and behavioral lens. More work will be needed from a practical lens regarding professional development, agency inclusion (e.g., mental health and community supports), and considerations of working from a more inclusive lens related to specialized student populations.

Researchers can shed light on issues extending beyond academic challenges by examining the intersections of various external factors, such as historical, theoretical, practical, and social barriers like a lack of cultural awareness, together with professional perspectives. This approach enables them to recognize the significance of developing innovative solutions to tackle a complex, multi-faceted phenomenon and has hindered minority students for decades.

Keywords: Overrepresentation, special education, emotional disturbance, subjective disability category, external factors, disproportion, minority students

Dedication

I would like to acknowledge some extraordinary and supportive people who have either started this journey with me or whom I have come to know along the way. No matter how large or small the contribution, their impact has led me to this day, and I am forever grateful.

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am constantly in awe of your ability to remain calm, even when I'm running around with my hair on fire. You are the perfect balance to my chaos, and I want to publicly acknowledge and thank you for your sacrifices and support, not just during this journey but throughout our 25-plus years together, I love you.

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Chapter I

Introduction

Overrepresentation of minority groups in special education in the United States has been a persistent reality since the inception of special education programming (Wright & Wright, 2021). This trend is rooted in historical and societal practices that have often marginalized the education of minority student groups by exploiting negative stereotypes and biases (Spring, 2016). Research suggests that multiple factors, beyond ability, contribute to this overrepresentation, including race, subjectivity in professional judgment, and various risk factors such as mental health, community influences, trauma, and socioeconomic status (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2020). These factors collectively lead to inappropriate educational programming for minority students, emphasizing external influences beyond their control.

Wright and Wright (2021) highlighted Congress's recognition of the overrepresentation of Black children in special education services dating back to 1975. Despite more current legislation, such as the 2004 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), this issue persists (Wright & Wright, 2021). Factors contributing to this disproportionality also include challenges in the identification and eligibility processes (related to professional judgment) and placement in special education programs (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2020).

Additionally, the lack of consideration of external or risk factors (noted above) during the evaluative process may negatively or inappropriately influence special education qualifications. For minority students, many of these factors lie outside a child's

control, and their impact may interfere with academic and social processes and present them as disabilities (e.g., emotional disturbance).

This study examines the impact external risk factors have on special education qualifications for minority students concerning appropriate eligibility determinations. It focuses on the issue of overrepresentation in subjective disabilities, specifically for Black students identified with emotional disturbance and the external issues beyond student control that contribute to behaviors that may present as an emotional disturbance.

The rest of this chapter expands on the introduction, giving a statement of the study's problem and purpose. Next, an overview of the study's methodology and significance is provided. The role of the researcher and the definitions of the terms are then shared. Finally, the chapter concludes with a preview of the organizational outline of the study.

Statement of Problem

Minority students qualify for special education programming at higher rates than their non-minority counterparts; several external factors, such as implicit bias and non-academic risk factors impact educational outcomes for minority students who qualify for special education (Harry & Anderson, 1994; Ingalls et al., 2006; National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2020).

Although non-minority students can experience these challenges, qualification rates are higher for minority students in specific disability categories. Furthermore, the subjective nature of disability categories such as emotional disturbance, intellectual disability, and multiple disabilities (Morgan, 2020; National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2020) leads to higher qualification rates for minorities, specifically Black

students (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Concerns regarding subjectivity, bias, race, and circumstances have contributed to and influenced special education outcomes for minorities (Tatter, 2019).

Students affected by the disproportion of special education identification rates are often served in separate classrooms or placements, have lower academic expectations and outcomes, and are stigmatized because of their disability category (Schifter et al., 2019). Theories on school failure, susceptibility, and differential treatment provide a context for adverse school outcomes (Kim et al., 2021). Students marginalized through the special education process can experience difficulties with school failure, leading to attendance problems, higher dropout rates, and discipline issues (Osher et al., 2002, as cited in Losen & Orfield, 2005). For instance, the susceptibility theory suggests students with disabilities engage in adverse behaviors such as "lack of impulse control, inability to anticipate the future consequences of actions, poor perception of social cues, irritability, suggestibility, and the tendency to act out" (Kates, 1995, Keilitz & Dunivant, 1986, p. 19). These behaviors are closely linked to those related to disabilities and can lead to delinquent behavioral issues (Kim et al., 2021).

Differential treatment is also associated with the impact of marginalization through special education qualifications. This treatment suggests that students "experience more punitive treatment across school and juvenile justice systems than their peers' counterparts" (Rutherford et al., 2002, as cited in Kim et al., 2021, p. 376).

Communities are also affected by the overrepresentation of minorities in special education. For example, related to juvenile justice involvement, "40% of probation youth reported having special education needs, a significant overrepresentation compared to

14% of the general education public-school students" (McFarland et al., 2019, as cited in Kim et al., 2021, p. 376).

By being identified at higher rates for special education services, consideration should be made as to whether minority identification disparities are a "result of a higher prevalence of disability relative to white students or whether this discrepancy is the consequence of systemic bias" (Grindal et al., 2019, p. 526). For instance, when considering age, gender, and socioeconomic status, Mandell et al. (2007) found that Black students were 5.1 times more likely to be diagnosed with behavioral issues, such as adjustment disorder and conduct disorder compared to their white counterparts who received diagnoses of ADHD.

The overrepresentation of special education programming can create barriers to academic success. Students can be denied exposure to rigorous academic opportunities, have lower expectations, and receive services in isolated learning environments (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2020). In addition to the impact on academic achievement or justice involvement, other adverse effects can include ongoing social-emotional issues, higher dropout rates, limited secondary educational opportunities, and lower-income/earnings potential (Council for Exceptional Children, 2002). These factors, combined with societal bias, poverty, and other traumatic experiences can have long-term effects on lifetime outcomes (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2020).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this research was to explore external factors contributing to the disproportionate representation of minority students in special education, with a particular focus on the qualification of minority students for subjective disabilities

compared to their non-minority peers. This study also examined the influence of external factors on the evaluative process, particularly for Black students who qualify for services in subjective disability categories like emotional disturbance. The results of this investigation could offer valuable insights into the intricate relationship between these factors and inform efforts to address the overrepresentation of minority students in special education in the future.

Methodology

This study aimed to investigate issues existing beyond students' control and contributing to the overrepresentation of minority students in special education programs. The research questions, methodology approach, and research sample must be considered in relation to the study.

Research Questions

(R1) Are minority students, specifically Black students, overrepresented in special education in more subjective disability categories versus their white counterparts?

(R2) Do external factors impact/influence the identification rates of minority students for special education programming, specifically within subjective disability categories like Emotional Disturbance?

Methodology Approach

Using both quantitative and qualitative data collection approaches, the study employed a mixed-method design. A questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data, identify participant information, and determine the overall level of agreement and experience related to the evaluative process. Q-methodology was utilized to gather

qualitative data by giving participants a Q-sort activity, including the use of concourse statements. Participants were asked to rank statements based on their level of agreement related to the research questions. The data were analyzed to gain perspectives related to the participants' special education experiences and the evaluative process.

Research Sample

The study sample included educational professionals familiar with the evaluative process, including but not limited to teachers, administrators, school psychologists, school counselors, and other special education personnel (e.g., special education coordinators).

Significance of the Study

This study of the overrepresentation of minority students qualifying for special education, specifically Black students in subjective disability categories is significant because of the implications of how race, disability, and social influences contribute to the marginalization of students of color in special education, specifically those identified for emotional disturbance. By examining the overrepresentation of minorities in special education through historical, theoretical, social, and contextual lenses, this study can offer valuable insights into the complexities of the educational factors, influencing their outcomes.

Role of Researcher and Research Assumptions

The researcher collected data and identified the limitations and assumptions. Data were collected using Q-methodology by creating a survey and Q-sort activity to collect participants' viewpoints that provide evidence to support the argument that external factors contribute to the overrepresentation of minority groups in special education. To

ensure that participants felt comfortable sharing their perspectives during the research process, the researcher created an environment that encouraged candid responses to support collecting accurate and reliable data.

Limitations

Limitations of the study include the possibility that the sample size may not comprehensively represent all potential opinions. Additionally, depending on the sample participants, data collection methods may be limited to specific group viewpoints and may not address broader systematic issues.

Assumptions

This study assumed respondents would participate in the research process and provide responses with fidelity. It also assumed ~~that~~ participants would have sufficient experience with special education and the evaluative process to provide relevant responses regarding the issues identified in the research questions. Their level of experience and responses provide a process context for the foundation of external factors in the overrepresentation of minorities in special education.

Definition of Terms

This section highlights the definitions of the terms used to provide context throughout the research. It incorporates terms defined in the dictionary and other entities associated with special education.

African American or Black: "an American of African and especially of Black African descent" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-a). This term is used interchangeably with the term Black throughout this study.

Black: "of or relating to Black people and often, especially to African American people or their culture" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-b). This term is used interchangeably with the term African American throughout this study.

Caucasian: "of or relating to a group of people having European ancestry, classified according to physical traits (such as light skin pigmentation)" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-c). This term is used interchangeably with the term White throughout this study.

Continuum of Services: "Instruction in regular classes, special classes, special schools, home instruction, instruction in hospitals and institutions, and provisions for supplementary services (such as resource room and itinerant instruction) to be provided in conjunction with regular class placement" (Ohio Department of Education Office for Exceptional Children, 2004, p. 35).

Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE): "Special education and related services provided at public expense, under public supervision, and at no cost to parents" (Ohio Department of Education Office for Exceptional Children, 2004, p. 36).

Individual Education Plan (IEP): "A written statement for each child with a disability that is developed, reviewed, and revised in a meeting" and includes an annual review of student goals and student levels of performance related to those goals, and learning environment (U.S. Department of Education, 2017a).

Disproportionate: "Widespread trend of students of certain racial and ethnic groups being identified for special education, placed in more restrictive educational settings, and disciplined at markedly higher rates than their peers." (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2020).

Inclusion: Access or exposure to the general education curriculum, with support for IEP accommodations providing for services to be delivered in a general education setting.

This setting provides opportunities for exposure to a rigorous curriculum with support (IRIS Center Peabody College, 2023).

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE): "To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities (including children in public or nonpublic institutions or other care facilities) are educated with children who are nondisabled" (Ohio Department of Education Office for Exceptional Children, 2004, p. 37).

Majority: Of a whole, the great portion, a group or number over 50% (Cornell Law School, n.d.).

Minority: A group distinguished culturally, ethnically, or racially that is a subgroup and belongs to a more dominant group (Britannica, 2023).

Overrepresentation: Expectations of a group that exceeds as the group differs significantly from others in the same category (Skiba et al., 2008).

Resource Room: A classroom setting typically serving special education students in a small setting, supporting IEP goals and other academic deficiencies, and is typically run by a special education teacher (*Resource Room [Education] Law and Legal Definition | US Legal, Inc.*, n.d.).

Separate Facility Separate School: These are children who receive education programs in public or private separate day school facilities. This includes children with disabilities receiving special education and related services, at public expense, for greater than 50% of the school day in public or private separate schools. This may include children placed in public and private day schools for students with disabilities; public and private day

schools for students with disabilities for a portion of the school day (greater than 50%) and in regular school buildings for the remainder of the school day; public and private residential facilities if the student does not live at the facility (Nebraska Department of Education, n.d.).

Special Education: "Specially designed instruction to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability" (Ohio Department of Education Office for Exceptional Children, 2004, p. 38).

Subjective: "Modified or affected by personal views, experience, or background" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-d).

White: "of or relating to white people or their culture" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-e). This term is used interchangeably with the term Caucasian throughout this study.

Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter I introduces this study and suggests issues related to the overrepresentation of minorities in special education regarding factors beyond academic issues, specifically with Black students who qualify for Emotional Disturbance. It also offers a framework for the purpose and significance of this study and provides information on the methodology, researcher's role, limitations, assumptions, and critical terms. Chapter II includes context related to research and historical information and formulates the study's literature review. Finally, Chapters III, IV, and V present the methodology, data analysis, results, and a summary, conclusion, recommendations, and conclusion of the study.

Chapter II

Literature Review

The educational experiences of minority students in special education are influenced in various ways. Barriers exist when considering historical and contextual perspectives, such as obstacles related to race, gender, ability, mental health, and behavioral issues stemming from life circumstances, socioeconomic status, societal expectations, and inappropriate or discriminatory educational policies. These factors can significantly affect student outcomes and lead to difficulties in learning, issues with social interaction, and behavioral problems that extend beyond the scope of educational frameworks and contribute to the overrepresentation of minority students in special education programs (The Illinois ACEs Response Collaborative, n.d.; Wright & Wright, 2021).

The research questions related to the overrepresentation of minority students compared to their non-minority peers and the failure to account for external factors in evaluative processes fall within the existing body of knowledge as historical implications related to the issues are far-reaching and continue to impact students in present-day educational processes.

Historical, theoretical, and existing research support the research questions within this study. These three components frame the literature review as they give context to overrepresentation, external factors, and their influences on the disproportionate outcomes for minority students in special education processes.

Historical Context

Historical implications for minority students in special education programs have raised concerns throughout history regarding questionable placement practices (Morgan, 2020). Elements combining the discrimination of minorities and disabled individuals have historically contributed to disparities, including overrepresentation, socioeconomic factors, cultural misunderstandings, and systemic issues within the educational system (Kreskow, 2013).

Unlike modern protections and before the passage of legislative safeguards, disabled students had limited rights and were often excluded from educational opportunities as a matter of practice (Hill & Taylor, 2021). Exclusionary practices were standard and, in some instances, supported by case law.

In the late 1800s, the instructional focus for challenging students was skilled labor, such as cooking, sewing, or carpentry (Wright & Wright, 2021). These children were also instructed on social values, and "early special education programs also focused on the "moral training" of African American children" (Wright & Wright, 2021, para. 6).

While states provided institutions for challenging children, the living conditions were grim, and disabled people were "merely accommodated rather than assessed, educated, and rehabilitated" (U.S. Department of Education, 2020, para. 6). In many instances, families were encouraged to send their disabled children away to these and other facilities that did not appropriately assess, care, or provide families appropriate access to them (Nighswander & Blair, 2022).

In 1919, the *Beattie vs. Board of Education* case ruled in favor of excluding special education students from schools (Canadian Bar Association, 2009; Hill & Taylor, 2021). The court determined that the exclusion was appropriate due to the students'

appearance, which reportedly had a nauseating effect on other students and school personnel and deemed the students' presence to be detrimental to the best interests of the school (Financiarul, 2017; Hill & Taylor, 2021; Nighswander & Blair, 2022). Around the same time, many programs related to special education in urban settings focused on life skills rather than general education programming. They were intended to prevent delinquency and emphasize the moral training of minority groups (Wright & Wright, 2021).

In 1954, in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the U.S. Supreme Court declared state laws establishing separate public schools for black and white students unconstitutional (National Archives, 2021; Sun, 2015). According to the American Psychiatric Association (2022), one significant aspect of the *Brown* decision was its recognition of the inherent harm caused by segregation. A policy of separating students by differences suggests that one group is inferior to another, which affects children's motivation to learn (American Psychological Association, 2022). This recognition laid the foundation for subsequent legal arguments concerning the exclusion and segregation of other marginalized groups as parent advocacy groups began to advocate for excluded students with disabilities "using the *Brown* ruling as a basis for their complaints" (Gilhool, 2011, as cited in Yell, 2021, para. 14).

While *Brown* focused on desegregation, its principles of equal protection under the law had broader implications for addressing disparities. It provided the catalyst for discussions about special education and laid a legal foundation for disability rights that set the stage for subsequent legal battles seeking educational equity (Antosh & Imparato, 2014; Cornett & Knackstedt, 2020; Yell, 2021).

In 1972, the Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Citizens (PARC) filed a class action lawsuit against the state due to the denied enrollment of disabled students (Nighswander & Blair, 2022). The complaint argued violations of due process rights, equal protection on a flawed basis of ability and educability of mentally disabled children, and children's right to education per the Pennsylvania Constitution and Law provision guaranteeing education to children (*Pennsylvania Ass'n, Ret'd Child. V. Commonwealth of Pa., 343 F. Supp. 279 (E.D. Pa. 1972)*, n.d.).

In another case, in 1972, *Mills vs. the Board of Education of the District of Columbia* cited ~~that~~ students with disabilities were consistently refused admission to public educational programming due to various emotional, physical, behavioral, or mental impairments (Disability Justice, 2014).

Since *Brown v. Board of Education*, most emerging cases, like the two indicated above, protected the civil rights of disabled students. In 1975, the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) was introduced, and Public Law 94-142 (P.L. 94-143) was passed as the first special education law in the U.S. (Hill & Taylor, 2021). This law protected the rights of disabled children by holding states accountable and mandating them to establish processes for providing services to children with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2020; Wright & Wright, 2021). In 1990, the EAHCA was reauthorized, and its name was changed to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The last reauthorization occurred in 2004 (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

Although significant strides have been made to protect the rights of students with disabilities, evaluative processes and disparities remain complex issues rooted in

historical inequities, cultural implications, and risk factors having theoretical implications.

Theoretical Context

This study explored several aspects of special education related to the overrepresentation of minorities in more subjective disability categories than their white counterparts. It also asked if external factors impact/influence the identification rates of minority students in special education programming, specifically within the disability category of Emotional Disturbance.

The theoretical framework for this study provided a framework for understanding through an investigation of established theories that provide a context for understanding the research questions and inform the review. The theories of focus for this review included Disability Studies and Critical Race Theory, Cultural Ecological Theory, and Social Learning Theory. These theories explain how race, disability, and social influences contribute to the marginalization of students of color in special education, specifically in the disability category of Emotional Disturbance (ED). By highlighting aspects of these theories related to the research questions, the review's focus offered a background regarding issues that minority students face regarding developing a comprehensive understanding of the social intricacies which shape the decision-making processes associated with the evaluative process leading to the overrepresentation of minorities in special education.

Disability Studies and Critical Race Theory (DisCrit)

The first theory, DisCrit is a conceptual extension of Critical Race Theory (CRT). The linkages between race and society were cited, and the concept was broadened by

adding disability status by noting that "race and ability are intertwined" (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 6; Britannica, 2023; Collins, 2009; Crenshaw, 1991). Annamma et al. (2013) developed DisCrit by combining the qualities of Disability Studies and Critical Race Theory. DisCrit explores the correlation between race and disability and suggests they are co-constructed within society (Annamma et al., 2013). While CRT conceptualizes race as a social construct, DisCrit adds a degree of educational marginalization within dual minority groups through the lens of Disability Studies. DisCrit notes a level of higher subjectivity regarding disability status, thus creating control over dual minority groups through overidentification or misidentification (Annamma et al., 2013).

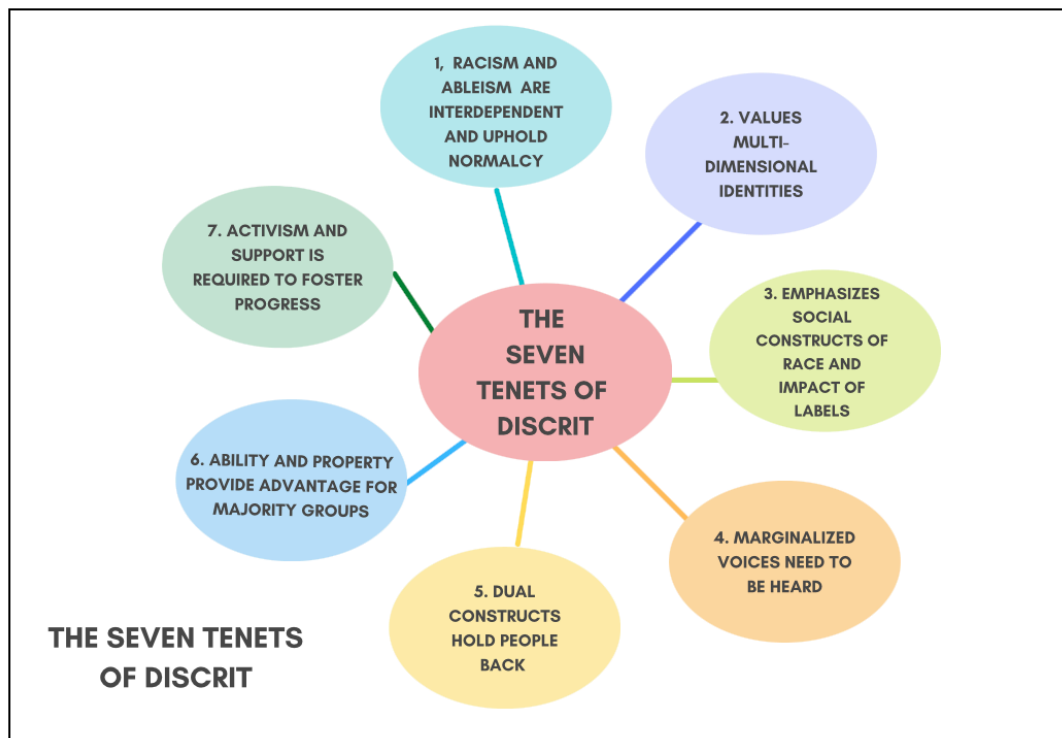
Objectivity and subjectivity during the evaluative process significantly influence special education qualification outcomes (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2020). For instance, physical disabilities, such as blindness or hearing impairments, can be evaluated for appropriateness with a degree of certainty because objective assessments, such as vision or hearing examinations, can determine evidence of impairment (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2020). Objective assessments are less likely to result in overrepresentation of minority groups (Annamma et al., 2013). However, disability categories, such as specific learning disability (SLD), intellectual disability (ID), and emotional disability (ED), are more subjective, and identification depends significantly on assessments that rely greatly on the professional judgment of educators and assessors (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2020).

DisCrit offers a perspective on why minority students qualify for special education programming at higher rates than their non-minority peers and focuses on structures of policy and the construct of race rather than ability (Annamma et al., 2013).

The DisCrit framework is based on seven guiding principles, seen in Figure 1, that examine the characteristics of disabilities, methods by which they are considered, and their place within societal structures. These principles explore how disabilities are socially constructed and used to restrict educational opportunities through the intersection of race and disability (Annamma et al., 2013).

Figure 1

Seven Tenets of DisCrit



Note. Figure from Annamma et al., 2013

As seen in Figure 1, DisCrit's tenets emphasize the interconnectedness between race and disability and society's impact on both.

Tenet one on focuses on ways "forces of racism and ableism circulate interdependently, often in neutralized and invisible ways, to uphold notions of normalcy" (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 11; Chiu et al., 2022, p. 14). This tenet suggests that both "race

and disability have been used by society to marginalize minority groups" by establishing norms that exclude them (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 11). For instance, historically, when students did not meet societal standards, represented by whiteness as the pinnacle of normalcy, their differences were perceived as shortcomings and were seen as inadequate (Annamma et al., 2013; Ferri, 2010).

This deficit mindset has manifested throughout history and within subcultures in society under the guise of normalcy. For instance, the normalcy of English settlers was different from that of Native Americans. Consequently, they were viewed as inferior (Spring, 2016). As a result of these Native American differences or deficits, settlers set out to change the culture by controlling the Native American narrative (Spring, 2016). Deficit thought can result in victim blame. In an educational setting, for instance, behavioral difficulties are blamed on the student, family, and even different cultures or traditions (Reid, 2020); therefore, illustrating non-normal behaviors justifying racism based on "normative cultural standards" (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 13). This tenet suggests focusing on differences in their strengths, not on how they fit society's definition of normalcy. They are not abnormal or a burden on society; they pertain to strengths that are discoverable in other areas (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 13).

Tenet two suggests, "DisCrit values multidimensional identities and troubles singular notions of identity such as race or dis/ability or class or gender or sexuality, and so on" (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 11), as these identities are inclusive of multiple statuses (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). In other words, DisCrit acknowledges the value of multiple identities intertwined with a disability, such as language, immigration status, or sexual

orientation, because discrimination is also associated with the factors of identity (Annamma et al., 2013).

Tenet three asserts that, "DisCrit emphasizes the social constructions of race and ability and yet recognizes the material and psychological impacts of being labeled as raced or dis/abled, which sets one outside of the Western cultural norms" (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 11). This tenet rejects race and disability as a matter of biology or circumstance; however, social structures continue to foster segregation and impose the concept of normalcy on numerous minority groups (Fierros & Connor, 2006, as cited in Annamma et al., 2013).

Tenet four maintains that "DisCrit privileges voices of marginalized populations, traditionally not acknowledged within research." (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 11). This tenet seeks to affirm the voices of marginalized groups by validating what they are saying, paying attention to, giving voice to, and acknowledging that counter-narratives have been unheard and underrepresented (Matsuda, 1987, as cited in Annamma et al., 2013).

Tenet five maintains that "DisCrit considers legal and historical aspects of dis/ability and race and how both have been used separately and together to deny the rights of some citizens." (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 11). This tenet illustrates how racial supremacy is a construct of society and does not have a biological correlation with one race being superior to another. This construct is based on the historical perspective of scientific superiority, which has since been debunked by objective science (Annamma et al., 2013; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). In addition, historical acceptance has frequently been used to normalize events or actions such as segregation and could otherwise be

interpreted as racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2021). Furthermore, this tenet contends that the support of qualifying for special education programming also serves as a means for modern-day segregation based on disability labels (Kim et al., 2010, as cited in Annamma et al., 2013). Finally, this tenet also addresses discrimination against marginalized groups and their inability to fulfill society's constructed expectations of belonging as related to working, child-rearing, and even language barriers, all of which call into question the ability to be productive citizens who belong to a normal society (Annamma et al., 2013).

Tenet six argues that "DisCrit recognizes whiteness and Ability as Property, and gains for people labeled with dis/abilities have largely been made as the result of interest convergence of white, middle-class citizens." (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 11). This suggests that while minority and majority groups can receive the same resources, the outcomes may be different and more beneficial for the majority group or person. This indicates that rights and privileges are groups having "the capacity to exercise them, a capacity denoted by racial identity" (Annamma et al., 2013; Harris, 1993, p. 1745). For instance, a white student receiving special education services will receive interventions and support that can enable them to improve academically, advance in school with their peers, and attend higher education institutions (Annamma et al., 2013). Black students receiving the same intervention, however, may be placed in a more segregated situation with less access to resources (Gibson, 2022). The tenet states that the benefit or service provides a more beneficial outcome for those in the majority because the resources are focused enough to benefit the majority group and do not truly help the minority (Annamma et al., 2013).

Tenet seven purports "DisCrit requires activism and supports all forms of resistance." (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 11). This tenet holds that activism is necessary but must be inclusive of those being supported. Regarding disability, activism does not necessarily mean protesting or sit-in activities; it should also include "academic or theoretical pedagogy" (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 18), supporting the notion that "the pen is mightier than the sword" (Bulwer-Lytton, 1839, as cited by Gee, 2015, para. 2).

DisCrit theory posits that the social constructs of race and disability serve as systemic barriers that marginalize certain groups, limiting their access to rights, resources, and societal progress (Vehmas & Watson, 2014). This framework informs this study by providing a contextual understanding. By examining its seven tenets, DisCrit explains barriers contributing to the overrepresentation of minority students receiving special education services and suggests that the intersection of race and subjective disability are socially constructed forms of segregation (Annamma et al., 2013).

Cultural Ecological Theory

The second theory, the Cultural Ecological Theory (CE), was introduced by John Ogbu in 1998. By studying differences in the achievement of minority student groups, Ogbu framed his theory based on understanding the difference in treatment of these groups within two categories of system and community and impacts related to their relationships in society effect the academic outcomes of minority students (Foster, 2004; Ogbu & Simons, 1998).

To provide a context for how minority groups relate to society, Ogbu (1992) differentiates them into four categories: autonomous, immigrant, refugee, and non-

immigrant minorities. This theory review focuses on two of the four categories: voluntary (immigrants) and involuntary (non-immigrants) (Foster, 2004).

Ogbu's research implies that immigrant groups typically adopt an impassive, practical approach when interacting with mainstream culture, which can lead to different consequences compared to non-immigrant groups (Foster, 2004). Immigrant communities generally emphasize an adaptive attitude in their social and educational approaches, concentrating on developing skills and assimilating them into society.

Involuntary minorities are part of a historical lineage of "subjugation after conquest or forced migration (enslavement)" (Foster, 2004, p. 70). Because of their historical experiences and treatment, they are seen as more oppositional and suspicious of society's dominant group (Foster, 2004; Hermans, 2004). CE suggests involuntary minorities have had to cultivate survival strategies that can either enable or impede academic success, encompassing practices such as "clientship/Uncle Tomming, collective struggle, hustling, emulation of whites, and camouflage" (Foster, 2004, p. 370). Unlike assimilation within the voluntary group, the involuntary group focuses on adaptability and equitable treatment and representation, as historical factors have contributed to the failure of involuntary minority students (Foster, 2004; Hermans, 2004).

While both groups adapt in their own way, CE asserts ~~that~~ no group is intelligently superior to the others and ~~that~~ learning is greatly influenced by societal and cultural factors within the system and community forces. These forces have been offered as a subsequent explanation for the differences in academic challenges and achievements between voluntary and involuntary minority groups (Ogbu & Simons, 1998).

CE indicates that external factors profoundly impact the academic achievement of minority student groups. Students of African-American heritage fall within the involuntary minority group and are subject to societal and educational structures and conditioned oppositional responses resulting from historical, educational barriers shaped by historical injustices predating their birth (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1992, 2004).

CE brings attention to the challenging journey of black students who struggle with the burden of factors of race and socioeconomic status, conforming to societal norms while simultaneously managing systemic barriers and discovering the complexities of their cultural identities (Ogbu, 2004). The layers of these experiences are the additional load black students must carry throughout their educational journey and significantly impact the academic achievement and educational trajectories of their lives.

Social Learning Theory

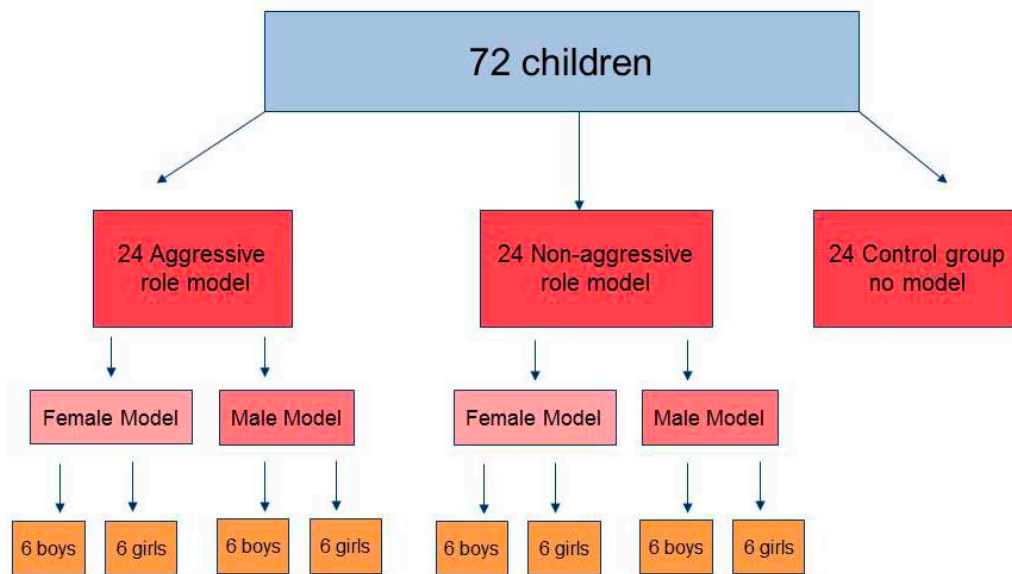
Bandura introduced the final theory, Social Learning Theory (SLT), in 1971. Bandura suggested that human behavior is not solely caused by internal factors (e.g., psychosis) but by "the causes of behavior are found not in the organism but environmental forces" (Bandura, 1971, p. 2). SLT considers "how both environmental and cognitive factors interact to influence human learning and behavior" (Liu, 2023, p. 655; McLeod, 2016, para. 1).

The SLT framework suggests ~~that~~ external conditions dictate the accumulation of new behavioral patterns, and ~~that~~ learning occurs through observation and modeling, signifying a link between cognitive and behavioral thinking (Bandura, 1971; McLeod, 2016; Rumjaun & Narod, 2020).

To support his claim, Bandura conducted an experiment in 1961 using an inflatable clown named Bobo. Known as the Bobo Doll Experiment, Bandura focused on three main groups of preschool children and exposed them to three controlled adult reactive environments with the Bobo doll. The controlled adult environments included adults who acted aggressively or non-aggressively toward the doll and a control group that had no exposure to the doll (Bandura, 1961). Figure 2 illustrates the sample structure of the Bobo Doll experiment.

Figure 2

Bobo Doll Experiment Demographic Breakdown



Note. (McLeod, 2023).

As seen in Figure 2, the sample size of the experiment exposed an equal number of students to the aggressive and non-aggressive models. Bandura noted that the children exposed to the aggressive model observed the adult engaging in aggressive and violent behaviors toward the Bobo Doll, including kicking, punching, hitting with a hammer/mallet, and screaming at it (Altin et al., 2011; Hollis, 2019). Figure 3 illustrates

behaviors of the children from the aggressive model group when they were left alone with the Bobo doll.

Figure 3

Bobo Doll Experiment – Aggressive Model Outcomes



Note. (Dixon, 2019).

As seen in the figure above, when the children in this group were left alone with the doll, they engaged in similar behaviors as their aggressive model. Bandura noted the results indicated, students exposed to the aggressive model perpetrated violence against the Bobo Doll (Bandura, 1971). The children exposed to the non-aggressive model did not abuse the Bobo Doll and children in the group not exposed did not act out aggressively at all (Hollis, 2019).

Bandura concluded learning occurs through modeling and observation, which leads to imitation and acknowledged the observations of aggression and behavior from

the Bobo Doll Experiment served as the basis for SLT, indicating observable behavior influences social learning (Bandura, 1977; Landsford, 2016, as cited in Zeigler-Hill & Shackelford, 2019).

Bandura later adapted the Bobo Doll experiment to include consequences, adding a reward/punishment component directed toward adults and their behavior toward the Bobo Doll (Lang, 2020). Bandura noted children were more likely to respond similarly to their aggressive or non-aggressive models depending on how they were rewarded or punished (praise or criticism). For instance, when adults were punished for aggression, children were less likely to engage in the behavior (Lang, 2020; Philonotes, n.d.). As Bandura posits, SLT provides a framework to illustrate learning has social components. Given certain circumstances and conditions, people learn by observing the actions of others (Lang, 2020).

Connections to the Study

Each theory presents a likely external contributory factor to the research problem. DisCrit illustrates the use of the intersectionality of race and disability has been used as a basis for dual discrimination. Cultural Ecological theory provides frame of reference for the mindset of minority groups historically marginalized who generationally face ongoing academic and social barriers, possibility triggered by historically embedded trauma. Finally, Social Learning Theory provides a cognitive framework explaining constructs social behavior's influence on learning and behavior.

Related to this research, these theories explain and present external forces which can influence the special education evaluative process for minority students, specifically black students, and emotional disturbances. As the theoretical context suggests, they

serve as conceptual bases to inform the study and address the research questions by providing a context to exemplify likely external factors contributing to the overrepresentation of minority students in special education.

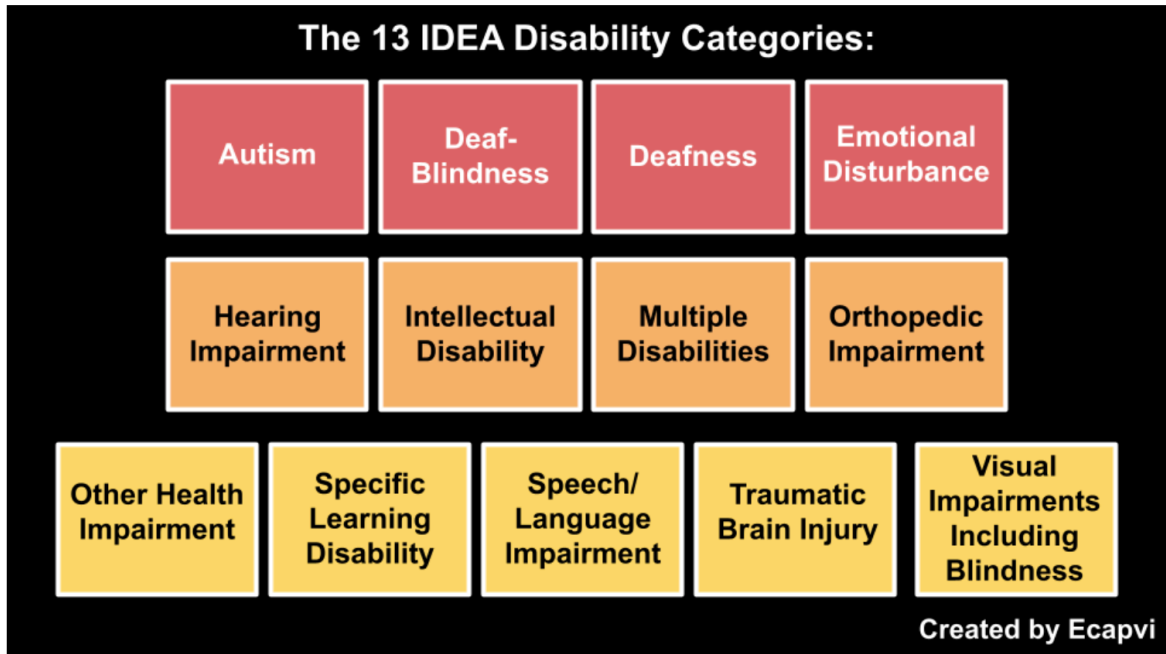
Review of Research

Extensive research has been conducted on the overrepresentation of minorities in special education. The research drawn upon for this study includes an extensive review of special education and disabilities, an analysis of disproportionate outcomes, and an exploration of risk factors.

Special Education and Disabilities

The passing of the 1975 Education of All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) meant new mandates provided states with guidelines for educating students with special needs. The EAHCA asserts that students have the right to free and appropriate public education (FAPE) and maintains that parents' and children's rights must be protected (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). For states, EAHCA meant they must follow FAPE guidelines and ensure adequate and appropriate educational for students with special needs (U.S. Department of Education, 2017b).

The federal definition of special education indicates it is "specially designed instruction, at no cost to the parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability, including instruction conducted in the classroom, in the home, in hospitals and institutions, and other settings; and instruction in physical education" (Riccomini et al., 2017, p. 2). Figure 4 provides a list of the 13 disability categories as defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

Figure 4*Thirteen Special Education Disability Categories Under IDEA*

Note. (*Multiple Disabilities Resources*, 2022).

The figure above shows that the IDEA presents 13 disability categories for educational services. The evaluative process for these disability categories is not entirely encompassing, as there are layers of objectivity and subjectivity. Objective disabilities have a "clear root cause and a definitive assessment" (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2020, p. 2) to gauge the degree to which a disability impacts a student. For example, visual and hearing impairments are considered objective disabilities. Subjective disabilities do not have definitive root cause assessments; their identification relies on blanket assessments and professional judgment. The disability categories are considered the most subjective, including SLD, ID, and ED (National Center for Learning Disabilities).

As a subjective disability category, students with ED are subject to an identification process that, if not done with fidelity, could misidentify them. For instance, in identifying school-related special education services, ED is defined as a condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a child's educational performance:

1. An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors.
2. An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers.
3. Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances.
4. A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression.
5. A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems.

As defined by IDEA, emotional disturbance includes schizophrenia but does not apply to children who are socially maladjusted, unless it is determined that they have an emotional disturbance (Ohio Department of Education, 2016).

Some factors should be noted concerning the definition of ED. First, social maladjustment is expressly noted as a criterion that cannot be used for qualifications. Next, ambiguous terms are noted in this definition. These imply a level of subjectivity is applied when making decisions regarding ED qualifications (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2020).

Excluding social maladjustment from the definition leads to unclear guidelines for those who make determinations within the ED category. While social maladjustment is

expressly excluded, there needs to be guidance to define what social maladjustment is or how to disqualify it as a factor in the evaluative process, which can lead to confusion concerning which students meet the criteria to qualify for ED versus those who do not (Merrell & Walker, 2004). At best, unofficial definitions provide social maladjustment as antisocial and willful behavior "in the company of other antisocial youths, as a way to maintain or enhance their social status within the antisocial subgroup, and in a manner that is unlawful" (Merrell & Walker, 2004, p. 902; Olympia et al., 2004). Comparatively, as shown in Figure 5, ED and social maladjustment behaviors may present in similar ways but are slightly different.

Figure 5

Characteristics and Differences Between Social Maladjustment and Emotional Disability

Common Characteristics	
Social Maladjustment	Serious Emotional Disability
Social Relationships	
Peer relationships are usually intact. Often unsympathetic, and remorseless in relation to others.	Peer relationships are often short-lived, a source of anxiety, and sometimes chaotic.
Often a member of a subculture group that is antisocial.	Tends to have difficulty in establishing or maintaining group membership.
Often skilled at manipulating others. Frequently quarrelsome.	Others are often alienated by the intensity of need for attention or bizarreness of ideas and/or behaviors.
Conflicts are characterized by power struggles, primarily with authority figures (e.g. parents, school personnel, and police). Often displays hostility and may engage in impulsive, criminal acts.	Conflict and tension often characterizes relationships.
Interpersonal Dynamics	
Often displays positive self-concept, except in school situations.	Often is characterized by a pervasively poor self-concept.
Tends to be independent and appear self-assured. Often displays charming, likable personality.	Often overly dependent or impulsively defiant.
Lacks appropriate guilt; may show courage or responsibility but often toward undesirable ends; generally reacts toward situations with appropriate affect.	Is generally anxious, fearful, mood swings from depression to high activity; frequently has inappropriate affect or may react to situations with inappropriate affect.
Often blames others for his or her problems, but otherwise is reality oriented.	Frequent denial and confusion; often distorts reality without regard to self-interest.
Often a risk taker; "daredevil"	Resists making choices, decisions
Substance abuse more likely with peers	Substance abuse more likely individually
Educational Performance	
Tends to dislike school except as a place for social contacts.	School is often a source of confusion and anxiety
Frequently truant	Truancy related to somatic complaints
Frequently avoids school achievement, even in areas of competence.	Achievement is often uneven.
Tends to rebel against rules and structures.	Often responds well to structure in the educational setting.

(Table adapted from work done by the Ventura Unified School District, Conejo Valley Unified School Districts, and Wayne County Educational Service Agency (2004)).

Note. (Colorado Department of Education, 2015; Wayne County Regional Educational Service Agency, 2004, pp. 12-15).

As shown in Figure 5, without clear guidelines or specific training regarding how to differentiate them, determining qualification is left to the subjectivity of the professional judgment of an evaluative team that may not have a proper understanding of either phenomenon (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2020).

Additionally, there is speculation regarding the exclusionary statement of social maladjustment from the ED definition. Merrell and Walker (2004) suggested it was

added to shield society from being "mandated to provide services to delinquent and antisocial your, a notoriously difficult to reach population"(p. 901).

Finally, the definition has subjective and ambiguous wording (Sullivan et al., 2019). Phrases such as "over a long period," "to a marked degree," "inappropriate types of feelings under normal circumstances," and "inability to maintain satisfactory relationships" (Ohio Department of Education, 2016, para. 2; Sullivan et al., 2019) and with no accompanying guidance or clarity, decision-makers are left to their interpretation and knowledge to make decisions regarding qualification and possibly disproportionate outcomes (Sullivan et al., 2019).

Disproportionate Outcomes

When disproportion is applied to education, it indicates a lack of balance among specific groups of students. When applied to special education, disparity evolves into a complex problem involving inappropriate services and separation practices inherent in school and social structures (Sullivan & Osher, 2019). These factors contribute to the overrepresentation of minority students and the high incidence of special education qualifications in SLD, ID, and ED (Sullivan & Bal, 2013).

The Office of Special Education Programs Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services U.S. Department of Education (2017) found that significant disproportionality factors include a high incidence of identifying children within a particular disability category, placement within a particular setting, and discipline considerations concerning race and ethnicity. The Disparities are reflected in the data. According to the Office of Special Education Programs Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, the U.S. Department of Education (2017) is concerned that racial

and ethnic minority children are more likely to be identified within distinct disability categories.

Each year, the U.S. Department of Education releases an *Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*. Data from this report support the National Research Council's (2002) findings that of the three most identified disability categories for minority students—Emotional Disturbance, intellectual disability, and specific learning disability—Black students are at a higher risk of eligibility in the disability category of emotional disturbance qualification than any other group.

Annual reports emphasize the risk ratios for all racial groups. A risk ratio "compares the likelihood students in a given racial group will experience an outcome compared to the risk students of all other races will experience that outcome" (Ohio Department of Education, 2022, p. 2). Table 1 provides a five-year comparison of risk ratios from the report years 2016-2020, comparing the highest and second-highest rankings with the respective demographic groups.

Table 1*Comparison of Risk Ratios of by Rank and Demographic Group*

Data Reporting Year	Highest Risk Ratio	Demographic Group	Second Highest Risk Ratio	Demographic Group
2020	1.9	African American	1.6	Two or more races
2019	1.8	African American	1.6	Native American/Alaskan
2018	1.9	African American	1.6	Native American/Alaskan
2017	2.0	African American	1.6	Native American/Alaskan
2016	2.0	African American	1.6	Native American/Alaskan

As shown in the table above, according to the *Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (2018, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023), the consistent pattern of elevated risk ratios over multiple reporting years highlights a disproportionate representation of African American students served within the disability category of emotional disturbance in special education programming.

According to the Office of Special Education Programs (2020), when compared to all students with disabilities during the 2018-2019 school year, African American students were most likely to be identified with emotional disturbance as compared to any other group. Further, according to Fish (2019), African American students are more likely to be referred to behavioral challenges, while white students are more likely to be referred to academic challenges.

According to the National Center for Learning Disabilities (2020, p. 2) and Harper and Fergus (2017), "black students are 40% more likely to be identified with a

disability versus all other students" (para. 2). While all minority groups are at risk of being overrepresented in special education services, the data suggest that African American students are at a higher risk of overrepresentation (U.S. Department of Education, 2022).

The data suggest a significant disproportion of minority students, specifically black students, identified for special education within the ED category (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2020). Regarding the risk ratios reported in the Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, black students are between 1.8 and 2.0 more likely to be identified as ED. The data suggest a link between a disproportional trend and assessor bias related to the subjective nature of identifying high-incidence disabilities, such as ED (Cooc & Kiru, 2018).

Qualification Subjectivity. According to the Office of Special Education Programs, Office of Special Education Rehabilitative Services U.S. Department of Education (2017), the inappropriate qualification of black students as needing special education and related services, specifically for emotional disturbance when they do not, reflects a concerning pattern of overrepresentation. This overrepresentation, which is often subjective, can manifest differently. The subjectivity of the special education evaluation process is influenced by various factors, including evaluator biases, socially accepted norms within the school culture, evaluator mindset, and family relationships (Hart et al., 2010).

Additionally, the impact on special education qualification rates can include inconsistencies in assessor bias. For instance, an evaluation outcome can still be flawed, even if executed with fidelity and including all the required elements (Hart et al., 2010;

Scardamalia et al., 2018). Emotional disturbance qualifications depend primarily on the evaluation team's interpretation data, as they relate to student behavior or other factors related to the evaluative process. Input includes teacher/parent input, observations, student interviews, and rating scale data (Scardamalia et al., 2018). Subjective determining factors, such as incomplete or skewed data or observations, can result in inconsistent and inaccurate results (Scardamalia et al., 2018).

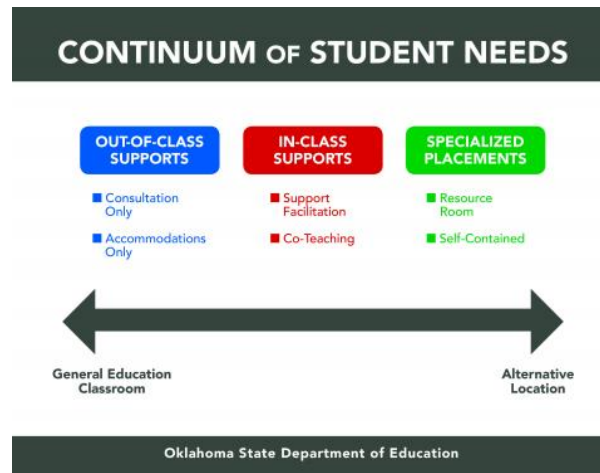
Finally, other factors affecting the evaluative process include hasty referrals in place of appropriate instructional interventions and classroom or school dynamics (Hart et al., 2010). These factors can lead to unregulated resources and practices and inadequate qualifications (Algozzine, 2017).

Service Models. Special education services can be provided in several ways and are determined based on students' needs and the determination of the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). According to the IDEA, LRE provides:

To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities are educated with children who are not disabled, and special classes, separate schooling, or other removals of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occur only when the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily. (U.S. Department of Education, 2019, para. 1)

To clarify, LRE is meant to provide the least disruption to a special education student's academic experience by ensuring that it is as close to a general education experience as possible and appropriate. Figure 6 illustrates how services are provided along a

continuum of varying levels of support, from least to most restrictive, along a continuum of services.

Figure 6*Continuum of Special Education Services*

Note. (Least Restrictive Environment, 2022).

Figure 6 shows that inclusion includes a team approach regarding planning, interaction, and academic and social flexibility (Sweeney, 2009).

For instance, inclusion focuses on special education service delivery, allowing students to engage in authentic interactions with their peers in general education with support. Conversely, resource rooms and separate placements are more restrictive and require support outside of inclusive settings. However, at what cost? Students in separate classrooms or alternative placements struggle to progress academically (Chitiyo & Brinda, 2018). Additionally, "separating students through the day labels them, thereby creating bias and making them different in the eyes of other students, and this might have detrimental effects on their academic performance" (Chitiyo & Brinda, 2018, p. 42).

Risk Factors

Risk factors that affect educational outcomes can affect minority groups in ways that are not directly linked to education and contribute to the prevalence of educational issues and adverse academic outcomes (Mofatteh, 2020). Risk factors, including mental

health, behavioral manifestations (internal and external), experiences with trauma, and socioeconomic status can impact the overrepresentation of minority students in special education programs (Alegria et al., 2010).

Mental Health

Minority students are among a larger group of at-risk youths, resulting in higher rates of emotional disturbance qualifications (Alegria et al., 2010). If these students display aggressive or disruptive behaviors, they are typically steered toward a system of juvenile justice, with little or no consideration of potential mental health factors (Alegria et al., 2010). The same steering may be said for the identification of the emotional disturbance of minority groups in special education programming. For instance, students who struggle with mental health factors may receive outdated or misaligned intervention approaches that sometimes create more problems (Child Mind Institute, 2016).

According to Jensen (2016), "one in 10 youth have serious mental health problems that are severe enough to impair how they function at home, in school or the community" (para. 2). Additionally, According to Patel (2023), "child and adolescent mental health challenges can significantly impact the ability to learn and develop" (para. 3). Additionally, mental health issues in children are often unseen and untreated, as "one in five children has a diagnosable mental, emotional, or behavioral disorder, yet many of them do not receive the help they need" (Jensen, 2016; Patel, 2023, para. 3). Not addressing known mental health issues creates a burden not only on children and their families but also has a trickle effect on society (National Research Council, 2009).

Trauma and Stress

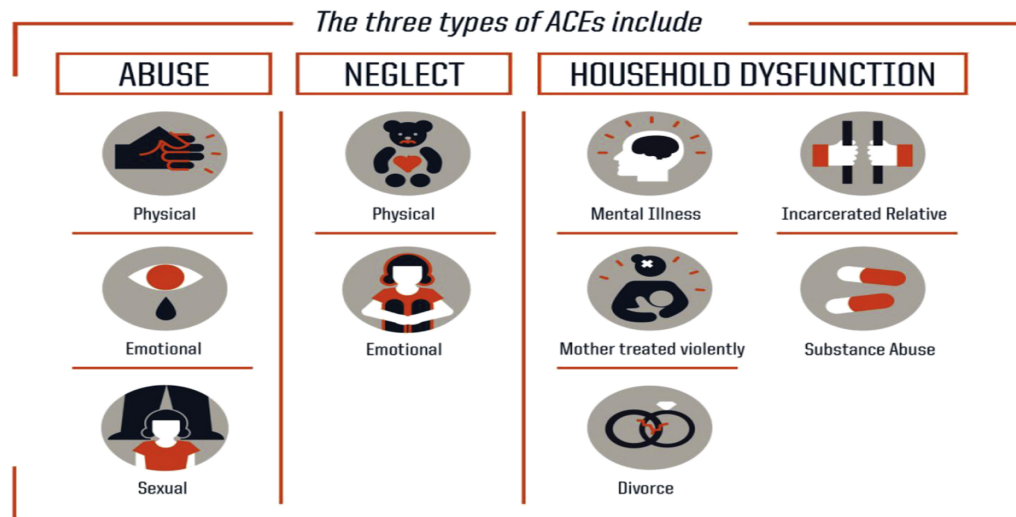
Childhood trauma plays a significant role in students' cognitive and social development. It can negatively affect educational outcomes, including poor academic performance and absenteeism. These issues put students at a higher risk of dropout, increasing behavioral issues and corresponding consequences (e.g., suspensions/expulsions) (Texas Association of School Boards, n.d.; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023).

Additionally, prolonged exposure to toxic stress can hinder or impair brain development. Toxic stress can affect the normal functions of physical and psychological systems (e.g., immune and endocrine systems), leading to a higher risk of chronic diseases and premature death) (Boullier & Blair, 2018). Also, toxic stress caused by abuse, neglect, or other adverse childhood experiences can "alter the trajectory of a developing brain" (Navalta et al., 2018, p. 273).

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

In the 1990s, the CDC and Kaiser Permanente developed a questionnaire to determine the impact of childhood trauma on mental and physical health factors, behaviors, and potential long-term life outcomes in children (Boullier & Blair, 2018; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020).

ACEs estimate the occurrence or likelihood of adverse life experiences, as seen in Figure 7, based on direct child maltreatment (Walsh et al., 2019). Answers were calculated using the three areas of childhood trauma, abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction, as well as their subcategories (Boullier & Blair, 2018).

Figure 7*Adverse Childhood Experiences*

Note. (Three-Types-of-ACEs-Include – Advokids: A Legal Resource for California Foster Children and Their Advocates, n.d.)

As indicated in Figure 7, varying levels of ACEs exist, from household dysfunction to abuse. The effect of any one or a combination of these ACEs can be far-reaching, causing a damaging chain reaction related to childhood development.

According to Harvard University (2019), maltreatment or neglect may have lifelong consequences on healthy development. Exposure to adults who are absent, inappropriate, or even unreliable becomes emotionally affected. ACEs can also result in disrupted growth and development, affecting developing brain circuits and disrupting how children process academic information and emotionally regulate themselves. These disruptions also affect social relationships (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023; Harvard University, 2019).

Additionally, minority children experiencing ACEs are more likely to have "compounded community trauma" (Alegria et al., 2018; Virginia Mental Health Access

Program, 2024, para. 3) or experiences and exposure to instances of violence in the home and the community, linking them to "high rates of mental illness, including post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and externalizing behaviors." (Alegria et al., 2018, para. 3).

According to Chafouleas et al. (2021), research indicates an intersection between trauma and educational outcomes. If trauma or compounded trauma begins in early childhood, adverse behavioral, academic, and social-emotional development responses will emerge, creating harmful outcomes in critical areas of development (Saleh et al., 2017).

ACEs are another framework that has indicated significant effects on minority groups. Research has indicated that minority children are at a significantly higher risk of experiencing ACEs (Jamieson, 2018), and according to Zhang and Monnat (2022), black children's experiences with ACEs are significantly higher than those of other groups. Research indicates that out of the five regions researched in the U.S., the prevalence of existing ACEs was the highest among Black children, accounting for 61% of children having experienced one of the more ACEs categories (Jamieson, 2018; Sacks & Murphey, 2018).

Social determinants of health are often observed in minority groups, with childhood trauma being a prominent example (Jamieson, 2018). Although ACEs alone cannot account for all contributing factors to trauma, research indicates a correlation between ACEs, mental health consequences, externalizing behaviors, and socioeconomic status/poverty, affecting the educational trajectory of children already struggling academically and behaviorally in school (Hicks et al., 2020).

Socioeconomic Status

Resources and access are external issues that significantly contribute to the overrepresentation of minorities in special education. According to Winford (2021), a significant contributor to high special education identification rates is the lack of support and resources for early intervention and access to literacy programs. Children without early access or exposure to literacy programming are significantly disadvantaged in reading and language development (Buckingham et al., 2013; Winford, 2021).

Special education overidentification among lower socioeconomic groups is a concern because "it affects students' course placement and may result in unfair disadvantages for some students" (Winford, 2021, p. 14). Considering the issues of insufficient resources, disability labeling, and socioeconomic status, these issues suggest that students from low-income backgrounds may be overrepresented in specialized educational programming and have lower academic success rates.

As indicated, socioeconomic status is another significant external factor that can hurt minority students who are overrepresented in special education. Poverty is often considered a primary source of academic and social struggle, and students living in poverty experience issues related to a significant lack of access to resources that are otherwise available in affluent or well-supported districts (Jordan, 2005; Kreskow, 2013).

Summary

This chapter provided a historical, theoretical, and exploratory review of research to support the study's research questions, which pertain to the contributing external factors that can lead to the overrepresentation of minorities in special education, particularly in specific disability categories. The purpose of this review was to provide a

comprehensive analysis of relevant literature to understand better the factors contributing to the overrepresentation of minorities in special education.

Historically, minority students have been systematically marginalized. Academically and socially, they have been misunderstood by society that has not considered or faced the long-lasting effects of the historical, educational, and social trauma to which they have been exposed. From a theoretical perspective, minority students in special education fall into the category of dual minority status (Annamma et al., 2013), exposing them to discriminatory practices and influencing educational outcomes.

Additionally, from a cultural perspective, minority students come from a lineage of trauma that has historically manifested as misinterpreted behavioral problems. Finally, exposure to behavior influences the foundations of conduct that could manifest positively or negatively.

The research presented in this chapter shows that black students are at a higher risk of being identified and serviced for emotional disturbance (*Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*, 2018, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023), and supports the problem and research questions indicating evidence of explicit overrepresentation of minority students in special education.

By considering historical and theoretical lenses, researchers can attempt to bridge the gap between risk factors and outcomes by providing a context for association influences related to historical and theoretical components. They can further explore the root causes of minority overrepresentation in special education and connect them to external factors.

While special education is meant to protect and support students with different learning abilities, it can also lead to situations where students are subject to failure. This study draws attention to adult failures in recognizing external factors related to special education referrals and evaluative processes. Given the historical and theoretical contexts, evaluative teams must seek to understand what specially designed instruction means for students lumped into special education because of race, behavior (e.g., social maladjustment), past trauma, lack of access, or bias (Rossen, 2018). Evaluative teams must also examine the challenges faced by minority students, understand that external factors may be unrelated to educational or academic issues, and meticulously consider all contributing factors related to qualifying students for special education, especially ED, as this is a big label for children and implies that an emotionally disturbed child is broken (Woodruff, 2020).

Chapter III

Methodology

This mixed-methods study aimed to investigate the external factors that contribute to the overrepresentation of special education services for minority students, specifically black students identified with ED. It emphasizes the need to identify root causes that contribute to the problem, beginning with the evaluative (MTSS) process, and determining factors including but not limited to inconsistency, implicit or explicit bias, cultural misunderstandings, and procedural misinterpretation.

This chapter provides a quantitative and qualitative methodology framework with a phenomenological approach used to study the overrepresentation of minority students in special education. The framework includes details regarding research methodology, instrumentation and measurement, tools used, permissions and consent materials, reliability and validity, participants, data collection, analytic strategy used, assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and research ethics. It seeks to address two key research questions:

(R1) Are minority students, specifically Black students, overrepresented in special education in more subjective disability categories versus their white counterparts?

(R2) Do external factors impact/influence the identification rates of minority students for Special education programming, specifically within subjective disability categories like Emotional Disturbance?

Research Methodology

The purpose of this mixed study was to explore external factors contributing to the overrepresentation of special education services for minority students, specifically for black students diagnosed with emotional disturbances. This study investigated the influence of bias, implicit bias, poverty, and adverse childhood experiences on the referral, intervention, and placement processes for special education services and studies, trends, and outcomes related to those processes, specifically as they pertain to subjective disabilities, such as ED in black students.

Instrumentation and Measurement

This study was designed to explore the external factors that lead to the overrepresentation of minorities in special education. This research focused on the subjectivity of special education qualifications and the impact of special education service delivery on social and academic outcomes, specifically for students categorized as emotionally disturbed.

This mixed-methods study analyzed quantitative and qualitative data from a large and midsized Midwestern school district. Following the informed consent process and agreement to participate, the participants completed a questionnaire and a Q-sort to provide data to inform the study.

Questionnaires

Survey research incorporates questionnaires as a fundamental tool that enables researchers to collect data to comprehend and quantify individuals' knowledge, viewpoints, attitudes, and actions. After completing the informed consent process, the questionnaire was sent to all participants who agreed to participate. The questionnaire was designed to address concepts from the literature review regarding the impact of

external factors on the identification rates of minority students, specifically in the emotional disturbance category.

The questionnaire was comprised of 17 questions, including five demographic questions, eight questions rated on a Likert scale, and three open-ended questions to allow the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of responses by exploring "participant thoughts, feelings, and beliefs" (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019, p. 1). The questions provided the researcher with data and information that satisfy instrument alignment to the study, theoretical concepts, and focus related to the research (see Appendix B).

Q-Methodology

The second phase of data collection involved the Q-methodology. This method explored and articulated common perspectives on subject outlining, where both agreement and disagreement exist among viewpoints.

Offering participants the opportunity to participate in Q-sort electronically was intended to provide convenience and mitigate potential coercion or hesitation. The research study employed purposive sampling techniques to invite participants to participate. Targeted electronic communication channels, such as emails, were utilized for this purpose. Participants received an email with an overview of the research, information about Q-Methodology, and instructions on accessing Q-sort with a unique code to protect their identities (Block, 2008; Webler et al., 2009).

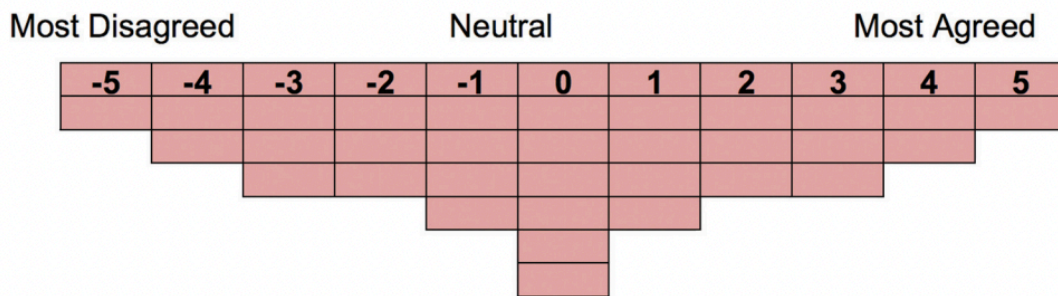
The Q-sort methodology involves participants sorting a set of statements or items along a continuum, typically a grid or scale. Participants are provided statements representing different opinions or viewpoints on a specific topic (Cross, 2005). They are

then asked to rank or sort these statements according to their perspective, from the most agreeable to the most disagreeable or from the most important to the least important (Block, 2008).

The sorted statements are placed on a grid, scale, or Q-sort grid, as shown in Figure 8. The grid typically has a fixed number of positions or categories of agreeable levels, from -5 to +5 or 1 to 9. Participants place each statement in one of these positions based on their subjective evaluation of the statement.

Figure 8

Symmetrical Q-Sort Grid



Note. (Coogan & Herrington, 2011, p. 26)

As illustrated in the figure above, participants will place each statement in one of these positions based on their subjective evaluation of the statement.

Table 2 shows the concourse statements related to this study, focusing on positive, neutral, and negative statements related to the MTSS process, self-reflection, collaboration, and subjective factors. The table also provides key themes related to the focus, including impact, fidelity, appropriateness, and whole-child focus.

Table 2*Q-Sort Concourse Statements*

Proposed Concourse Statements for the Q-sort	Key Focuses: MTSS Process, Collaboration, Self- reflection, Subjective factors, Student considerations	Type of Statement Wording (positive, neutral, negative)	Themes related to the key focus: Impact, fidelity, Appropriateness, Whole Child
The MTSS team has a clear understanding of the definition of Emotional Disturbance	MTSS Process: Subjective factors	Positive	Appropriateness; Impact; Fidelity; Whole Child
Staff involved with the MTSS process provide interventions with fidelity	MTSS Process: Collaboration	Positive	Fidelity
It is important to "get it right" when identifying students for subjective disabilities (ex. emotional disturbance).	MTSS Process: Subjective factors; Student considerations	Positive	Impact, fidelity, Appropriateness,
The MTSS team respects one another.	MTSS Process: Collaboration	Positive	Impact, fidelity,
Teachers are patient throughout the MTSS process.	MTSS Process: Self- reflection	Positive	Impact, fidelity,
The MTSS process does not account for external issues students deal with on an ongoing basis (ex. homelessness, food insecurity)	MTSS Process: Self-reflective; Collaboration	Positive	Impact, fidelity,
I understand my role in identifying subjective	MTSS Process: Subjective factors; Student	Positive	Impact, fidelity, Appropriateness,

disabilities	considerations		
I review the data provided before the evaluation team report meeting	MTSS Process: Collaboration; Student considerations	Positive	Impact, fidelity, Appropriateness,
I respect the decisions made during the MTSS evaluation	MTSS Process: Self-reflective; Student considerations	Positive	Impact, Appropriateness, Whole Child
The MTSS process considers the well-being of the student.	MTSS Process: Student considerations	Positive	Impact, fidelity, Appropriateness, Whole Child
The MTSS process ensures the whole child is supported (i.e., academically, socially, and emotionally)	MTSS Process: Collaboration, Self-reflection, Subjective factors, Student considerations	Positive	Impact, Appropriateness, Whole Child
The MTSS process is designed to identify supports for struggling students (academically and/or behaviorally).	MTSS Process: Collaboration, Self-reflection, Subjective factors, Student considerations	Neutral	Impact, Appropriateness, Whole Child
The MTSS process provides relevant, targeted interventions for students.	MTSS Process: Student considerations	Neutral	Impact, fidelity, Appropriateness, Whole Child
The MTSS allows interventions to be individualized for students	MTSS Process: Student considerations; Subjective factors	Neutral	Fidelity, Appropriateness, Whole Child
The MTSS process is data	MTSS Process:	Neutral	Fidelity,

driven.	Collaboration		Appropriateness,
The MTSS process is a collaborative process between school personnel and parents.	MTSS Process: Collaboration; Student considerations	Neutral	Impact, fidelity, Appropriateness, Whole Child
The MTSS process is time consuming	MTSS Process: Self-reflection	Negative	Fidelity
The MTSS process does not value my opinion about students' abilities, behaviors, or strengths.	MTSS Process: Self-reflection	Negative	Impact, fidelity, Appropriateness,
The data collection process for MTSS is confusing.	MTSS Process: Collaboration	Negative	Fidelity, Appropriateness,
The hyper-focus on a data driven decision is a disservice for the students.	MTSS Process, Collaboration, Self-reflection, Subjective factors,	Negative	Impact, fidelity, Appropriateness, Whole Child
The MTSS process focuses on student weaknesses rather than strengths.	MTSS Process: Self-reflection, Subjective factors, Student considerations	Negative	Impact, Appropriateness, Whole Child
The MTSS process does not account for external issues students deal with on an ongoing basis (ex. homelessness, food insecurity)	MTSS Process: Collaboration, Self-reflection, Subjective factors, Student considerations	Negative	Impact, fidelity, Appropriateness, Whole Child
The MTSS process is subjective	MTSS Process: Subjective factors;	Negative	Impact, fidelity, Appropriateness,

	Student considerations		
The MTSS process is inconsistent when considering certain disabilities (ex. emotional disturbance)	MTSS Process: Self-reflective	Negative	Impact, fidelity, Appropriateness,
There are times I've agreed to an identification when I believed otherwise	MTSS Process: Self-reflective; Collaboration	Negative	Appropriateness
Interventions are done so the team will more likely identify a student	MTSS Process: Subjective factors	Negative	Impact, fidelity, Appropriateness, Whole Child
The MTSS process is a way to get students out of teacher/administrator classrooms/schools.	MTSS Process: Subjective factors, student considerations	Negative	Appropriateness,

The participants sorted the statements from the table above and participant data were collected and analyzed. Factor analysis was utilized as it identified distinct patterns or factors within the data, helping group participant data based on similarities in sorting patterns and identifying the underlying subjective viewpoints or factors that shape their opinions (Cross, 2005).

Permissions and Consent Materials

Permission to conduct the research was obtained by Dr. Karen Larwin. Guidelines for informed consent and guidelines were obtained from the YSU Office of Research Services regarding human subjects research and the IRB website, specifically the Informed Consent page (Office of Research Services, 2021). A link to Qualtrics was

provided to participants for the questionnaire and was used to collect the data. IBM SPSS was used to analyze statistical data.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability refers to the consistency and dependability of measurements or results obtained using a particular method or instrument. This addresses the extent to which an experiment, test, or tool yields the same results under consistent conditions. Reliability is critical because it ensures the consistency, credibility of the research, and reliable measurements, which are crucial for maintaining quality standards.

Validity in research refers to the study's accuracy in measuring what it aims to assess, ensure credibility, and reduce bias. It determines whether a test truly gauges the intended concept and ensures that the research measurements faithfully represent theoretical ideas. This study verified the reliability and accuracy of the methods used to support minority students and the appropriateness of using special education services as default support.

Participants

The participants in this study included administrators/supervisors, general education teachers, special education teachers, school psychologists, and special education coordinators or teachers on special assignments (TOSAs). The participants were sampled from urban and suburban school district settings. Participants were identified through a snowball sampling method, which involved directly reaching out to individuals and expanding the search by asking them to recommend or introduce others who were interested or suitable for participation. Links to the study questionnaire were provided via email, and upon completion of the questionnaire, randomized and

unidentifiable links to the Q-sort were provided. Participants were free to participate in one or both if they decided to participate.

Data Collection

The data were collected through a questionnaire. The questionnaire results were analyzed using IBM SPSS software based on the quantitative data sets. The Q-sort data were collected through Q-Method Testing and Inquiry Platform (QTIP), analyzed using Q Method Software, and informed overall adult attitudes and behaviors related to the research questions.

Analytic Strategy

The data collected for this study consisted of quantitative and qualitative sources that provided context for the overrepresentation of minorities in special education and suggests that special education identification in minorities is related more to outside factors, such as implicit bias than actual cognitive/developmental deficits.

Quantitative data were gathered using a 17-item questionnaire. The questionnaire was used to collect demographic data, obtain the level of agreement (using a Likert scale), and gather information through open-ended questions based on the research questions. The first 14 questions were analyzed using descriptive statistics, and the remaining open-ended questions were coded for patterns or common themes.

Qualitative data were collected using Q-methodology. The Q-sort link was provided to participants, and they were asked to rank their feelings related to the MTSS process using 26 statements provided (see Table 2). Phenomenological information allowed the participants' personal feelings and experiences to be considered in the study. The data were analyzed using the Q Method Software; significant themes emerged and

were used to report an understanding of how the participants responded to the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A textual description was prepared for use of emerging themes to report "how participants experienced the phenomenon" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 80)

Assumptions

Simon (2011) indicated that the assumptions of a study are out of the researcher's control. Since the research depends significantly on the lived experiences of teachers, students, parents, and other key staff, this study's assumptions included the openness and honesty of the participants. Additionally, the study assumed that the participants wanted to assist and were qualified to provide their views on special education identification related to minority students. Finally, the study assumed that multiple viewpoints exist and that these perspectives influence how individuals interpret and understand phenomena. The questionnaire and Q-sort contributed to the data-gathering process and were fundamental in answering the study questions that addressed the research problem statement. The general validity of the research relied on participant candor during the data-gathering process. Participation and responses were fundamental to answering the study questions that addressed the research problem statement.

Limitations

Beyond the researcher's control, study limitations are conditions that limit the researcher's capacity to study (Price & Murnan, 2004; Simon, 2011). The principal limitation of this study was participant withdrawal. Participant withdrawal was considered because this limitation affects the overall sample size, the ability to generalize data, and the limitation of participants' level of involvement in the study. Moreover, it

is important to recognize the study's participants were primarily administrators and non-teaching personnel. Not having traditional educators participate may have resulted in a lack of perspectives, potentially limiting the diversity of viewpoints. Additionally, district employees may feel obligated to provide more positive responses out of duty to the district to share their true feelings. However, other participants may answer negatively based on what they have seen in the media rather than on their actual experiences with the district.

Delimitations

This study focused on the overrepresentation of minority students in special education, concentrating on black students who qualify for services within subjective disability categories, specifically that of ED. It does not address the identification of the other disability categories with as much detail. Additionally, the study does not address qualification rates of objective disabilities (e.g., blindness, hearing impairments, and orthopedic impairments). Finally, the focus of the service setting is that of ED resource rooms and may not be replicated in school districts that do not offer these services.

Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Youngstown State University. Informed consent, confidentiality, and data management were obtained and protected using YSU's IRB guidelines. Participant identities were protected regarding the questionnaire and Q-Methodology. The role of the researcher was to collect, transcribe, code the data, and identify themes in the findings. Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS and Q Method Software, and confidentiality was protected using coding and pseudonyms when appropriate. In this study, the researcher gathered, analyzed, and coded the data.

The study results were reported, and data were secured in a password-protected file to be destroyed after three years. Additionally, if the participants had any concerns about their participation in the study, they received the IRB Chair's contact information.

Summary

This chapter restated the purpose of the study and the accompanying research questions related to the overrepresentation of minority students in special education. This phenomenological study was the most appropriate for the study as it focused on discovering, interpreting, and "understanding the essence of lived experience" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 67) of participants related to a lived phenomenon.

This chapter also provided the structure of the study, including the research methodology, aspects related to the sample, elements of data and collection procedures, the analytic strategy used, and potential issues considered for the study based on the research questions. Chapter IV provides the data analysis results and a summary of these findings.

Chapter IV

Results

The focus of this research was to explore external problems that affect special education identification outcomes, specifically within the disability category of ED as the federal definition of ED is defined by IDEA does not "apply to children who are socially maladjusted" (*Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*, 2017, para. 7).

This chapter is a presentation of the findings of the mixed-methods case study conducted to answer the research questions related to ED identifications posed in Chapter I:

(R1) Are minority students, specifically Black students, overrepresented and misidentified for special education services in more subjective disability categories vs. their White counterparts?

(R2) Do external factors impact/influence the identification rates of minority students for Special education programming, specifically within subjective disability categories like Emotional Disturbance?

Chapter IV presents the analyzed data collected through the administration of a questionnaire given to school personnel directly involved in the disability identification process and conducted a Q-sort analysis with the same group to determine if, at their level of expertise, they believed that special education qualification in the ED disability category was more related to external factors (e.g., social maladjusted behavior).

Participants

A link was provided to the participants to complete the study. The participants were asked to complete a survey and a Q-sort. Of the 15 participants, two (13%) were

excluded from the study for not completing the Q-sort, resulting in a total of 13 participants with an 87% completion rate.

Four participants were between the ages of 36-45 (31%); four participants were between the ages of 46-55 (31%); three participants were 55 or older (23%); and two participants were between the ages of 26-35 (15%). Ten participants were female (77%) and three participants were male (23%). Seven participants were Black/African American (54%) and six participants were White/Caucasian (46%).

Seven participants were administrators/supervisors (54%); three participants identified as former educators or other roles (23%); two participants were TOSAs (15%); and one participant was a school psychologist (8%). Nine participants work in an urban school district (69%), and four participants work in a suburban district (31%).

For descriptive data and factor loading information for each participant, refer to Appendix X. Raw data can be found at the following link: [Martin Dissertation Raw Data](#)

Q-Sort Results

Thirteen participants completed a Q-sort to explore their subjectivity related to the study systematically. This analysis discusses the findings related to participants' perspectives, focusing specifically on factors, including a matrix with defining sorts, a covariance matrix, factor score correlations, factor characteristics, and individual analysis of the three factors identified.

Factor Matrix

The factor matrix with defining sorts flagged shows the association between participants and their shared viewpoints taken from the analysis of the Q-sort. Table 3 reflects a factor matrix illustrating the correlation or loading of each Q-sort with

emergent factors within the factor analysis. The correlation or loading shows how closely the participant's Q-sort matches the identified factors. A significant Q-sort has a high loading $p > 0.5$ related to a factor and suggests participants' Q-sorts align, providing a mapping between participants and perspectives.

Table 3

Factor Matrix With Defining Sorts Flagged (X)

Participant	Factor 1		Change Amount	Factor 2		Change Amount	Factor 3		Change Amount
19xot78kBT	-0.12		0.21	0.11		0.47	0.77	X	-0.24
2XGsoUebt0	-0.06		0.18	0.20		0.31	0.58	X	-0.26
blKPN4hnz5	0.88	X	-0.08	-0.11		-0.28	-0.05		0.04
brkagqXftQ	0.73	X	-0.01	0.08		-0.22	0.05		-0.10
chNVI6FXG8	0.71	X	0.00	0.41		-0.47	-0.22		-0.24
Hjp7GI0kx5	0.74	X	-0.06	-0.30		-0.04	0.19		0.12
hr2DJK1eAx	0.69	X	0.00	-0.02		-0.12	0.16		-0.06
Igm1odXRMS	0.01		0.16	0.70	X	-0.17	0.04		-0.46
lumAJWhI45	0.53	X	0.09	0.47		-0.24	0.09		-0.35
MRgIJwBUu5	0.76	X	0.00	0.19		-0.29	0.01		-0.16
NG1JgHa4nR	0.00		0.26	0.89	X	-0.06	0.30		-0.64
ykLmaEr3SD	0.57		0.15	0.14		0.17	0.65	X	-0.27
ZmIkoPaL1X	0.31		0.08	-0.11		0.23	0.50	X	-0.06

As seen in Table 3, the loadings for each participant in the Q-sort fall within three factors. The higher positive values indicate association with that factor view, and lower negative values indicate divergence with that view. Of the 13 participants, seven loaded significantly for factor one, two for factor two, and four for factor three.

The "X" or flag indicates defining sorts for each or a load that significantly illustrates that factor perspective, $p > 0.5$ and signifies how some sorts strongly define a factor. Many participants have results that suggest blended viewpoints. However, the flagged loads indicate the chief perspective. The change amount column shows the load difference from the closest factor, giving higher values a greater separating definition for that factor over others.

Covariance Matrix

A covariance matrix, seen in Table 4, was used to understand the relationships between participants in the Q-sort. By comparing the covariances between all pairs of variables in the Q-sort, a covariance matrix provides insights into how the variables vary together in positive or negative ways allowing assessment of the strength and direction of their associations (Thakar & Divakar, 2023; *Study Analysis | Q Method Software*, n.d.).

Table 4

Covariance Matrix

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
Factor 1	0.13	-0.06	-0.07
Factor 2	-0.06	0.11	-0.02
Factor 3	-0.07	-0.02	0.09

As shown in Table 4, the values 0.13, 0.11, and 0.09 represent the variances in each factor. These values suggest that Factor 1 accounts for slightly more of the total variance in the Q-sorts than the other factors. The remaining numbers indicate the covariances between pairs of factors. A high positive score indicates factors that have similar viewpoints. A negative value signifies a gap in viewpoints between the two components.

For instance, low negative covariances exist between F1 & F2, F1 & F3, and F2 & F3.

These data indicated that all factors represent distinct subjective viewpoints with differences between one another rather than overlapping perspectives. Overall, the pattern of low negative covariances implies three different shared perspectives emerging from the Q-sort data according to the factor analysis.

Score Correlations

The correlation matrix analysis between the 13 Q-sorts indicated a scale for these correlations ranging between -1.00 and +1.00. "The analysis involves the correlation of one Q-sort to the Q-sorts of other participants" (Damio, 2018, p. 62). Positive or negative correlations can be determined related to proximity to ± 1.00 , respectively, and indicate differences between participant responses on the Q-sort. Table 5 provides the correlations between factor scores.

Table 5

Factor Score Correlations

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
Factor 1	1.00	0.07	0.20
Factor 2	0.07	1.00	0.36
Factor 3	0.20	0.36	1.00

Table 5 reflects the statistical correlations between the z-scores calculated for each statement across pairs of factors in the Q-sort. The two factors with the higher association are Factor 2 and Factor 3 ($r = .36$).

Here, the across-factor correlations are relatively low. The highest is 0.36 between F2 and F3, which suggests that Factors 1, 2, and 3 all have moderately different

configurations regarding how the statements were relatively ranked from most disagree to most agree within each perspective.

Characteristics

Factor characteristics in Q-methodology refer to some key quantitative indicators that provide information about each factor (shared subjective perspective) extracted from analyzing a set of Q-sorts (Valenta & Wigger, 1997).

The main factor characteristics include several defining variables, average relative coefficient, composite reliability, and standard error of factor z-scores (*Study Analysis | Q Method Software*, n.d.). These characteristics offer information about each factor's reliability and quality and are identified in Table 6. The characteristics provide quantitative information about each subjective perspective viewpoint's strength, stability, and precision uncovered through Q analysis (Zabala et al., 2018).

Table 6

Factor Characteristics

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
No. of Defining Variables	7	2	4
Avg. Rel. Coef.	0.8	0.8	0.8
Composite Reliability	0.97	0.89	0.94
S.E of Factor Z-Scores	0.19	0.33	0.24

As indicated in Table 6, the number of defining variables from the Q-sort that show each factor's perspective with significant loading include eight sorts that strongly define Factor 1, two that define Factor 2, and four that define Factor 3. The average relative coefficient between defining variables' sorts and factors is 0.8 and suggests good factor exemplification. The composite reliability of 0.9 or above measures how stable the

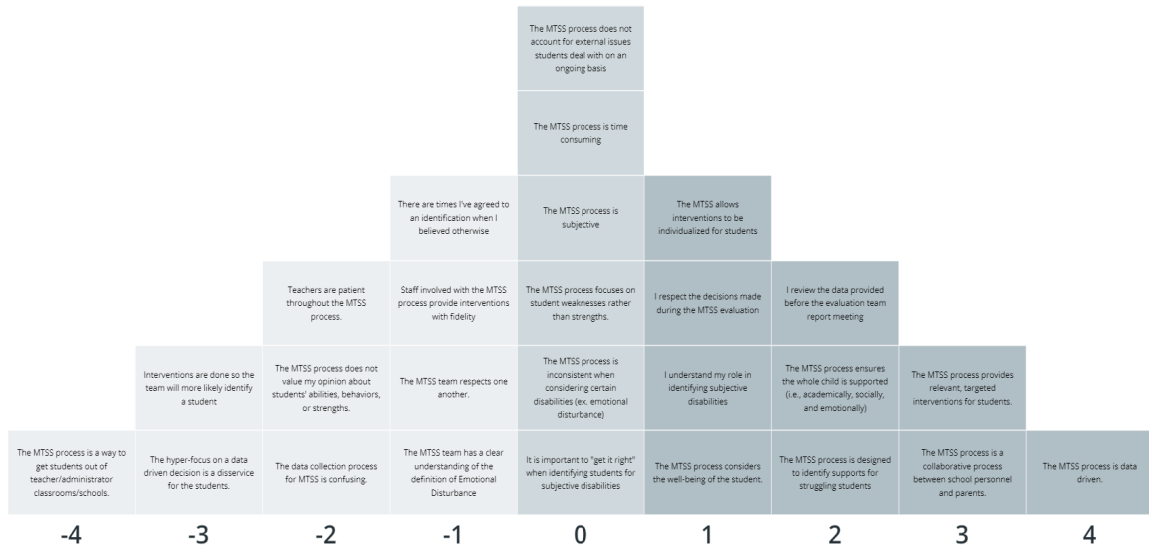
factors are based on the defining sorts. Finally, the standard error of factor z-scores shows the estimate of the factor's viewpoint and indicates that the lowest standard error falls within Factor 1 and the highest within Factor 2. Based on the factor characteristics, they all adequately exemplify perspectives. However, Factor 1 has the most defining sorts and estimates the most reliable viewpoint. Factors 1 and 3 represent the most reliable defining sorts, and Factor 2 represents the least reliable.

Factor Analysis 1, 2, and 3. All factors derive from an analysis to identify groups of participants who sorted statements similarly. Factors are mathematically organized into relevant sorts of factors, participant opinions are correlated into recognizable factors, and their distinguishing and consensus statements are interpreted. In this study, the analysis found three factors.

Representing factor 1, Figure 9 presents the array sort for the seven participants who loaded significantly for the factor.

Figure 9

Model Sort for Participants Who Loaded Significantly for Factor



As the figure above reflects, there is significant loading of statements that are further analyzed and listed in Table 7, clarifying the distinguishing statements for Factor 1 and the overall endorsement of statements (positive, negative, or neutral) associated with the factor's perspective.

Table 7*Distinguishing Statements for Factor 1*

Statement Number	Statement	Endorsement
13	The MTSS process is data driven.	+
12	The MTSS process is a collaborative process between school personnel and parents.	+
15	The MTSS process provides relevant, targeted interventions for students.	+
16	The MTSS process is designed to identify supports for struggling students	+
17	The MTSS process ensures the whole child is supported (i.e., academically, socially, and emotionally)	+
18	The MTSS process considers the well-being of the student.	+
19	I respect the decisions made during the MTSS evaluation	+
14	The MTSS allows interventions to be individualized for students	+
5	The MTSS process is subjective	^
11	The MTSS process is time consuming	^
6	The MTSS process does not account for external issues students deal with on an ongoing basis	^
3	There are times I've agreed to an identification when I believed otherwise	-
8	The hyper-focus on a data driven decision is a disservice for the students.	-
2	Interventions are done so the team will more likely identify a student	-
1	The MTSS process is a way to get students out of teacher/administrator classrooms/schools.	-

Note: Endorsement indicated as positive (+), neutral (^), or negative (-)

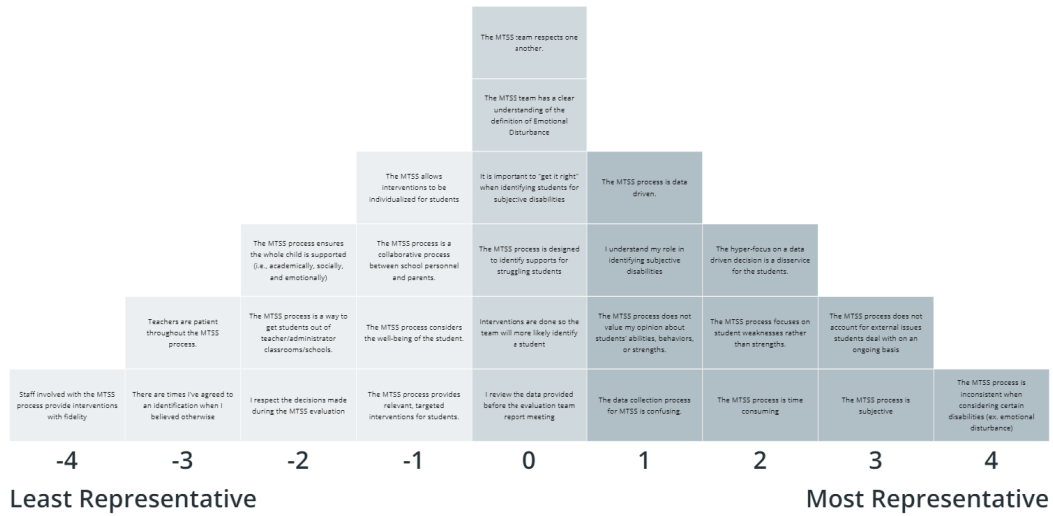
As seen in Table 7, Factor 1 appears to reflect an overall positive perspective on the MTSS process and its implementation. This is evidenced by the high scores (most agree) within these statements 13, 15, 16, and 17. Additionally, Factor 1 seems to disagree with more critical statements 6 and 8.

Based on this information, Factor 1 likely represents the viewpoint that MTSS is a holistic, supportive framework for understanding student needs and providing appropriate academic and socio-emotional interventions based on data. There appears to be confidence in MTSS teams to make objective decisions. Moving forward, this perspective is referred to as the Holistic Supportive Framework Perspective (HSFP).

Representing Factor 2, results indicate an array of characteristic statements representing a distinct viewpoint among the sampled respondents and has two significantly loading Q-sorts that define this factor's perspective. Figure 9 presents the array associated with Factor 2.

Figure 10

Model Sort for Participants Who Loaded Significantly for Factor 2



As the figure above reflects, there is significant loading of statements that are further analyzed and listed in Table 8, providing the distinguishing statements for Factor 2 and their significantly loaded Q-sorts related to participants perspectives.

Table 8*Distinguishing Statements for Factor 2*

Statement Number	Statement	Endorsement
4	The MTSS process is inconsistent when considering certain disabilities (ex. emotional disturbance)	+
11	The MTSS process is time consuming	+
7	The MTSS process focuses on student weaknesses rather than strengths.	+
9	The data collection process for MTSS is confusing.	+
10	The MTSS process does not value my opinion about students' abilities, behaviors, or strengths.	+
12	The MTSS process is a collaborative process between school personnel and parents.	-
14	The MTSS allows interventions to be individualized for students	-
3	There are times I've agreed to an identification when I believed otherwise	-
4	The MTSS process is inconsistent when considering certain disabilities (ex. emotional disturbance)	+
11	The MTSS process is time consuming	+
7	The MTSS process focuses on student weaknesses rather than strengths.	+
9	The data collection process for MTSS is confusing.	+

Note: Endorsement indicated as positive (+), neutral (^), or negative (-)

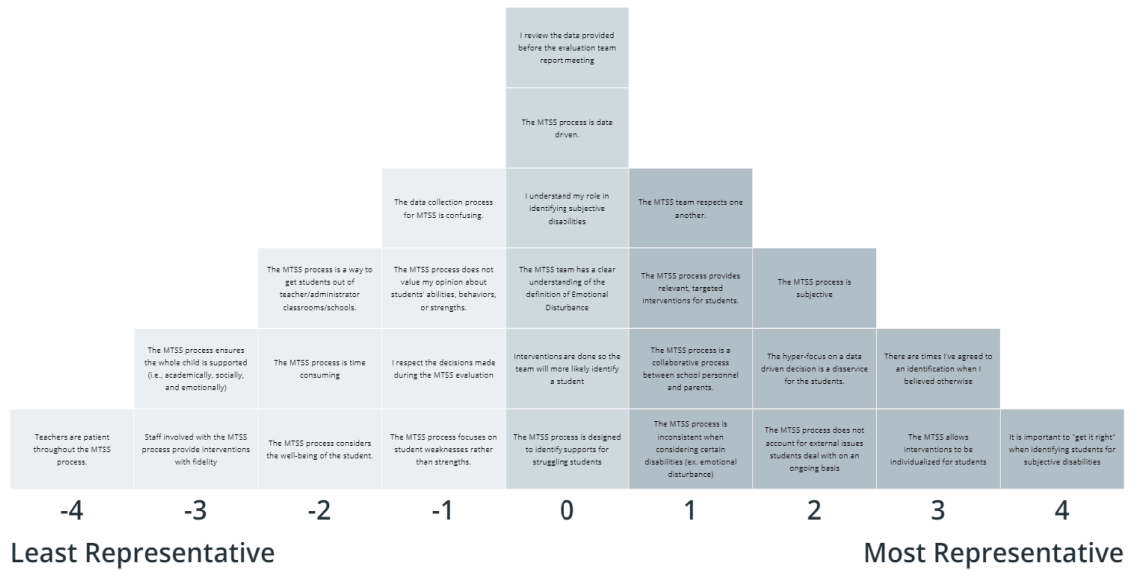
As indicated in the table above, Factor 2 seems to represent a more skeptical view of some elements of the MTSS process; despite acknowledging a few strengths, it appears that Factor 2 finds agreement with statements 4, 9, and 10 and finds that experiences with the MTSS process consider statements 14, 12, and 3 to be true.

Overall, Factor 2 is concerned about inconsistencies in MTSS, especially for certain disabilities, as well as issues with data collection, time intensiveness, and focusing on weaknesses. There seems to be some distrust of the process, with Statement 3 suggesting the factor has felt pressured to agree to disability identifications they questioned. However, they are still open to collaboration and individualization of interventions. Factor 2 indicates the presence of overall skepticism with MTSS outcomes, including participants who feel overlooked in the process or have concerns about possible bias. Moving forward, this perspective will be referred to as the Inconsistencies are a Concern Perspective (ICP).

Four participants loaded significantly for Factor 3 and Figure 10 presents the array of Factor 3 representative of the significantly loaded Q-sorts for the four participants associated with it.

Figure 11

Model Sort for Participants Who Loaded Significantly for Factor 3



As the figure above reflects, there is significant loading of statements for this factor that are further analyzed and listed in Table 9, presenting the distinguishing statements for Factor 3 and based on four participants who had significantly loaded Q-sorts associated with individuals and their aligned perspectives.

Table 9*Distinguishing Statements for Factor 3*

Statement Number	Statement	Endorsement
24	It is important to "get it right" when identifying students for subjective disabilities	+
14	The MTSS allows interventions to be individualized for students	+
3	There are times I've agreed to an identification when I believed otherwise	+
12	The MTSS process is a collaborative process between school personnel and parents.	+
11	The MTSS process is time consuming	-

Note: Endorsement indicated as positive (+), neutral (^), or negative (-)

According to the table above, Factor 3 places a high value on the accuracy of disability identification during MTSS, even though there is concern about potentially not always getting it right. Collaborating with parents and individualizing student plans are positives. However, the time-intensive nature of MTSS is seen as a challenge. Moving forward, this perspective will be referred to as the Accuracy of Disability ID Perspective (ADIP).

Participant Viewpoints

Participants were provided the opportunity to share, in their own words, a detailed description of their roles within their respective districts, describe their experience with the MTSS or evaluation process related to identifying students for special education, and offer suggestions for a school district interested in pioneering a new/alternative service delivery model for students.

Of the roles reported in the demographic section of the survey, the participants provided a more detailed description of positions related to their roles in the last section. Table 10 provides an expanded description of each reported role.

Table 10

Expanded Description of Reported Roles

Reported Role	Expanded Description of Role
Administrator/Supervisor	Supervisor Principal Assistant Principal Principal Coach
School Psychologist	School Psychologist
Teacher on Special Assignment (TOSA)	Special Education Coordinator Behavior Specialist (Supporting students in a public separate facility)
-	
Other	Parent Surrogate (Retired teacher) High School Counselor (Public Separate Facility) Para Pro (Serving Special Education Units)

As indicated in the table above, the participants serve in various roles involving special education services or management of personnel related to special education.

Related to their experience with the MTSS or evaluative process, the participant's answers were coded for common themes for experience ranging from the beginning, some experience, and extensive or expert participation. The common theme revealed that three responses indicated a level of experience with the MTSS process and ranged from beginning to very experienced or expertise.

Survey question number 17 asked participants, "Based on your experience with students identified in subjective disability categories, specifically ED, what changes would you suggest to a school district wanting to pioneer a new/alternative service delivery model for students." Participant responses were highly in favor of support for students through various means. For example, Participant MRgIJwBUu5 indicated that need, not disability category or school district placement for students with specific disabilities, should determine services and further stated that "more training should occur to help school-based professionals identify the difference between a difficult student, social maladjustment, and an emotional disturbance." Related to special education populations as members of the school community, Participant ykLmaEr3SD suggested that an inclusive climate, focusing on training and modeling appropriate interactions within the school community, may help "break down the barriers for lack of acceptance for this population in our schools." Lastly, Participant 19xot78kBT indicated that adults working with children should also be conscious of diverse sociological and cultural behaviors among student demographics.

To address the second part of question 17, the participants were asked to offer suggestions for a school district interested in pioneering a new/alternative service delivery model for students. This question was also coded for common themes as seen in Table 11.

Table 11*Common Themes for Survey Question 17*

Theme	Response
Professional Development/Training	4
Mental Health Supports	4
Inclusivity	2
Community/Social Agency Support	13

As the table above indicates, common themes related to survey question number 17 include concentration on professional development (training), mental health support, inclusivity, and community/social agency support.

Lastly, participants shared their viewpoints related to minority special education identifications. For instance, when asked if social constructs (i.e., labels of race, ability levels, assumed behavior of a specific group) have created barriers for minority students served through special education programming, six participants strongly agreed (46%), six agreed (46%), and one strongly disagreed (8%). They were also asked if social maladjustment (ex., juvenile crime, anti-social behavior, etc.) must be addressed through social and school-based services, not through the special education process. Seven participants strongly agreed (54%), and six agreed (46%). When asked related to students identified in subjective disability categories, specifically ED, if separating students by disability category is a form of modern-day segregation, five agreed somewhat (39%), four participants strongly agreed (31%), two neither agreed nor disagreed (15%), and two somewhat disagreed (15%). Finally, participants were asked if minority students are identified for special education services more than students of the majority; eight

participants strongly agreed (63%), four participants agreed (31%), and one participant neither agreed nor disagreed (8%). Finally, related to students identified in subjective disability categories, specifically ED, not addressing behaviors through modeling and programming, students experience barriers to academic success; four strongly agreed (38.5%), four somewhat agreed (38.5%), and three neither agreed nor disagreed (23%).

Summary

This chapter presented the results of a quantitative and qualitative factor analysis by sorting 26 statements by 13 participants including school administrators/supervisors, TOSAs, former or other district employees, and a school psychologist, working in either urban or suburban schools in the Midwest. Q-methodology was used to measure the subjective viewpoints related to the overrepresentation of minorities in special education by exploring the evaluative (MTSS) process. All participants loaded into one of the three factors, indicating similar perspectives that see the MTSS process as a support, view it with a level of skepticism, and understand implications of making the wrong decision, respectively.

The HSFP had seven statistically loaded participants whose overall viewpoints represent a positive view that MTSS is a holistic, supportive framework for identifying student needs, planning interventions, and making data-based decisions. Based on HSFP, the process is consistent, focused on the whole child, and outcomes are appropriately individualized.

The ICP had two statistically loaded participants and captures a more skeptical perspective on some aspects of MTSS. This factor indicated participants questions with consistency in disability recognition, like ED, finds data collection confusing and

believes strengths/teacher input are overlooked. However, it acknowledges customization of interventions and staff-parent collaboration as assets.

The ADIP had four statistically loaded participants whose viewpoint is centered around the importance of accuracy in determining subjective disability eligibility through the MTSS process. It indicates a balance of desire for precision with admissions of agreeing to diagnoses despite some doubt; it sees value in intervention customization and collaboration but finds the process time-intensive.

The three factors revealed different perspectives, resulting in noteworthy findings that can contribute to addressing the study's research questions. Participants also shared their viewpoints and consensus related to research questions.

Chapter V

Discussion

This mixed-method study explored the overrepresentation of minorities in special education related to subjective disabilities and considerations of external factors impacting identification rates. This chapter discusses the significance of the study and the implications of how race, disability, and social influences contribute to the marginalization of students of color in special education (specifically ED) through historical, social, and contextual lenses. It also provides a summary of the study, including the research questions, a summary of the findings, a discussion of the findings, theoretical implications of the research, limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, and a conclusion.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this mixed study was to explore external factors contributing to the overrepresentation and misidentification of special education services for minority students, specifically for Black students diagnosed with subjective disabilities, namely emotional disturbance. This study investigated the influence of bias, poverty, and adverse childhood experiences on the evaluative processes of special education services in suburban and urban school district settings.

The approach adopted in this research involved collecting quantitative and qualitative data using Q-methodology and a survey. Qualitative data were obtained via Q-methodology, where participants were given a link to a Q-sort and asked to rank their attitudes regarding the MTSS process based on 26 concourse statements. Analysis was conducted using Q Method Software, revealing significant themes or factors related to participant viewpoints concerning the research inquiries.

The survey was distributed via Qualtrics XM software and included 17 questions. These questions aimed to gather demographic information, assess agreement levels, and solicit participant insights through open-ended responses aligned with the research questions.

The study participants included administrators/supervisors, general education teachers, special education teachers, school psychologists, and special education coordinators or TOSAs from urban and suburban school district environments. Participants were identified using a snowball sampling approach, whereby individuals were directly contacted and encouraged to suggest others interested in or suitable for participation, thus expanding the pool. The study questionnaires were distributed via email with randomized and unidentifiable links provided for the Q-sort upon completion. Participants could engage in either or both study components as they saw fit.

Summary of Findings

The study participants represented viewpoints and experiences with the evaluative process. This section discusses the Q-sort and questionnaire findings for each research question.

Research Question 1 Findings

Research question one asks are minority students, specifically Black students, overrepresented and misidentified for special education services in more subjective disability categories vs. their White counterparts?

Based on the participant Q-sort responses and the three emerging factors, there is reasonable evidence to suggest that minority students, specifically Black students, may be

overrepresented and potentially misidentified for special education services in more subjective disability categories compared to White students.

The Holistic Supportive Framework Perspective (HSFP) ranked the statement on inconsistencies in certain disabilities (Statement 4) in the neutral position. It sees subjectivity in the process but does not strongly confirm disproportionate placement. In contrast, the Inconsistencies are a Concern Perspective (ICP) ranked the statements on inconsistencies (Statement 4) and subjectivity (Statement 5) very highly at +4 and +3, respectively. This factor sees systemic bias in subjective categories that likely drives the overrepresentation of minorities. Like ICP, the Accuracy of Disability ID Perspective (ADIP) ranked the statements on inconsistencies (+1) and subjectivity (+2) on the agree side. This viewpoint also perceives disproportionality influences in subjective diagnoses. Additionally, ICP and ADIP ranked the importance of accurately identifying subjective disabilities at the extremes, suggesting concern overrepresentation or misdiagnosis.

Additionally, ICP and ADIP provided evidence supporting the research question. At the same time, HSFP is more neutral, but overall, the subjectivity and inconsistency concerns lend reasonable credence to disproportionate minority placement in special education.

Furthermore, based on participant responses, there seemed to be strong support confirming that minority students, specifically Black students, are overrepresented and potentially misidentified in more subjective special education categories compared to White students. For instance, 92% of the respondents fell within some level of agreement that social constructs (i.e., labels of race, ability levels, and assumed behavior of a specific group) have created barriers for minority students served through special

education programming. In addition, when asked if they agreed that students identified in subjective disability categories, specifically ED, separating students by disability category is a form of modern-day segregation, 70% of respondents fell within some level of agreement, indicating the possibility of overrepresentation of minorities being identified as unequal rates compared to the majority. Finally, participants fell within 94% of some level of agreement when asked if minority students were identified for special education services more than students of the majority.

These viewpoints suggested a level of agreement with research question one, acknowledging that systemic biases contribute to the overrepresentation of minorities in special education, as there are cultural gaps in identification and support, and more holistic programming is needed for affected students rather than segregation by way of service delivery. This suggested that the overrepresentation of black students in more subjective disability categories is an issue.

Research Question 2 Findings

Research question two asked do external factors impact/influence the identification rates of minority students for special education programming, specifically for ED?

Based on the three factors extracted from the Q-sort data, there was evidence to suggest that external factors do impact identification rates of minority students for special education, specifically in more subjective categories like ED.

HSFP ranked Statement 6, "The MTSS process does not account for external issues students deal with," in the neutral 0 position. This suggested that external factors are not seen as a significant influence in MTSS decisions from this perspective. However,

in contrast, ICP ranked Statement 6 as one of its highest at +3, indicating that external issues are overlooked in the MTSS process. This factor feels these issues contribute to inconsistent identification of specific disabilities. Thus, for this view, external factors likely drive disproportionate placement. Finally, ADIP, like ICP, ranked Statement 6 as +2. This viewpoint also sees external issues as overlooked in MTSS decisions, which could disproportionately impact minorities. Both ICP and ADIP ranked the statement on external issues highly, giving credence to the research question that these systemic factors contribute to identification rates, especially in subjective categories like ED. HSFP was more neutral on external factors but still saw inconsistencies in certain disabilities. Overall, the data lends reasonable support to the influence of external variables.

Based on participant responses to research question two, external factors influencing identification rates of minority students, specifically Black students, for special education programming in subjective categories like ED, the overall consensus supported the question.

For instance, 100% of participants agreed that social maladjustment (ex., juvenile crime, anti-social behavior, etc.) must be addressed through social and school-based services rather than the special education process. Participant MRgIJwBUu5 stated that services should be "based on need, not disability category" and that "more training should occur to help school-based professionals identify the difference between a difficult student, social maladjustment, and an emotional disturbance." Making the correct distinction between social maladjustment and emotional disturbance is crucial for effective and appropriate intervention and support. According to Cloth et al., (2013), the identification of emotional disturbances in students requires a comprehensive assessment

of behavioral, emotional, and developmental factors, and social maladjustment refers to the inability of an individual to effectively adapt and function within societal norms and expectations, often resulting in distress and dysfunction.

Additionally, 77% of the respondents fell within some level of agreement related to students identified in subjective disability categories, specifically ED, versus specifically addressing behaviors through modeling and programming, thus creating potential barriers to academic success. This speaks to systemic biases driving disability identification and a possible lack of culturally informed external support, which may improperly channel minority students to special education and not have appropriate cultural responsiveness addressing behaviors, which may contribute to inappropriate ED identifications. For instance, Participant MRgIJwBUu5 indicated that "all adults who work with children should be aware of different societal and cultural practices and differences among varying populations of students (i.e., 'disrespect' being subjective and varying widely)." Research suggested that even the "learning style of African American and other minority students is more relational, and that the absence of such relationships may differentially disadvantage those students" (Townsend, 2005, as cited in Skiba et al., 2008, p. 421). This hints that overreliance on academic data in eligibility decisions versus a whole child perspective can create issues of overrepresentation that have been linked to various societal issues such as poverty, limited access to quality healthcare and early intervention services, cultural biases in assessment procedures, and systemic inequalities in education (Garcia & Weiss, 2017). For instance, Harry and Klingner (2006) highlighted how cultural misunderstandings and other barriers can lead to misinterpretations of behavior as suggestive of a disability. In addition, disparities in

resources and support systems between affluent and disadvantaged communities exacerbate the likelihood of misdiagnosis and inappropriate placement (Artiles & Trent, 1994).

Participant ykLmaEr3SD indicated a whole student approach needs to be a focus by "addressing deficits and mental health and environmental concerns." Research has underscored the necessity of a holistic strategy that integrates academic, social-emotional, and environmental support mechanisms. As noted by Skiba et al. (2014), traditional deficit-based models of special education assessment often lead to the disproportionate identification of minority students, perpetuating inequities; therefore, a whole-student approach emphasizes the importance of addressing academic challenges, mental health, and environmental factors contributing to students' struggles (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018).

By adopting this approach, educators can create inclusive environments in which diverse learners receive tailored support to thrive academically and socioemotionally. This will ultimately promote equity and reduce disparities in special education identification.

Discussion of Findings

This section includes a discussion of the findings, including the implications of the results, detailing how they relate to the research questions, a brief discussion of the study's limitations, and recommendations for future research.

Implications

The findings of this study suggest that the overrepresentation of minorities in special education is a complex issue with far-reaching practical implications for the

identification process. As the interpretation of the distinguishing and consensus statements indicates, disparities likely exist in special education identifications, especially ED, for minority groups. Overlooking external factors and systemic biases suggests that exploring the root causes and addressing contributing factors is essential. Harry and Klingner (2006) emphasize that systemic biases such as cultural misunderstandings and lack of culturally responsive assessment practices can lead to the misidentification of minority students for special education. Additionally, the disproportionate representation of minority students in special education can be attributed to systemic factors, such as biased referral practices and inequitable access to resources and support services (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Skiba et al., 2002).

The overrepresentation of minority students within the special education system underscores the power dynamics perpetuated by systemic inequalities. DisCrit theory offers a lens through which to analyze this phenomenon, emphasizing the intersectionality of race, class, and ability in educational settings (Ladson-Billings, 1995). The biased referral practices and unequal distribution of resources cited by Artiles and Trent (1994) and Skiba et al. (2002) reflect broader patterns of institutional discrimination. Supporting research question one, this perpetuates a cycle wherein marginalized groups are disproportionately labeled as in need of special education services, reinforcing their marginalization within the education system (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000). Thus, DisCrit theory critically questions these structures and calls for transformative action to address systemic injustices perpetuating educational disparities (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

In examining the systemic biases inherent in disability identification processes within educational settings, Ogbu's Cultural Ecological theory provides valuable insights that support both research questions. Ogbu (1992) asserted that individuals from marginalized cultural backgrounds often face structural inequalities and systemic discrimination within educational systems, leading to differential treatment and outcomes. This perspective underscores the significance of cultural factors in shaping educational experience and outcomes. As suggested in research question one, within the context of disability identification, cultural biases may lead to the misidentification of students from minority backgrounds as having disabilities, particularly if educators lack cultural competence or an understanding of diverse cultural norms and behaviors (Harry & Klingner, 2006). Consequently, students may be inappropriately channeled into special education programs because of the lack of culturally informed external support (Artiles & Trent, 1994). Moreover, the absence of culturally responsive practices in addressing behavioral challenges further exacerbates the risk of inappropriate identification, particularly in emotional disturbance (ED) cases where cultural misunderstandings may misinterpret behaviors (Alegria et al., 2010). By integrating Ogbu's Cultural Ecological theory into discussions surrounding disability identification, educators and policymakers can better understand and address systemic biases that contribute to the disproportionate representation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education.

Finally, Bandura's social learning theory, supporting research question two, argues that individuals learn by observing others and modeling their behavior, suggesting that behavior is influenced not only by direct experience but also by observing others in their social environment (Bandura, 1977). This theory stresses the significance of social

interactions and their role in shaping and reinforcing behavior. Moreover, Bandura (1986) emphasized the importance of cognitive processes in learning, suggesting that individuals actively process information from their environment and make decisions about their behavior based on these observations. This perspective aligns with Kauffman's (2012) research, which highlights the importance of understanding the cognitive and social aspects of emotional disturbances and social maladjustment. Kauffman's (2012) work asserts that individuals with emotional disturbance may struggle with social functioning and emotional regulation, as their observations and experiences could influence their social environment. Similarly, individuals with social maladjustment may face challenges adapting and functioning within societal norms outside of educational processes, which could also be shaped by their observations and interactions with others (Bandura, 1986; Kauffman, 2012).

The findings of this study support the intricate nature of the overrepresentation of minorities in special education, particularly in categories such as ED. The identification process has systemic biases and cultural misunderstandings that support research questions related to disproportionate representation and reinforce systemic inequalities within educational systems. Drawing from theoretical frameworks, such as DisCrit theory, Cultural Ecological theory, and Social Learning Theory, it becomes evident that addressing these disparities requires a multifaceted approach. Transformative action must be taken to dismantle the institutional discrimination that underpins biased and inappropriate referral practices. Furthermore, integrating culturally responsive practices and understanding behavioral challenges from both cognitive and social perspectives can lead to more accurate identification and equitable outcomes for all students. Educators

and policymakers can work towards a more inclusive and just educational system by acknowledging and addressing the complex relationships of factors influencing the special education identification process.

Understanding these implications indicates a process contending with equity issues, access to quality education, culturally responsive practices, acknowledging misidentification and overidentification, and determining how to address these issues through teacher training and partnerships. Moreover, resolving these disparities requires a multifaceted approach involving collaboration among educators, administrators, families, community members, and policymakers to ensure that all students receive holistic support and the resources they need to thrive academically and socially before resorting to special education as a default response.

Discussion

Significant patterns emerged from the data on the issue of the overrepresentation of minorities in special education. The factor results for HSFP, ICP, and AICP underscored the belief that systemic flaws enable subjective biases to increase special education referrals and minority eligibility decisions. Overlooking external factors and the lack of cultural responsiveness are critical issues. Both perspectives identified inconsistencies in how certain groups, particularly those with disabilities such as ED, were assessed. These patterns reveal the theme of the relationship between process weaknesses (i.e., MTSS, referrals) and inequities with minority groups.

Additionally, improvement with data monitoring, staff training to address any implicit biases, and leveraging community partnerships resonated across all viewpoints. While perspectives differed on the severity level of issues, the solutions centered on

safeguards supporting objective practices and fostering environments for at-risk student groups.

Ultimately, the study supported existing gaps that disproportionately place minority students, especially Black students, into special education without adequately employing preventative interventions first and meeting needs. These concerns highlighted opportunities to promote equity through professional development, accountability mechanisms, and collaboration, with racial components underscoring persistent strains in education processes. These findings compel further examination of policies and daily practices, marginalizing certain groups instead of empowering them. The multi-faceted perspectives lend insight into complex challenges that require nuanced solutions to foster trust and support services' effectiveness.

It is also important to note and address the variances in the data. Based on these results, no significant discrepancies were observed in the data. However, some aspects related to the discrepancies could be discussed. For instance, viewpoint discrepancies indicate that, while all factors acknowledged issues in the special education identification process to some degree, there were discrepancies in how the biases were believed to impact disproportionate representation. ICP and ADIP viewed external factors as more influential, as evidenced by higher statement rankings than HSFP's neutral positioning. In general, discrepancies centered more on perspectives and proposed changes than on data accuracy. Examining these discrepancies allows a better understanding of the similarities and differences across viewpoints on this complex issue.

It is also important to highlight the study's limitations, generalizability, and any threats to validity. Regarding limitations, the small sample size may not fully represent all

possible perspectives. The concourse development did not include family perspectives, and the questions focused largely on the identification procedures rather than systematic issues.

Related to generalizability, the results apply to issues within the overall special education referral process rather than isolated district policies. Additionally, several criteria that indicate potential biases raise questions about fairness in subjective eligibility determinations, which are expected to be widespread.

Concerning the threats to validity, honesty, socially desirable responses, and biases may have influenced participants' responses to provide more acceptable viewpoints. Additionally, ordering effects from the Q statement arrangement may have influenced the statement interpretation.

The study's limitations include the sample size, which may not fully encompass all possible viewpoints, and the constraint that data collection methods may be confined to specific group perspectives, possibly neglecting broader systematic issues.

Future Research

Future considerations related to this study include an exploration of bias, cultural implications, policy, and historical impacts affecting special education outcomes for minority students.

Investigating bias among decision makers, as indicated by Skiba et al. (2002), when presented with referral data differing by race, suggests that it is imperative to examine the role of bias among MTSS team members in the referral and evaluative process for special education services. Understanding how biases influence identification decisions is critical. Research could focus on developing evaluative and service

interventions to mitigate bias in the referral process, thus enabling educators to recognize and address bias in identification practices. Future considerations related to this study include exploring bias, cultural implications, policy, and historical impacts on special education outcomes for minority students.

Furthermore, it is essential to explore how community and cultural factors influence the identification of students for special education services. Artiles and Trent (1994) highlighted the significance of cultural considerations in the assessment and placement process of diverse students, emphasizing the need for culturally responsive practices.

Policy and procedure implications significantly impact the disproportionality of special education identification (Harry & Klingner, 2006). A policy or process audit could assess the efficacy of current policies in identifying and mitigating systemic biases in special education identification, thereby ensuring that decisions for all students are reliable and meaningful (Maki & Adams, 2020).

Considering the significant impact of early achievement levels on later academic outcomes (Morgan et al., 2022), research should also explore the long-term academic and socio-emotional outcomes of students identified through inequitable special education identification. Understanding these long-term outcomes is crucial for creating equitable educational processes that effectively support all students.

It is imperative to recognize that special education evaluation should not only focus on determining eligibility for assistance but also guide interventions customized to meet the individual needs of all learners equally. Without focusing on the goal of

improving student outcomes, the utility of special education evaluation is compromised (Maki & Adams, 2020).

Additionally, future research should be conducted to explore outcomes if the study were replicated with only teachers as participants, which could provide valuable insights into how the perspectives of classroom practitioners differ from those in administrative or non-teaching roles.

Finally, researching minority overrepresentation in special education in conjunction with minority underrepresentation in gifted and talented programming could illuminate systemic disparities in educational access and opportunity. By examining these two contrasting phenomena, researchers can understand how societal factors, institutional practices, and cultural biases intersect to shape educational outcomes for minority students. This holistic approach could inform the development of more equitable policies and interventions to address all students' unique needs and potential.

These future considerations aim to provide additional perspectives, mitigate biases, and delve deeper into the complex dynamics that drive disparities. Using quantitative and qualitative methods can enrich the knowledge base and facilitate the identification of applicable solutions across diverse educational contexts.

Conclusion

This study utilized Q-methodology and survey results to examine systemic biases in the overrepresentation of minorities identified for special education through the lens of various education professionals. The data revealed a complex picture: while consensus emerged on enhancing cultural awareness and teacher support, perspectives differed

regarding the prevalence of inconsistencies, allowing implicit biases and contributing to disproportionate minority representation.

Ultimately, between the subjective viewpoints and survey results, reasonable concerns persist around the influence of cultural unawareness, systemic flaws, and data interpretation issues in disproportionately identifying minority students in subjective categories, like ED, and essentially placing them in restrictive special education environments. The results indicate that marginalized students receive inequitable outcomes caused by external issues within the identification process.

In conclusion, the results supported both research questions and highlighted a compelling need to safeguard against biases in special education eligibility decisions through professional development, building cultural partnerships between schools and families, considering external issues that may present as needs, and ensuring transparency in placement data. Progress requires nuanced solutions that confront realities around historical and cultural systemic strains disadvantaging exceptional students based on characteristics rather than aptitudes. Renewing systemic commitments to equitable access, resources, and treatment for all learners is an essential first step.

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Appendix A

INFORMED CONSENT

Dear Sir/Madam:

My name is Michelle Martin, a doctoral student at Youngstown State University (YSU). I am conducting a study to investigate the over-representation of minority students in special education, focusing on subjective disability categories, specifically Emotional Disturbance. The name of the research study is "Over-representation of Minorities in Special Education: An Exploration of External Causes and Effects." I am seeking your consent to participate in this research.

In this study, you will be asked to participate in a survey and a Q-sort, a method used to identify shared viewpoints on a topic revealing areas of consensus and disagreement across these views related to the special education identification process. I will also need to collect information about you, such as age, race, job/position, and descriptions of your experience related to the evaluative process for special education.

There are no risks to you for participating in this study, and there are no direct benefits to your participation in this study. There are also no direct rewards for your participation; however, this research can contribute to the body of knowledge in the subject area and raise awareness of the issue.

Your privacy is critical, and I will handle all information related to you and your participation confidentially. I will report the project's results in a way that will not identify you (your child). While I plan to present to a dissertation committee and publish the results, all data from the survey and Q-sort data will be kept confidential, including using pseudonyms and omitting identifying details that could lead to potential risk.

You are not required to participate in this study. If at any time you feel uncomfortable at any point during this study, you have the right to opt out of participating in this research. If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this research project, you may contact the Michelle Martin at xxx-xxx-xxxx or xx@student.ysu.edu or Dr. Karen Larwin at xx@ysu.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a participant in a research project, you may contact the Office of Research Services at YSU (330-941-2377) or at YSUIRB@ysu.edu

 ----- I understand the study described above and have been given a copy of this consent document. I am 18 years of age or older and I agree to participate.

Participant Name
 (Printed) _____

Participant Signature: _____ Date:

Appendix B
QUESTIONNAIRE

Section I: Demographic Questions

1. What is your age:
 - a) 18 – 25
 - b) 26 – 35
 - c) 36 – 45
 - d) 46 – 55
 - e) 56 or above
 2. What is your race
 - a) White
 - b) Black/African American
 - c) American Indian/Alaska Native
 - d) Asian
 - e) Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander
 3. What is your gender
 - a) Male
 - b) Female
 - c) Other (please list _____)
 4. What is your role in the school district
 - a) Administrator/Supervisor
 - b) General Education Teacher
 - c) Special Education Teacher
 - d) School Psychologist
 - e) Teacher on Special Assignment/TOSA (Please list your role _____)
 - f) Former Student/Other (Please list _____)
 5. Describe the student demographic of your school district:
 - a) Urban
 - b) Suburban
-

c) Rural

Section II: Dis/Crit Theory Questions

Scaled questions (Strongly Agree/Agree/Neither/Disagree/Strongly)

6. Minority students are identified for special education services more than students of the majority.
 7. First interventions should include community or agency services (ex. clinical therapists, psychiatrist, family therapists, behavioral therapists, agency social workers).
 8. Social constructs (i.e., labels of race, ability levels, assumed behavior of a specific group), have created barriers for minority students served through special education programming.
-

Section III: Cultural Ecological Theory Questions

Scaled questions (Strongly Agree/Agree/Neither/Disagree/Strongly)

9. Learning is influenced by culture and society and student reaction to intervention is sometimes seen as a control vs. a support.
 10. Social maladjustment (ex. juvenile crime, anti-social behavior, etc.) needs to be address through both social and school-based services, not through the special education process.
 11. An Individualized Education Plan (IEP) should be supplemented with additional non-academic based interventions or services.
-

Section IV: Social Learning Theory

Scaled questions (Strongly Agree/Agree/Neither/Disagree/Strongly):

12. Related to students identified in subjective disability categories, specifically ED, I feel separating students by disability category is a form of modern-day segregation
13. Related to students identified in subjective disability categories, specifically ED, I feel not specifically addressing behaviors through modeling and programming, students experience barriers to academic success.
14. Related to students identified in subjective disability categories, specifically ED, I feel, in addition to traditional teaching certificates, teachers should receive specific, required, and ongoing tiered professional development (depending on the disability category taught) to support students (ex. classroom management and specific behavior intervention)

Section V: Open-Ended Questions

Demographic Question:

15. Please indicate and describe your position within the district, if not employed by the district, please indicate your relationship to the district (ex. parent, student, other).
 16. Please describe your experience with the MTSS or evaluation process related to identifying students for special education
 17. Based on your experience with students identified in subjective disability categories, specifically, ED, what changes would you suggest to a school district wanting to pioneer a new/alternative service delivery model for students.
-

Appendix C

Q-SORT CONCOURSE STATEMENTS

1. The MTSS process is a way to get students out of teacher/administrator classrooms/schools. Interventions are done so the team will more likely identify a student
2. There are times I've agreed to an identification when I believed otherwise
3. The MTSS process is inconsistent when considering certain disabilities (ex. emotional disturbance)
4. The MTSS process is subjective
5. The MTSS process does not account for external issues students deal with on an ongoing basis (ex. homelessness, food insecurity)
6. The MTSS process focuses on student weaknesses rather than strengths.
7. The hyper-focus on a data driven decision is a disservice for the students.
8. The data collection process for MTSS is confusing.
9. The MTSS process does not value my opinion about students' abilities, behaviors, or strengths.
10. The MTSS process is time consuming
11. The MTSS process is a collaborative process between school personnel and parents.
12. The MTSS process is data driven.
13. The MTSS allows interventions to be individualized for students
14. The MTSS process provides relevant, targeted interventions for students.

15. The MTSS process is designed to identify supports for struggling students (academically and/or behaviorally).
16. The MTSS process ensures the whole child is supported (i.e., academically, socially, and emotionally)
17. The MTSS process considers the well-being of the student.
18. I respect the decisions made during the MTSS evaluation
19. I review the data provided before the evaluation team report meeting
20. I understand my role in identifying subjective disabilities
21. Teachers are patient throughout the MTSS process.
22. The MTSS team respects one another.
23. It is important to "get it right" when identifying students for subjective disabilities (ex. emotional disturbance).
24. Staff involved with the MTSS process provide interventions with fidelity
25. The MTSS team has a clear understanding of the definition of Emotional Disturbance

Appendix D

IRB LETTER OF PERMISSION



Sep 7, 2023 11:16:33 AM EDT

Karen Larwin
Psych Sciences and Counseling 141009, Teacher Ed and Leadership St

Re: Exempt - Initial - 2023-264 Overrepresentation of Minorities in Special Education

Dear Dr. Karen Larwin:

Youngstown State University Human Subjects Review Board has rendered the decision below for Overrepresentation of Minorities in Special Education

Decision: Exempt

Selected Category: Category 1. Research, conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, that specifically involves normal educational practices that are not likely to adversely impact students' opportunity to learn required educational content or the assessment of educators who provide instruction. This includes most research on regular and special education instructional strategies, and research on the effectiveness of or the comparison among instructional techniques, curricula, or classroom management methods.

Category 2.(ii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or

Any changes in your research activity should be promptly reported to the Institutional Review Board and may not be initiated without IRB approval except where necessary to eliminate hazard to human subjects. Any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects should also be promptly reported to the IRB.

The IRB would like to extend its best wishes to you in the conduct of this study.

Sincerely,
Youngstown State University Human Subjects Review Board