

Review

Black Students in Special Education: A Historical and Current Account Toward Change

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Abstract

Black students in special education continue to experience disproportionate identification in subjective disability categories, restrictive placements, and unequal access to quality instruction and resources. Despite decades of educational reform and the promises of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Black students with disabilities remain among the most academically marginalized, scoring lowest on standardized assessments and facing higher dropout, unemployment, and criminal justice involvement risks. Historical inequities, systemic segregation, and chronic underfunding of predominantly Black school districts compound these challenges, limiting access to experienced teachers, rigorous curricula, and inclusive learning environments. Implicit and explicit biases among educators further contribute to disproportionate referrals in subjective disability categories and lower academic expectations. This article examines these interconnected factors—historical context, placement patterns, resource disparities, and bias—and proposes evidence-based mitigation strategies, including culturally responsive practices, increased representation of Black educators, and equity-centered policy reforms. Achieving educational equity requires consistent commitment to transforming special education into a system that supports, rather than marginalizes, Black students.

Keywords: Black students; special education; educational inequity; implicit bias; inclusive practices

1. Introduction

The education of Black students in the United States has been marked by systematic exclusion, segregation, and marginalization from slavery-era literacy prohibitions to contemporary special education disproportionality. Understanding this history is essential for addressing persistent educational inequities that continue to limit opportunities and perpetuate disadvantage. Never far from these discussions are conversations and research about how students of color perform in the United States (US) public school system. Most of the time, these discussions are centered around how to improve the educational outcomes for students of color (Shores et al., 2020). This is because these students often score lower on assessments and have less favorable outcomes than White students. When student performance and achievement are broken down across racial and ethnic lines, Black students have some of the lowest achievement as measured by outcomes on standardized academic assessments.



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Although there is much debate about how to remedy these outcomes, scores taken from nationwide academic assessments reveal only marginal improvements for many Black students over the past several decades. For example, average reading and math scores reported by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) ([National Center for Education Statistics, 2022](#)) demonstrate that White students outscored Black students by a margin of 34 points in the 2000 report. Although both groups improved their scores by 2020, Black students were still outperformed by White students by an average of 26 points. More alarming than the discrepancy in scores is that, on average, Black students were still reading below what is considered “basic” reading levels. Similar patterns can be noted for other subjects like math and science, where many Black students are performing at or below basic proficiency levels. This is particularly true for Black students in highly segregated and urban school districts.

Although the differences in academic performance between Black and White students can be found throughout the academic literature, a more nuanced discussion must be had about students who receive special education services because of an identified disability. Outcomes for these students tend to be the poorest and are often the result of lower academic performance, chronic absenteeism, and unequal opportunities to participate in the general education curriculum. In fact, Black students with disabilities continue to score the lowest on reading and math assessments when compared to all other student demographics and across all grade levels ([U.S. Department of Education, 2023](#)). Recent NAEP data analysis confirms that Black students with specific learning disabilities experience significantly greater opportunity gaps than their White and Asian peers, with more than 95% not achieving reading proficiency ([National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2023](#)). This pattern of intersectional disadvantage is well-documented across multiple studies examining the combined effects of race and disability status on academic outcomes ([Belcher et al., 2024](#); [Morgan et al., 2022](#)). These students deserve the highest level of attention and support to abate outcomes that put them at greater risk of being in poverty, unemployed, and involved in the criminal justice system.

As educators and scholars continue to research and debate solutions to address inequities in the educational system, it is useful to understand the historical perspective of the Black student experience in the United States. Understanding the historical perspective is essential because current disparities in special education are not isolated phenomena but rather the continuation of systematic exclusion and marginalization that began with slavery-era literacy prohibitions. Historical analysis reveals how past policies and practices created the structural inequities that persist today, informing more effective contemporary interventions. Moreover, an analysis of past and current practices needs to be conducted to further the understanding of the conditions that Black students face in the public education system in the United States. The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of the past and current standing of Black students who are identified for special education services in the United States’ public school system.

2. Review Methodology

This narrative review synthesizes historical and contemporary literature on Black students in special education to examine persistent inequities and identify evidence-based mitigation strategies. Literature was identified through searches of ERIC, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar for peer-reviewed articles, policy reports, and historical texts published between 1954 and 2025, using terms including “Black students,” “African American students,” “special education,” “disproportionality,” “overrepresentation,” “educational equity,” and related terms. Additional sources were identified through citation chaining and targeted searches for seminal historical works. This review prioritizes recent empirical research

(2015–2025) while incorporating foundational historical and theoretical sources essential for contextualizing contemporary patterns.

The synthesis approach involved thematic analysis of sources to identify recurring patterns, contradictions, and gaps in the literature. Sources were organized chronologically for the historical section and thematically for contemporary issues. This narrative review approach allows for a comprehensive examination of complex, interconnected factors while acknowledging that it does not follow the systematic methodology of formal systematic reviews. Limitations include potential selection bias in source identification and the interpretive nature of narrative synthesis.

3. Historical Perspective

The education of Black people in the United States has been an uneven and somewhat torturous journey that continues to be in peril. Most Black people began their tenure in this country as enslaved persons. Although many states passed anti-literacy laws during the period of slavery, there are records of literate Black people from before the founding of the country, such as Phillis Wheatley, the poet, who came on a slave ship in the 1700s and documented one of the earliest published works in English (Gumbs, 2021). Prior to the Civil War, many Black folks benefited from schooling, often offered in their churches or other small gatherings, but the fear among White people that Black literacy would lead to uprisings among enslaved persons was so great that some states such as South Carolina outlawed literacy among free Black people as well as those in bondage (Brosnan, 2016; Davis, 2017).

Following the Civil War and during the period of Reconstruction, Black people aggressively pursued educational opportunities. They viewed schooling as a means for social mobility and economic freedom (Brosnan, 2016). With the aid of the Freedmen's Bureau in 1865 and Northern missionaries, Black people were able to mobilize to create schools throughout the South. In North Carolina, for example, this coalition enabled Black people to pass the Education Act of 1869, which mandated universal public education for all students in North Carolina between the ages of 6 and 21 (Davis, 2017). While some White people's actions to aid Black schooling may have been based on human kindness and social justice, historical evidence suggests that White fears and stereotypes significantly influenced these educational efforts (Anderson, 1988; Brosnan, 2016). According to Brosnan, northern White people feared that Black people might invade the north, might act in retribution toward White people, and might become permanently dependent on the state and destabilize the country. Accordingly, these perceptions, along with stereotypes of Black people such as lazy, uncivilized, and predatory, led northern White people to provide schools and teachers as an antidote to these negatives. In her review of the books used during this period, Brosnan (2016) indicated that the focus was on maintaining the status quo so that Black people were encouraged to be content with positions of physical labor as during slavery, to recognize and subscribe to White supremacy, and to adhere to White moral codes such as legalizing partnerships (marriage) and abstaining from alcohol.

On the other hand, a major fear of many southern White people led them to strongly resist the education of Black children for fear that Black people would become more educated than White people and less subjugated to them (Davis, 2017). Thus, many White people launched counter movements, such as resisting the Education Act of 1869, and following Reconstruction, when they gained political power in the South, White people took steps to gut Black education. In North Carolina, for example, White students received \$22.22 per student compared to \$1.78 for Black students (Anderson, 1988; Davis, 2017). The education of Black children was further undermined throughout the South through mandatory segregated schools.

The period between Reconstruction and the mid-20th century, known as the Jim Crow era, saw the systematic institutionalization of educational segregation and inequality. During this time, the “separate but equal” doctrine established in [Plessy v. Ferguson \(1896\)](#) provided legal justification for maintaining separate and grossly unequal educational systems. World Wars I and II brought some changes as Black men serving in the United States military highlighted contradictions between fighting for democracy abroad while being denied equal rights at home. The Great Migration of Black families from the rural South to northern cities also created new educational challenges and opportunities, though northern schools often maintained de facto segregation through housing patterns and district boundaries ([Anderson, 1988](#)).

Nevertheless, researchers noted some silver linings despite documented efforts to undereducate Black children and to decimate their schools. While these schools faced systematic underfunding and resource deprivation, many Black schools served as bastions of hope, centers of communities, and houses of academic rigor ([Pellegrino et al., 2013](#)). The assets of these schools were that they were part of the Black community, had caring teachers, good school leaders, and high academic and moral expectations. Similarly, in a qualitative study of Black teachers prior to [Brown v. Board of Education \(1954\)](#) in the Jim Crow South, [Preston-Grimes \(2010\)](#) described teachers who felt it was their mission to provide explicit instruction that specifically helped prepare the students for their future. Rather than teaching for White supremacy or Black subservience, these teachers taught what they considered to be decision-making skills, self-respect, survival skills for self-protection, and civic education. It was important to help students understand the political realities of their time and the principles of a democracy needed for constructive citizenship. Furthermore, these teachers added Black history to the regular curriculum throughout the school year, not limited to Black History week or month.

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s brought significant legal and social changes, beginning with [Brown v. Board of Education \(1954\)](#), which declared separate educational facilities inherently unequal. However, the implementation of desegregation faced massive resistance, particularly in the South, leading to prolonged legal battles and gradual, often incomplete integration. The period following Brown saw both progress and backlash, with some communities successfully integrating while others found ways to maintain segregation through private schools, residential patterns, and other mechanisms.

The Black–White schooling differences noted in the South also existed in the North. While southern segregation was legally maintained, nearly intractable housing, banking, and political practices protected school segregation in the north. Despite the 1954 Supreme Court ruling that separate schooling was inherently unequal and that schools should be integrated with all deliberate speed, public schools in the United States remained highly segregated according to race and socioeconomics ([Garcia, 2020](#); [Hannah-Jones, 2019](#); [Logan et al., 2017](#); [Sibilia, 2020](#)). There have been changes; however, schools are currently more integrated in the south than they are in the north. Of the 10 most segregated states, only two are in the South (Mississippi and Tennessee), but the six most segregated states are in the North in the following order: New York, Illinois, Maryland, Michigan, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania ([Hannah-Jones, 2019](#)). California and Wisconsin also fall within the top 10 most school-segregated states in eighth and tenth positions, respectively. Districts can maintain or even increase this level of segregation largely through the mantra of “neighborhood” schools ([Hannah-Jones, 2019](#)). More recent data through 2025 continues to show persistent segregation patterns, with some districts experiencing increased segregation due to demographic changes and policy decisions ([Logan, 2013](#); [Mann et al., 2024](#)). One example using charter schools was in 2018. The U.S. Department of Education began awarding charter school funds to states (e.g., North Carolina), which could disperse these

monies according to its own guidelines. In one case, for example, several suburban communities of Charlotte, NC, had applied for grants to support charter school “academies.” These predominantly White student populations would be pulled out of the Charlotte Mecklenburg school district, leaving Charlotte, which is predominantly Black, the most segregated district in the state (Bryant, 2021; Hannah-Jones, 2019). It is worth noting that this system not only uses taxpayer money to resegment the schools, but it also uses taxes of Black workers whose children are already being underserved in their school districts.

Other factors maintaining and increasing this level of segregation include greater increases in poverty (Logan et al., 2017), magnet schools, corporate-funded curricula (Melancon & Hendry, 2015), arbitrarily drawn district boundaries (Sibilia, 2020) and White flight (Pogodzinski et al., 2018). School choice policies beyond charter schools, including voucher programs and open enrollment policies, have also contributed to segregation patterns in many districts, though effects vary by implementation and local context (Frankenberg & Siegel-Hawley, 2024). Pogodzinski et al. (2018), for example, studied student demographics for a decade and found that White and higher socioeconomic populations were more likely to exit their school districts as more non-White and low socioeconomic students increased in these districts.

Although many Black parents and scholars have supported the concept of “neighborhood” schools (Shealey et al., 2005), there is good evidence showing the benefits of integrated education for Black students without negative effects for White students (Edsall, 2019; Garcia, 2020; Hannah-Jones, 2019). Hanushek and Rivkin (2009) found that the academic achievement gap increased between Black and White students when Black students were in highly segregated schools. They attributed these findings partly to the fact that in predominantly Black schools, children were less likely to have advantages such as highly experienced teachers and advanced classes. Furthermore, the differences in resources and revenue cannot be overlooked. Sibilia (2020) reported, for example, that nationwide non-White school districts receive \$23 billion per year less than majority White districts, even though the districts are serving the same number of students—a per-student funding gap of approximately \$2226 annually. While EdBuild, a nonprofit organization that focused on school funding, ceased operations in 2020, more recent federal data confirms the persistence of these disparities. The U.S. Department of Education’s 2023 Annual Report to Congress on IDEA Implementation documents continued funding inequities that disproportionately impact students with disabilities in high-poverty, predominantly minority districts, suggesting that the funding gaps identified by Sibilia remain largely unchanged (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). In addition to higher achievement, other findings in favor of integration are that Black children in integrated settings are likely to have more years of education and, in adulthood, higher wages along with reductions in poverty and incarceration (Edsall, 2019).

Melancon and Hendry (2015) give another voice for the importance of integrated schools. They contend that integrated education is essential for creating the unity of one nation. We need to constantly challenge ideologies and institutions that do not lead to a democratic society. Segregation and segregated school conditions are counterproductive to this idea. Some scholars argue that public education is the bedrock of our democracy (e.g., Preston-Grimes, 2010), and it is conceivable that this segregated “caste” (Hannah-Jones, 2019) system, with its accompanying inequalities, would eventually destabilize or undermine the U.S. ideal model of a multiracial democracy.

If Black children are disadvantaged in segregated schools, is it reasonable to question whether further segregation of Black children into special education is even more damaging? The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act—IDEA (originally named Education for All Handicapped Children Act) emerged in the 1970s from the activism of predominantly

White parent organizations insisting that the government provide free public schooling for their children with disabilities. Prior to this legislation, services for most of these children were in separate facilities, often funded by the children's parents or were nonexistent ([Mills v. Board of Education](#), 1972; [Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children v. Commonwealth](#), 1971; U.S. Department of Education, 2020). The litigation for this law was based on [Brown v. Board of Education](#) (1954); that is, separate schooling is inherently unequal. This legislation was not only a victory but held special promises for parents and their children. The law specified that children with disabilities would not only be educated using the same taxes that fund public schools, but they should be educated in the least restrictive environment (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). That meant that instead of special schools, many, if not all, of these children could be educated in traditional school buildings, and in some cases, general education classes. Other major provisions were that teachers of these students would be "highly qualified," and students would receive evidence-based individualized instructional programs (IDEA, 2004). It is important to note that prior to IDEA, special education services were largely nonexistent in segregated Black schools. While White schools began developing special programs in the early 1900s, Black students with disabilities were typically excluded from school entirely or received no specialized services ([Anderson](#), 1988). This historical exclusion meant that when IDEA was implemented, Black students with disabilities faced the dual challenge of entering a special education system designed primarily by and for White families while attending schools that remained largely segregated and under-resourced.

For Black children, the aforementioned and other related promises have yet to be realized. Even prior to IDEA, prominent researchers began to question the viability of special education placements as a source for quality education or questioned if it was simply a place to put children with disabilities ([Dunn](#), 1968). These speculations heightened with large numbers of Black people migrating into northern cities from the south, overwhelming their respective school districts. [Shealey et al.](#) (2005), for instance, contended that from the period of [Brown v. Board of Education](#) (1954), Black children were disproportionately tracked into remedial and special education settings. Although researchers have consistently reported that Black children are disproportionately placed in special education (e.g., [Skiba et al.](#), 2006; [Zhang et al.](#), 2014), more recently, other researchers have offered that Black children were under-identified for special education (e.g., [Morgan et al.](#), 2015, 2019; [A. L. Wiley et al.](#), 2013). [Morgan et al.](#) (2019), for example, examined special education in southern states, questioning if these placements were used as another means for furthering racial segregation. Considering that school segregation currently seems to be more concentrated in the north than in the south ([Hannah-Jones](#), 2019) and that "'poor' states have fewer resources that can be devoted to special education" ([Zhang et al.](#), 2014, p. 125), such analyses may not be particularly useful. The debate over whether Black students are over- or under-identified for special education may obscure more fundamental questions about the type and quality of services rendered. Both patterns can coexist—over-identification in subjective categories (e.g., intellectual disability, emotional disturbance) driven by bias, and under-identification in categories requiring advocacy and recognition (e.g., specific learning disabilities, autism). Rather than focusing solely on identification rates, research must examine whether special education, as implemented, actually improves outcomes for Black students.

Therefore, examinations of the type and quality of services rendered would probably be of greater value. For example, a related important understanding is that IDEA authorizes students with disabilities to be taught in the least restrictive environment. Researchers have long noted that Black students with disabilities tend to be assigned to the most restrictive placements with relatively little access to the general education classroom compared to

their White peers (Algozzine, 2005; Losen & Orfield, 2002; Skiba et al., 2006). Other researchers report findings showing general education access correlating with higher levels of academic achievement, post-secondary education, and employment (Waitoller & Maggin, 2020). These studies also reported more access for White students with disabilities than Black students with disabilities. More recently, Waitoller and Maggin (2020) found the same greater restrictiveness for Black than White students within both neighborhood and charter schools, indicating that public schools continue to disadvantage Black students, especially Black students with disabilities. Whether in urban or rural districts, Black students tend to be situated in school systems with relatively fewer resources (e.g., Skiba et al., 2008) and in both special (Blanchett, 2006) and general (Ford, 2012) education, Black children have poorer school outcomes compared to their non-Black peers, indicating the continued shortcomings of public education in serving Black students.

Thus, a major question is whether special education for Black children is generally more helpful than harmful (Algozzine, 2005). The following questions guide our analysis of current placement patterns, resource allocation, and outcomes for Black students in special education: Do we have evidence that special education in the typical Black school provides the kind of educational therapy that produces more positive outcomes than in the Black general education class? Should we focus more on the quality of service delivery and the quantity of available resources than simply on educational placement? Is it realistic to expect poor schools to compete adequately with highly resourced and funded schools?

4. Placement, Resources, and Outcomes for Black Students in Special Education

Given the historical context of education for Black students in the United States and the marginalizing outcomes for many special education students, we need to explore several contributing factors. These include placement of Black students in special education environments, the resources devoted to providing services to special education students, and the outcomes for this group of students. The contributing factors are addressed in relation to the impact they have on the lives of these students, their families, and their communities.

Special Education Placement. As already established, Black students who are placed in special education environments are at the highest risk of poor educational outcomes (Keyes, 2022; Harry & Klingner, 2006). While special education services *should* provide higher levels of support leading to better outcomes, research demonstrates that for many Black students, placement in under-resourced, segregated special education settings exacerbates rather than remediates educational risk (Artiles et al., 2010; Blanchett, 2006; Blanchett et al., 2005). The issue is not whether Black students with disabilities should receive special education services, but rather the quality, appropriateness, and inclusiveness of those services. The issue of over-representation of Black students in special education would not be so problematic if, once placed, these students received the supports and services needed to remediate their risk factors. Black students who are identified for special education services should, in theory, have better educational outcomes than those who go unidentified. Sadly, in many cases, placement in special education settings only exacerbates their risk for more marginalizing outcomes. For these reasons, we need to analyze and question the process by which Black students are identified for and placed in special education settings.

How quickly children are identified for special education placement depends on the nature and presentation of their disability. Although some disabilities can be identified before, at, or shortly after birth (e.g., Cerebral Palsy, Down Syndrome), many are not readily identifiable by physical or medical presentation alone. Some disabilities are considered “invisible” because they are not apparent from initial observations. These disability cate-

gories include emotional/behavioral disorders (EBD) and intellectual disabilities (ID). One commonality among these categories is that the identification of children largely depends on the initial observations or professional opinions of teachers and other school-based professionals (Ford, 2012; Losen & Orfield, 2002). This subjectivity becomes problematic for Black children who are more likely to be referred for evaluation by their classroom teachers based on their actions, affect, and/or behaviors (Fish, 2019; La Salle et al., 2020; Redding, 2019; Sullivan & Bal, 2013). Given that the teaching force in the U.S. is comprised of mostly White women, it is more than likely that Black students will make their initial impressions on teachers who are not from the same cultural backgrounds or communities as their teachers (Ingersoll et al., 2021; La Salle et al., 2020). This may lead White teachers to perceive young Black students as being more active, boisterous, or disruptive than their non-Black peers (Redding, 2019).

Hence, the role of implicit and explicit biases can lead teachers to improperly refer Black students for evaluation for one or more of these invisible disabilities. This often leads to over-identification of Black students for behaviors and actions that rely on teacher perception and/or tolerance to perceived differences. This becomes more evident and problematic when Black students attend schools that are primarily White. In these school environments, Black students are more likely to be overidentified for special education. Moreover, these students are typically identified as having emotional/behavioral difficulties or intellectual disabilities.

Fish (2019) analyzed data from over 400,000 students from a large, Midwestern state to determine if the race or ethnicity of students was a factor in them being identified for specific disability categories and for special education placement. Fish (2019) found that Black students were significantly more likely to be identified for special education services compared to their White peers, even after controlling for socioeconomic status and academic performance. Additionally, Black students were disproportionately identified as having emotional/behavioral disorders or intellectual disabilities—categories that rely heavily on subjective teacher judgment rather than objective medical criteria. The study revealed that this pattern was most pronounced in schools where Black students were in the racial minority, suggesting that cultural discontinuity between predominantly White teaching staff and Black students played a significant role in referral decisions. These findings suggest that implicit biases and cultural misunderstandings can lead to inappropriate special education placements. When Black students attend predominantly White schools, their behaviors and learning styles may be misinterpreted as deficits rather than differences, leading to over-identification in subjective disability categories. Conversely, in schools with more diverse student populations and teaching staff, referral patterns tend to be more equitable, suggesting that cultural awareness and representation matter significantly in identification processes.

Beyond identification rates, the type of placement Black students receive once identified for special education raises additional concerns. Research consistently demonstrates that Black students with disabilities are more likely to be placed in restrictive, segregated settings compared to White students with similar disabilities (E. M. Hines et al., 2025; K. E. Wiley et al., 2025). These restrictive placements limit access to the general education curriculum, reduce opportunities for interaction with non-disabled peers, and often result in lower academic expectations. The irony is profound: special education, designed to provide additional support and services, often becomes another mechanism of segregation and marginalization for Black students.

Resources Devoted to Special Education. The quality and quantity of resources available to support Black students in special education vary dramatically based on geographic location, district wealth, and school demographics. Research indicates that predominantly

Black school districts receive substantially fewer resources than predominantly White districts, even when serving similar numbers of students (Darling, 2013; Weathers & Sosina, 2022). This funding disparity directly impacts the quality of special education services available, including access to specialized staff, evidence-based interventions, assistive technology, and appropriate curricular materials (Kolbe et al., 2023).

In under-resourced schools, special education programs often operate with outdated materials, insufficient staffing ratios, and limited access to specialists such as speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, and school psychologists (Cruz et al., 2022). Teachers in these settings may be asked to serve larger caseloads with fewer supports, making it difficult to implement the individualized instruction mandated by IDEA. Furthermore, these schools are less likely to offer advanced coursework or enrichment opportunities for students with disabilities, further limiting educational outcomes.

The disparity of resources extends beyond material goods to include human capital. Schools serving predominantly Black student populations often struggle to recruit and retain highly qualified special education teachers. High teacher turnover disrupts instructional continuity and relationship-building, both critical for students with disabilities who benefit from consistent, responsive teaching (Cormier et al., 2024; Mason-Williams et al., 2020). When experienced teachers are scarce, students miss out on the expertise needed to implement sophisticated instructional strategies and behavioral support.

So, teacher turnover in high-poverty, predominantly Black schools creates a cycle of educational instability (Sorensen & Ladd, 2020). New teachers, often with less training and experience in special education, may struggle to implement individualized education programs (IEPs) effectively. Research demonstrates that novice special education teachers face significant challenges in developing competencies required for serving students with disabilities, particularly in implementing evidence-based practices such as systematic instruction (Ruppar et al., 2016; Sawyer et al., 2017). The constant need to train new staff diverts resources from direct student services. Additionally, schools with high turnover rates lose institutional knowledge about effective practices and student needs, forcing each new cohort of teachers to start from scratch rather than building on previous successes.

The economic impact of losing experienced educators extends beyond individual classrooms. When skilled special education teachers leave, they take with them years of professional development investment, knowledge of evidence-based practices, and relationships with students and families. This represents a significant loss of human capital that affects not only current students but also the school's capacity to serve future students effectively. The relationship between teacher quality and special education effectiveness is particularly crucial, as students with disabilities often require more specialized, intensive instruction that demands higher levels of expertise (Brock & Carter, 2017).

Outcomes for Black Students in Special Education. The combination of disproportionate identification, restrictive placements, and inadequate resources culminates in persistently poor outcomes for Black students in special education. These students face elevated risks across multiple domains, including academic achievement, school completion, post-secondary education, employment, and involvement with the criminal justice system.

Academically, Black students with disabilities consistently score lowest on standardized assessments in reading and mathematics across all grade levels when compared to all other demographic groups. This achievement gap persists and often widens over time, reflecting cumulative disadvantages in educational opportunity and quality (Kevelson, 2019; Wei et al., 2013). Many Black students in special education graduate with modified diplomas or certificates of completion rather than standard diplomas, limiting their post-secondary options and employability.

School completion rates tell a troubling story. Black students with disabilities experience higher rates of dropout and lower rates of graduation compared to their peers (Cramer et al., 2014). The restrictive and often punitive school environments that many Black students with disabilities encounter create conditions that push students out rather than support their success. Post-secondary outcomes reveal the long-term consequences of these educational inequities (Tabron & Ramlackhan, 2019). Black students with disabilities are less likely to pursue or complete a college education, limiting their career opportunities and earning potential. Employment rates for this population remain low, contributing to cycles of poverty and dependence. Most alarmingly, Black students with disabilities face disproportionate risk of involvement with the criminal justice system, a pattern that reflects both the school-to-prison pipeline and broader systemic inequities (D. E. Hines et al., 2018).

Implicit and Explicit Biases. The role of teacher bias—both implicit and explicit—in the identification and treatment of Black students in special education cannot be overstated. Implicit biases are unconscious attitudes and stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions, often in ways that contradict our stated beliefs. Explicit biases, conversely, are conscious and deliberate. Both forms of bias shape how teachers perceive, interpret, and respond to Black student behavior and academic performance. Research reveals that Black students, especially boys, are more likely to be perceived by teachers as older, less innocent, and more threatening than their White peers, even when exhibiting identical behaviors (Goff et al., 2014; Okonofua et al., 2016). Many of these Black students are viewed as “troublemakers” by their teachers (Okonofua et al., 2016). These perceptions influence teacher responses to student actions, with behaviors that might be overlooked or addressed informally for White students triggering formal referrals for evaluation or disciplinary action when exhibited by Black students. For example, behaviors such as assertiveness, high energy, or cultural communication styles may be misinterpreted as defiance, hyperactivity, or disrespect.

The cultural discontinuity between predominantly White teaching forces and increasingly diverse student populations exacerbates these biases (Ingersoll et al., 2021). When teachers lack understanding of cultural differences in communication, interaction styles, and behavioral norms, they may pathologize cultural differences, viewing them as deficits requiring intervention or remediation. This cultural mismatch contributes to both over-identification in subjective disability categories (e.g., intellectual disabilities, emotional disturbance) and under-identification in categories requiring advocacy and recognition of student needs (e.g., specific learning disabilities, autism).

Implicit biases also affect academic expectations. Teachers may hold lower expectations for Black students based on racial stereotypes, providing less challenging instruction, fewer opportunities for advanced coursework, and reduced academic support. These lowered expectations become self-fulfilling prophecies, as students receive less rigorous instruction and consequently perform below their potential, seemingly confirming the initial low expectations. When academic struggles emerge, referral to special education may seem like an appropriate response, even when the root cause is inadequate instruction rather than disability (Lorenz, 2021; Peterson et al., 2016).

Addressing these biases requires intentional, ongoing effort. M. R. Brown et al. (2019) recommend that teachers engage in self-reflection by taking assessments such as the Implicit Association Test (IAT), which reveals unconscious biases. While individual awareness through tools like the IAT represents an important first step, research suggests that awareness alone is insufficient to eliminate bias effects (Dobbin & Kalev, 2018; Gino & Coffman, 2021). However, the effectiveness of IAT has been debated in the literature (Oswald et al., 2013; Schimmack, 2021). Teachers must also engage in continuous professional development focused on culturally responsive practices, examining how their own cultural

backgrounds and biases shape their perceptions and interactions with students. Sustainable change requires combining individual reflection with systemic changes that reduce opportunities for bias to influence decisions, ongoing professional development, and accountability mechanisms. Additionally, focusing on student strengths rather than deficits, prioritizing relationship-building, and maintaining high expectations for all students can help counteract bias effects.

Schools and districts must create systems that reduce opportunities for bias to influence critical decisions. Multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) that are culturally responsive can help ensure that students receive appropriate interventions before being referred for special education evaluation. Diversifying decision-making teams, using objective data to inform referrals, and implementing universal screening rather than relying solely on teacher referrals can create more equitable identification processes. Furthermore, examining disaggregated data on referrals, placements, and outcomes by race can help schools identify and address patterns of inequity.

5. Mitigation Strategies

Given the current discussion surrounding the education of Black students, it is imperative that we focus on strategies to mitigate the unequal educational and life outcomes for these students. This includes addressing systemic/structural inequities in the education system, as well as biases and teacher preparation programs. While these are by no means the only strategies, they are some solutions to help address the historical and current educational inequities for Black and other marginalized students.

Addressing Inequity. The history of schooling in the United States and the demographics of the teaching profession set the stage for cultural discontinuities and maintaining the inequitable status quo. However, many in the education field desire better outcomes for culturally and linguistically diverse students. University teacher preparation programs (TPPs) play a significant role in creating more equitable schools as they are training future teachers. Thus, many TPPs have started preparing teacher candidates to be more in tune with culture, with a focus on enhancing cultural competence or proficiency, oftentimes using frameworks like culturally relevant pedagogy, culturally responsive teaching, and culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP). While each of these frameworks may have different emphases or ways of enactment, the common thread across them is an intentional focus on students' academic achievement, being aware of and sensitive to yourself and others, and critically analyzing systems and society (CEEDAR, 2019).

Part of that critical analysis is moving away from a basic understanding of various "cultures" and toward social justice and equity in schooling. Indeed, P. Gorski (2016) reminds us that we need to rethink culture and focus more on equity. If we focus more on culture and less on injustices, we will not solve educational inequities. P. Gorski (2016) notes how racism, economic injustice, and sexism, for instance, "... are matters of power: of the ways in which power and opportunity, and at times even material resources, are distributed and exerted" (p. 224). That would never be part of a discussion that focused simply on appreciating or being aware of another's culture. Therefore, to prepare more social justice-oriented teachers, it would behoove TPPs to develop their pre-service candidates' "equity literacy." Gorski's "equity literacy framework" provides useful supplementary guidance as a structured approach to developing educators' capacity to recognize, respond to, and redress inequity, and sustain equity. By focusing on real issues (e.g., race, economics, ableism) instead of culture, educators will increase their knowledge and skills, which should help create more equitable institutions (i.e., anti-racist, anti-ableist). While the evidence regarding this approach is limited, the theoretical rationale for focusing on real-life case studies regarding various aspects of diversity (e.g., race, disability, gender) is sound.

This framework should be implemented alongside and in support of the foundational work of Black scholars rather than as a primary approach.

Certainly, we must center the voices and scholarship of Black educators and researchers who have long advocated for transformative approaches to education. Ladson-Billings' (2021) work on culturally relevant pedagogy, Love's (2019) framework for abolitionist teaching, and Muhammad's (2020) historically responsive literacy framework provide essential foundations for reimagining special education practices. These frameworks share common goals of honoring students' cultural assets, challenging deficit-based thinking, and creating learning environments that affirm and build upon students' identities and experiences.

The journey toward preparing educators to create more equitable institutions is easier said than done. P. C. Gorski and Dalton (2020) analyzed reflection assignments in multicultural and social justice education courses, as most TPPs have one course that is devoted to teaching about diversity/multiculturalism. The authors categorized these assignments into one of five approaches, ranging from conservative to liberal to critical. They found that most of the assignments were conceptualized from the conservative or liberal approach, with a greater need for more reflection assignments from the critical approach, where students can engage in reflection about how they can be change agents and create more equitable, socially just schools. Unfortunately, P. C. Gorski and Dalton (2020) discussed obstacles faculty have implementing such teaching activities from the critical approach, like student resistance, lower course evaluation scores, institutional resistance, and burnout, all of which may be especially pronounced for faculty of color and LGBTQ+ faculty. Indeed, P. C. Gorski and Parekh (2020) found a correlation between the criticality of instructors' courses and their perceived level of institutional support. Even though faculty must contend with these institutional, instructional, and structural barriers, the bright side is that P. C. Gorski and Parekh (2020) found that the instructors in their study tended to ascribe to more critical orientations. However, faculty may need support when implementing those ideals in practice.

Though the focus of this paper has been on how TPPs can address inequity, there are ways for PK-12 schools to address inequities as well. Schools and districts should examine their data (e.g., disciplinary exclusion, referrals to special education), and disaggregate it by demographic variables (e.g., race, gender). Based on these data, schools/districts may need to revise their policies and practices (e.g., implementing nonpunitive alternatives to zero-tolerance policies, culturally responsive MTSS).

Addressing the Lack of Representation. The underrepresentation of Black educators, particularly in special education, contributes significantly to the challenges Black students face in these programs. The teaching force in the United States remains overwhelmingly White and female, while student populations have become increasingly diverse (Ingersoll et al., 2021). This demographic mismatch creates cultural discontinuities that affect student-teacher relationships, instructional effectiveness, and equitable access to educational opportunities.

Black teachers bring critical assets to educational settings that benefit all students but hold particular importance for Black students. Research demonstrates that Black students taught by Black teachers experience higher academic achievement, increased graduation rates, and greater likelihood of college enrollment (Gershenson et al., 2022; Sun, 2018). Black teachers often hold higher expectations for Black students, are better able to interpret cultural communication and behavioral styles, and serve as important role models and advocates. In special education contexts specifically, Black teachers may be less likely to misinterpret cultural differences as deficits and more likely to distinguish between disability-related needs and culturally based differences. That being said, it needs to be acknowledged that race alone is not a sole factor for improving outcomes for Black students.

Teacher preparation, quality, and commitment to equity are also important. There is nothing to preclude White teachers from being very effective in supporting Black students who are at risk, if they are committed to this outcome.

Beyond individual classroom impacts, increasing Black representation in teaching and school leadership positions can transform school cultures and policies. Black educators bring diverse perspectives to discussions about curriculum, discipline, identification processes, and resource allocation. Their presence on evaluation teams, in faculty meetings, and in leadership roles can challenge deficit-based thinking and advocate for more culturally responsive practices. Schools with more diverse staff tend to have more equitable referral patterns and more inclusive educational environments (Gay, 2002; Landsman & Lewis, 2023). However, recruiting and retaining Black educators, particularly in special education, presents significant challenges. The pathway to teaching includes barriers that disproportionately affect Black candidates, including expensive teacher preparation programs, licensure exams that may reflect cultural bias, and limited financial support for students pursuing education degrees. Once hired, Black teachers often face unwelcoming school cultures, microaggressions from colleagues, and expectations to serve as cultural translators or disciplinarians for Black students while being excluded from decision-making roles (E. Brown, 2019; Milner, 2020).

To address representation gaps, school districts and teacher preparation programs must implement targeted recruitment and retention strategies. Grow-your-own programs that identify promising high school students and paraprofessionals from local communities and provide pathways to teaching careers show promise. Financial incentives such as tuition assistance, forgivable loans, and competitive salaries can make teaching more accessible and attractive. Alternative certification programs may provide entry points for career-changers and individuals with relevant experience but non-traditional educational backgrounds. Moreover, retention requires creating supportive, inclusive school environments where Black educators feel valued and empowered (Bristol, 2020). Mentorship programs pairing new Black teachers with experienced Black educators can provide crucial support (Harris & Davis, 2018). Professional development addressing racial equity and creating affinity groups for educators of color can foster community and belonging (Matschiner, 2023). Most importantly, school leaders must address racism and bias when they occur, actively work to diversify leadership positions, and ensure that Black educators' voices shape school policies and practices.

Addressing School Funding and Resource Allocation. Addressing educational inequity for Black students in special education requires confronting fundamental disparities in school funding. The financing of public education in the United States relies heavily on local property taxes, creating dramatic funding differences between wealthy and poor communities. This system ensures that predominantly Black and low-income school districts receive substantially less funding than predominantly White, affluent districts, even when serving equal numbers of students.

Sibilia (2020) reported that nationwide, non-White school districts receive \$23 billion less per year than majority White districts serving the same number of students. This enormous funding gap translates directly into differences in educational opportunities: fewer experienced teachers, larger class sizes, outdated materials and technology, limited access to advanced coursework, inadequate facilities, and fewer support services. For special education specifically, underfunded districts struggle to provide mandated services, employ sufficient specialized staff, and implement evidence-based interventions.

Addressing these funding inequities requires policy changes at the state and federal levels. Weighted student funding formulas that provide additional resources for students with disabilities, students from low-income families, and English learners can help ensure

that resources follow student needs (Jarmolowski et al., 2022; Tuchman et al., 2022). States must reform funding formulas to reduce reliance on local property taxes and increase state contributions to education, particularly for high-need districts. Federal funding through IDEA should be increased to meet the law's original promise of covering 40% of the excess cost of educating students with disabilities—a promise that has never been fulfilled. Examples of successful funding reforms include Massachusetts' foundation budget review (Massachusetts Foundation Budget Review Commission, 2015) and Texas's school finance reforms (University of Houston Education Research Center, 2019), which have reduced per-pupil spending gaps between high-poverty and affluent districts. Legal challenges to funding inequity, such as school funding adequacy lawsuits in multiple states, have also produced significant improvements in resource allocation.

However, increased funding alone is insufficient without paying attention to how resources are used. Accountability measures tied to equity outcomes, including special education placement patterns, academic achievement gaps, and post-secondary success rates, are essential for ensuring that additional resources translate into improved outcomes for Black students. Too often, the most experienced teachers, newest materials, and richest course offerings go to schools serving predominantly White, affluent students, while schools serving Black and low-income students receive fewer resources despite greater needs (Bischoff & Owens, 2019). District policies should ensure equitable distribution of high-quality teachers, requiring that schools serving the highest-needs students have access to the most experienced, effective educators. Resources should be allocated based on student needs rather than maintaining historical patterns that perpetuate inequality.

Addressing Implicit and Explicit Biases. Educational inequity for Black students in special education will continue to be an issue until PreK-12 schools and universities address the implicit and explicit biases of pre-service and in-service teachers. As we know, Whiteness tends to be centered in TPPs given that “Racism is deeply embedded in the structures of teacher education programs, yet programs obscure their culpability in maintaining and perpetuating racial harm” (Kohli & Pizarro, 2022, p. 5). So, Kohli and Pizarro (2022) provide four steps to advance racial justice in TPPs, but given the current political landscape, those steps (e.g., requiring racial literacy to be admitted into a TPP) will be more difficult to institutionalize. While requiring racial literacy may not be feasible, TPPs can address biases through class content and coursework. For example, professors can include assignments and activities related to learning about themselves (e.g., IAT) and others (i.e., various cultures). Kumar et al. (2022) used a survey and pre-service teachers' responses to the race IAT to examine the connection between how pre-service teachers viewed Black students and the approaches to instruction the teachers would implement. The authors discussed how teachers who genuinely want to *be* and *appear* unprejudiced are more likely to use culturally responsive and supportive instruction (e.g., learning about their students' cultures and incorporating it into their curriculum). Indeed, M. R. Brown et al. (2019) discussed research regarding conceptual strategies that can help teachers create culturally sustaining inclusive classrooms, including suggestions such as taking the IAT, being reflective and continuously engaging in PD, focusing on students' strengths without emphasizing problems and deficits, prioritizing relationships with students, and challenging students in order to grow. In theory, the abovementioned conceptual strategies increase inclusivity in classrooms, which should positively affect diverse students.

In his commentary on a special issue of articles about teachers' implicit biases, Worrell (2022) stated that pre-service teachers will continue to need support when they are in-service teachers to ensure they do not act on their implicit biases. This ongoing need for PD is not surprising given the inherent issues with diversity and equity in TPPs. Actually, Taylor et al. (2023) pointed out that behavior analysis programs do not include much

content on culturally responsive practices or anti-racism, thus students will lack knowledge about how to work with diverse students. Therefore, in-service teachers must continue learning about and reflecting on their biases and how they impact their classroom practices, expectations, and interactions with students and their families. Some ways teachers can show bias in their classroom are by their nonverbal cues, like eye contact, smiling, and their tone of voice (Worrell, 2022), often without realizing it. When teachers do engage in biased behavior, they need to be accountable and fix the harm they caused the student. That is just one of six ways to mitigate implicit bias that Shaffer et al. (2022) provide practitioners.

Administrators also play a crucial role in combating biases. Santiago-Rosario et al. (2024) point out that "...administrators may also be an interruption point for unintentional bias" (p. 293) as they are the ones who interpret and implement school (discipline) policies. Implementing more positive, proactive approaches to discipline is an effective strategy for schools to increase equity. Teachers should not be reactive to students; instead, they need to implement preventative practices like Social Emotional Learning (SEL) (Shaffer et al., 2022) and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) like Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support (PBIS) (Santiago-Rosario et al., 2024). These approaches are more effective when they are culturally responsive. However, Taylor et al. (2023) go a step further and explain how to add the Cycle of Critical Consciousness (critical analysis, agency and action) and anti-racist practices to the PBIS framework, thereby increasing equitable implementation of PBIS. They included resources that teachers can use to understand critical consciousness, anti-racism, and response to intervention (RTI).

Within the RTI framework, there is not just a focus on student behavior but on academic achievement. Given the link between instructional engagement and classroom behavior, Green and Stormont (2018) explain how teachers can use evidence-based culturally responsive instruction for diverse students with disabilities. They note how using EBPs can lower disciplinary exclusion for diverse students both with and without disabilities. Green and Stormont (2018) provide an explanation of four EBPs (pre-correction, opportunity to respond, Direct Instruction, and behavior-specific praise) that, when used appropriately and with fidelity, can increase students' academic achievement and decrease challenging behaviors. Santiago-Rosario et al. (2024) discussed similar research that showed students exhibited on-task behavior and more correct responses and overall academic engagement when teachers provided specific praise. Relatedly, providing teachers with feedback and data on their instructional practices, like their use of praise versus reprimands, increased equity in their use. Teachers can also use research-based reading interventions like PALS with extensions (see King Thorius & Santamaría Graff, 2018) and other promising literacy practices for Black males (see Husband & Kang, 2020) to increase educational equity for diverse learners.

Another strategy to mitigate bias is by diversifying the teaching profession and leadership. Kumar et al. (2022) state that TPPs need "...to be even more intentional and deliberate about actively recruiting students of color" (p. 9) and noted some positive outcomes for Black and other minoritized students when there is a racial/ethnic match between teachers and students. This teacher-student racial match is vital for Black students, and Black boys with economic disadvantages, in particular, as Hart and Lindsay (2024) found that Black students who had Black teachers were less likely to be identified with a disability. However, it is challenging to match teachers and students racially/ethnically, as Bettini et al. (2025) highlighted how difficult it is to recruit and retain teachers, special education teachers (SETs) of color included. They discussed the importance of recruiting and retaining teachers of color in TPPs and schools because if TPPs do not graduate enough SETs, then districts cannot hire them. Unfortunately, even when districts say they place value on teacher diversity, they may not have any urgency for hiring diverse teachers as Bristol et al. (2024)

found that educators received “mixed messages” as the district superintendent talked about the benefit of teachers of color for students of color, but he limited the high school’s Equity Committee’s efforts to recruit diverse teachers even though it had been successful. So, if schools do not recruit and retain diverse teachers, there will be less teachers who could move into leadership positions. Diverse leadership is critical to mitigating bias and for diverse students to have more positive school and post-school outcomes.

Research demonstrates that culturally responsive practices can significantly reduce disproportionate referrals and improve outcomes for Black students (Gay, 2002; Hammond, 2015). Emerging evidence suggests that when teachers receive training in cultural responsiveness and implicit bias awareness, referral patterns become more equitable (Bal et al., 2019). Theory and preliminary evidence suggest that combining individual teacher development with systemic changes produces the most sustainable improvements. Therefore, all the strategies discussed herein are vital to eliminating educational inequities for Black students in (special) education settings. When we keep “...a keen eye on biases that permeate educational systems, educators can actively engage in reducing racism and promoting equitable success for all students” (Taylor et al., 2023, p. 320).

6. Summary and Concluding Thoughts

This review examined the historical and contemporary experiences of Black students in special education, revealing persistent patterns of inequity that span from slavery-era literacy prohibitions to current disproportionate identification and restrictive placement practices. The historical perspectives examined in this review demonstrate how current disparities are rooted in centuries of systematic exclusion and marginalization. Understanding this historical context is essential for developing effective contemporary interventions because it reveals how past policies and practices created the structural inequities that persist today. The mitigation strategies proposed directly address these historical patterns by focusing on systemic rather than individual solutions, recognizing that genuine transformation requires addressing root causes rather than symptoms.

The evidence presented throughout this review demonstrates that Black students in special education face multiple, interconnected challenges, including disproportionate identification in subjective disability categories, placement in restrictive settings, inadequate resources, and poor long-term outcomes (Garwood & Carrero, 2023; Murphy et al., 2025). Recent research confirms that Black students are 40% more likely than their peers to be placed in special education and are twice as likely as White students to be diagnosed with emotional disturbance, while also being disproportionately placed in restrictive settings outside general education classrooms (Murphy et al., 2025). Addressing these outcomes requires confronting these root causes rather than simply tinkering with special education processes. In fact, Ko et al. (2025) “...found that the special education policy implementation...involves a complex, contradictory interweaving of histories of segregation, racial ideologies, resource availability, and competing policies” (p. 202).

The mitigation strategies outlined in this review, which include addressing biases, developing equity literacy while centering Black scholarship, increasing representation of Black educators, implementing culturally responsive practices, and pursuing policy reforms, represent evidence-based approaches to addressing these inequities. Implementation requires sustained commitment, adequate resources, and willingness to challenge existing power structures and practices; however, implementation of equity-focused strategies is occurring within an increasingly challenging political context. As of 2026, numerous states have enacted legislation restricting teaching about racism, systemic inequity, and related topics in K-12 and higher education settings (Bissell, 2023; Schachle-Gordon et al., 2025). These restrictions create tensions between equity imperatives and legal/political

constraints. Educators and institutions must navigate this terrain thoughtfully, focusing on evidence-based practices that improve outcomes for all students while acknowledging and addressing documented disparities. Framing equity work in terms of educational effectiveness, legal compliance with IDEA and civil rights law, and student success rather than politically charged terminology may provide more sustainable pathways forward, though such compromises risk diluting the critical consciousness and systemic critique essential for genuine transformation.

Future research should focus on several critical areas. Longitudinal studies tracking special education outcomes for Black students across different placement settings and intervention approaches are needed to identify effective practices. Intervention research testing specific strategies to reduce disproportionate identification and improve outcomes should also be prioritized. Research on decision-making processes in multidisciplinary evaluation teams can reveal how bias influences identification decisions. Studies examining successful models where Black students in special education achieve strong outcomes can provide blueprints for replication.

Policy recommendations emerging from this review include specific federal policy changes to IDEA requiring disaggregated data reporting, stronger enforcement mechanisms, and increased funding for evidence-based interventions. State-level funding formula reforms must address resource disparities, while accountability measures tied to equity outcomes ensure that policies translate into practice. Professional development requirements for all educators working with diverse students should include mandatory, ongoing training in cultural responsiveness, implicit bias awareness, and evidence-based practices that are linked to licensure renewal requirements.

Looking forward, researchers, educators, and advocates must continue documenting disparities, identifying effective practices, and demanding accountability for equitable outcomes. But documentation alone is insufficient. As [Melancon and Hendry \(2015\)](#) argue, integrated, equitable education is essential for creating the unity of one nation and realizing the ideal of a multiracial democracy. The current system of segregation—by race, by class, and by disability—with its accompanying inequalities, threatens to undermine this democratic ideal. The education of Black students, including those with disabilities, is not merely an issue of individual opportunity but a matter of collective future.

For sure, the stakes of this work extend beyond individual student outcomes to the health of our democratic society. As [Preston-Grimes \(2010\)](#) noted, public education serves as the bedrock of democracy. When significant populations of students are systematically marginalized and underserved, the foundations of democratic participation and social cohesion are undermined. Transforming special education to truly serve Black students is, therefore, not only a moral imperative but also essential for the future of our diverse democracy.

Certainly, the current state of Black students in special education is unacceptable. Too many Black students experience special education as segregation rather than support, as diminished expectations rather than individualized instruction, as a pathway to marginalization rather than opportunity. Changing this reality requires confronting uncomfortable truths about racism, bias, and systemic inequity in education. It requires moving beyond rhetoric about equity to make fundamental changes in funding, policy, practice, and culture. Most importantly, it requires recognizing that the students we are discussing are not statistics or case studies but young people with potential, dreams, and rights to educational opportunities. Their futures, and our collective future, depend on our willingness to transform special education from a system that perpetuates inequality into one that genuinely supports all students to reach their full potential.

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