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Special Issue
Identity in Flux: Confronting the Complexities of Identity in Educational Contexts

Guest Editors
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From the Editors

Brian Schultz, in his 2024 Society of Professors of Education Presidential Address, responds to the conference theme: What should education professors do? Education professors have always had to adjust and adapt to ever changing educational contexts. Shultz asks the critical question–if we could redo yesterday, should we? Through the power of story, he responds by weaving experiences and ideas--stories of teaching,, multiple curriculum theories, song lyrics, and an analysis of a play. In this way, Schultz embraces Schwab's (1983) conception of an eclectic arts approach to curriculum-making. Understanding a multiplicity of theory is essential for educators to adapt and generate alternative courses of action that consider time, place, people, and context (Schulz, 2025).

In this special issue, Identity in Flux: Confronting the Complexities, guest editor Christopher Harris has assembled a collection of articles that speak to the fundamental need to consider "time, place, people, context" if schools and teachers are to support healthy, robust identity development of students. The contributing scholars represent multiple disciplines—psychology, special education, pedagogy and curriculum, and leadership. The authors engage multiple theories from their fields to analyze the students' contexts and contexts' relationship to identity development; they also offer multiple teaching and curriculum frameworks and practices for supporting identity development—supporting Black students, immigrant students, students with disabilities, and Black and immigrant students with disabilities.

We offer two observations from a bird's eye view:

1) The titles of the articles in this special issue are packed with action words and phrases: Do, in flux, (in)visibility, speak, build, assist, reflect. This list, it appears to us, reflects a process of good teaching and of supporting students. As teachers—We act (do), are always in flux (context changes, students change, we change, and more) seeking to make every student visible and to support their speaking in the world. To do this, we build (classroom and school environments) and assist students' performances so that students give voice to their own stories. And, we reflect. We reflect on our own and students' actions asking questions: What did students do today? What changed? Who was visible? Who was rendered invisible? Why? Who spoke and who did not? Why? What can we together build tomorrow? Next week? Next semester? How can I assist? What should change?

2) The authors in each of the articles in this issue offer us, whether classroom teachers or professors of education, specific analytical and practical approaches that can enhance and inform our own teaching and learning. They give us resources needed to reflect and then act differently so that all students we teach are visible, speaking, learning, and engaged.

We are grateful to each of the contributing authors for sharing their expertise so generously. We thank Christopher Harris for his excellent work as guest editor—leading takes time, energy, and skill. Thank you, Dr. Harris, for choosing to share your time with the Society of Professors of Education.

In gratitude for the conversations we have through SPE,

Mary Kay Delaney, Gretchen Givens Generett, and Paula Groves Price, editors

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Society of Professors of Education Presidential Address 2024

If Only Yesterday Took Place Tomorrow…. Or, What Professors of Education Should Do

Brian D. Schultz
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Leaning into more than a half-century of curriculum reconceptualization scholarship, Tom Poetter's (2024) refreshing new book, *Curriculum Fragments*, makes a proposal for practicing educational inquiry through and participating in life processes. The power of Tom's invitation rests on his brilliant weaving of stories—what he calls curriculum fragments—that point to and point out the transformative bits that make up his life, and in turn, his curricular journey. I, too, have found that what I refer to as narrative-points-of-entry (Schultz & Pearson, 2021) allow for powerful stories of educators, including my own, to come alive—to attempt to show rather than tell—about educational interactions in classrooms and beyond them. Others before Tom and me have leveraged stories, particularly educators' stories as a way to make meaning, further understanding, and promote theorizing. We can see this vividly in what Bill Schubert (1991) calls teacher lore, or what Michael Connelly and Jean Clandinin (1988) push towards in their powerful promotion of narrative inquiry.

In this spirit of the reflecting on fragments, bits, points-of-entry, and stories I am inspired by the timely call for proposals for this 2024 Society of Professors of Education Annual Meeting. Professors and co-program chairs Kelli Rushek and Meghan Phadke (2023) prompt us to confront our responsibilities as professors of education. With thought-provoking questions, they challenge us to imagine and cultivate an educational future:

What might a radical re-envisioning of education look like?

In what ways must our work engage with and transform the public sphere?

What might we need to cast off to build anew?

Kelli and Meghan ask these questions—perhaps rhetorical, perhaps answerable and actionable—amidst grave concerns about and for higher education, and education more broadly in both local and global contexts. Using the words assault, austerity, divisive politics, global violence, and civil unrest, they describe how we as professors of education must contend with an ever-changing educational environment. And, how we must act.

One way for me to act is through story. Leveraging the power of story and that of this conference's theme, I am going to share some curriculum fragments that have me contemplating education, and life, in this moment. I will start by pondering a line from a song by an alternative rock band which resonates with me, share a recent experience seeing a revival of a Broadway play, and reflect on a dissertation in which I served on the committee. Each of these bits allow me to theorize about our situation as professors of education.

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In the song, *Handyman* (Bruno, 2018), written by AWOLNATION frontman Aaron Bruno, there is a line that has been making me think:

"If only yesterday took place tomorrow"

What if yesterday happened tomorrow? I have been reflecting on and contemplating this vexing question after seeing the alternative band live in concert about a year ago at music festival. As with many song lyrics, the words and sounds act as prompts for wondering. Prompts for pondering.

And with most music, there are debates about what the lyrics mean, what the writer was
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alluding to, or what the words are referencing. Online, some believe this song is about addiction, recovery, and seeking something better. A more supportive environment. Others think the song connects to the cards one is dealt with in life, fragility, and overcoming challenges (SongMeanings, n.d.). I certainly see these themes throughout the song, but I find that line—the refrain, if only yesterday took place tomorrow, to be the line that has me ruminating. A lot. So much so, that it is a running joke in my family, particularly with my 18-year-old who laughs at my perseveration on it.

It is not unusual for people to try and course correct for things that have happened in their past. For example, just a couple of weeks ago, comedian Dana Carvey (Zemler, 2024) made a public apology to actor Sharon Stone for a skit he performed at Stone's expense on *Saturday Night Live* in the early 1990s (Michaels, 1992). Stone, who was serving as that particular night's guest host, was a box office star with her provocative movie roles—remember *Basic Instinct* (Verhoeven, 1992)?

These kinds of reflections—or repentances—are not limited to popular culture. There seems to be a common trope amongst politicians about things they said or did in the past that may now be at odds of the current (or supposed) stances of major party platforms. Take for instance recent headlines from a conservative candidate for the US Senate seat in Nevada discussing on national news his wife's past abortion (NBC News, 2024). Or Joe Biden's (2024) reference to an undocumented immigrant as "illegal" in his forceful State of the Union Speech a month ago (although this reference was removed from the "official" transcript posted to the White House website). Course corrections take place. Statements released. Apologies given. Some authentic. Some heartfelt. Some sincere. Some just part of the machine.

Having an opportunity to learn from mistakes, missteps, misspoken thoughts, or words should be part of being human. But it can be a challenge to correct the record or respond to the pervasiveness and ubiquity of a gotcha media culture. A culture that inundates us with the constancy of snapshot headlines that do not always represent the nuance of a moment, a comment, or tell a full story.

I know in my everyday life I certainly appreciate an opportunity to think about what I have said, written, or done that I wish I had not. I want to make sure I was appropriate. To learn from things that have hurt people, been misconstrued, or that I have rethought over time and in different contexts. Of course, there are a multitude of things I wish I had take-backs on, people I have hurt with my actions, or patience I have lost. That customer service representative on the other end of my frustration most certainly did not deserve my ire.

But that Aaron Bruno line: "If only yesterday took place tomorrow" has applications to the field of education. What kinds of methods would be changed? What have we learned from research about the brain and child development? How do we make classrooms more inclusive to honor culture, language, race, religion? But in terms of education, do we always need to go back and change things because we should have known better? Different? Should we wish for re-dos and second chances? Surely some practices, methods, and fads should change. But is there also a power of a curriculum-in-the-making? Is there power in muddling through, in the messiness of teaching and learning, and the beauty in not knowing what's next?

Before I theorize about this power, though, I want to break. Because, sometimes there is an absolute, without a doubt, necessity to be able to course correct. Repent. Do better. A powerful example was with my recent watching of the revival of Branden Jacobs-Jenkins' play *Appropriate* (2013, 2023) on Broadway starring Sarah Paulson. Apropos to her character in *American Horror Story* (Murphy, 2011-2021) or her the role as Nurse Ratched (Romansky & Murphy, 2020), Paulson's lead role in *Appropriate* is complicated yet exemplary of what it means to be a horrible human being. Paulson's character and that of her estranged brothers and their partners—who themselves have not so desirable

traits to say the least—gather at the Arkansas plantation estate of their recently deceased father. What was to be a chance to learn of their inheritances and liquidation of items from the home reveals deeply troubling pasts not only of their father, but of themselves. Racist and antisemite actions, deeds, and yes, artifacts found in the family home deserve attention at the very least, as well as changes to their current beliefs, thoughts, and actions.

The play begs questions that this year's conference theme challenges us to contemplate and act on: is there a possibility for re-envisioning? Can we start anew? How do we engage in the public sphere about complicated matters? So, *Appropriate*, acting as both noun and verb certainly offers the family in the play, and all of us to think—and to rethink words, actions, stances, and deeds—if only yesterday took place tomorrow. No spoilers here—go see the play, or at the very least check out *New York Times* theatre critic, Jesse Green's, multiple reviews (2014, 2023a, 2023b) of the play over the last decade. What stands out to me is his initial panning of the play 10 years ago to a grand celebration of it this past year. Why the change? Why a different stance? Green posits this to his own change, his own transformation over time. He specifically notes that the play or characters' actions are the same, but what has been re-envisioned is his growth as a human. Powerful.

Allow me to now situate this back into the role of professors of education. Here I want to echo Joseph Schwab's (1983) guidance in his fourth essay on practical inquiry. In this article, Schwab suggested what curriculum professors can do to help realize his previous calls for a practical curriculum paradigm (Schwab, 1970, 1971, 1973). These previous calls challenged assumptions about curriculum, teaching, and learning. Schwab offered a completely different approach to what he called curricular commonplaces—students, teachers, subject matter, and milieu—all acting and interacting together. He also posited a view of and for eclectic arts where a multiplicity of theory is known by educators so that these theories can be adapted, tailored, or adjusted based on those commonplaces to generate alternative courses of action. Course of action that took into consideration time, place, people, context.

Surely for those of us who advocate for culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995), responsive (Gay, 2018), and sustaining pedagogies (Paris & Alim, 2017) see the power of such specifically designed, intentional approaches. In the spirit of Schwab's practical 4, I wonder out loud with all of you, what is it that professors of education can and ought to do?

With the backdrop of the AWOLNATION lyrics, if we could redo yesterday, should we? Should we redo what we did before in classrooms and with our students? In this very moment, amidst the onslaught and proliferation of anti-LGBTQ+, anti-Black, racist and other laws, would we change course of teaching and writing about, for instance critical race theory, or other (woke) ideas that have become part and parcel—a boogeyman of sorts—of current culture wars? Would we call it something different like Ladson-Billings (1995) did nearly thirty years ago when she implored: *But that's just good teaching*! Would this be what Bill Ayers (2016) has framed as received wisdom? Seeing into the future or anticipating what is or can be next has a place. Being strategic because of such anticipation is something that I did or tried to practice as a department chair for 12 years.

But there is also strength in allowing for the emergent nature of education—of curriculum—to play out. To be in the making. To not look back. To realize and relish in the messiness. To be in adventure. Over the past 20+ years, I learn from my students as we work together in what I have called social action curriculum projects that evolve from the very priority concerns of those who have the most at stake in elementary or college classrooms—the students.

Importantly, though, this does not mean that as professors of education we do not practice reflection and ground our work in critical introspection. We must.

This is why this line resonates so much with me. There is such a good tension in it for me. Of

course, I and we need to course correct, apologize, rethink, redo. But we must also look to our students and our journeys with students and with each other as a means to do our work. Embracing the emergent nature of it. Embracing the messiness. Not always knowing where our work will land. Be in the making.

This line of thinking brings me to a recent dissertation committee of my friend and colleague, Ashley Cartell Johnson (2024). Officially "Dr. Cartell Johnson" as of this past Thursday, Ashley tells narrative stories—the curriculum fragments—of her life in classrooms and in out-of-school curricular endeavors at the intersection of special education, disability studies, and disabilities studies in education. Her stories take the reader to the very moments when she is interacting with young people, with adults with disabilities, and with some of her former students who are now adults, friends, and university students. Her self-critique of some of the practices as a teacher are profound, heart-wrenching. Some cause you to wonder; some cause you to wince. Ashley clearly wishes that some things she did over the years had been done differently or not at all.

But importantly, Ashley uses a refrain throughout that draws on the powerful quote often attributed to Maya Angelou: "Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better." In Ashley's (2024) words she writes, "In an effort to position myself to 'know better,' I surfaced my hardest moments as a teacher, my biggest mistakes, hoping that taking an uncomfortable stance could open the window that changes the view" (p. 95). She goes on to later argue that "By pushing through and centering my mistakes and weaving them through stories of my highest, lowest, and hardest moments in my career, I can see now how leaning into and surfacing this range of experiences—without suppressing the hard times or mistakes—was the catalyst for the reckoning I went searching for" (p.113).

Ashley is not looking for a redo here, but instead impressively reconciling how she has grown, learned, and emerged as the professor of education she is now. So yes, there is no doubt that Ashley or any of us would want to change things if we are acting in hindsight, but those experiences, those moments, make us human. They make us who we are. But they also have the power to make us who we want to be. How we want to act. They let us do what Kelli and Meghan prompt in their call for this very meeting.

So of course, I have not resolved the dilemma about "If only yesterday took place tomorrow." I want a *both and* here. There is power in learning from mistakes, transgressions and the like, but there is also power in following the path in front of you and making meaning of the past as you engage in the future. I know this power from working with young people and college students embracing curriculum that originates from the students' questions, curiosities, frustrations, and problems. Likewise, I know this power, from developing and acting on threshold concepts (Meyer & Land, 2005) with colleagues in a department over years as a chair. May there be both celebrations or critiques of my teaching or leadership? Of course, but with conviction, I want to continue the journey alongside students and colleagues as we work to "do better" for ourselves and those around us as professors of education.

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Guest Editor Introduction: Introduction to Special Issue: Identity in Flux: Confronting the Complexities of Identity in Educational Contexts

Christopher L. Harris

Introduction

In today's educational landscapes, identity is not a fixed label but a dynamic, evolving tapestry—woven from sociopolitical, historical, and institutional threads. It shifts and reshapes itself across time and context, revealing the complex interplay of race, gender, class, ability, and other intersecting markers that influence who we are. The contributors to this special issue, comprising of educators, researchers, practitioners, and sociologists, invite readers into a critical dialogue about identity formation within educational spaces. Together, we assert that understanding identity requires more than surface-level engagement; it demands a deep, sustained inquiry into how identities are constructed, contested, and transformed across diverse educational ecosystems.

Identity development is a multifaceted journey that shapes how students and educators see themselves and engage with the world. As society evolves, so too must our understanding of how identities are socialized, racialized, and regulated by institutional norms and sociopolitical forces. The field of self and identity scholarship continues to expand, offering new frameworks for conceptualizing identity in ways that are more inclusive, intersectional, and justice-oriented. Scholars such as Beverly Daniel Tatum, Gloria Ladson-Billings, and bell hooks have long emphasized the importance of identity in shaping educational experiences and outcomes. Their work reminds us that identity is not merely personal; it is political, pedagogical, and deeply relational.

This special issue emerges at a particularly urgent moment. In the wake of political mandates—such as the executive orders issued during the Trump administration and the ongoing wave of anti-DEI legislation, educators are grappling with the implications of censorship, erasure, and ideological control. These policies have far-reaching consequences for our schools and, most importantly, for our students. The current climate of book bans, curriculum restrictions, and attacks on inclusive education threatens to undermine decades of progress in equity and justice. Now more than ever, we must interrogate pedagogical practices and curricula that privilege dominant narratives while marginalizing or erasing others.

Identity in Flux: Confronting the Complexities of Identity in Educational Contexts invites readers to explore the lived experiences of students and educators navigating identity in flux. From Black students and immigrant youth with disabilities to White preservice teachers and Black preachers, the articles in this issue illuminate how identity can be shaped by context, power, and resistance. The contributors draw on a range of theoretical and methodological approaches, including racial identity development, Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit), Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and bell hooks' engaged pedagogy, to examine how identity is negotiated in classrooms, communities, and beyond.

What unites these diverse contributions is a shared commitment to disrupting deficit-based narratives and advancing identity-affirming pedagogies. The authors in this issue do not merely describe identity struggles; they offer strategies, frameworks, and visions for

transformation. Whether through curriculum redesign, teaching methods, teacher preparation, or community-based praxis, each article contributes to a broader project of educational justice.

As guest editor, I view this special issue as both a scholarly contribution and a call to action. Educational spaces must be reimagined as sites of affirmation, belonging, and transformation. This means creating classrooms where students are not only seen and heard but also empowered to bring their whole, authentic selves into the learning process. It means preparing educators to engage critically with their own identities and to foster identity-safe environments for all learners.

The authors of this special issue invite you to join us on this journey. As you engage with the articles in this issue, we hope you will reflect on your own positionality, challenge your assumptions, and consider how your work might contribute to more equitable and inclusive educational futures. The stakes are high, but so is the potential for change.

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Curricular (In)Visibility – Race, Representation, and Black Racial Identity Development

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Abstract

This paper examines the impact of Black representation in K-12 educational curricula on the development of racial identity among Black students, specifically in terms of their self-concept, academic engagement, and sense of belonging. Drawing on William Cross's Nigrescence theory and Beverly Daniel Tatum's extension of the model, this paper explores how the portrayal—or lack thereof—of Black people in school curricula shapes the racial consciousness and self-concept of Black youth. By critically analyzing the role of curricular content in reinforcing or challenging racial stereotypes, this paper argues that the representation of Black identity within K-12 education plays a significant role in shaping students' academic achievement, self-worth, and social identity. Through a comprehensive review of existing literature, the paper identifies key gaps in research regarding how curricula influence racial identity development and suggests directions for future studies to address these gaps. Ultimately, this paper underscores the necessity for curricular reforms that offer more inclusive, accurate, and empowering representations of Black individuals and their histories, thereby contributing to the broader discourse on educational equity and identity formation.

Keywords: racial identity development, K-12 curricula, educational psychology, race, school context, racial representation

Introduction

In contemporary U.S. education, curricular controversies are increasingly influencing the educational landscape. These debates intertwine educational goals with politics and social dynamics, leading to policies that determine what and who should be taught. Across the country, attacks on the cultures and histories of non-dominant groups, particularly those outside the White dominant culture, demonstrate the far-reaching effects of these conflicts. Given the potential to shape education for generations, understanding these controversies is crucial.

This paper examines how the representation of K-12 curricula, or the lack thereof, impacts the racial identity development of Black students by examining how educational content can affirm or undermine students' sense of self, belonging, and academic engagement. Through an integrative review of existing literature, the paper identifies key gaps in research and argues for more inclusive and accurate curricular practices that support the healthy development of Black youth's identities. To ground this discussion, it is important to define key terms related to race and identity. According to the American Psychological Association (APA, 2022), race is a social construct that categorizes individuals based on physical characteristics, ancestry, culture, religion, or national origin. For Black students, race is not only a visible marker but also a profoundly influential factor in shaping

[1]Christopher L. Harris, https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8481-4279 I have no conflicts of interest to disclose. This article is based on the dissertation completed by Harris (2023) Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Christopher L. Harris, 600 Forbes Avenue, Pittsburgh, PA 15282. Email: harrisc10@duq.edu. Phone: 412-396-6114

educational and life experiences, often in stark contrast to those of their White peers.

Racial identity refers to an individual's self-concept as influenced by their membership in a racial group, including the social and political implications of being part of that group (Hypolite, 2020; Johnson & Arbona, 2006). The APA (2023) further defines racial identity as a sense of belonging linked to one's racial group. In this paper, I draw on both definitions, considering racial identity as encompassing both group membership and a sense of belonging, shaped by internal perceptions and external social forces.

Racial identity development refers to the process through which individuals come to understand, internalize, and express their racial identity over time. For Black youth, this development is shaped by a range of factors, including family, community, media, and, critically, schooling (Akos & Ellis, 2008). The development of racial identity and its influence on Black students' well-being, academic achievement, and life outcomes has been widely studied since the post-slavery period (Zirkel & Johnson, 2016). Research consistently shows that a positive racial identity is associated with stronger academic outcomes for Black students (Chavous et al., 2008; Datnow & Cooper, 1997; Ford & Harris, 1997; Hypolite, 2020).

Despite this growing body of research, there remains a gap in understanding how curricular representation, that is, the presence or absence of Black voices, histories, and perspectives within educational content, impacts racial identity development. This integrative review examines existing literature on racial identity development, schooling, and curricula to explore this relationship. Following Spring's (2013) approach, the review critiques current research through a historical and critical lens. This article aims to highlight the negative impact of stereotypical or absent representation in K-12 curricula on the racial identity development of Black students, while identifying gaps in the literature and justifying the need for further research (Randolph, 2009). Although research on this topic is limited, this review demonstrates the strong connection between K-12 schooling and students' identity development, suggesting a clear direction for future studies.

Identity in Early Childhood

Understanding the early development of identity is critical, as identity formation begins in early childhood and lays the foundation for the more abstract and complex identities that emerge during adolescence. Although much of the scholarly discourse on identity development centers on adolescence, early childhood experiences build these later stages of identity formation (Tatum, 2017). Early childhood is a cornerstone for numerous quality-of-life indicators, including physical and mental health, identity development, and key developmental milestones (Raburu, 2015).Identity, broadly defined, encompasses a person's general sense of self, beliefs, and attitudes about themselves and their world (APA, 2023). Children develop concrete understandings of themselves and others during early childhood, informed by observable behaviors and appearances. However, at this stage, children lack the capacity for abstract self-reflection. Instead, childhood think in constructs, the foundations for the reflective processes that will emerge in adolescence (Tatum, 2017).The factors influencing identity development are multifaceted and include family dynamics, relationships with peers, age, gender, religious background, and cultural context (Tatum, 2017; Raburu, 2015; Umana-Taylor & Hill, 2020). As children grow, their identities become increasingly complex, shaped by interactions within a world that mirrors this complexity. Unique experiences and socialization facilitate the transition from concrete to abstract identity processes. Children start engaging in self-reflection by asking pivotal questions about who they are and who they aspire to become. Beyond the family unit, external influences such as schools, peers, teachers, community environments, and media significantly shape

children's capacity for self-reflection and identity development (Raburu, 2015; Tatum, 2017).

Eccles (1999) emphasizes that the elementary and middle school years are a period of rapid skill acquisition, competency development, and identity formation. During this stage, children increasingly seek independence and opportunities to demonstrate their skills, make decisions, and control their behavior. They also form social relationships with peers and adults, crucial to their identity development. These rapid and dramatic changes are driven by a fundamental need to explore and define their role in the world beyond the family. While early childhood lays the foundation for identity development, adolescence marks a critical period when racial identity becomes more salient, particularly for Black youth navigating a racialized society.

Racial Identity Development and Blackness

Racial identity development is especially significant for Black youth, who typically become aware of racial differences in early adolescence (Tatum, 2017), and it is among Black scholars' most studied constructs (DuBois, 1903; Clark & Clark, 1939; Cross, 1991; Helms, 1990; Tatum, 2017). All children in racialized societies develop a racial identity, but this article focuses on the racial identity development of Black American students. During the early adolescent period, Black youth are navigating the complexities of their educational and professional goals and their identity (Tatum, 2000; Verhoeven et al., 2018). The messages individuals receive from their environment shape their self-perception, and for Black adolescents, these messages become increasingly racialized.(Tatum, 2017).For Black students, messages from school and the curriculum are often negative or inconsistent with healthy identity development. For example, when Black students are taught that slavery marks the beginning of their history, when only one month is dedicated to Black leaders, or when their histories and achievements are excluded, the curriculum sends a message of marginalization. Yet, a positive racial identity fosters a sense of self-confidence and optimism (Bakari, 1997). Therefore, a positive racial identity is key to Black students' academic and personal success.

Racial identity influences how Black students perceive themselves, their peers, and others outside their racial group. It impacts school engagement, which in turn affects their educational and professional paths as well as their quality of life (Ritchey, 2014). The development of racial identity is an ongoing, meaning-making process that changes and varies based on individual experiences (Seaton et al., 2006; Tatum, 2017). It is not a straight path but a dynamic, context-dependent process shaped by age, school environment, and societal influences (Piper, 2019; Hypolite, 2020; Tatum, 2004, 2017).

Because positive racial identity development influences both the current and future well-being of Black youth, fostering and supporting positive racial identity is essential for Black students' academic and personal achievement. Hypolite's (2020) study of Black college students showed that racial identity development continues into adulthood, and that support from cultural centers and staff can be vital in helping students reflect on and understand their racial identity. Taken together, schools play an important role in promoting a healthy racial identity by exposing students to new ideas and opportunities (Coll & Falsafi, 2010; Flum & Kaplan, 2006; Verhoeven et al., 2018). On the other hand, schools can also undermine a healthy racial identity if students lack support or are exposed to harmful messages (Tatum, 2017). To better understand how these identity processes have been conceptualized, it is important to examine foundational scholarship that shaped the field of Black racial identity development.

Early Scholarship on Racial Identity Development

W.E.B. Du Bois (1903), a pioneering African American scholar and activist, introduced the

concept of "double consciousness" in his seminal work, *The Souls of Black Folk*. He described a double consciousness as the internal conflict experienced by Black people who are forced to view themselves through the lens of a society that marginalizes them. Du Bois argued that this dual perspective leads to a fragmented self-awareness, entailing individual struggles to reconcile their identity as both Black and American. Du Bois's exploration of double consciousness laid the groundwork for understanding the complexities of Black identity and the psychological effects of systemic racism.

In the 1930s, psychologists Kenneth B. Clark and Mamie K. Clark conducted influential research on racial identity development in African American children (Clark & Clark, 1939). Their "doll studies" involved presenting Black children with two dolls, one with lighter skin and one with darker skin, and asking them to identify which doll they preferred and which they associated with positive attributes. The results revealed a preference for the lighter-skinned doll, indicating internalized racism and a negative self-image among the children. This study highlighted the detrimental effects of segregation and societal discrimination on the self-esteem and racial identity of Black children. The Clarks' work provided empirical evidence of the psychological impact of racism, influencing the landmark Supreme Court decision in *Brown* v. *Board of Education* (1954), which declared racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional. Building on these early insights, William Cross (1971) introduced a more structured model of racial identity development that has become central to contemporary understandings.

William Cross' Nigrescence Theory

William Cross developed the influential Nigrescence Theory in 1971, a cornerstone of scholarship on Black racial identity development (Vandiver et al., 2002). The term *nigrescence*, derived from French, refers to the process by which individuals understand and embrace their Black identity (Cross, 1971; 1994). Cross's theory was built on Erikson's (1968) and Marcia's (1980) theories of identity development, seeking to capture the stages through which Black Americans experience shifts in their racial self-identification (Cross, 1971; 1994). Unlike earlier models that did not specifically address Black youth, Nigrescence aimed to fill this gap and explain how Black individuals develop a positive racial identity.

Cross's revised Nigrescence model, introduced in 1991, expanded to encompass the diverse experiences of Black Americans, recognizing multiple identities within each stage and redefining certain stages accordingly. Notably, he reframed the "pro-white" identity to an "American identity," emphasizing that such an identity does not necessarily indicate self-hatred (Cross, 1991). Additionally, the Internalization and Internalization-Commitment stages were combined due to their psychological similarities (Cross, 1994). Ultimately, Cross's revised model consists of four stages: Pre-Encounter, Encounter, Immersion-Emersion, and Internalization.

1. **Pre-Encounter**: At this stage, race holds little to no salience for the individual, often due to factors like denial and an unawareness of race or racial implications (Ritchey, 2014). Individuals in this stage may align more with White culture and distance themselves from Black peers (Tatum, 1992).
2. **Encounter**: This stage typically begins with a negative encounter with racism, forcing the individual to confront the reality of their Blackness (Tatum, 1992). As they process these experiences, their understanding of their racial identity is challenged, often resulting in anger and frustration (Cross, 1994).
3. **Immersion-Emersion**: At this stage, individuals struggle between old and new identities. They seek deeper connections to their Black identity and often experience a shift from anger toward White people to seeing them as irrelevant (Tatum, 2017). This stage is

marked by excitement in exploring Black culture and history beyond common stereotypes (Ritchey, 2014).

4. **Internalization**: Individuals reach a stage of greater comfort and acceptance with their Black identity while maintaining positive relationships with non-Black individuals (Cross, 1994; Vandiver, 2001). This stage represents the transformation of self-worth and embracing a more positive racial identity (Ritchey, 2014).

Cross (1991) was a trailblazer in exploring and defining Black identity development within academic research. His contributions provided a foundation for subsequent studies. Beverly Daniel Tatum (1992; 2017) later expanded on Cross's work, presenting a more detailed and sophisticated perspective on racial identity development and clarifying how individuals navigate these stages. Tatum's elaboration of Nigrescence has been crucial in shaping this paper's approach to racial identity and in advancing the field of racial identity development.

Tatum's REC Identity Development

In her theory, Tatum (2017) created a framework that integrates race, culture, and racial identity into what she describes as Racial-Ethnic-Cultural (REC) development. William Cross's theory of racial identity development served as the framework for Tatum's (2017) own understanding of the racial identity of Black students. Tatum (2017) argues that race, ethnicity, and culture overlap in students' lived experiences so that they must be viewed together.

Tatum (2017) acknowledges the fact that children of color, in particular Black children, are faced with negative, stereotypical, and racist images and misinformation as early as their preschool years. She emphasizes the importance of Black parents and teachers being race-conscious with children from an early age by reassuring and fostering an atmosphere where race is viewed positively through offering children cultural artifacts, knowledge, images, and messages regarding what it means to be Black. When these race-conscious steps are taken to help reinforce positive racial identity in children, Tatum (2017) argues, the impact of the dominant society's negative messages is reduced.

Tatum (2017) outlines the stages children go through as they develop their racial identity, from pre-puberty to adolescence into young adulthood. Her stages echo Cross' (1994) stages; however, a key difference is that Tatum's conceptualization of identity and racial identity offers a more complex, dynamic view and understanding of racial identity development. Tatum's conceptualization of racial identity is conscious of the contextual factors that influence one's racial identity (i.e., gender identity, sexual orientation, physical ability, religion, and socialization, to name a few). In adolescence, Black children start to develop an ever-evolving and increasingly complex understanding of their racial identity that begins to include not only information about themselves but also an understanding of their racial group membership. Tatum (2017) states that this development in adolescence is marked by a growing understanding that there is a commonality of experiences and destiny for those with ethnic or racial group membership. This growing understanding extends to how these shared experiences differ from individuals who are part of other groups.

The American Psychological Association (APA) identifies pre-adolescence as the period that comes before adolescence, comprising approximately two years before the onset of puberty (2018). The APA defines emerging adulthood as 18 to 25 years old (2018). Tatum (2017) asserts that pre-adolescent children are in a state of pre-awareness concerning their racial identity. As children get older and gain more experiences, they develop more complex views of their racial identity. When children reach young adulthood, many will enter the immersion-emersion phase of racial identity.

Tatum (2017) asserts that this is a key stage for young adults because they begin to actively explore their racial identity.

Although college is an ideal place for young adults to explore their racial identity, Tatum (2017) acknowledges that college is not the only place where young adults can explore who they are as Black people, as well as their histories. On the contrary, Black young adults will learn about their Blackness and their histories outside of the educational landscape as non-college students who are seeking alternative, positive definitions of what it means to be Black, different from what is taught by default. Young people continue to learn what it means to be Black for themselves as they consciously develop their racial identities. Tatum argues that this occurs in virtually every aspect of young Black people's lives in different ways: from embracing religion or spirituality, immersing oneself in civic participation, establishing informal relationships with friends and family, to creating connections with formal organizations that aim to strengthen Black people's ties with one another. While these theories provide a strong conceptual foundation, it is equally important to explore how racial identity is shaped by the school environment itself.

Schooling and Racial Identity Development

Psychologists have studied how children gain an understanding of race and how their understanding is shaped over time for decades (Quintana, 1998; Watford et al., 2021). Racial-ethnic socialization is a process of information transmission to children regarding their race and ethnicity (Hughes et al., 2006). The messages that young people receive throughout their lives regarding the meaning and consequences of their racial group membership have been shown to influence their psychological well-being and psychosocial and academic development (Hughes et al., 2006; Watford et al., 2021). Socialization is a dynamic process whereby multiple sources deliver messages to the youth. Young people then select from these messages and interpret meaning and value based on their experiences, beliefs, and knowledge (Byrd and Legette, 2022). School is an important factor in the socialization process for children due to the influence that school has on students, directly and indirectly. Not only do students spend a great deal of time in school, but schools are also positioned to shape young people's career goals and aspirations and how they view themselves in society (Byrd & Legette, 2022).

Davidson (1996, as cited in Nasir et al., 2009) argued that one negotiates one's racial identity in school and the classroom. These contexts can support or fail to support whether a student views schooling as a contributor to their racial identity formation or as an oppositional force working against their racial identity. These oppositional forces that create disengagement in schooling for students of color often manifest through academic tracking, low or negative expectations, racial discrimination, and barriers to knowledge (Davison, 1996). One key mechanism through which schools influence racial identity is cultural socialization, the intentional and unintentional messages students receive about race and culture.

School Cultural Socialization

Cultural socialization is an aspect of socialization first identified by Byrd (2015; 2017), who combined literature on parental socialization and multicultural education to identify five dimensions of school Ethnic-Racial Socialization: 1) cultural socialization: opportunities for students to learn about their own culture(s); 2) promotion of cultural competence: opportunities to learn about other cultures; 3) critical consciousness socialization: opportunities to learn about prejudice and discrimination; 4) mainstream socialization: refers to the messages about mainstream U.S. norms and values; 5) color-blind socialization: refers to the messages that encourage students to ignore the role race plays in their daily lives and in society. Byrd and Legette (2022) argue that allowing students to

learn about their culture significantly contributes to racial identity commitment and exploration. Furthermore, Del Toro and Wang (2021) assert that adolescents of color who possess a positive ethnic-racial identity show promising academic adjustment, school performance, and attitudes toward school and learning.

Literature on parental socialization shows positive linkages between cultural socialization messages from parents and positive racial identity development, so it would be fair to argue that the same positive linkages would be found if students learned about their own culture in school, thus helping students further develop the positive meaning of racial group membership. Del Toro and Wang (2021) posit that when schools decide to embrace their roles as sources of cultural socialization and make conscious efforts to promote their students' ethnic-racial affect and pride, teachers can aid students in integrating their ethnic-racial group membership into their school identities. Furthermore, when the congruence between one's ethnic-racial identity and school curricula is increased, Black students' academic self-confidence is boosted, and teachers are better positioned to ascertain students' academic interests and even instill a strong sense of competence. School belonging, school engagement, and willingness to complete school-related tasks are also likely to benefit from school cultural socialization (Del Toro & Wang, 2021).

Students can learn about culture in school through various means: Social Studies and History classes, language arts and literature, ethnic studies courses, student organizations, and teachers who incorporate culture into their teaching (Byrd & Legette, 2022; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Del Toro and Wang (2021) conducted a longitudinal study examining whether school cultural socialization predicted Black adolescent students' grade point averages in relation to their ethnic-racial identities. This study showed that students who perceived more school cultural socialization focused on positive racial identity development had higher grades 1 and 2 years later. To complement theoretical and institutional perspectives, it is essential to consider how students themselves perceive and interpret these racial identity messages.

Students' Perceptions of Racial Identity Development and Schooling

Watford et al. (2021) conducted semi-structured interviews with 64 Black adolescents to explore their experiences with and understanding of race. Their findings highlight that parents, school curricula, and students' encounters with racial discrimination significantly shape racial beliefs. Ethnic-racial socialization also arises from broader societal contexts, including public spaces and media consumption, emphasizing the multi-faceted nature of influences on adolescents' racial identities. Nasir et al. (2009) identify two critical contexts that influence racial and academic identities: the school and local context, and the historical and national media context. These contexts work together to shape students' racial identity development. Understanding racial identities requires examining students' schooling practices, as schools significantly impact the formation of racial, ethnic, and academic identities (Nasir et al., 2009; Shelton & Sellers, 2000).

School Context

The school environment has a significant influence on how Black students perceive their racial and academic identities. For instance, Nasir et al. (2009) studied Black high school students in a predominantly Black urban school, using interviews, surveys, and observations. They identified two identity types: street savvy, an identity that reflects students who align with popular culture, use ebonics, and view their Black identity as separate from academic success, and the school-oriented and socially conscious identity, which Nasir et al. argue that students who hold this identity emphasize their connection education, community, and cultural heritage, often viewing themselves as agents of positive change within their communities.

Historical and National Media Context

Nasir et al. (2009) also explore the impact of historical and media narratives on the racial identity development of Black students. Media representations of Black individuals have evolved but remain deeply tied to systemic racism and stereotypes. For example, in the 1950s, Black media portrayals were scarce, and Black individuals often sought to assimilate through appearance and behavior, prioritizing education as a path to mobility. Today, while media representation has increased, it frequently perpetuates stereotypes, such as depicting Black men as athletes or entertainers and Black women as hypersexualized. These stereotypes can have profound developmental implications. Spencer (2006) argues that harmful portrayals in the media exacerbate the challenges of identity development for Black youth. The internalization of negative stereotypes often undermines self-perception and complicates the process of constructing a healthy racial identity.

Implications for Racial Identity Development

Nasir et al. (2009) assert that students' environments and experiences significantly shape their racial identity. Media narratives and school practices interact to create diverse interpretations of what it means to be Black. Importantly, while all students in Nasir et al.'s study identified as Black, their understanding of Blackness and their critical engagement with racial identity varied widely. These findings underscore the need for educational and societal systems to provide supportive contexts that foster positive racial identity development for Black adolescents. These student perspectives underscore the importance of examining the curriculum itself as a powerful site of identity information.

Curricula and Their Relation to Racial Identity Development

Research across disciplines, including science, mathematics, social studies, and language arts, reveals a persistent lack of diversity in racial representation in curricula, including a scarcity of characters of color in children's books (Bishop, 1990; Emdin, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Loewen, 2018). This absence reflects systemic inequities that impact students' learning and self-perceptions.

Eisner (2002), in *The Educational Imagination: On the Design and Evaluation of School Programs,* provides a foundational understanding of curricula. He defines it as a series of planned events designed to produce educational outcomes for students. He emphasizes that curricula are not static; their objectives and implementation vary by context and environment. Beyond planned content and instructional materials, a redefinition of curriculum must address how curricula shape and are shaped by students' experiences, particularly concerning racial identity. Eisner's framework includes three forms: explicit (what is taught), implicit (what is indirectly conveyed), and null (what is omitted), providing a lens to explore how what students learn and do not learn impacts their perceptions of race and identity.

Eisner's Three Types of Curricula.

According to Eisner (2002), schools teach much more (and much less) than what they publicly purport to teach. *Explicit Curricula.* Explicit curricula are presented to the public and include the content, goals, and objectives for various content areas and instruction. According to Eisner (2002), they are an educational menu offered to students, their families, and the community.

Implicit Curricula. The "hidden" curriculum teaches indirectly what should be valued in school and in life. For example, the hidden curriculum of discipline policies emphasizes compliant behavior and the hidden curriculum of grades and tests teach competition. Furthermore, emphasizing the significance of various subject areas, such as math and the sciences, over other subject areas, such as the arts, results in a hidden curriculum. Eisner (2002) defines implicit curricula as the omnipresent expectations and

rules that define the cultural system of formal schooling. This cultural system, in and of itself, teaches powerful and important lessons to its pupils.

Null Curricula. Eisner (2002) posits that the third curriculum does not exist because it is not taught to students. The null curricula include two dimensions: 1) neglected intellectual processes, and 2) the content or subject areas that are absent in school curricula. Eisner (2002) defines null curricula as options not provided to students, perspectives they may never be taught about and cannot utilize, and concepts and skills not meant to be included in their intellectual skills.

Representation in Curricula.

The dominant culture's tradition of assimilation in U.S. education often strips away the uniqueness of minority groups, neglecting the rich diversity of American society. Chisholm (1994) likens America to a vibrant mosaic, where each culture contributes to the whole while retaining individuality. For curricula to reflect this mosaic, the experiences and achievements of students of color must be incorporated to engage them meaningfully (Chapman & Hobbel, 2010).

Today's heightened racial tensions underscore the need for inclusive education, for a mosaic approach to education. Movements like Black Lives Matter highlight systemic inequities, while conservative opposition to Critical Race Theory, which has never been and is not taught in K-12 schools, created conditions that allowed for limits to be placed on discussions of race in schools. Amid this sociopolitical backdrop, integrating positive racial identity development for Black students into curricula is crucial, as positive racial identities promote academic resilience and self-concept (Varelas et al., 2012). The following discussion focuses on three academic subject areas—science, language arts/English, and social studies/history—and their role in fostering racial identity development among Black students.

Science and Mathematics. The underrepresentation of Black students in science and math curricula often hinders their academic identity and self-concept. MacIntyre and Hamilton's (2010) study revealed that the selection of relevant and realistic content improves student engagement and success. Bryan and Atwater (2002) argue that deficit-based portrayals of children of color in science curricula discourage aspirations and achievement.

Emdin (2006) emphasizes the need for dialogue between teachers and students to deconstruct rigid, militarized teaching methods that ignore students' cultural contexts. His findings show that neglecting students' experiences alienates them from STEM fields, whereas engaging their identities fosters deeper connections to the subject matter. Varelas et al. (2012) introduced the Content Learning and Identity Construction (CLIC) framework, demonstrating that intertwining content learning with identity construction enhances students' engagement and scientific literacy. This approach positions students as practitioners, enabling them to think and act like scientists, thereby bridging academic content with the development of racial and professional identity.

Language Arts and English. Literacy, a cornerstone of individual advancement, remains fraught with disparities. Historical inequities, from slavery to segregated schools, have left a legacy of limited access to quality literacy education for Black Americans (Gadsden, 1991). Current curricula often fail to reflect the diverse racial and cultural identities of students. For instance, NYC public schools predominantly feature White authors despite a majority non-white student population (NYC Coalition for Educational Justice, 2019).

The absence of representation has a negative impact on students' self-perception and academic motivation. Bishop (1990) argues that when children don't see themselves in books or when they encounter stereotypes, they internalize society's undervaluation of their identity. Conversely, culturally relevant teaching methods—such as communal literacy activities and legitimizing students' real-life experiences—promote intellectual leadership and cultural

competence (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Tatum, 2000). These practices affirm students' identities while addressing fundamental literacy barriers, creating a more equitable learning environment.

Social Studies. Social Studies curricula are uniquely positioned to explore race and identity, yet they often reinforce White supremacy by centering dominant cultural narratives (Busey & Russell, 2016). This lack of representation marginalizes non-White histories and perpetuates racial hierarchies. Hawkman (2019) contends that social studies can empower students by helping them understand racial justice and fostering a positive racial identity.

Ladson-Billings (2012) highlights the harm caused by students not seeing their histories and cultures represented in curricula. Inclusive social studies teaching can combat this by amplifying diverse perspectives and promoting critical consciousness. By moving beyond dominant narratives, educators can cultivate classrooms that validate all students' experiences and challenge systemic inequities. Representation in curricula is not merely an inclusionary act but is integral to fostering positive racial identities and academic resilience among Black students. Science and mathematics benefit from frameworks like CLIC, which merge identity with content learning (Varelas et al., 2012). Students thrive in language arts/English classes when culturally relevant texts and pedagogies affirm students' cultural and personal identities (Ladson-Billings, 2009). By confronting dominant narratives, social studies can empower students to engage critically with race and justice (Hawkman, 2019). Together, these approaches challenge systemic inequities and create an educational landscape reflective of America's vibrant mosaic. These studies

Conclusion

In today's volatile sociopolitical climate, curriculum is not just a pedagogical tool – it is a site of ideological struggle. The exclusion, erasure, or distortion of Black histories and identities in K-12 education is not accidental; it is a deliberate act with profound consequences. As states pass legislation to restrict discussions of race, and as school boards remove books and limit inclusive content (Harris, 2024; Mangan, 2025), what is truly at stake is the psychological well-being, academic engagement, and identity development of Black students. Debates over what knowledge is taught—and to whom it is taught—reflect deeper societal struggles. Curricula serve as racial texts, shaping students' perceptions of what constitutes valuable knowledge while teaching them about their roles and representations within society. Despite the importance of these issues or perhaps because of the importance, the debates remain highly politicized and contested, with significant implications for racial identity development among Black students.

This integrative review has demonstrated that racial identity development is a dynamic, context-sensitive process, profoundly influenced by the messages students receive in school. When curricula omit or misrepresent Black experiences, they send a message that Black lives, histories, and contributions are peripheral or unworthy of study. These omissions are not benign; instead, they are acts of curricular violence that can lead to internalized racism, disengagement, and diminished self-worth. Conversely, inclusive and affirming curricula have the power to foster resilience, pride, and academic success. They help students see themselves as thinkers, creators, and leaders. Nevertheless, despite decades of research affirming these benefits, the field still lacks a comprehensive understanding of how curricular representation directly shapes racial identity development across different contexts and developmental stages.

We find ourselves at a crossroads, where educational equity is under attack and racial justice is being reframed as divisive or "woke" (Tensley, 2022), educators, researchers, and policymakers must act with urgency. Curriculum is not neutral (Castenell & Pinar, 1993). It is a mirror that reflects the values of a given society, and that communicates to children who is worthy of being celebrated and taught, and who is not.

Suppose we fail to reflect the full humanity of Black students in what we teach. In that case, we risk not only their disengagement but also the perpetuation of systemic inequities for generations to come. The field of educational psychology must prioritize research that interrogates these dynamics and advocates for transformative curricular practices. Only then can we move toward an educational system that affirms all students' identities and prepares them to thrive in a diverse and just society.

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Intersecting Identities: Experiences of Immigrant Students with Disabilities Through a DisCrit and Universal Design for Learning Lens

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Abstract

Students receiving special education services in the U.S. has reached an all-time high record of 7.5 million students in the year 2022-23, or 15% of all public-school students, a percentage that has continued to rise in recent years (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024) but there is no data on how many students are both immigrants and receiving special education services. Recent research increasingly highlights the misrepresentation of students of color in special education services (Artiles et al., 2004; Cruz et al., 2021; Shores et al., 2020; Tefera et al., 2023; Voulgarides et al., 2017); however, more research is needed on immigrant students with disabilities and their experiences at these intersections. In this paper, the author employs the theoretical approach of Disability Critical Race Studies, which aims to explore how larger societal issues like racism and ableism, along with other discriminatory structures, manifest in the everyday experiences of students of color with disabilities (Annamma et al., 2013). Because families of immigrant students with disabilities face key challenges, including barriers to identification of special education eligibility and barriers to advocacy, the author aligns these barriers to DisCrit's core tenets, and then proposes Universal Design for Learning as a transformative framework for fostering inclusion and equity for immigrant students with disabilities.

Keywords: immigrant students, intersecting identities, DisCrit, universal design for learning

Immigration, Disability, and Education

In the U.S., there is an increasing number of both immigrant students and students with disabilities, yet little is known about the experiences of students who belong to both groups. Approximately 649,000 immigrant children ages 5-17 resided in the U.S. in the year 2021, with an additional 11 million U.S.-born students from immigrant households enrolled in public schools, accounting for 23% of all students (Camarota & Zeigler, 2023; Sugarman, 2023). Public schools provided special education services to 7.5 million students in the U.S. during the 2023-24 academic year, representing 15% of the total public-school population (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). Despite the rapid growth of these two populations, there is little research on the intersection of immigrant identity and disability in education. While existing studies highlight the disproportionate representation of students of color in special education (Artiles et al., 2004; Cruz et al., 2021; Shores et al., 2020; Tefera et al., 2023; Voulgarides et al., 2017), more research is needed on immigrant students with disabilities (ISWD). This lack of data raises critical questions. How do ISWD experience educational barriers? How do systemic factors

influence ISWD's access to services and inclusive learning environments?

This paper defines an immigrant student in line with the U.S. Department of Education's definition, as an individual who is between the ages of 3 and 21, was not born in the U.S., and has not attended a school in the U.S. for more than three full academic years (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). This paper, however, goes a step further to focus on immigrant students with disabilities, or ISWD, so those who fit the U.S. Department of Education's definition while simultaneously having a disability eligibility through U.S. school systems. The purpose of this paper is to apply Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) to examine the educational experiences of ISWD. Additionally, this paper proposes Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as a framework for addressing these barriers, offering educators practical strategies for fostering inclusion and equity. By extending DisCrit to immigrant students with disabilities and connecting the analysis to UDL, this paper highlights both the need for systemic changes that recognize and support the diverse needs of ISWD and offers practical strategies for practitioners to address these needs.

DisCrit Theory

Disability Critical Race Studies (DisCrit) is a framework that integrates aspects of Critical Race Theory and Disability Studies to examine how race and disability intersect. The framework examines how the intersection of race and dis/ability may lead to educational systems providing or denying opportunities to individuals from marginalized groups (Annamma et al., 2013). In Annamma et al.'s (2013) seminal article on DisCrit, authors highlight how race and disability are interdependent social constructs that inform and reinforce each other. The authors emphasize their rejection of these identities as biological facts. They then continue on to discuss how society also creates "normal" characteristics of students which are based on whiteness and ability, among others, and that individuals who are not of these characteristics are deemed "abnormal" or "deviations" from the norm. These intersections of identity are oftentimes how inequities and marginalization of students of color who have disabilities persist in education. The seminal article highlights seven tenets that frame DisCrit. See Table 1 for a summary of those tenets. DisCrit aims to push researchers and educators both to understand these approaches when thinking of ability and race, and to advocate for resistance to systems that perpetuate inequity.

Researchers have applied DisCrit to examine specific racial disparities in special education, particularly for Black and Latinx students (Cruz et al., 2021; Iqtadar, 2024; Lavín & Francis, 2024; Tefera et al., 2023), however, its application to ISWD in general remains limited. Some scholars have recently incorporated DisCrit to explore immigrant experiences, but these studies primarily focus on specific racial or legal identity groups rather than examining immigrant student experiences as a broader, yet diverse, population. For example, Iqtadar (2024) employed DisCrit as a primary theoretical lens to explore the experiences of two first-generation Black African ISWD. Findings highlighted how racism and ableism intersected with linguistic discrimination to influence special education placement and student resistance. However, this study was limited in scope, since it focused on a small sample of Black African ISWD and did not consider the systemic barriers faced by other immigrant groups. Similarly, Lavín and Francis (2024) used DisCrit to examine the experiences of undocumented Latinx students with disabilities, arguing that racism, ableism, and anti-immigrant policies intersect to exclude undocumented students with disabilities from equitable education. While Lavín and Francis' research is valuable, it focuses exclusively on undocumented Latinx students, overlooking the challenges faced by immigrant students from other backgrounds. Although immigrant experiences in special education cannot be treated as a monolith, there is a need for broader research that examines systemic barriers shared across diverse immigrant populations.

This paper extends the DisCrit framework to analyze the experiences of ISWD more comprehensively, recognizing the way in which race, disability, and immigration status intersect to shape educational access for ISWD in a broader sense. ISWD face a distinct form of marginalization that affects not only Latinx and African students but also those from other underrepresented immigrant backgrounds. Unlike U.S.-born students of color with disabilities, immigrant students face additional barriers such as language exclusion, fear of deportation, and cultural dissonance in special education services (Luelmo et al., 2023; Lim & Cheatham, 2021). These challenges shape their access to equitable educational opportunities and contribute to systemic exclusion.

The following sections explore how ISWD' experiences align with DisCrit's core tenets. The author discusses common challenges from the literature faced by immigrant families of ISWD such as (a) systemic barriers to identification and access and (b) challenges in advocacy. See Figure 1 for a summary of all challenges discussed. After introducing each challenge, the author discusses how those challenges are aligned to the DisCrit perspective. See Table 2 for a summary of the alignment of DisCrit to the challenges for families of ISWD.

Barriers to Identification and Access

Prior research has demonstrated that immigrant families of ISWD face significant barriers to identification and access (Akande, 2021; Choe et al., 2024; Iqtadar, 2024; Kibria & Becerra, 2021; Landa, 2023; Lavín & Francis, 2024; Lim & Cheatham, 2021; Luelmo et al., 2022; Montoya et al., 2022; Yan et al., 2022). One barrier to identification and access is delayed diagnosis or misdiagnosis (Akande, 2021; Iqtadar, 2024; Landa, 2023; Luelmo et al., 2022).

Studies show that schools are less likely to identify children of immigrants for special education services compared to children of U.S. born parents (Landa, 2023). Even when they are identified, ISWD are more likely to experience delayed diagnosis (Landa, 2023; Luelmo et al., 2022). Some schools may even delay special education evaluations until students develop English proficiency, which leads to further delays (Landa, 2023). This hesitation to evaluate may stem from fear of misdiagnosis because differentiating between language acquisition and disability can be challenging for educators (Landa, 2023).

Cultural beliefs may also contribute to misinterpretation of symptoms. For example, some families may view speech delays as normal development, which can further delay diagnosis (Akande, 2021; Luelmo et al., 2022). Furthermore, lack of culturally and linguistically appropriate screening tools make it more difficult for timely diagnosis (Luelmo et al., 2022). Even when schools identify ISWD, they often misidentify their disabilities (Luelmo et al., 2022). In particular, language acquisition challenges are often mistaken for disabilities, thus leading to English Language Learners being placed in special education at disproportionate rates (Iqtadar, 2024). Further, of those who do get identified for special education services, ISWD are more likely to receive services in self-contained classrooms rather than in mainstreamed classrooms (Iqtadar, 2024; Landa, 2023; Lavín & Francis, 2024).

From a DisCrit perspective, these challenges to identification are not just inefficiencies in school procedures but rather, a reflection of how education systems privilege white, monolingual, able-bodied students by assuming a definition of what disability looks like (Annamma et al., 2013, Tenet One). Educators are less likely to identify ISWD in a timely manner because immigrant students do not fit the dominant norm of disability, which is that of white and monolingual students. DisCrit also highlights that race and ability are defined and identified by social and cultural norms (Annamma et al., 2013, Tenet Three). These norms shape the way educators may identify students for special education services. Educators with less experience and confidence with ISWD may delay

diagnosis or misdiagnose. By defining 'normal' through Eurocentric and English-dominant norms, special education systems exclude ISWD from timely and appropriate access to identification. Additionally, the multidimensional identity (Annamma et al., 2013, Tenet Two) of ISWD such as disability, language, and immigration status, can be viewed as deficient, lacking or inferior to the dominant status quo. This may delay students in being identified in comparison to their English-speaking, U.S. born peers.

Another barrier to identification and access is lack of awareness (Choe et al., 2024; Kibria & Becerra, 2021; Landa, 2023; Lavín & Francis, 2024; Luelmo et al., 2022; Montoya et al., 2022). Prior research demonstrates that families of ISWD may not have awareness about disabilities in general (Choe et al., 2024; Luelmo et al., 2022; Montoya et al., 2022). In addition, they may not be aware about how to navigate special education systems, the law, and their rights (Choe et al., 2024; Kibria & Becerra, 2021; Landa, 2023; Lavín & Francis, 2024; Montoya et al., 2022). From a DisCrit perspective, lack of awareness is not an individual issue, but rather an issue shaped by structural barriers that uphold dominant norms of whiteness, ableism, and English-speaking (Annamma et al., 2013, Tenet One; Tenet Six). The expectation that families must navigate and understand complex systems on their own assumes access to knowledge and resources that immigrant families may not have, which excludes ISWD from equitable identification. Failure to provide immigrant families with accessible knowledge in culturally and linguistically responsive ways maintains the dominant status quo, where white, middle-class, English-speaking families are more likely to understand information related to the special education system, while families of ISWD are left behind.

A third barrier to identification and access is challenges with communication, and research demonstrates that ISWD and their families often experience language barriers that prevent clear communication with their children's educators (Akande, 2021; Landa, 2023; Lim & Cheatham, 2021; Luelmo et al., 2022; Montoya et al., 2022; Yan et al., 2022). Families of ISWD may not be able to understand IEPs in English, making it difficult to fully participate in their child's education in schools (Choe et al., 2024; Iqtadar, 2024; Lim & Cheatham, 2021; Luelmo et al., 2022; Montoya et al., 2022). Lack of translated or poorly translated IEP documents or other important documentation makes it difficult for families of ISWD to advocate and understand what's happening in their child's learning (Choe et al., 2024; Kibria & Becerra, 2021; Landa, 2023; Lavín & Francis, 2024; Yan et al., 2022). During the IEP process, the use of complex words, vocabulary, and technical language such as "due process," can make it difficult for parents of ISWD to understand (Akande, 2021; Choe et al., 2024; Kibria & Becerra, 2021; Montoya et al., 2022). This situation can lead to caregivers signing documentation in English without understanding it fully (Montoya et al., 2022; Yan et al., 2022). Families often feel that bilingualism or multilingualism is framed as a deficit rather than strength, which can reinforce the power imbalance between families and educators (Akande, 2021; Iqtadar, 2024; Lavín & Francis, 2024; Lim & Cheatham, 2021; Yan et al., 2022). In addition, immigrant families may feel linguistic insecurity that leads them to blame themselves rather than recognizing systemic barriers (Lim & Cheatham, 2021). In fact, they may even feel disempowered and less likely to advocate for their children (Akande, 2021; Kibria & Becerra, 2021; Landa, 2023).

Though federal law requires schools to provide translation and interpretation services, this can be inconsistent across schools (Landa, 2023; Montoya et al., 2022; Yan et al., 2022). For example, schools may not always have sufficient bilingual staff or interpreters (Choe et al., 2024; Kibria & Becerra, 2021; Landa, 2023; Lavín & Francis, 2024; Lim & Cheatham, 2021; Luelmo et al., 2022; Yan et al., 2022). Even when available, translators and interpreters may not always be trained in special education, available for critical discussions, or may not be

familiar with special education terminology (Akande, 2021; Lim & Cheatham, 2021; Montoya et al., 2022; Yan et al., 2022). This can sometimes mean translation services are inconsistent or low-quality (Montoya et al., 2022; Yan et al., 2022). In addition, schools may rely on outsourcing language services rather than trying to create more inclusive environments for ISWD, which can exacerbate challenges for families of ISWD (Lim & Cheatham, 2021).

These findings show barriers in language for families of ISWD and it is also important to stress the underlying systemic elements of these barriers. From a DisCrit perspective, these challenges in communication are not just superficial barriers, but rather, a reflection of how education systems privilege English-speaking, monolingual students (Annamma et al., 2013, Tenet One). Since 'normal' is English-dominant, special education systems exclude families of ISWD from conversations about their child's education when that family does not speak English. Schools and educators expect families to communicate using English, reinforcing the idea that bilingualism and multilingualism are deviations, rather than strengths. This dynamic stresses that certain groups have privilege while others are denied the same privilege, assuming that non-English speaking families will find their own ways to navigate the system (Annamma et al., 2013, Tenet Six). The multidimensional identities of ISWD including disability, language, and immigration status are thus seen as deficits and shortcomings in comparison to the dominant norms of ability and English proficiency (Annamma et al., 2013, Tenet Two).

Barriers to Advocacy

Several factors may contribute to barriers to advocacy for families of ISWD. One common barrier to advocacy for ISWD is fear of deportation and immigration policies (Landa, 2023; Lavín & Francis, 2024; Luelmo et al., 2022). For example, fear of deportation may discourage families of ISWD from approaching public institutions such as schools, disability services, or other entities. (Landa, 2023; Lavín & Francis, 2024; Luelmo et al., 2022). Other families may not feel comfortable signing IEPs due to legal concerns or may even withdraw from services for their child altogether because of fear (Luelmo et al., 2022). Additionally, it is common for families of ISWD to feel distrust towards their child's school and staff due to deportation concerns (Landa, 2023; Lavín & Francis, 2024; Yan et al., 2022). From a DisCrit perspective, barriers to advocacy are related to the interconnectedness of racism and ableism which reinforce each other and shape who is on the receiving end of power, resources, and opportunities (Annamma et al., 2013, Tenet One). Schools prioritize white, English-speaking, U.S.-born norms, which marginalize families of ISWD who fear deportation and limit their ability to advocate for their child's rights.

At the intersection of immigration status, disability, and race, families of ISWD are more vulnerable to surveillance, exclusion, and lack of access to resources. Educators and school staff may assume immigrant families do not desire involvement in their child's education, rather than recognizing the fear of legal repercussions they may have. DisCrit also highlights that race and ability are socially constructed but have material consequences (Annamma et al., 2013, Tenet Three). Fear of deportation is not a personal choice, rather, systemic policies shape it. Families with secure immigration status may be more willing to advocate, while those who fear legal consequences may avoid advocating for their child, appealing IEPs, or even attending school meetings. DisCrit also reminds that history and policy matter (Annamma et al., 2013, Tenet Five). The legal system has historically used disability, race, and immigration status to deny individuals rights. Legal barriers to advocacy, created by immigration status, reinforce a system that provides ISWD with fewer protections and resources than white, U.S.-born individuals. Without legal safeguards that consider the status of ISWD and their families, families struggle to advocate for their children.

Community supports can also have a profound impact on families of ISWD in helping them advocate for their children and navigating the special education system (Choe et al., 2024). However, families with limited networks can struggle to find this help and support through community (Kibria & Becerra, 2021; Lavín & Francis, 2024; Luelmo et al., 2022). Many caregivers feel isolation being the only ones in their social circles dealing with the special education system (Kibria & Becerra, 2021). On the other hand, some families may rely on informal community supports to obtain critical information about special education, which may or may not always provide complete or accurate information to families (Akande, 2021; Choe et al., 2024; Luelmo et al., 2022). DisCrit emphasizes that identities are multidimensional and dependent on context (Annamma et al., 2013, Tenet Two). Families who do not have community supports and long-standing connections may find it harder to navigate special education and advocate for their children. This isolation can also lead to feelings of no emotional support, peer support, or sharing of experiences among others in the community. Additionally, community supports often reflect the dominant cultural norms and may not adequately support families of ISWD.

Beyond advocating for their children and navigating special education systems, many ISWD families also face stressors such as acculturation, discrimination, family separation, financial insecurity, and unfamiliar immigration laws (Lavín & Francis, 2024; Luelmo et al., 2022). Economic hardship further limits ISWD families' access to special education services and advocacy efforts, creating barriers such as transportation challenges, inability to hire advocates, or limited legal supports (Kibria & Becerra, 2021; Lavín & Francis, 2024). Many families of ISWD report feeling lost and overwhelmed while advocating for their child and navigating services(Montoya et al., 2022). DisCrit highlights that society constructs race and ability, and that these constructions have material consequences (Annamma et al., 2013, Tenet Three). Advocacy requires time, energy, and emotional capacity, but families of ISWD may not always have those resources with the stress they experience. The stress they experience is not only individual feelings, but rather a systemic consequence of how race, disability, and immigration status are structured. Special education systems place the burden of navigation on families, making it challenging as they juggle other stressors.

Cultural and national perspectives on disability shape advocacy efforts in schools. In some cases, cultural stigma surrounding disability reduces ISWD families' involvement and advocacy in schools (Akande, 2021; Kibria & Becerra, 2021; Landa, 2023; Luelmo et al., 2022), which can contribute to their involvement and advocacy in schools. Still, another barrier to advocacy for ISWD is related to parent-school relationships (Akande, 2021; Choe et al., 2024; Kibria & Becerra, 2021; Montoya et al., 2022; Yan et al., 2022). Parents report that educators sometimes dismiss or treat them unfairly, discouraging them from advocating for their children (Akande, 2021; Choe et al., 2024; Kibria & Becerra, 2021; Montoya et al., 2022; Yan et al., 2022). At times, some parents may not feel empowered to ask or advocate out of fear of negative consequences for their child (Choe et al., 2024; Kibria & Becerra, 2021; Yan et al., 2022). Again, DisCrit highlights that race is socially constructed (Annamma et al., 2013, Tenet Three). Many immigrant families conceptualize disability differently from the way disability is conceptualized in the U.S., which can lead to hesitation to advocate and misunderstandings with educators. From a DisCrit lens, schools often ignore the voices of marginalized families (Annamma et al., 2013, Tenet Four). When educators dismiss or invalidate families, these actions reinforces exclusionary practices that silence ISWD families in advocacy efforts. Additionally, DisCrit highlights that advocacy is a privilege that not all families can access and schools often exclude ISWD from advocacy opportunities (Annamma et al., 2013, Tenet Six).

Universal Design for Learning

While the barriers outlined in the previous section highlight the challenges faced by ISWD, it is equally important to consider how to address these challenges. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) offers an equity-driven approach that aligns with DisCrit's call to challenge exclusionary practices. UDL is an approach to creating learning environments that work for all students regardless of ability or background (CAST, 2024; Evmenova & Hrisseh, 2022). It is grounded in the approach that barriers to learning exist because of educational practices and environments, and not students themselves. Recently, the UDL Framework was updated (CAST, 2024) to include more emphasis on asset-based theoretical frameworks, such as culturally relevant and culturally sustaining pedagogies. There are three main principles to UDL including Designing Multiple Means of Engagement, Designing Multiple Means of Representation, and Designing Multiple Means of Action and Expression (CAST, 2024). By designing learning environments in a flexible, culturally responsive, and accessible format, UDL provides practitioners with concrete strategies to support ISWD in meaningful ways.

Under the three main principles, there are 36 considerations in the UDL framework. A full list of all the considerations is available on the CAST (2024) website (https://udlguidelines.cast.org/). For the purposes of this paper, only the considerations that are relevant to the aim of the paper are discussed (i.e., those which directly relate to ISWD and their families). Specifically, the considerations that can help to address (a) systemic barriers to identification and (b) challenges in advocacy. These considerations include *Consideration 1.3 Represent a Diversity of Perspectives and Identities in Authentic Ways; Consideration 2.3 Cultivate Understanding and Respect Across Languages and Dialects; Consideration 5.2 Use Multiple tools for Construction, Composition, and Creativity; Consideration 7.4 Address Biases, Threats, and Distractions; Consideration 8.4 Foster Belonging and Community* (CAST, 2024; https://udlguidelines.cast.org/). These considerations and practical UDL-based strategies are discussed in the following sections. See also Table 3 for a summary list of UDL strategies for practitioners (CAST, 2024).

Consideration 1.3 Represent a Diversity of Perspectives and Identities in Authentic Ways.

ISWD may sometimes feel unseen or excluded in mainstream curricula, where dominant narratives are the status quo. UDL calls for diverse representation in instructional materials, which aligns with DisCrit's emphasis on challenging dominant narratives and centering marginalized voices. Creating this inclusive learning environment is crucial for ISWD. Students should be able to see themselves represented and reflected within the curriculum, materials, and media presented within their classroom. Examples could include adding books that depict the students' heritage, celebrating students' culture, and posters that reflect their native language. This can help foster a sense of belonging and validation in students' identities. Another example is inviting community members and multilingual speakers to share their lived experiences. Implementing bilingual labels, anchor charts, and other descriptions around the classroom could also be helpful.

Consideration 2.3 Cultivate Understanding and Respect Across Languages and Dialects.

Oftentimes, bilingualism can be viewed as a deficit rather than an asset, as described in earlier sections. UDL calls for validating and incorporating home languages as part of learning (Annamma et al., 2013, Tenet Four). To support students who are immigrants and have disabilities, it is imperative to create an environment that values and respects languages and dialects. This means making sure learning materials are accessible to everyone. Examples can include offering translated materials, using visuals in instruction and communication, developing peer support, and providing other multilingual resources. Other

examples could be using real-time translation tools such as Microsoft Translator or Google Translate to help learning. This can help empower self-expression and communication so that students can express themselves more authentically. This helps to build confidence, and a sense of self, by not abandoning key parts of their identity in school. This also helps to facilitate communication with families and student learning within school.

Consideration 5.2 Use Multiple Tools for Construction, Composition, and Creativity. Verbal or written assessments or assignments can disadvantage ISWD, especially while their language acquisition is still developing. UDL emphasizes alternative ways for students to demonstrate their knowledge beyond traditional verbal or written assessments. Some practical examples could be allowing students to respond using visuals, oral recordings, or multimodal projects. Other examples include having students use different technologies that support their linguistic needs, such as speech-to-text or word prediction software. Practitioners can also encourage storytelling methods that might help integrate their cultural background and lived experiences. However, not all students have equal access to these tools, so schools must consider device availability, internet access, and technology funding, especially for families already facing systemic barriers. Without these supports, technology can widen gaps instead of closing them.

Consideration 7.4 Address Biases, Threats, and Distractions. ISWD may experience stress, fear of deportation, or racial and linguistic discrimination at school, which can impact learning and engagement. UDL calls for reducing environmental threats that can undermine learning, which aligns with DisCrit's emphasis on activism and resistance to challenging the status quo and advocating for social justice. Practitioners should actively address biases, threats, and distractions that disrupt learning, by intervening in bias, threat, or distractions in the classroom and by reflecting on their teaching practices and creating spaces where students can voice challenges and seek support. For example, educators can critically examine how their instructional approaches may unintentionally reinforce biases or exclude certain identities. Trauma-informed teaching approaches, recognizing discrimination and policy effects on students' well-being could be introduced. Training teachers to understand and practice culturally responsive pedagogy is also another option (Evmenova & Hrisseh, 2024). A supportive learning environment for ISWD is key to fostering a sense of safety, value, and engagement in the classroom. ISWD face systemic biases, and by advocating for institutional change and implementing inclusive practices, educators can contribute to a more equitable environment, where ISWD feel a sense of belonging and recognition of their identities.

Consideration 8.4 Foster Belonging and Community. Many ISWD can experience social isolation when lacking strong community connections, as mentioned previously in this paper. UDL emphasizes relationship-building as a strategy for learners, aligning with DisCrit's themes on centering marginalized experiences. For ISWD, this can be done through building a sense of belonging and community in the classroom, especially when they may have been excluded in the past. This can look different for each student, but ensuring practitioners take the time to build relationships, connect with their students' identities, and make them feel valued. Examples include taking the time for practitioners to invite students to share their own ideas of what belonging means to them and embracing their interests within the classroom. Other examples include peer mentorship programs, where ISWD can be paired with older multilingual students for guidance and support. Additionally, culturally inclusive celebrations could take place in the classroom to allow students to share their traditions and values. These actions can help students in affirming their intersectional identities, where they can see their

different experiences and perspectives as assets rather than deficits.

By using the UDL framework in designing learning, teachers can create an environment supportive of ISWD and ISWD will benefit from flexibility, accessibility, and cultural responsiveness in the classroom (Evmenova & Hrisseh, 2022; Evmenova & Hrisseh, 2024), which are counter to systemic injustices and issues in education. UDL's emphasis on removing barriers directly aligns with DisCrit's call to challenge how educational systems privilege dominant groups. Ultimately, UDL should be seen as a framework that can help support practitioners in how they approach teaching ISWD and all students.

Summary

This paper explores common challenges of ISWD and their families using DisCrit perspective. The analysis and strategies presented are intended to support K-12 educators, policy makers, and researchers in creating more equitable and inclusive learning environments. This topic remains under-researched despite the growing number of ISWD. While existing studies have explored racial disparities in special education using DisCrit, more research on immigrant families using this framework is needed. In this paper, DisCrit is used to analyze the systemic barriers that ISWD and their families face, particularly in identification and in advocacy. This paper also introduces UDL as a framework for beginning to dismantle these barriers by promoting inclusive and equitable education. Key barriers that were identified included barriers to identification (e.g., delayed diagnosis, misdiagnosis, language barriers) and challenges in advocacy (e.g., fear of deportation, lack of community supports, cultural stigma, and strained parent-school relationships). This paper then aligns these barriers with DisCrit's core tenets, demonstrating how educational systems privilege white, monolingual, able-bodied students while excluding and marginalizing ISWD.

Finally, the paper explored UDL-based approaches to reframe learning environments, empower ISWD, and challenge exclusionary practices. Using a UDL approach to teaching can help to disrupt systemic inequities and remove barriers to learning. UDL emphasizes fostering inclusion and equity, embedding culturally responsive approaches, and improving accessibility for students in the classroom. Future research should continue to explore the intersection of immigration status and disability using DisCrit, particularly through studies that center the voices of ISWD and their families. Future research should also center voices that are often underrepresented in the literature, including those who are frequently misclassified as white in data systems but their identities do not align with that classification. Additionally, future research should also examine how teacher preparation programs prepare preservice and in-service teachers to support ISWD, particularly through frameworks such as DisCrit and UDL. By integrating DisCrit analysis with UDL considerations and practices, this paper calls for a fundamental shift in how educators and stakeholders approach special education for ISWD, moving beyond deficit-based approaches to environments that affirm multilingualism, disability, and immigrant identity as strengths.

Figure 1: Common Challenges Faced by Immigrant Students with Disabilities and Their Families

Table 1: Summary of DisCrit Tenets (Annamma et al. 2013)

Tenet	Summary of Tenet
1	Racism and ableism are interconnected systems that reinforce each other to persist inequities in education. These two help to shape who is on the receiving end of power, resources, and opportunities.
2	Multidimensional identities rather than singular notions of identity, such as race, disability, social class, gender. Certain identities that are viewed as different from the norm are viewed as deficient, lacking or inferior to that which is considered the norm.
3	Race and ability are not biological facts, rather, are social constructs that continually redefined over time. That which is considered 'normal' is shaped by history and culture, similarly, that which is deemed 'deviations' from the normal.
4	Centering marginalized voices and experiences, such as individuals of color and those who have disabilities is critical to working towards equity and understanding oppression.
5	History and policy have favored individuals based on race and ability. This history shapes what systems of oppression look like in today's day and time.
6	Whiteness and ability serve as a form of property or privilege, giving advantages to those who can claim it, while systematically excluding and disadvantaging those who cannot.
7	Activism and resistance are key to challenge the status quo and advocate for social justice.

Table 2: Common Challenges for Immigrant Families with Disabilities and the Connections to DisCrit Lens

Common Challenges	Connection DisCrit Tenets (Annamma et al., 2013)
Delayed diagnosis and misdiagnosis (Akande, 2021; Iqtadar, 2024; Landa, 2023; Luelmo et al., 2022)	Racism and ableism are interconnected and reinforce each other to persist inequities and shape who is on the receiving end of opportunities, such as access to timely diagnosis (Annamma et al., 2013, Tenet One); belonging to certain multidimensional identities related to disability, language, immigration status that is not of the status quo is viewed as deficient, lacking, or inferior (Annamma et al., 2013, Tenet Two); Advantages and privilege, such as earlier diagnosis, to those who can claim the status quo, thereby excluding those who cannot (Annamma et al., 2013, Tenet Six)
Lack of information or awareness about special education systems (Choe et al., 2024; Kibria & Becerra, 2021; Landa, 2023; Lavín & Francis, 2024; Montoya et al., 2022)	Interdependently, racism and ableism work together to exclude those who are on the receiving power of knowledge/resources, such as familiarity/understanding of the special education system (Annamma et al., 2013, Tenet One); Advantages and privilege, such as access to information, to those who can claim the status quo, thereby excluding those who cannot (Annamma et al., 2013, Tenet Six)
Language barriers prevent clear communication between families and educators and prevent families from advocating fully for their children (Akande, 2021; Landa, 2023; Lim & Cheatham, 2021; Luelmo et al., 2022; Montoya et al., 2022; Yan et al., 2022).	Privileging families who are English-speaking and excluding those who do not from power and resources (Annamma et al., 2013, Tenet One); Advantages and privilege, such as clear communication, provided to those who are of the status quo, excluding those who do not speak English (Annamma et al., 2013, Tenet Six); Multidimensional identity including language is viewed as lacking or inferior (Annamma et al., 2013, Tenet Two)
Barriers to advocacy stemming from fear of deportation (Landa, 2023; Lavín & Francis, 2024; Luelmo et al., 2022)	Racism and ableism shape who is on the receiving end of power (Annamma et al., 2013, Tenet One) and schools are built around white-English-speaking U.S.-born norms, which puts families who have fear of deportation as outsiders; Race and ableism are socially constructed (Annamma et al., 2013, Tenet Three) and fear of deportation is not a personal choice, rather, something shaped by systemic policies. Families with secure immigration status may be more likely to advocate for their children

Limited community supports (Kibria & Becerra, 2021; Lavín & Francis, 2024; Luelmo et al., 2022)	DisCrit Tenet Two emphasizes that identities are multidimensional and dependent on context, and for families who do not have community supports, this can be challenging to navigate
Other stressors such as acculturation, discrimination, family separation, financial insecurity, and navigating unfamiliar immigration law (Lavín & Francis, 2024; Luelmo et al., 2022)	Due to the social construct of race and ability and have material consequences (Annamma et al., 2013, Tenet Three) it can be difficult for families of ISWD to have sufficient supports and resources alongside the stress they experience; the stress they experience is not just personal, but a result of systemic consequences due to their identities
Other challenges such as cultural stigma, parent-school relationships, and fear of negative consequences	DisCrit Tenet Four highlights that voices of marginalized persons are often ignored; Advocacy is a privilege that not all families can access (Annamma et al., 2013, Tenet Six) and many ISWD are excluded from this

Table 3: Strategies for Practitioners to Address Challenges in Alignment with Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2024)

Common Challenges for ISWD	Strategies for Practitioners Using UDL Approach
Delays in special education services (Landa, 2023; Leulmo et al., 2023)	Culturally responsive training for educators; building trust; Address biases and threats within classrooms and assessment practices; proactively design instruction that supports all students; flexible instructional strategies for all; promote inclusive practices
Lack of information (Choe et al., 2024; Landa, 2023; Leulmo et al., 2023)	School and community partnerships, parent liaisons or navigators, accessible information dissemination; Foster belonging and community; build partnerships and respect with families
Language barriers (Choe et al., 2024; Landa, 2023; Leulmo et al., 2023)	Providing culturally and linguistically responsive resources including translation services, culturally responsive trainings for family and staff; Represent diversity of perspective in classroom; Use technologies like real-time translation tools; Peer support and other multilingual resources; Use alternative forms of assessments
Barriers to advocacy stemming from fear of deportation (Landa, 2023; Lavín & Francis, 2024; Luelmo et al., 2022).	Fostering community and belonging; Community members help participants navigate the system and secure diagnosis and services for children; Add representation of students' culture and heritage in the classroom to foster belonging; Practitioners can critically examine their teaching biases; trauma-informed teaching practices
Barriers to advocacy from limited community supports and other stressors (Kibria & Becerra, 2021; Lavín & Francis, 2024; Luelmo et al., 2022)	Reflecting students' heritage and identities in the classroom, in curriculum, in materials and media; inviting community members and multilingual speakers to share lived experiences in the classrooms; implementing bilingual labels, anchor charts, and other classroom descriptions.

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You do not speak for me: Using CRT and DISCRIT to assist in identity development for Black students with disabilities (BSDs) in K-12 schools

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Abstract

Educators' refusal to understand the intersectionality of BSDs decreases school safety and increases difficulty in accessing the general education curriculum. Therefore, the school system is designed to make it difficult for BSD to embrace their multiple identities. Addressing these challenges requires not only acknowledging them but actively working to expose and dismantle the structures that continue to perpetuate inequities and racial disparities across K–12 schools. This paper focuses on using critical frameworks of critical race theory (CRT) and disability critical race theory (DisCrit) to understand how patterns of oppression uniquely intersect to target BSDs in schools.

Keywords: Black students, CRT, disabilities, DisCrit, universal design for learning

Introduction

Although demographic projections suggest that United States (US) K–12 schools may achieve full racial diversity by 2030 (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2021), there is limited research on the anticipated population of Black students with disabilities (BSDs) by that time. Nonetheless, the racial and ability-based disparities present in the education system remain substantial, and these issues could worsen the challenges faced by BSDs. These disparities may be reflected in access to quality educational services, placements, disciplinary practices, and racial biases. While access to quality and equitable learning opportunities for all students has been the catchphrase of most educational policies in US schools, studies have shown that when compared to their White peers, BSDs are mostly underserved in their placements (Pope et al., 2022; Schifter et al., 2019).

Apart from the fact that BSDs are disproportionately recommended for self-contained special education (Cartledge & Dukes, 2009; Ruppar et al., 2017) thereby depriving them of the same educational experience as their peers in general education classrooms, they are also likely to experience more serious school-based exclusionary discipline that may be laced with implicit bias for their skin color (Gage et al., 2019). These circumstances have raised concerns about systemic racism in our educational spaces

and educators' poor understanding of the unique needs of BSDs. In this paper, the authors first discuss racism in K-12 education, specifically targeting Black children, then review theoretical frameworks of critical race theory (CRT) and disability critical race theory (DisCrit) to understand how patterns of oppression uniquely intersect to target BSDs in schools, and finally, we discuss parental choice of schools along with universal design for learning (UDL).

Authors' Positionalities

Dr. Oshokoya is a Black woman with her doctorate in special education. She is currently working as a behavior health specialist towards her BCBA. Her research centers on Black girls with disabilities, compassionate care in Applied Behavior Analysis, and functional communication training to improve access across school and community environments. Dr. Green is a White, disabled woman with her doctorate in special education. She is currently an associate professor with research focusing on transitioning students to post-secondary environments and on special education law. Dr. Robinson is a Black woman with her doctorate in special education. She was a teacher and principal before becoming a clinical faculty member. Her research centers on community engagement, Black parents' school choice, and how teachers create inclusive classroom environments for diverse learners.

As authors of this work, we are committed to educational equity and justice for BSDs. We situate ourselves within the intersecting frameworks of CRT and DisCrit, not only as academic tools but as lenses shaped by our lived experiences and community commitments. Our lived experiences inform our understanding of the systemic barriers BSDs face in our educational spaces and societies, as well as the resilience and resistance they demonstrate. Although one or more of us identify as Black and/or as individuals with disabilities, we do not claim to speak for BSDs. Instead, we seek to create space for their voices, affirm their identities, and challenge the structure and systems that seek to silence or marginalize them. This work signals a strong assertion of self-representation, pushing back against the common practice of educators, administrators, professionals, and systems speaking on behalf of BSDs without hearing or involving them. Our work calls for educators and stakeholders to start creating spaces that are conducive enough to listen and learn from BSDs.

Institutionalized Racism and Education of Identity

Despite the importance of racial equity in our schools, racial discrimination has continually become the order of the day (Ezikwelu, 2020). This can manifest in the form of biased curriculum, where predominantly White historical figures, events, and perspectives are centered, while the contributions and histories of Black, Indigenous, and other marginalized groups may be glossed over, misrepresented, or completely ignored. In some cases, Black history is only emphasized during a specific month (like Black History Month) or is not adequately talked about at all.

Institutional racism has been described as the policies and practices rooted in deficit thinking, negative perceptions and attitudes, and structures that often lead to unequal treatment and outcomes for Black students based on their race and other intersectional identities such as ability and gender (Emdin, 2016; Murji, 2007). Additionally, institutional racism against BSDs in K–12 schools is rooted in practices such as racial segregation, disparities in discipline, funding inequities, and lack or misrepresentation of Black students in their curriculum and their teaching staff (Emdin, 2016; Ezikwelu, 2020).

Institutionalized racism operates in K–12 schools on a systemic level, and it is often also manifested through disparities in discipline against Black students. For example, Black students are disproportionately punished, suspended, or expelled compared to their White peers (Welsh & Little, 2018b). Although the issue of suspension disproportionality for students with disabilities has been debated (Morgan et al.,

2019), research continues to reveal that BSDs are more likely to experience exclusionary discipline in the form of harsh penalties and treatments for the same behaviors demonstrated by their White counterparts (Davidson et al., 2021; Holt et al., 2022). These disciplinary practices sometimes stem from teachers' implicit biases and their misconceptions of Black students' behaviors, leading to higher incarceration and dropout rates for Black students (Liu et al., 2023). This continues to explain how racism and disability may coalesce to affect the schooling experience of BSDs in our educational spaces.

Institutional racism continues to perpetuate residential racial segregation in schools (Howard, 2010). A U.S. Department of Education report from 2022–2023 indicates that out of approximately 100,000 public schools nationwide, about 83% of Black and 82% of Latino students attended schools where most students were non-White, whereas 75% of White students attended majority White schools (NCES, 2024). Although legal segregation ended officially with *Brown* v *Board of Education* (1954), many schools remain racially segregated (i.e., majority White, Black, and Latinx schools) leading to them being overcrowded and underfunded. For schools that serve mostly students from marginalized groups, this often creates a culture of poverty in schools, leading to students' limited access to high-quality resources and instruction, especially for BSDs who mostly attend low-wealth schools (Reardon et al., 2019). EdBuild (2019) revealed that despite serving the same number of students, non-White school districts, received $23 billion less than White school districts. Additionally, institutionalized racism has contributed to increased funding inequities between schools. For example, schools with a majority of Black students have access to fewer extracurricular opportunities, outdated educational resources and school supplies, and they lack access to the resources that would help them succeed (Reardon et al., 2019).

Biased curriculum, unequal disciplinary practices, and inequities in funding all affect the identities of Black students. It is important to note that the impact of institutional racism on students' sense of identity does not affect all Black students in the same way. The intersection of race and disability can create unique challenges for BSDs who are often overlooked in discussions that concern race and education. BSDs experience racialized and ableist discrimination (Annamma, 2013). As a result, BSDs may experience compounded issues of marginalization and stereotyping for their racial, disability, and other identities, which may further impact their schooling experience and identity development (Robinett, 2023).

Stereotypes of Black Students

Stereotypes are dangerous, generalized beliefs about BSDs that can impact their educational experience and may also influence how they are perceived by their peers, teachers, and society (Thoman et al., 2013). In addition to institutional racism mostly privileging Whiteness while subjecting Black students to lower expectations, harsh treatment, and biased experiences, stereotyping can limit the functioning of BSDs thereby negatively impacting their school experience (Smith, 2009). One of the pervasive stereotypes Black students mostly deal with at school is teachers' beliefs that they are less interested in education and are academically incapable of succeeding. These beliefs lead to teachers providing inadequate support for Black students' academic growth including fewer opportunities for advanced classes (Liu et al., 2023). Some of these beliefs stem from teachers' insufficient understanding of the cultural differences between themselves and their students, as well as potential stereotypes about Black students, which can hinder their ability to effectively address BSDs' needs (Gardner-Neblett et al., 2023). Oftentimes, Black children are viewed as more mature than they are, less innocent, and more capable of engaging in criminal acts when compared to their White peers (Goff et al., 2014). This perception may result in Black students being denied the benefit

of the same childhood innocence ascribed to their White peers.

Studies have also shown that Black students are viewed by their teachers as being likely to be unruly and to misbehave in class (Elder et al., 2021). Black students are also unfairly stereotyped as naturally being louder and angrier compared to their White peers to the extent that their voices are dismissed, not taken seriously, and misinterpreted as rude and non-compliant (Morris, 2007). Further, Emdin (2016) reported that pre-service teachers are being taught during their teacher education program to be extremely mindful of Black students because they are tough. Therefore, negative stereotypes are affirmed as teachers are indirectly trained to scrutinize and hyper-analyze Black students' emotions, behaviors, language, and dress. Again, it is important to note that despite the negative impact of these stereotypical beliefs against Black students, BSDs have far worse schooling experiences than their peers due to their disabilities. BSDs internalize negative stereotypes about their abilities and these inaccurate perceptions impact their sense of identity and belonging leading to internalized racism, lower self-esteem, and poor academic achievement (Goff et al., 2014; Smith,,2010). Equally important, educators overlook Black students' resilience and determination to succeed, leading to their disproportionate representation in special education (Morgan, 2020).

Overrepresentation and Misidentification of Black students in Special Education.

Disproportionality is a topic that has sparked debates about systemic inequities in diagnosis and identification biases in the U.S. educational system for many years (Morgan, 2020). Disproportionality is a pattern in the process of referral and identification, and leads to under- and over-representation of Black students in special education (Cruz & Rodl, 2018). Schifter et al. (2019) have shown that when compared to their White peers, Black students are more likely to be overrepresented for subjective disabilities (e.g., emotional behavior disabilities (EBD) and conduct disorder). These disabilities rely on educators' and professionals' judgment rather than objective assessments of students' needs (Goff et al., 2014), and have shown that Black students are frequently viewed through a lens of negativity and deficiency with behaviors like assertiveness and the outward expression of emotions often being misinterpreted as disruption or defiance (O'Brennan et al., 2014). These implicit biases that are projected onto Black students impact their learning and engagement in the classroom. This can result in an increased likelihood of Black students being disproportionately diagnosed with disabilities like attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and EBD. The intersection of race and disability may heighten the risk of Black students being disproportionately overrepresented in special education by their teachers (Skiba et al., 2002).

Most research in the area of disproportionality has focused more on statistics than the crux of the matter, which is the factors that may have contributed to it in the first place (Fish, 2019). These factors include biases in educational assessments, cultural bias, language barriers, and a lack of training on cultural responsiveness for educators and other education professionals. Biases in educational assessments may be contributing to disproportionality as reflected in the underrepresentation of Black students in gifted and talented programs and overrepresentation in special education (Murphy et al., 2024). K–12 schools are dominated by White teachers who may hold unconscious or implicit biases that affect how disabilities are identified in Black students (Emdin, 2016; Fish, 2019) and this may lead to misidentification, where behaviors are misunderstood in a cultural context, and then overrepresentation as student actions are labeled as disabilities. Linguistic and cultural differences between Black students and their teachers may result in the misidentification of Black students for disability categories such as learning disabilities and speech disorders (Morgan, 2021). The broad and vague criteria for these disabilities make them prone to misidentification. Although special education is

intended to offer appropriate support and accommodations for students with disabilities (Hanushek et al., 2002), the referral and identification process may exacerbate the stigmatization of Black students, who are already facing racial bias, by isolating them from their peers and subjecting them to lower teacher expectations while limiting their access to the general education curriculum (Morgan, 2020; Sullivan, 2011).

After Black students are identified for disability categories, they may be placed in resource rooms with lower expectations where they may receive inadequate or inappropriate support due to a lack of resources, cultural competence, or adequate attention specific to cater to their unique needs (Morgan, 2020; Schifter et al., 2019). This could lead to poor educational outcomes, reinforcing a cycle of disadvantage. Additionally, since educators are key in the identification and referral process for special education services, they may not always be fully aware of their own biases or consider how systemic inequities influence their perceptions of Black students. Teachers' heavy reliance on subjective assessments, such as observations of classroom behavior and checklists rather than empirical data (e.g., systematic approach to collecting data on a behavior (Jordan, 2016), when making referral decisions, may contribute to the overrepresentation of Black students in special education programs.

Established historical inequities in our educational spaces, which include racial segregation, lack of access to adequate educational resources, discriminatory policies and practices may continue to create a structural imbalance that may worsen the educational experiences of BSDs (Murphy et al., 2024). These systemic issues may lead to school administrators enacting policies, such as bans that challenge BSDs' identities and schooling experiences, resulting in greater scrutiny and pathologization of these students.

Policies challenging Black students' identities

Recently, bans in public school spaces have become a significant and controversial issue restricting BSDs' rights and abilities, thereby challenging their intersectional identities (Tabron & Ramlackhan, 2019). Even as the population in schools becomes more racially and linguistically diverse, some states in the U.S. are either proposing or have issued executive orders, passed laws, and/or enacted policies to ban books and curricula with contents that promote diversity and address topics related to race, ability, gender, sexual orientation, and other "sensitive" matters (Lopez et al., 2021). Bans on books covering certain curriculum content, along with restrictions on dress codes, language (such as slang), and specific religious practices, disproportionately target Black students with multiple identities. These bans increasingly reinforce or worsen institutional racism in our schools. The book ban policy raises pertinent questions about the balance between protecting BSDs and the persistence of systemic racism in educational spaces that should support their well-being and academic success, including freedom of expression.

More specifically, an increasing number of Republican party-led states have enacted not only book bans but also prohibitions on teaching CRT in K–12 schools, despite no evidence that it was ever part of the curriculum. This argument is based on an unsubstantiated claim that it fosters division among students by categorizing them by race as either oppressors or oppressed (Horne, 2022). While CRT is a legal theory mostly adopted in higher education discourse, it is rarely taught in K–12 schools (Koyama, 2024). States such as Florida, Texas, and Tennessee have been particularly prominent in leading the charge against CRT teachings and book bans in schools and libraries in states or districts across the nation. These states have contributed to the ongoing controversy by enacting laws and policies that make it easier to target books exploring themes of racism, gender identity, and historical

events that challenge the nation's mainstream narrative (Langrock et al., 2023). It is worth noting that instead of these book bans completely restricting discussions on these topics, they have increased attention and interest in the banned books. Some notable examples of banned books in these states include *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, *The Hate You Give* by Angie Thomas, and *Maus* by Art Spiegelman.

Furthermore, it is also important to set the record straight that labeling CRT as an anti-American and a divisive concept is incorrect (Lopez et al., 2021). These states argue that CRT creates feelings of guilt among White students, which could lead to resentment and reverse discrimination, meaning that White students might perceive themselves as being unfairly treated or disadvantaged in favor of racial minority groups (Lee & Kang, 2023). These are all distorted narratives of CRT. More accurately, CRT is a theoretical framework that examines how race and racism intersect and are embedded in U.S. institutions and systems (Crenshaw et al., 1995).

Above all, enacting restrictive policies and bans in K–12 schools is not only an attempt to politicize education but also serves to undermine analysis of the historical racial inequities that Black students continue to face in both schools and society, perpetuating institutional racism by effectively erasing their identities. These actions may further perpetuate a cycle of discrimination and suppress critical discussions about race and identity (Langrock et al., 2023), while also creating an environment where marginalized voices are silenced, making it harder to build an inclusive and equitable educational space. Finally, while attacks on CRT and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) have been increasing, many policymakers and legislators are deliberately substituting CRT for DEI to reframe and politicize equity-focused initiatives (Hernández, 2024). Research indicates that this shift is intentional and aimed at portraying inclusive policies such as DEI as controversial, divisive, or extreme (Shaw, 2025). While anti-DEI policies impact the larger Black student population, certain legislation will directly pose a threat to disabled students. The One Big Beautiful Bill Act (2025) introduced an option for school choice, incentivizing families to send their children to private schools through tax credits based on the median gross income of their location. While at a high level, allowing choice for school presents as an equal opportunity, it is not equitable, nor justice-centered. Most private schools still can choose who attends their school, which can disproportionately impact those from marginalized groups, such as BSDs.

Theoretical Frameworks to Promote Black Students' Identities

In a world where the needs of Black students and their families take a back seat while societal norms dominate the forefront of instruction planning, BSDs continue to navigate who they are and how to construct their identities in educational spaces that may lack rich opportunities for them. Therefore, understanding and supporting BSDs' identities in educational spaces requires frameworks that acknowledge the importance of race, culture, and the development of identity. These frameworks provide a deeper understanding of how Black students experience and navigate their identities in both school and society, while also advocating for the dismantling of educational practices that marginalize BSDs. To help create a more inclusive educational environment for BSDs where they feel seen and heard, the next section of this paper will focus on how the lenses of CRT and DisCrit help us to see and promote the identities of BSDs in schools.

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Given the pressing need to theorize race, CRT, originally a legal framework (Crenshaw et al., 1995) has expanded into education to explore the role of race and racism within systems and structures. It focuses on the intersections of race, power, and identity, and how these factors shape

the lived experiences of Black students in schools (Lynn & Parker, 2006). CRT allows for in-depth analyses of how systemic inequities in education and society disproportionately impact the schooling experiences of BSDs. Scholars of CRT argue that race is not defined by biological or innate differences but rather by historical processes and societal norms that are used to oppress and exploit BSDs who face more significant challenges in school (Morgan, 2020). CRT also emphasizes interest convergence (Bell, 1995), suggesting that advances for racial justice for BSDs in schools are only likely when they align with the interests of their White peers and teachers (Crowley, 2013).

Further, one of the core ideas of CRT is its emphasis on recognizing and validating Black students' identities (Delgado, 2002). It includes an understanding of how race intersects with other axes of identity, such as disability and gender, to explain specific forms of marginalization and discrimination for Black students. Educators and society have long used derogatory words like "at-risk," "problematic," and "disruptive" to stereotype and marginalize Black students in educational spaces (Marsh & Noguera, 2018). Now that those negative terms have become less socially acceptable, schools are increasingly using disability labels to continue marginalizing these students. Rather than serving as a tool for support, the disability label may be used to legitimize the unequal treatment and exclusion they experience. When layered with racial bias and systemic inequities, the disability label may shape how teachers and peers perceive their potential, often reinforcing low expectations and negatively impacting their sense of identity (Shifrer. 2013).

Applying the policies and practices informed by CRT can be instrumental in affirming the identities of BSDs, especially when it is used to challenge and dismantle the deficit-based narratives that are commonly used to define BSDs. Given that the principle of CRT acknowledges BSDs' resilience, utilizing CRT-informed policies and practices may help promote a more equitable and empowering educational experience for them. More specifically, CRT advocates for implementing inclusive curriculum and teaching practices that reflect the unique identities of BSDs while validating their identities and promoting their sense of belonging (Gay, 2002). Some specific CRT practices that can be implemented to promote BSDs' identities include ensuring that our schools' curricula are culturally relevant; thereby creating an environment where BSDs see their own culture and history reflected in what they learn, and in classroom activities which may help validate their identities (Paris & Alim, 2014). Expanding on this perspective, a CRT lens leads educators to embrace culturally responsive or sustaining pedagogies in their practice. These frameworks are not only consistent with CRT's focus on amplifying marginalized voices, but they also serve as practical tools for challenging deficit-based narratives while recognizing the experiences of BSDs.

Another CRT practice worthy of note is providing opportunities for BSDs to critically engage with issues of race, power, and systemic inequalities (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lynn & Parker, 2006). This can be done through class discussions, group assignments, and projects that encourage them to reflect on the dynamics of social justice and how they can advocate for themselves and their communities. Analysis using CRT may also lead to practices involving of building supportive spaces explicitly for BSDs to: find peer and mentor support; express themselves in conversations; and to participate in mentorship programs that foster positive relationships. BSDs can connect with their peers and teachers who understand and support their struggles (Thomas et al., 2008; Walker & Hutchison, 2021).

Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit)

DisCrit, also a theoretical framework, combines the principles of CRT with disability studies to understand how systems of power, privilege, and oppression, particularly racism and ableism, coalesce to exacerbate the marginalization of BSDs (Annamma et al., 2013). DisCrit focuses on

expanding the single analytical view of students to include their multiple identities and the need to examine the effects of the overlapping and interconnected nature of race, disability, and other social identities on the lived experiences of BSDs (Annamma, 2018b). Viewing the identities of BSDs through the lens of DisCrit involves understanding the intersectionality of race and disability thereby recognizing the unique challenges BSDs face in and out of educational spaces (Gill & Erevelles, 2017). It starts with acknowledging that BSDs' experiences cannot be fully understood by isolating either race or disability or any other identities they may have; identities must be examined in tandem to gain a deeper understanding of students' strengths and struggles (Erevelles & Minear, 2010; Young et al., 2017).

To ensure that both racial and disability identities and the intersection between the two are acknowledged and respected, DisCrit calls for the dismantling of both racism and ableism by advocating for policies and practices in schools that affirm the identities of BSDs (Connor et al., 2016). Therefore, affirming Blackness and disability for BSDs means recognizing disability not as a deficit, it should be viewed as an important part of who they are (Baffoe, 2020). This recognition may help counter the stereotypes and stigmas that maintain the inequities BSDs face, while promoting self-pride in BSDs' identities, making them feel heard, acknowledged, empowered, and valued.

Finally, DisCrit emphasizes that affirming identities for BSDs requires rejecting the idea that disability is a problem and challenging the systems that uphold Whiteness in school, forcing BSDs to conform to the standards of normalcy set by Whiteness and ableism within our educational spaces. Shifting the focus from the normative standards set by White and able-bodied individuals to creating policies and practices that seek to promote the unique identities of BSDs may open the door for more equitable schooling experiences for BSDs. Examples of these policies and practices could include celebrating Black history and achievements within the context of disability, using culturally responsive teaching methods, and providing accessible accommodations that honor the unique needs of BSDs. It might also involve public school boards intentionally working towards inclusivity by not only recruiting "people of color" for committees but also offering staff training on cultural competency. For instance, in 2021, Chicago public schools published an official statement on their website titled "Say Their Names," with the goal of equipping staff with the tools needed to engage in meaningful conversations about race and racism in their classrooms. The statement highlights the importance of expanding the staff's view of intersectionality by providing them with the resources they need to support students who are disproportionately marginalized due to their multiple identities.

Framework to Promote Access

Understanding the needs of our Black students with and without disabilities is crucial for their academic successes. There are specific frameworks that remove barriers experienced by Black students and to increase motivation and access to content within school settings (e.g., content or career coursework). Ensuring that educators pay attention to potential barriers that students face (e.g., personal biases, misunderstandings of cultural needs, impact of disabilities) can positively influence how BSDs engage in the classroom (Gordon, ed., ed., 2024). Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and parental perceptions of education can impact school choice and access for BSDs. It is important to understand how UDL and parent voice can bring in DisCrit and CRT pedagogy in a way to support students' cultures and learning needs while developing and empowering all identities of the learners.

Universal Design for Learning. UDL is a scientific framework that removes barriers to improve access in the educational setting (CAST, 2024; Gordon, 2024). Some barriers that may emerge in the classroom are anxieties related to presentations, inability to organize long papers,

text anxiety, or lack of interest working alone (Kieran & Anderson, 2019). Three underlying principles guide UDL and tie to brain networks (i.e., affective, strategic, and recognition). To effectively implement UDL and provide meaningful opportunities within the classroom, the teacher must put in an intentional effort to build community and demonstrate that students' input is not only valuable, but heavily important in the learning process (Kieran & Anderson, 2019). This scientific approach allows educators to remove environmental and content obstacles , and requires teacher to align assessments to provide multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression.

Multiple Means of Engagement. Multiple means of engagement addresses the affective network, targeting the limbic system or the emotional home of the brain. The affective system motivates students during learning and requires teachers to understand the "why" of learning. Motivation, or the why of learning, is influenced by many factors, including but not limited to content reading, time of day, mastery of background or prior knowledge, socioeconomic status, and cultural expectations of student responsibility (Gordon, ed., ed., 2024). This brain network requires teachers to understand what motivates learners and to provide opportunities for students to engage in multiple learning pathways while understanding how to self-regulate their behaviors relating to content and classroom requirements.

A meaningful way for teachers to provide engagement with the curriculum is to allow students to share personal stories as they relate to the content and provide feedback in a way that is meaningful to the students. BSDs need to be able to show emotional engagement around their multiple identities and learning needs, while also being provided the opportunity to safely show their vulnerability in the classroom context. Providing BSDs with topics that they can see themselves in that also relate to the content and skill being developed, promotes engagement (Oshokoya, 2023). For example, black girls with reading difficulties who read passages where they had similar characteristics of the main character (e.g., hijab, hair, or skin color) improved oral reading fluency and comprehension (Oshokoya, 2023).

Multiple Means of Representation. Multiple means of representation, or the "what" of learning, require educators to consider all the pathways to demonstrate the material to the learners (e.g., in a graph, text, or picture). This principle of UDL uses the recognition network, including the occipital lobe, which supports visual recognition, and the neocortex, a section of the brain close to the occipital lobe that assists in pattern recognition (Gordon, ed., ed., 2024). Providing choice to access materials is essential to multiple means of representation. When considering this network, we must acknowledge the role of cultural representation in helping students understand content and transfer pattern recognition skills across different classes. For example, teachers using an online text that allows students to read the text to them and define difficult words supports the representation of learning. This can assist students who may have reading difficulties or pronunciation issues. Still, if the teacher has students unfamiliar with the topic, the representation becomes an added barrier.

Taking time to understand the needs of the students in the classroom, such as preference to group discussion or time to brainstorm ideas prior to completing a classroom prompt, can allow students to identify how they understand their abilities as it relates to the curriculum. Therefore, it is on the teacher to ensure that background knowledge is done to master the skill. To promote representation in a meaningful way for BSD, would be allowing students to discuss identities and valuing diversity, beyond asking culture and skin color. It requires the teacher to understand who BSDs value in their daily lives and how educators can create opportunities to bring those who influence BSD to represent the content being discussed in class. Like multiple means of engagement, representation requires the teacher to understand background needs, interests, and preferences to

support learning and mastery. This requires teachers to understand how different disabilities impact their Black students, while also understanding how their interests and strengths can be utilized to develop self-confidence and regulation within the classroom. This cannot be done unless the educator intentionally builds relationships with BSDs and understands their fears and needs in their classroom.

Multiple Means of Action. Multiple means of action and expression guide teachers to understand and be cognizant of barriers associated with the "how" of learning. This principle, linked to the strategic network, relies heavily on the student's executive control and cyclical communication between the parietal lobes (language), motor cortex (movement), and prefrontal cortex (executive functions) (CAST, 2018; Gordon, ed., ed., 2024). The prefrontal cortex is a part of the brain essential to learning. It is home to a series of skills that allow a person to engage in goal-orientated behaviors including but not limited to sequencing, scheduling, time management, self-regulation, working memory, and emotional regulation (Gordon, ed., ed., 2024). The strategic network is critical in engaging students in action and demonstrating content mastery. Engaging the strategic network requires educators to ensure students can learn how to create goals related to content and assignments, design and execute a plan, assess how they are achieving benchmarks within the plan, and make corrections before submitting the assignment.

One way that teachers can provide this opportunity is having classroom activities to be student-led and use points that the students discuss or are interested in to guide connections between the BSDs and the content. Further, teachers must pay attention if BSDs do not enjoy multiple choice exams and would rather create a podcast. Educators must be open for feedback if their prompts are not clear to the audience due to language that may not be normal in different generations (Gordon, ed., ed., 2024). Effectively meeting the principle of action and expression requires educators to identify the content standard and demonstrate mastery in a manner that allows students to show achievement of goals and creativity through pictures, drawings, drama, podcasts, videos, or papers. Teachers must spend time understanding the needs and interests of their students and how these can assist students in acquiring content and make connections to real-world activities (Kieran & Anderson, 2019).

The goal of UDL is to support mastery and demonstration of learning in the educational context, not only to understand and produce memorization of content to meet standards. The UDL framework, focusing on the brain networks and principles, relies on the teacher's willingness to engage with their classroom beyond the content (CAST, 2018). UDL relies heavily on classroom management, and educators need to take time to build relationships to understand environmental and content barriers (Kieran & Anderson, 2019). They also need to understand the variability of identities within the classroom context to allow students to engage with content beyond a binary approach of Black and White or disabled or not disabled. UDL will enable educators to understand that students' rapport with learning is crucial to mastery of content. Therefore, educators are required to not only know the needs of the students but also intentionally identify interests that engage learners in dynamic, active ways. This can improve attendance and parental awareness of how schools support the needs and multiple identities of BSDs.

School Choice, Access to Schools, and Students' Identities. All students have a right to an equal education, and all students deserve an education that effectively prepares them for their chosen post-secondary career, college, and community pathways. However, access to this type of learning experience has been and continues to be a privilege afforded only to some. Long-standing gaps in outcome measures such as high school graduation rates, college attendance, and standardized assessments can be observed between students with and without disabilities and also between races (NCES, 2024). In addition, Black students are more likely to be taught by novice or uncertified teachers (Cardichon et al., 2020) and less likely to have access to advanced coursework (Chatterji et al., 2021). Millions of students across the country attend schools equipped with law enforcement officers but are without key personnel like school counselors, social workers, and/or nurses (Whitaker et al., 2019).

As previously addressed, DisCrit as a theory allows for the interrogation of how race, racism, disability, and ableism affect students' educational outcomes and identity development. Students who do not possess the properties of whiteness and ability — students deemed raced and disabled by dominant society — were systematically excluded from public schooling in the United States from its very outset (George, 2019). Now, in spite of past federal policies promoting integration and inclusion, these students typically still learn, play, and grow in schools that were not designed for them and where White normative and ableist ideologies persist (Kearl, 2019).

School choice, defined here as a parent or guardian's opportunity to choose the school their child attends, is presented by some as a means of advancing equity in our schools; structures and policies facilitating choice for families have been established in nearly every state (Cardine, 2019). Depending on where one resides, families may elect to send their child to the neighborhood school, a charter or magnet school, cyber or private school, educate their child at home, or move to a more preferred district. They may do so using school vouchers, tax-credit education savings accounts, tax deductions, and so on (Abdulkadiroğlu & Andersson, 2023). The act of choosing a school can be oversimplified. Parents are thought to evaluate schools as they would any other good – as consumers who weigh schools' benefits and drawbacks and then proceed with selecting the one that best meets their needs (Chapman & Donnor, 2015). Research has shown, however, that the school choice process does not often follow a rational or predictable pattern. It is commonly intertwined with the constructs of race, class, and ability (Ellison & Aloe, 2017; Mavrogordato & Stein, 2016; Waitoller & Lubienski, 2019). For members of communities who have historically been disenfranchised by schools, namely students with disabilities and students of color, the school selection process is far from straightforward.

In regard to students with disabilities, the initial challenge becomes finding a school that provides evidence-based instruction *and* sound implementation of special education services. For caregivers of BSDs who are also seeking a school that affirms their child's multifaceted identities, thereby promoting a sense of self-efficacy and emotional safety, the school choice decision-making process can be even more difficult. Traditional classroom approaches tend to focus on what appears to be shortcomings in students with teachers designing lessons with the intent to close gaps in performance. Planning starts by thinking about what students cannot do. In taking this approach, teachers run the risk of devaluing the cultural academic capital students bring to the table.

Research on the school choice decision-making process as it relates to parents of BSDs is limited. However, studies conducted with the intent to hear from this subset of parents found that factors such as location, school and neighborhood safety, implementation of special education services, and educational placement decisions were influential in the selection process (Waitoller & Lubienski, 2019). Parents were

interested in instructional supports like co-teaching and access to individualized attention; they inquired about a school's philosophy on inclusion. Parents of BSDs were concerned with access to an academically challenging program and rates of academic growth. Additionally, in the school choice process, they had to attend to matters other parent groups do not — protecting their child from racist attitudes of staff and seeking a curriculum that adequately and appropriately represents both race and disability (Robinson, 2021).

While a high-quality educational experience, appropriate special education services, and an environment that demonstrates genuine love and appreciation for children is not too much to ask for, but parents of BSDs are made to feel just that way (Robinson, 2021; Waitoller & Super, 2017). Instead of having the freedom to choose wholly what is best for one's child from an empowered position, too often parents of BSDs must engage in the "politics of desperation" (Waitoller & Super, 2017), forced to choose one necessary facet over another. Creating the kind of learning spaces parents of BSDs desire and that BSDs deserve would require at minimum ongoing and intentional examination at the individual and systemic levels and a commitment to relational and pedagogical practices that center the experiences, cultures, identities, and giftedness of students.

Implications for Educators

The value of CRT and DisCrit in pedagogy requires educators to take an active role in interrogating their own implicit bias towards others and understand the cultural needs present in their classrooms. Understanding the needs of BSDs and how CRT and DisCrit-informed policies and practices can support learning and improve perceived safety has the potential to lead to meaningful changes in the practice of K -12 practitioners and teacher educators.

Valuing Identities as a Pathway to Learning

The identities of students are essential in creating an inclusive learning environment. Vygotsky (1979) discussed the development of higher-order thinking through use of tools and environmental cues. Valuing culture, religion, and disability and aligning these identities with text creates multiple opportunities for students to engage with the content, recognize patterns and cues to ensure context is applied to the material for higher-order thinking, and have an environment that encourages students to apply strategies to other texts or coursework. For example, texts that center on multiple identities can increase motivation and create opportunities for students to learn and master skills which they can then employ to other texts that may seem less engaging or dynamic.

BSDs are overlooked in the K-12 school system. They have unique needs and skills that are not recognized or valued due to misunderstandings of CRT, anti-racist teaching, or parental and political opinions on school content. Therefore, it is imperative that educators begin to recognize that Black students experience higher rates of correction, punishment, and other disciplinary actions. Once educators understand the overrepresentation of Black students in negative disciplinary actions, they must identify and reflect on how they consciously or subconsciously designed a classroom and rules that perpetuate these rates (Kieran & Anderson, 2019). To promote BSDs safety in schools, teachers must first understand how their beliefs are upheld by white supremist views that may unknowingly suppress BSDs' self-worth and strengths. Educators must recognize BSDs' value on their multiple identities and how the schools hinder or support their needs.

Engagement with Education

Educators also need to understand how their learners, specifically marginalized groups like BSDs, prefer to engage with the curriculum and feel safe and understood in the school

environment. This awareness requires teachers to understand familial influences towards education, create a dynamic curriculum, and identify that their pedagogy upholds White supremacist pedagogy. Centering the content and classroom management in UDL, ensures that the educator is valuing students multiple identities and potential needs that relate to learning. Also, by allowing BSD to communicate with their teachers about important historical readings, persons, or holidays that relate to their multiple identities are simple ways educators can protect BSDs protect rapport with learning (Gordon, ed., ed., 2024). As mentioned above, simply allowing students to discuss who is important to them and allow BSDs' input on lesson design can improve their engagement and performance in the classroom (CAST, 2018).

Family Influences. Parental choice is essential to the educational process. Families are paying attention to the graduation rates of students, specifically students of color, the enrollment in post-secondary activities, and employment opportunities provided by schools. This requires educators to be cognizant of students' interests and how strengths and preferences can lead to university or career opportunities. Educators do not have the luxury of overlooking what motivates students and their interests and hobbies, as students' interests and hobbies are factors that engage students in the classroom. Through UDL, educators can evaluate barriers that influence students' and families' choices of schools, embed opportunities for students to begin to "see" themselves in future employment prospects, and identify the educational pathway to achieve successful employment through representation in the curriculum.

Educators must also pay attention to the cultural and religious influences on students' identities and how representation can improve learning. Currently, there is an effort to diminish the representation of student identities in students across the U.S. Removing diverse learning opportunities can have a negative impact on motivation and learning. For example, when BSDs were given texts to read where the lead character was Black and had multiple identities (e.g., disabled or Muslim), the BSDs not only improved in their oral reading fluency (ORF) but demonstrated better comprehension with texts that included cultural and multiple identities representations compared to their reading comprehension of the non-culturally responsive texts (Oshokoya, 2023). While their learning improved, BSDs reported that they not only enjoyed reading books highlighting them and valuing their multiple identities, they requested more books like the ones in the study (Oshokoya, 2023).

Educators Responsibilities. UDL requires teachers to identify barriers that emerge in their classroom prior to designing the curriculum, this includes, as stated before, how the educators subconsciously create barriers for students (e.g., lack of effort to understand different cultures or refusal to teach beyond simply lecturing to students). One barrier that can emerge relates to the texts chosen for a course or class. For example, some texts may be viewed as classics, but "classics" may not engage all learners or may not allow BSDs to see themselves in the texts. Cognizant of the content standards and assessments, teachers can provide students with recommended books that align with the content and overarching goal of the unit. Finally, educators can allow BSDs and their peers to create final assessments that allow them to utilize creativity and strengths to show mastery of content. Further, teachers must consider and constantly evaluate how UDL can assist in creating a space where BSDs' identities are acknowledged and supported throughout the learning process.

DisCrit. BSDs are uniquely positioned to benefit from CRT and DisCrit when the educator understands their role in empowering students. Many educators currently view inclusion settings as students being either disabled or non-disability, White or a person of color. Being a member of a marginalized community should not require an individual to be limited to binary codes (i.e., 0- non-disabled and 1- disabled). Teachers can begin to make an effort to allow

students to explore their multiple identities and the impact of different environments on their identities, especially those pertaining to the perceived abilities of people with disabilities. This can be done through direct instruction or reflection, such as journaling and responding to prompts. The teacher must understand the barriers students face from the intersection of race, ethnicity, culture, and disability. Using DisCrit as a conceptual framework can provide guidance as educators intentionally create safe classroom environment that removes barriers through the use of UDL and promotes the value of multiple identities, specifically with BSDs.

Conclusion

BSDs are an overlooked population in K-12, and there should be a call to action for educators to begin to create spaces that value and empower the multiple identities BSDs bring to classrooms. While UDL is one way to remove barriers experienced by BSDs, it cannot be the only way to support BSDs. Educators in K-12 and higher education must begin to be cognizant of anti-racist policies and practices, and implement them in their classrooms. Further, they must do explore materials in a way that engage students, protect students' rapport with learning, continue to encourage motivation and representation in their classroom. Educators acknowledge, especially post-COVID, that student behaviors are disrupting classrooms. Now more than ever, teachers should consider how potential biases can be projected on BSDs and impact their access to the general education curriculum. A good education indicates adult success, and educators must begin to implement content aligned with the curriculum, provide an accurate and meaningful representation of BSDs, and remind them that they, too, can achieve their dreams.

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From Preparation to Practice: A Strengths-based Approach to Building Identity-Affirming Learning Environments in Teacher Preparation

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As faculty in a teacher preparation program, we are committed to recruiting and retaining a diverse pool of teacher candidates who aim to respect and value all students in their future classrooms. We create identity-affirming learning environments in each course through reflective teaching practices, community-building activities, and a cohort model that fosters meaningful, respectful professional relationships. However, as teacher candidates transition to their full-time internship experiences, creating and maintaining identity-affirming learning environments becomes more challenging as our program faculty does not control the elementary school environment. Though the university supervisor visits the classroom frequently, the school administrators and mentor teachers are the key factors in creating the learning environment. As such, mentorship practices involving mostly experienced white female teachers present significant challenges for our diverse student intern population. Due to the evaluative nature of internships, candidates may need to assimilate to classroom norms and practices to pass the internship, rather than the internship model being an affirming and transformative experience for all stakeholders (Rabin, 2020). The power dynamics in these relationships can be restrictive, not allowing interns to express themselves freely, and therefore devaluing their identity. It is imperative to incorporate models that will help foster identity affirmation for both teacher candidates and their students (Rabin, 2020). Program faculty can support the development of identity-affirming environments by equipping interns and mentor teachers with strategies to help teacher candidates value their own voices and identities, including the use of co-teaching internship models (Rabin, 2020).

In this article, we first discuss identity-affirming environments and how we can best support teacher candidates in embracing their authentic selves. We will discuss strategies program faculty use to develop these environments. We will then explore how university supervisors can empower our teacher candidates and mentors to foster identity-affirming environments throughout the internship experience. In applying these models, program faculty and supervisors can better prepare teacher candidates to challenge the norms in many of our partner schools, particularly those that may marginalize certain student groups. By supporting our diverse teacher candidates in embracing their

authentic selves, we can help foster a diverse field of future educators.

Strengths-Based Practices and the Science of Learning and Development (SoLD)

The Science of Learning and Development (SoLD) emphasizes the importance of context, relationships, and identity in shaping how students learn and thrive (Science of Learning and Development Alliance, 2020). A foundational understanding of SoLD is that all students possess assets that can be nurtured through developmentally and culturally responsive environments. Using an asset or strengths-based approach with teacher candidates not only helps them thrive but also serves as a model for how best to approach teaching and learning in their own future classrooms (Science of Learning and Development Alliance, 2020).

Recent research by Anderson, Or, & Maguire (2024) supports this claim by demonstrating that when college instructors intentionally implement strengths-based teaching practices, such as recognizing individual capabilities, providing personalized feedback, and cultivating positive relationships, students experience significantly higher levels of self-efficacy. Specifically, the study found moderate positive correlations between students' perceptions of strengths-based instruction and their general self-efficacy, strengths self-efficacy, and academic self-efficacy.

In teacher preparation programs, explicitly training future educators to notice and name students' assets not only shifts their instructional mindset but also fosters classrooms where students are empowered to affirm their own authentic identities. By embedding asset-based pedagogy into coursework, field experiences, and reflective practice, our program aims to support the identities of our teacher candidates as well as their future students.

Teacher Identity

To develop strong, resilient future teachers, staff in teacher preparation programs must help teacher candidates develop and affirm their personal and professional identities. This identity development and affirmation contributes to individuals learning to value their authentic selves and show up this way in a variety of contexts. Flores and Day (2006) define teacher identity as an "ongoing and dynamic process which entails the making sense and (re)interpretation of one's own experiences" (p. 220). Identity is formed by personal, professional, and contextual interaction (Flores & Day, 2006). Candidates in teacher preparation programs bring various personal experiences from their schooling and beyond, which help form their identity. With so much influence over the development of teachers' identities, staff in teacher preparation programs must understand and embed practices to develop and affirm teacher candidate identities.

One way to think about developing and affirming teacher candidates' identities is to consider Zimmerman's (2018) three-part approach to understanding virtue. The ability to name and live out one's virtues, or morality at their core, contributes to an affirmed identity (Zimmerman, 2018). Zimmerman (2018) explains that many educational researchers in the past and present believe in the importance of developing "virtuous teachers", though how this virtue is developed and sustained is debated. As Zimmerman (2018) explains, teaching is more than a technical craft, it is also a set of dispositions held by teachers that are modeled each day. In addition to delivering academic content effectively to students, teachers also need to model dispositions such as respect and compassion. Under this understanding, teacher preparation programs must help develop and foster individual and collective dispositions/virtues of future teachers.

Virtuous teaching is either a function of the teacher, a function of the profession, a function of the situation, or possibly a combination of these (Zimmerman, 2018, p. 99). In a teacher

preparation program that believes virtue is a function of the teacher, program faculty would find ways to focus on teacher candidates' strengths and how these can be incorporated into their future lives as teachers (Zimmerman, 2018). In a teacher preparation program in which faculty believe virtue is developed as a function of the profession, faculty would work to mold teacher candidates to align with a central set of virtues or dispositions that they think are needed to succeed in the field of education. Finally, the program faculty who believe virtuous teachers are created as a function of the situation understand that teacher candidates may function or act in one way within our classrooms, differently when they enter internships, and differently when they have their own classrooms someday. We believe virtuous teachers are created as a function of each of these: the teacher, the profession, and the situation, and therefore, we must support individual student identity formation in a variety of ways and contexts.

We firmly believe that teacher preparation programs play a critical role in helping teacher candidates explore and strengthen their developing professional identities, empowering them to be their authentic selves across multiple contexts. Grounded in the principles of the Science of Learning and Development (SoLD) Alliance, which emphasize the importance of identity, relationships, and context in human development (Science of Learning and Development Alliance, 2020), our Early Childhood–Special Education (ECSE) Program takes a strengths-based approach to creating identity-affirming environments. We also recognize that fostering teacher candidates' identities must be intentionally supported across various settings, including university classrooms and internships in partner schools.

Identity-Affirming Practices in Courses

In each course, we strive to create identity-affirming learning environments. We achieve this through reflective teaching practices, community-building activities, and a cohort model that fosters meaningful, respectful professional relationships. One of the key practices, as previously described, is a strengths-based approach, which focuses on identifying and nurturing each teacher candidate's unique strengths and talents. This approach aligns with the concept that virtuous teachers are formed by the function of the teacher themselves (Zimmerman, 2018). By helping our teacher candidates identify and utilize their strengths, we can help them become strong teachers who are affirmed in their unique identities.

The cultural backgrounds of teacher candidates significantly contribute to their developing identities (Gordon & Espinoza, 2020). Aligned with the principles of the Science of Learning and Development (SoLD), faculty in our program engage in intentional, relational practices that affirm candidates' identities and foster a sense of belonging (Science of Learning and Development Alliance, 2020). These practices help candidates feel recognized and supported, preparing them to model identity-affirming approaches in their future classrooms. A strengths-based framework further supports this work by encouraging teacher candidates to reflect on their lived experiences and understand how these shape their cultural and professional identities.

Further, affirming the identities of diverse teacher candidates also includes supporting them in developing, sharing, and working toward their educational goals. Many goals shared by our teacher candidates in the program revolve around improving the lives of students with disabilities and students of color. Many of our teacher candidates can identify a specific experience, such as one involving a family member or working with children in a camp or daycare setting, that inspired them to become a teacher. In a strengths-based approach, helping teacher candidates understand how their own diversity can help them support their future students with similar backgrounds/experiences can be immensely beneficial. For example, we have some teacher candidates who come from a bilingual, bicultural background. In a strengths-

based approach, we encourage these candidates to recognize that their own experiences navigating two languages and cultures are assets rather than deficits. We encourage them to consider how they can incorporate their knowledge and experiences to foster connections with students in their classrooms and develop more inclusive environments. We aim to maintain a strengths-based approach throughout coursework and as teacher candidates transition into internships.

Cohort Model to Foster Community

The use of a cohort model supports our belief that a teacher's virtue is a function of themselves and the profession. This cohort model is a cornerstone in fostering an identity-affirming learning environment. It is critical that students in teacher preparation programs learn to care for one another and develop professional relationships so that they have these skills when they transition to the field (Rabin, 2020). Developing skills to form caring relationships that lead to effective collaboration is a strength of our program, fostered by using a cohort model (Lillo, 2018; Kruse et al., 2021). Each year, one to two cohorts, comprised of typically 15-20 teacher candidates, are admitted to our Early Childhood-Special Education (ECSE) undergraduate program. These teacher candidates admitted to our cohorts are diverse in race, ethnicity, and background experiences, which have led them to the field of education. We also admit several students in each cohort with documented disabilities, and they receive support throughout the program. Before the first semester of courses begins, our ECSE faculty conducts an orientation that outlines program expectations and allows teacher candidates to meet and come together, giving candidates the opportunity to begin forming relationships with their peers, even before the start of their first class. During this initial meeting, students share about their backgrounds and what led them to pursue a degree in Early Childhood-Special Education (ECSE). This shared, common goal of becoming ECSE teachers serves as a foundation for the connections formed among cohort members, who remain together across all of their courses in the two-year ECSE program.

We intentionally embed community-building activities into courses to foster community among ECSE teacher candidates and to model how to build communities in their own future classrooms. Creating positive classroom communities is essential in helping students learn to value their unique identities and those of their peers (Gibbs, 2006).

For example, in multiple ECSE courses, teacher candidates self-select into classroom "jobs," including job descriptions they are responsible for throughout the course and each class session. Participation in class jobs models the importance of class jobs. Students *experience* the purpose of class jobs and how class jobs can support the development of core social and emotional learning competencies (CASEL, 2024) in young children. Thus, having class jobs themselves provides teacher candidates with experience and the motivation to engage in proactive classroom practice as teachers. This practice also supports overall community building for our teacher candidates; they are accountable and responsible together for performing class jobs across the semester, which helps support classroom routines and running the course smoothly as we all engage and share in this "work".

In our *Primary curriculum and instruction in the inclusive classroom* course, instructors model 15–20-minute community-building activities at the start of each class session. Gibbs (2006) provides numerous one-page community-building activities we utilize in this course. These include activities during which teacher candidates find things they have in common, work together on a fun challenge, brainstorm realistic classroom problems and how to approach them and share personal goals and dreams (Gibbs, 2006). After a few activities have been modeled, teacher candidates work in groups to implement community-building activities each week. They can use a community-building activity that

they find or create their own. Our teacher candidates are also encouraged to utilize these community-building activities in their internship placements. ECSE candidates frequently provide positive feedback about these activities and how they have positively impacted the feeling of connectedness in their cohort community. These types of activities help teacher candidates learn more about one another, as well as help them see and value the unique strengths of their peers.

Reflective Practices

Throughout the first semester, teacher candidates form relationships with each other and the program faculty. In a first-semester course, *Social Competence in Early Education*, teacher candidates explore their own personal biases under the guidance of our experienced faculty. The course begins with an "inventory of self", asking candidates to reflect on their prior family, community, and school experiences. Candidates make connections to how their experiences and bias may potentially impact their identity as a future teacher or "show up" in their future classroom; then, across the course and through additional reflective in-class activities, candidates build on this self-awareness and work intentionally towards becoming more culturally competent. Teacher candidates in this class also engage in a number of self-reflection activities involving transcript and video analysis of their interactions with students, analyzing the verbal and non-verbal language they use while working with young children with and without disabilities. After engaging in this in-depth analysis, candidates set and adjust goals to work on in future field placements and internships.

In other methods courses across our ECSE program, teacher candidates engage in a number of reflective, practice-based activities. Practice-based teaching focuses on equitable educator practices and instructional activities essential to classroom teaching and student learning (Grossman et al., 2009). Practice-based pedagogies have been utilized in our program coursework to provide hands-on opportunities for our teacher candidates to learn, explore, apply, and reflect on their teaching skills. Research in teacher education supports the importance of using practice-based pedagogies to provide preservice teacher candidates with "experiences of teaching" (Berry & Loughran, 2002, p.15) to provide more meaningful preparation, and more explicitly link university and field experiences (Ball & Forzani, 2009; Lampert et al., 2013; Kavanagh et al., 2020). Our teacher candidates prepare through short in-class rehearsals, then enact, and reflect on video recordings of their own micro-teaching activities across multiple courses. Candidates receive feedback from peers and instructors and self-reflect on their specific individual strengths and skills they will work on in future practice-based activities. Engaging our teacher candidates in this reflective cycle provides additional opportunities for practice and reflection before entering their internships. We can work on intentionally identifying their strengths and areas for growth as future educators.

As program faculty, we work hard to develop and affirm students' identities within their coursework. However, it's essential to acknowledge that a substantial portion of their professional and personal identity is not only influenced but also truly shaped during their internship under the guidance of their mentor teacher. The internship experience, where teacher candidates spend approximately 180 days in a school setting throughout the program, has a profound impact on our teacher candidates, transforming them both professionally and personally.

Identity-Affirming Practices in Internship

Though the population of teacher candidates admitted to our program is increasingly diverse, the pool of mentor teachers we work with is predominantly white and female. The traditional internship model itself creates a power dynamic that can be difficult for students to navigate (Rabin, 2020). The teacher candidate is expected to meet the expectations of the university

supervisor and the school-based mentor teacher to pass the internship course. Not passing can negatively impact the future career of the intern and often carries a financial burden to repeat the internship. Interns are often scared to raise concerns with their mentor, fearing that it will be perceived as unprofessional or overstepping. These concerns can range from areas of best teaching practices, interactions with students, interactions with other staff members, or feedback from the mentor or supervisor. Though we spend two years as a program helping students affirm their personal and professional teaching identity, it can be quickly dismantled as the context shifts from college classroom to internship school site. Beyond affirming the identity of our teacher candidates, we hope they will also learn practices to affirm the students' identities in their future classrooms.

Gordon and Espinoza (2020) explain that internship experiences can be used as an effective method for promoting culturally responsive teaching and learning. In order to do this, there must be mutual trust and collaboration between those involved in the internship experience (Gordon & Espinoza, 2020). A strength of our internship model is that it focuses on mentor-teacher and teacher-candidate co-teaching practices during early internships (Rabin, 2020). Our program supervisors also use a strengths-based, proactive approach and clear communication to foster identity-affirming environments in internship settings. We also work to strengthen their sense of agency as future teachers by helping them learn to advocate for themselves in various situations in the internship context.

Strengths-Based Approach in the Internship

As in our coursework, our program faculty also aims to use a strengths-based approach as they help teacher candidates navigate internship experiences, including relationships with mentor teachers. A strengths-based approach can help teacher candidates understand how their individual strengths can be incorporated into their work as teachers (Zimmerman, 2018). Our supervisors are very involved in the internship experience, communicating early and often with both the mentor and the teacher candidate. An initial meeting is set to help forge the relationship and discuss expectations for the internship. At the meeting, teacher candidates share areas where they feel they excel and areas where they think they need the most guidance and support. Having the teacher candidate share in this capacity, with the mentor and supervisor present, positions the teacher candidate from the start in an experience is strengths-based and values growth mindset. Candidates with documented disabilities and internship accommodations are encouraged to communicate their needs with their mentor teacher during this meeting. While disclosure is never required, we hold one-on-one conversations with the candidate, supervisor, and, when appropriate, the student's advisor, to emphasize the value of open communication in ensuring they receive appropriate support throughout the internship experience. We also have a strong relationship and work collaboratively with our Accessibility and Disability Services (ADS) office to support students with communicating their needs if necessary.

Before teacher candidates independently teach in their internship, we use a co-teaching model, which supports a strengths-based approach in an internship, as candidates can utilize their strengths while learning alongside their mentor teacher. A co-teaching internship model supports the affirmation of teacher candidate identities, as well as the identities of students in their internship classroom (State Education Resource Center [SERC], 2004). In each field placement and internship experience, we require co-teaching between the mentor teacher and teacher candidate. The State Education Resource Center (2004) outlines six primary co-teaching models, which we teach candidates about in a methods course and provide a co-teaching resource for mentors as well. As Rabin (2020) found, using co-teaching models

helps mentors and candidates learn to balance the power dynamics in the internship experience because they depend on each other for the success of their students. Mentors note appreciation for new ideas from their paired teacher candidates (Rabin, 2020). This affirmation of ideas and perspectives can help candidates feel affirmed in their teacher identity.

As students transition away from a co-teaching model to a more independent teaching role towards the end of their final internship experience, we still require active involvement from our mentor teachers and supervisors. All mentor teachers attend a mandatory internship training, where we discuss program information and provide resources for how to support our candidates, including how to provide feedback and foster growth. We require mentor teachers to provide weekly feedback for the teacher candidate, encouraging a "glows and grows" framework. This framework involves the mentor sharing what went well throughout the week (glows) and areas for improvement moving forward (grows). This approach fosters a constructive feedback culture and helps the teacher candidates focus on their strengths and areas for growth (Keiler et al., 2020). Supervisors meet with teacher candidates to debrief on the lesson after each formal observation, which occurs twice throughout each internship semester. Supervisors emphasize the importance of self-reflection to empower interns and hold them accountable for their own growth. They encourage the interns to focus on their strengths and begin the post-observation conference by asking them to reflect on what went well. After verbally sharing what went well, the interns share what they would do differently next time, taking ownership of their learning process.

Developing Agency

Bieler (2010, 2013) explores issues around teacher turnover by working to build agency in teacher candidates during their preservice internship experiences. In a study on holistic mentoring, Bieler (2013) employed strategies to help interns value their personal identities and professional aspirations. Bieler (2010) mentions the importance of helping teacher candidates develop visions for their work to help teachers remain in the field. In a study on the discourse used by mentor teachers, Bieler (2010) argues that preparing agentive teachers before they enter the field will help address the typical power structures in schools. Building teacher candidate agency can also reaffirm teacher candidate identity by giving them a sense of control over their professional decisions that align with their values.

Supervisors in our program work to build teacher candidate agency in various ways. Connected to practice-based pedagogies, supervisors have begun using role-play scenarios to help teacher candidates understand and practice how to advocate for themselves in various situations, especially with people at different power levels. Due to the recent teacher shortages, administrators approach teacher candidates directly with job opportunities to fill in their schools. Teacher candidates often express how challenging it is to tell a principal they do not want a particular position or are not ready to commit to something yet. Supervisors have begun role-playing these conversations for teacher candidates to help them practice communicating effectively and confidently. For instance, we simulate a conversation where a principal offers a job to a teacher candidate, and the candidate has to politely decline or express their need for more time to consider. Providing opportunities for our teacher candidates to practice communicating confidently and effectively is a critical way to develop agency.

It's also imperative that teacher candidates are treated with openness and honesty. When concerns arise, mentor teachers are often more likely to contact the supervisor directly rather than address the problems with the intern. This behind-the-scenes communication frequently hinders the teacher candidate and can be misinterpreted. In these situations, our supervisors usually schedule a meeting where the teacher candidates can be present to listen

intently, advocate for themselves, and share what they need to feel supported. Although all students deserve this opportunity to advocate for themselves, it is particularly crucial for students from diverse backgrounds and experiences. For instance, students with disabilities may be best supported in ways the mentor is unaware of. By reaffirming the teacher candidates' needs and letting them advocate for themselves in this way, we are reaffirming their identities and developing skills. Further, we are providing an opportunity for our pool of mentor teachers to learn about the experiences of others and see firsthand how these experiences might connect with young students in their classrooms.

Conclusion

This article aimed to explain the programmatic features of our teacher preparation program that we have developed to be inclusive of teacher candidates of diverse backgrounds and help all our students learn to value their authentic identities. We plan to continue exploring the co-teaching internship model and how the use of that model for a longer period of time, rather than a traditional gradual release model, may be more beneficial for our teacher candidates. Co-teaching models could serve to challenge some of the systems currently in place that may intentionally or unintentionally oppress the identities of diverse future teachers and students. We also intend to explore more ways to involve our mentor teachers and partner schools in the work of developing and sustaining identity-affirming internship practices since these partners play such a massive role in our program to prepare our teacher candidates.

While this article focuses on affirming teacher candidates' identities, it is also essential to consider how faculty members' own identities, such as race, gender, and individual teaching philosophies, influence their ability to model the strengths-based and identity-affirming practices discussed in this article. Faculty members' identities and perspectives influence how they interpret and implement identity-affirming practices. We are fortunate to have a collaborative team of faculty across our special education programs who are deeply engaged in working with students. We frequently invite each other to be guest speakers in classes, engage in faculty peer observations, and co-teach courses as opportunities arise. Through ongoing reflection on our own identities and intentional dialogue with one another, we strive to model the inclusive, culturally responsive practices we ask our candidates to develop.

Those working in teacher preparation have the unique privilege of fostering an affirmed sense of personal and professional identity for a diverse group of future teachers. This has an even more significant impact on the world as our teacher candidates enter the field and work to value the many identities of students in their classrooms. By taking a strengths-based approach, encouraging reflective practices, and developing teacher agency, we can develop identity-affirming learning environments in coursework and during internships.

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Any Given Sunday: Church Pew Reflections on the Pedagogy of Black Preachers and its Implications for K-12 Classrooms

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Abstract

Regardless of one's political affiliation, it would be difficult to deny the talents and charisma demonstrated by Senator Raphael Warnock during his speech at the 2024 Democratic National Convention. As the son of two Pentecostal pastors, his compelling delivery was not only a testament to his skills as a public speaker but also to the rich traditions of the Black church. This tradition, rooted in a long history of using oratory to inspire, educate, and mobilize communities, is exemplified by leaders like Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Reverend Ralph Abernathy, and Senator John Lewis. While their contributions cannot be overstated, the art of powerful and moving oratory is still alive and well in the sermons delivered by Black preachers in churches across the country on any given Sunday. Drawing upon bell hooks' (1994) theory of engaged pedagogy, which describes education as the practice of freedom, this essay explores the practical connections between the impactful methods of Black clergy and that of K-12 practitioners. By examining sermonic delivery methods and their application to key facets of instruction, the authors assert K-12 educators can create more responsive and joyful learning environments. Further, this exploration aims to demonstrate how these methods can transform educational practices and better serve diverse student populations.

Keywords: identity, culturally responsive education, Pentecostal pedagogy, homiletic

Introduction

Educational systems have long struggled to equitably serve students of color from historically marginalized communities. This persistent reality invites us to rethink not just what we teach but how and where we find inspiration for practices that honor the diverse cultures and identities of our students. An important body of scholarship, including but not limited to, Moll and Gonzales' (1994) funds of knowledge, Ladson-Billings' (1995) culturally relevant pedagogy, Gay's (2000) culturally responsive pedagogy, Paris' (2012) culturally sustaining pedagogy, and Muhammad's (2020) historically responsive literacy framework, offer practitioners resources to address inequities at the classroom level. These frameworks share a foundational commitment to valuing and leveraging the cultural capital, lived experiences, and knowledge systems that students bring to their education. Furthermore, they suggest a means of reconfiguring traditional modes of teaching and learning that devalue the

identities of students who are not white, English-speaking, and middle-class and call upon practitioners to undergo shifts in perspective and practice. Part of this shift includes looking to new places and spaces or looking differently at the places and spaces we are already familiar with for methods that can be applied in classrooms to serve students more effectively and more justly. The Black church stands as one of those places.

Black clergy, who have a long history of using oratory to inspire, educate, and mobilize communities, regularly drop pedagogical gems from the pulpit. Emdin (2017b) describes it as a "Pentecostal pedagogy," or "strategies born out of the Pentecostal Black church and effective in activating [a looking inward] and being culturally relevant" (p. 110-111). He highlights preaching moves like call and response and altar calls, and argues conditions that show genuine appreciation for individual voices and emotional connection are necessary for teaching youth in urban settings (Emdin, 2017a). This article intends to continue the conversation centered around the Sunday morning Black church experience and its application to K-12 classrooms through an examination of the theological, the philosophical, and the experiential in an attempt to make plain the practical.

The pulpit preaching moment (the homiletical), in its contour and delivery, can inform the classroom teaching moment (the pedagogical). Homiletics refers to the preparation and preaching of a topic derived from the word of God. In its demonstration, it looks like a "theological conversation between preachers and hearers" (Jacobsen, 2015, p.4) communicated in such a way that the hearer can understand. Pedagogy refers most simply to the way teachers teach. It is shaped by an educator's beliefs about students and learning and is mediated by culture. The work that follows is not intended to claim that effective teaching necessitates a bent toward religion. Rather, its focus is on the methods of instructional delivery commonly utilized by Black preachers that can be actioned upon in classrooms.

Theoretical Underpinnings

In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks (1994) writes about her time in graduate school, recalling the pervasive boredom and disempowering nature of teachers' practice. She comments on professors' expectation of conformity and their need for control in the classroom, especially in regard to their students of color. Running counter to this type of teaching and learning experience is her theory of engaged pedagogy, explicated in this same text. This is a pedagogy that welcomes student expression, that collaboratively works toward the development of a critical consciousness, one that requires vulnerability, and one that endeavors to move beyond knowledge acquisition and toward liberation.

hooks (1994) asserts the classroom must be a place wholly supportive of a student's pursuit of self-actualization (p.16). Consistent in her conceptualization of an engaged pedagogy is the teacher's willingness to model or initiate action as an active participant in the learning community. Educators who "embrace the challenge of self-actualization will be better able to create pedagogical practices that engage students, providing them with ways of knowing that enhance their capacity to live fully and deeply" (hooks, 1994, p. 22). And is that not what we say we want for all students? Even so, in our "melting pot", incomplete and inaccurate histories are (re)told while Eurocentric ways of knowing, being, and doing are privileged in curriculum and instruction. For example, classroom management practices often prioritize conformity and control, reflecting a normative view of "right" conduct and behavior (Boyce & Beneke, 2024). History classes required for graduation tell of events deemed significant by the West typically from the perspective of the West while the histories of peoples of color are elective coursework if they are offered at all. This conventional approach to schooling and narrow view of knowledge systems has consistently reproduced unacceptable outcomes.

The previously mentioned asset-based pedagogies and frameworks position identity and

culture as central to the effective instruction of all students and students of color in particular. They emphasize the importance of recognizing and leveraging the diverse cultural backgrounds and lived experiences that students bring to the classroom. Of the nearly 50 million public school students in the United States, over half are students of color. Black and Hispanic students account for approximately 22 million students (NCES, 2022). One out of every ten is a multilingual learner (NCES, 2024). Our K-12 classrooms are evidence of the fact that our students are vastly and beautifully diverse, representative of varying cultures, ethnicities, sexual orientations, religions, genders, abilities, languages, and races. In order to create change that allows for students who are systemically and systematically marginalized by schools to practice freedom in their classrooms, there must be a "renewal of minds" on the part of practitioners (hooks, 1994, p. 34). This renewal of minds involves a reorientation of educators' perspectives and practices, moving away from traditional, Eurocentric approaches to embrace more inclusive, culturally responsive methods. It requires educators to critically examine their own biases, challenge the status quo, and commit to continuous self-reflection and growth. Freedom in the classroom, characterized by an openness to conversation, self-expression, and acknowledgement of others without judgement, is representative of what occurs in the Black church experience.

Preaching and Teaching: Pedagogy and Praxis

Walking into many Black churches on any given Sunday is an experience that moves the body, the mind, and the soul. With choirs singing, people clapping, instruments blaring, tears flowing, and feet stomping, the Sunday morning Black church experience is a holistic approach to a divine encounter. Nothing is left outside the door, but the totality of the human experience is brought into the pew such that the Sunday morning experience can be described in several ways: 1) According to the liturgy (liturgically). Liturgical descriptions refer to the formal and structured worship practices of the church and include the prescribed words, songs, prayers, readings, and rituals. Stephen Scarlett (2024) asserts, "The liturgy draws us into an experience of union with the [preacher] in Christ through the Spirit. This is not merely a cognitive truth—an idea in the mind. It is an experience of reality that engages our whole being" (para. 4). 2) The Sunday morning church experience could also be described according to word and sacrament. The word is associated with the Word of God, both written and spoken, through which the gifts of grace are poured out upon the church as the sacraments. 3) The Sunday experience can be described according to the church hymnody. The hymns and spiritual songs describe the joy, hope, and struggles of believers and reflect the faith, beliefs, and the understanding of a shared journey amongst the church community. 4) Finally, the Sunday morning church experience can be described according to the Great Commission – the church's mission. The congregants assemble not only for individual spiritual development but also to be reminded of the church's mission, i.e., to grow the church by gaining those who are lost.

When the preacher mounts the pulpit, he or she is there to grapple with a text and is positioned as the Gospel herald. The articulation of truth is at the core of the preaching moment, to discover truth so that the truth would free the entangled soul. Yet, what is apparent is that when the preacher stands behind the sacred desk, this Gospel proclamation is not a preaching event, it is a preaching experience. An event is something to be viewed much like a spectator at a baseball game, but an experience is something to join into and engage with.

Preaching in the Black church identifies the congregation as a participant in the preaching moment. The congregation is there to offer witness to the truth as it is proclaimed and to affirm the Gospel. Subsequently, one may easily find that as a congregant, there is simultaneous personal investment in the learning process and a

feeling of joy. One might wonder, "What is happening here?" And just as important, "what is *not* happening here?" The discussion of pedagogy and practice implications to follow is organized according to three preaching and teaching considerations: the environment one wants to create, the engagement of those in attendance, and finally, how one makes room for the unexpected.

Environment

In the preaching and teaching environment, one notable feature that contributes to the formation of community is music. Music in a Black church communicates to each member of the congregation that they are welcome to be who they are. People clap, raise their hands, do the two-step, sit, sing, listen, or all of the above because there is a culture of freedom and acceptance. There is no set formula, but it is not uncommon for a worship leader to lead the assembly in a classic hymn which reminds the congregation of its foundation and history, a fast paced song to energize and invite participation, and a slower, more reverent song to set the meditational tone for reflection and prepare the audience for the upcoming message. When words fall short of expressing our deepest adoration, music transcends the boundaries of language, bridging the gap between the ineffable and the divine. Music also serves as a vehicle or medium for a shared grounding experience, assisting in establishing a culture and community. There can be hundreds of people in the church pews, but they are all attuned to the same song at the same time. The people in attendance can and do change from service to service and from Sunday to Sunday, but music is a constant. It is the tie that binds. For our purposes and as it applies to the classroom, music acts as a metaphor for the rituals and routines a teacher and his students consistently enact in order to show care and compassion for one another. This musical bonding creates a sense of belonging as a prerequisite for intellectual engagement.

The body of research on the importance of school belonging is extensive. It is positively associated with motivation, self-concept, and self-belief (Korpershoek et al., 2019), emotional well-being (Parr et al., 2020), academic engagement, positive attitudes toward learning, academic success, and overall health (see reviews in Allen et al., 2018, 2022). Maslow (1954) identified belonging as a basic human need. Goodenow and Grady (1993) described it as "the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment" (p. 60). Baumeister and Leary (1995) refer to belonging as an innate motivation to form lasting and significant interpersonal relationships.

Kuttner's (2023) recent offering of a critical, transdisciplinary framework for understanding school belonging is especially intriguing as it outlines the "agentic, systemic, intersectional, place-based, and political" dimensions of belonging (p.3), focusing attention on the othering of students from nondominant communities and prompting us to reflectively and reflexively ask the following questions: How do we model and communicate the belief that belonging is a fundamental right, especially for students who face systemic barriers to inclusion? In what ways can teaching practices encourage students to navigate, contest, or redefine spaces where they feel excluded, and how can we support them in this process? Finally, Souto-Manning et al. (2021) led us to perhaps the most pointed question of all, in what ways are we "complicit in the production and reproduction of exclusion"? (p. 484)

Whether in church or a classroom, excluding the support of community lessens the theological and pedagogical experience. Emotional, mental, and educational development lies within human connectivity. Belonging is essential to human development. Howard Thurman (1971) demonstrated the need to belong in his work titled, *The Search for Common Ground* as he asserts, "Men, all men, belong to each other, and he who shuts himself away diminishes himself, and he who shuts another

away from him destroys himself" (p. 104). To work in isolation is to reduce the human capacity to learn and grow.

Belonging is an ontological longing situated in the human makeup. When the preacher-parishioner connection offers a strong sense of belonging, it creates positive outcomes for individual members. When it falls short, congregants can feel like round pegs trying to fit into square holes. The preaching and teaching moments are ideal for creating a sense of belonging. Thurman (1971) contends, "We have committed to heart…a feeling of belonging and our spirits are no longer isolated and afraid…. [We need to resist the] 'will to quarantine' and to separate ourselves behind self-imposed walls" (p. 104). Humanity, Thurman (1986) says, would never accept the absence of community as his destiny. The residual aim of connecting with others is to connect with self. The preaching and teaching moment yields belonging and the undiscovered sense of identity through community, not isolated individualism. Inasmuch as this bonding element is identified as an inextricable part of the human condition, the practical applications become even more apparent.

Here, we ask, what routine(s), ritual(s), norm(s), or practice(s) demonstrate the teacher's belief that each student has value and importance? On any given school day, this could be as simple as welcoming each student by name and playing a chosen theme song that signals upcoming transitions. Perhaps this means beginning each day with a morning circle where students greet one another, share ideas, join in an activity together, and interact with a motivating message. This could also look like a more comprehensive integration of social and emotional learning (SEL).

SEL can be described as a process whereby individuals gain and apply knowledge, skills, and attitudes to effectively manage emotions, make responsible decisions, feel and demonstrate empathy for others, set and accomplish goals, and establish and maintain healthy relationships (Weissberg et al., 2015). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, arguably the most well-known resource on the topic, provides information on several forms of SEL implementation including personally responsible and participatory SEL. Transformative SEL has more recently been conceptualized as a form of implementation that cultivates in young people and adults the skills needed to critically examine and collaboratively act on root causes of inequity. It directs implementation more squarely toward issues such as "power, privilege, prejudice, discrimination, social justice, empowerment, and self-determination" (Jagers et al., 2019, p. 163). Although relatively new in the field, transformative SEL offers a justice-oriented pathway to build communities that more equitably serve students furthest from opportunity, access, agency, and belonging. Carefully constructed lesson plans and clearly stated content will inevitably fall short if students do not feel as though they belong.

When community is missing and there is no sense of belonging, we are lost. Community, by definition, includes all kindred and thereby embraces our relationships with all creation. We seek to belong, we long to be with others and be part of their work and drama. In Ellison's (2017), *Fearless Dialogues*, a sense of belonging is explored and the need for interpersonal connections is demonstrated. He writes "to be ignored with or even vanquished by others, threatens one's sense of belonging" (p. 78). Belonging is the most fundamental human need and requires, as Ellison states, "consistent interactions in a temporarily stable environment with a few people who are concerned for one another's welfare" (p. 78). Not only is the need for consistent interaction critical for pulpit to pew connections, but it is also fundamental in the classroom to establish concern for teacher-student welfare.

Engagement

The second consideration in the discussion of pedagogy and practice is engagement. Engagement in the homiletic model is dualistic.

Kerygma is the proclamation of the Word of God, and didache is the teaching of the Word of God. Proclamation is a persuasive element whose aim is the conversion of souls. On the other hand, teaching references the instructions of the church for proper living – the way of life, the rules for church governance and conduct, and the "how to" of the church (baptism, fasting, prayer, etc.). Didache is the instruction on morality and church practice. On any given Sunday the preacher offers a mixture of the kerygmatic and didache to inspire congregants to participate in the life of the church and the engagement of the Spirit.

Oftentimes to start, the preacher's voice level, cadence, and hand movements are calm and conversational. As his message progresses, the tone and urgency ebbs and flows according to the words he is speaking, the point he is making, or the type of engagement he is hoping to elicit. He uses metaphor, high level vocabulary, hip-hop references, alliteration, rhyme, scans who is in the seats and refers to them by name. He knows his audience and varies modalities for participation. The preacher embodies the homiletic articulation of truth and with hands waving, fingers pointing, and feet pacing, the preaching moment is a full-body workout. The Sunday morning experience is dialogic, it is illustrative, and it is personal. The Monday through Friday classroom experience may benefit from the incorporation of these same principles.

*Dialogic.*The preacher cannot just say what the preacher wants to say, but what the preacher says is confirmed by the witness of the congregants. At the moment of witness and confirmation in many Black church experiences, amens are offered. Hallelujahs are raised. Thanksgivings are hollered. And the truth is cheered as the preacher delivers the divine message. The congregation is part of the search for truth and the articulation of the Gospel. Like the preacher, the teacher "uses vocal musicality (as well as gesture, gaze, and postural positioning) to summon students' collective attention to crucial now and next moments in the communicative behavior stream, and in the collaborative thinking that is going on—moments at which important new information will be provided" (Erickson, 2009, p. 451). Then, a new creative social ecology can be ushered in.

This is the classroom that from the outside might sound noisy or look disorganized. It might take a second to locate the teacher. Students are talking to one another, asking questions, and perhaps moving throughout the classroom. They are very much in the process of "doing" - constructing, researching, experimenting, writing. Once inside, an observer understands the "noise" is actually composed of conversation and debate related to content that is interesting and relevant. When asked, students are able to explain what they are doing and why it is valuable. The teacher may lean on the very same dialogic strategies used by Black preachers like call and response, "turn and tell your neighbor", and "repeat after me". This classroom centers the voices of students and upholds a culture of high expectations for all members of the learning community. Examples of pedagogical approaches that would work in support of this tenet are project-based learning (PBL), place-based education (PBE), and youth participatory action research (YPAR).

In classrooms that mirror the interactive and participatory nature of the Black church experience, students demonstrate agency in the learning process. In PBL, students work with authentic problems and answer complex questions over extended periods of time, pushing them to develop and apply content knowledge across disciplines. Additionally, there is an emphasis on skills like collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, and communication (Gabuardi, 2021; Saldo & Walag, 2020). PBE offers an alternative to the Eurocentric curriculum previously mentioned as it positions local communities, physical landscapes, cultures, and community members as primary resources for learning (Deringer, 2017). By centering students' lived experiences, we can cultivate a sense of belonging and demonstrate appreciation for students' identities. Finally, YPAR involves students identifying an issue of importance to

them and working with adult partners to develop a research agenda and conduct research, all with the aim of intentionally changing knowledge and practices in order to address the issue affecting students' lives and/or communities (Anyon et al., 2018).

Through any one of these approaches, students might investigate a lack of public transportation in an area, problem-solve how to increase stakeholder engagement in a community farm, design for the preservation of oral histories, or research sustainable energy solutions. To identify the topic of inquiry, teachers can consider engaging students in an exercise Muhammad (2019, p. 91) referred to as "the urgency of your pen". In this exercise, students generate a list of social concerns they would most like to change or improve as it relates to their identities and communities. If implemented appropriately, PBL, PBE, and YPAR align with the principles of asset-based pedagogies as they connect curriculum to students' cultural backgrounds, leverage community resources, and place students who have been pushed to the margins at the center of teaching and learning.

Illustrative. Storytelling is a powerful practice. It is how we share ideas and make meaning. It allows the teller and hearer to provide personal context, connect the past to the present, and reflect on how prior experiences can inspire the future. Storytelling is a practice that promotes learning, a sense of belonging, independence, and ownership in the classroom. It can support relationship-building and foster empathy for others. By its very nature, storytelling is personal, reciprocal, and uniquely human.

Storytelling was a teaching tool used frequently in the Bible. As a homiletical tool, Jesus used parables to convey heavenly thought through earthly illustrations. The parables of the prodigal son, the mustard seed, and the wheat and the tare were simple stories that contained much richer and transcendent meanings. Often complex and difficult ideas that otherwise would be incomprehensible to the human mind could be grasped in the form of a story. Storytelling was not an attempt to "dumb down" intricate concepts; rather it was intended to place them in a container that could be more readily received. That is what good stories and good storytellers do.

Stories told from the pulpit connect to the scriptural passage that inspired the sermon and are often ones from preachers' own lives. The story then serves to highlight the relevance of a thousands-year old book to today. It could be about embracing patience when a flight is delayed or a conversation with a stranger on the golf course, or how he had to hold back his anger at the local pharmacy when he witnessed discriminatory treatment directed towards the young woman standing two people ahead of him in line. In telling the story, he answers the question, "when am I ever going to use this in real life?" Anyone who has spent time in a classroom will likely be familiar with this question, and rightly so. If asked, this question may be an indication that a teacher has yet to make the learning to life connection clear or has not provided opportunities for students to draw authentic connections themselves.

Stories are cognitive and cultural tools that can foreground students' prior knowledge and lived experience as integral to the learning process. As the title of Jonathan Gottschall's (2013) book confirms, we are storytelling animals. When thoughtfully implemented, stories can help us take learning from what can feel like an abstract exercise to something personal and communal. Preachers use stories to illuminate scripture; teachers can use them to make academic content relevant, accessible, and emotionally resonant. This work, however, is not merely about inserting stories at the top of our lesson—it is about creating a classroom culture in which storytelling is an authentic and deliberate practice. This requires us teachers to approach stories not as a decorative add-on to our math lesson, for example, but as a worthy pathway to understanding and a craft worthy of developing. It also demands a shift in classroom power dynamics like that called for by hooks (1994).

When students' narratives are not just welcomed but are actively considered in the discussions we hold space for and the curriculum we design, learning can become something co-constructed with students as opposed to something done to them.

In order to cultivate this kind of culture, educators must first examine their relationship to storytelling and to their students. How are we modeling vulnerability and authenticity in how we share? Are we making room for multiple truths to coexist in our classroom? Are we listening to students (and their families) with the intent to understand? Teaching with stories is, at its core, a justice-centered practice. It affirms identities, offers counternarratives to deficit-based thinking, and fosters learning communities in which students—particularly those who have been silenced—can recognize their own power. When teachers tell stories and invite students to tell their own, they communicate that knowledge is not confined to textbooks and expert discourse. As the preacher uses story to link the past to the present, teachers can use story to tie the personal to the academic and the cultural to the universal. Furthermore, a well-told story can invite students to see themselves in the learning process rather than passively observing it from the outside.

Teachers can begin to incorporate stories into their practice using structured storytelling assignments or posing open-ended questions that allow students to contextualize what they are learning (Murray-Orr & Milton, 2023) or even working with students to develop the skill of listening to one another. However, it will be important to keep in mind that storytelling as it is presented here does not flow in one direction, nor is it solely a tool for engagement—ideally, it is a reciprocal exchange between speaker and listener that validates and amplifies the voices of those present.

The authors offer pláticas, a method drawing from Chicana/o/x and Latina/o/x oral traditions, as a consideration for K-12 practitioners interested in exploring culturally and linguistically responsive storytelling practices. Gonzalez (1998) describes pláticas as a "way to gather family and cultural knowledge through communication of thoughts, memories, ambiguities, and new interpretations" (p. 647, as cited in Fierros & Delgado-Bernal, 2016). In this conceptualization, pláticas are informal conversations that facilitate knowledge collection, but they are also a means of knowledge production.

In order to be effective as a research methodology, Fierro and Delgado Bernal (2016) offer principles for implementation that are also relevant to educators' work in classrooms. Speakers' lived realities are viewed as valuable sources of insight and worthy of inquiry. Pláticas require trust, and trust requires demonstrated reflexivity on the part of the researcher, reciprocity, and vulnerability. Researchers should be willing to answer any questions posed to participants. In order to avoid perpetuating old power structures, participants are viewed and honored as co-creators of knowledge. Finally, time engaging in pláticas may serve as a healing space where support is offered and self-discovery can occur. At its best, storytelling in the classroom goes beyond connecting students to content and serves to connect students to one another. Brooks (2024) discusses and shares an example of pláticas in practice designed by practitioner Cindy Mata.

Personal. To effectively convey ideas through preaching or teaching, one must present themselves in their most authentic form. The authentic self is the crucible through which truth can be offered. Alfred P. Gibbs (1986) reminds us quite pointedly that "the fact that a person possesses a natural fluency of speech and facility of expression does not, in itself, qualify that person to preach" (p. 80). Likewise, coursework and certifications do not, in itself, qualify a person to teach. Gibbs (1986) goes on to assert that while "natural gifts are necessary, they are not enough. The fact of their possession does not constitute a call to preach" (p.80). Nor do they signify a teacher's call. Teachers cannot expect to simply move along the assembly line of a

preparation program and become effective. Something more is required.

The "something more" lies in the distinction between a profession and a vocation. Professionals undergo particular training and earn required credentials. They even speak a specific jargon. A vocation carries with it a call. A vocation is tied to one's purpose and is connected to an innate quality that cannot be degreed. To be an effective teacher or preacher, one must be confirmed by both profession and vocation. In order to live as one's authentic self, one must be grounded by their life's purpose.

As Henri J.M. Nouwen (1972) would suggest, authenticity consists not in the denial of personal inconsistencies and idiosyncrasies, but in accepting our personal wounds from which we preach and teach. All people are damaged goods. Everyone has wounds, scars, lesions, and abrasions through which they conduct their business and live their lives. The main point offered by Nouwen (1972) is "'a deep understanding of our own pain makes it possible for us to convert our weakness into strength and to offer our own experiences as a source of healing to those who are often lost in the darkness of their own misunderstood sufferings" (p. 93) Because wounds have something to teach us and present something to learn from, the power of preaching and teaching alike, is derived from the lessons learned from the lacerations that have been inflicted upon us. Valued are the lessons learned through the problems and pain of personal experience. Wounded healers are those who have been there — those who allow their truths to serve as vehicles to inform and inspire.

Teaching is about truth-telling, and it is truth-telling that creates pathways to educational freedom. Without truth-embodiment in the classroom by instructors and students alike, a liberating classroom remains impossible. Only as truth-enactment is shared between teacher and student does the pedagogical moment become emancipatory. The authentic self is paramount in the telling of truth and teaching effectiveness.

Phillips Brooks (1877), a prominent 19th-century American preacher maintained that "preaching is truth through personality" (p. 5) Preaching is achieved most effectively when it is not fabricated, pretentious or manipulative but is carried out through the preacher's authentic self. So too with education, the teacher is most effective when not disingenuous. Brooks' words suggest that the effectiveness of preaching (teaching) relies not just on the content of the message (the truth) but also on the character, conviction, and authenticity of the preacher (the personality). The Roman statesman, lawyer, philosopher and rhetorician of antiquity named Cicero stated in *De Oratore* that eloquence (whether preaching or teaching) consists of two things: character and content – not only in what one speaks, but in how well one lives. Certainly, effective teachers are such because their character is not detached from their teaching.

Expecting the Unexpected

The teaching and preaching moment is akin to spontaneous combustion. Often, an improvisational, spontaneous, impulsive act occurs within the preaching and teaching moment that spawns the unexpected. Because both preaching and teaching are tapping into an infinite domain of the possible, one simply enters a realm when speaking that encapsulates the possible. Although both plan and prepare lessons, the infusion of the unknown is also an active variable in the presentation process. Trusting the process of delivery, preachers and teachers rely on a higher power, such that "as we speak, we are spoken to" from the wealth of voices and content studied. That bandwidth of knowledge is always on call and often regurgitated without a moment's notice. These interruptions to the normal pedagogical flow create what is termed here as *eruptions of awareness*. Housed in these eruptions is the tension between structure and flexibility. In the midst of high-stakes testing and curriculum pacing guides and new directives, how does one demonstrate a structurally sound and creatively flexible praxis? It is by first understanding that our flexibility must be in *how* we facilitate learning, even in circumstances

where *what* we teach is fixed. In other words, outcomes may be structured, but processes can vary.

From where is this unexpected derived? Martin Buber (2014) identifies a space of "the between" as the revelatory, or the space of discovery. The revelatory space of "the between" is identified by Buber as the constructive, relational decision-making space (p. 5). The conversational, dialogic space is an ontological reality that offers an opportunity for creative discovery. Calvin O. Schrag (1986) called this space a "space of subjectivity" (p.11), valued as information-sharing and partners in the conversation as a way to open new pathways to unforeseen effects. It is in this space of the intersubjective that the adage applies –"more is caught than taught." Arnett et al. (2018) explain, "this space of subjectivity is a dwelling owned by no one. Individual content shared in the communication makes the relational reality of the between possible" (p. 109). Each contributor, whether preacher, teacher, or student brings goods to the subjective space, a communicative sharing that houses the revelatory. It is in the space "in between" that the revelatory happens – teaching's "aha" moment, the epiphany, the lightbulb moment. Expecting the unexpected is every teacher's and every preacher's aim, to hear at last the ineffable words: "I get it!"

In a Pentecostal pedagogy, there must always be room for the unexpected. In the Black church experience, there are services in which the preacher does not preach his intended message or where an expression of jubilee leads a parishioner to run freely down an aisle. Such happenings do not occur every Sunday, but they could happen on *any given* Sunday, and the preacher, choir, musicians, and congregants know that all too well. In the classroom, there are often unforeseen effects as well. For example, a student may ask to take an assignment in an unplanned direction or a discussion intended to take 15-minutes takes twice as long because students are especially curious. Unforeseen effects are not to be avoided or denied; they are to be leaned into. Teachers, and preachers, must look forward to these conditions, trusting that the unexpected can very well lead to something transformational.

Conclusion

This project has explored several connections between the preaching and teaching moments and how these intersections can inform a more inclusive pedagogical structure. Having examined homiletical devices related to environment, engagement, and the unexpected, the authors have provided a lens through which pedagogy and praxis can be a transferable model to persistent realities that invite us to adjust teaching methods and look broadly for places of inspiration. Within this pedagogical structure, three coordinates identify the Any Given Sunday model.

The first of these is belonging. As previously stated, belonging is a prerequisite for intellectual engagement. Learning cannot occur in spaces in which isolation prevails. Howard Thurman (1986) writes, "The community cannot feed for long on itself; it can only flourish where always the boundaries are giving way to the coming of others from beyond them" (p. 104). The second is relationship. This refers to a teacher's academic engineering—deliberative action—that liberates students to move from passive spectators to agentic participants. Rather than simply observe teacher instruction, the opportunity for the co-orientation of student learning is provided through relational teacher-student connections. The final coordinate in this model is improvisation. This necessitates a teacher's flexibility and openness to a revelatory encounter, or a teaching moment.

What we have seen in this model is a shift in the teaching paradigm that must occur in order to build the joyful and responsive learning communities worthy of our students. Schools in the United States were not originally intended for many of the students they are now responsible for educating i.e. Black students, multilingual and multicultural learners, and students with disabilities. Teaching is contextual. When teaching is devoid of students' lived experiences,

it is academically hollow at best. When teaching honors the unique gifts and talents of students, it has the potential to transform. Dunn et al. (2021) pose the question, "How radical would it be for students to see themselves in their curriculum, for them to develop relationships, and for them to heal in the very spaces that have been built to enact pain and lies that tell them that they do not belong?" (p. 214). Through belonging, relationships, and improvisations, teachers can create a more relatable context.

Make no mistake, teaching is among the most challenging professional endeavors one can take on; teaching in the current sociopolitical context is even more so. Practitioner expertise and intention has been called into question, funding and resources continue to be disparate, and teachers are responsible for meeting what can be a wide range of strengths and needs in a single classroom. The approach described in this paper is not put forth as the remedy to all that ails us but as a loving reminder of why we teachers, principals, school counselors, and others elected to engage in this work from the start.

In a 2023 address delivered at the University Council for Educational Administration Convention, Gloria Ladson-Billings offered the metaphors of the sieve and the net. She commented that too often, schools act as sieves. We push students in the ways we know how, in the ways we adults are comfortable, and typically in the ways we were taught. Students who make it through to the other side are considered worthy of bright futures, worthy of college and career readiness, worthy of a sense of belonging in their school communities. The ones left in the sieve — frequently students who are raced, disabled, and/or presently situated in poverty — are discarded on low academic tracks, through exclusionary discipline policies, or through the slow erasure of their cultures and identities from our curriculum. In contrast to the sieve, Ladson-Billings explained, is the net. When a safety net is hung below a structure, we do not cross our fingers and hope it holds up in the event an individual falls from above. Nor do we place blame on the person who fell. Safety nets are appropriately anchored, rigorously tested, and made of materials that will allow the net to give but not tear. The net, then, is not only a symbol of protection but of collective responsibility.

What actions are teachers, school staff, administrators, school board members, and policy makers willing to take in order to ensure no student is denied effective instruction or excluded from community? To mislabel students as incompetent or incapable, as is often the case when teaching marginalized students, is to identify a breach in the teacher's tool set or mindset. Emdin (2021) writes, "there are considerations beyond the rigors of the subject matter that lead to what many term as underperformance. Many young people underperform in classes not because the content is out of reach, but because it is challenging to bend yourself to an approach to instruction that is ordinary when your life beyond the classroom is extraordinary" (p. xiii). The educational imperative lies in making an innovative classroom that allows for unconventional and nontraditional ways of academic pursuit.

Finally, the pedagogical methods of Black clergy—anchored in storytelling, dialogue, shared power, and openness to the unexpected—are one pathway to establishing a foundational commitment to leveraging the cultural capital, lived experiences, and knowledge systems that students bring to their education. There is no singular description of effective teaching. The one way, one method, one style pedagogical approach is dismantled as the multiplicity of instructional form is parlayed. The discussion provided in this project is only the beginning of a much broader assemblage of relatable intersections of pulpit and pedagogy. The formidable response to new places and spaces that inspire us to create more impactful pathways to learning and more justly serve students is the next step in the teaching discussion. New styles and alternative methods of effective teaching can happen anywhere and everywhere, especially when we cultivate learning models that are intellectually rigorous and emotionally resonant.

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