12-2021

Understanding the African American Male Student Experience of Being Diagnosed with Emotional Disturbance Through the Use of Counter-Storytelling

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UNDERSTANDING THE AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE STUDENT
EXPERIENCE OF BEING DIAGNOSED WITH EMOTIONAL DISTURBANCE
THROUGH THE USE OF COUNTER-STORYTELLING

The counter-stories of African American males diagnosed with Emotional Disturbance

A Dissertation Presented
to
The Faculty of the School of Education
Special Education Department

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

By
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San Francisco
December 2021
THE UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

Dissertation Abstract

Understanding the African American Male Student Experience of Being
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In the U.S. educational system, it is too common to see African American males overrepresented in special education classrooms, including segregated special education settings. African American males continuously experience disproportionate representation and placement in special education, especially under the label of ED (Harry & Anderson, 1994). Twice as many African American students in the United States are receiving services for Emotional Disturbance than their White counterparts.

Students who are labeled with ED have the lowest educational outcomes as well as lower success rates in life than *any* other disability classification (Merrrell & Walker, 2004). The consequences of the ED label can be devastating for African American males. This qualitative case study aims to fill a gap in the literature by using counter-storytelling, through the theoretical framework of Critical Race Theory, to privilege African American students' voices in order to develop a further understanding about how the label of Emotionally Disturbed impacts African American males' educational experiences. The counter-stories collected will inform and serve as a counterbalance to the dominant ideology that that entry into special education provides the effective teaching strategies necessary to serve the needs of students with Emotional Disturbance.

Signature Page

This dissertation, written under the direction of the candidate's dissertation committee and approved by the members of the committee, has been presented and accepted by the Faculty of the School of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.
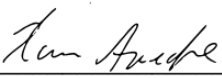
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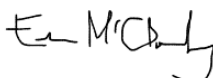
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Acknowledgments

I would like to begin by thanking my Chair, Dr. Apedoe, for the continued support throughout this journey. Thank you for your brilliance, love, guidance and encouragement. Your belief in me never faltered even when I was struggling to believe in myself. Your gentle yet supportive push was exactly what I needed and I would not have been able to complete this dissertation without you. To my committee members, Dr. Smith and Dr. McCloskey; thank you for your knowledge and supportive feedback. You both were carefully selected for your passion and knowledge on this topic and I am grateful you were willing to guide me through this. A very special thank you to Dr. Smith for agreeing to be on my committee while on sabbatical.

To my mom and dad; this is for you! You both are my inspiration and the epitome of unconditional love. Your sacrifices are what allowed me to be here and I am forever grateful to you both for raising me to be a strong, confident and proud Latina. You both have encouraged me to dream big and showed me that all things are possible. You were always so sure that this day would come and always believed in me, even when I didn't believe in myself. I have never been prouder to be a daughter of two immigrant parents.

To my siblings Bianca, Valeria and Diego; thank you for your unwavering support. You three have been my rock throughout this whole journey and I could not have done it without you. You all inspire me daily and I owe so much of this to you. Thank you for your encouraging messages, for sending me food during my long nights, for listening to my vents and for being my biggest cheerleaders when I doubted myself. I have always strived to a source of inspiration for you and I hope this degree did just that.

A special thanks to my mentor Myles. Truth be told, I would not have begun this journey had it not been for you and your continual encouragement to never settle for less and to keep bettering myself. Thank you for planting this crazy idea in my head and for supporting me every step of the way.

Last but not least, to my fiancé Julian. Although you weren't a part of this journey from the beginning, you entered my life during the most critical part. Thank you for all the sacrifices you made to keep me sane, focused and fed throughout these past few months. You never complained when I spent countless hours locked up writing yet you encouraged me to continue pushing through and made sure I never had anything to worry about. You are the true definition of a supportive partner. Thank you for all the love you poured into me while I finished. It's time for us to start living our life together!

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Statement of Problem

The overrepresentation of African-American male students in special education has been an ongoing problem for over four decades. Personnel in schools in the United States have assigned mild disability categories, such as emotional disturbance, to African American students in special education, at over twice the rate of other students (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Historically, African Americans are affected by having the highest probability for obtaining special education services and as well as being placed in separate school settings (Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachman, 2005). Cultural mismatches, unexamined biases and assumptions, and stereotypes of African-Americans add to the high rate of special education referrals for African-American males (Sullivan & Bal, 2013). This has caused the marginalization of African Americans in schools, causing vast disproportionality within special education, particularly in males, stifling their academic success and leading to poor educational outcomes. According to research done by McKenna (2013), of all African American students diagnosed as having an emotional disability (ED), 50% of them drop out of school before earning a diploma and within 3 to 5 years of that happening, these students are either arrested or have had negative encounters with law enforcement.

Because there are various disability diagnoses, the assessment criteria for the ways in which students are assigned or labeled inevitably varies based on the disability. Some scholars argue that disproportionality or overrepresentation is an issue that only applies to "judgmental," "mild," "subjective" or "soft" disability categories such as ED

(Sullivan & Bal, 2013). "Judgmental" disabilities are diagnoses that are not based on evidence-based biological data but rather clinical judgment and opinion (Harry & Anderson, 1994). Examples of diagnoses that are biological in nature include categories such as visual impairments and orthopedic impairments where medical doctors use diagnostic measures to determine the degree of vision loss or impairment. According to Harry & Anderson (1994), the five disability categories that are susceptible to bias are Emotional Disturbance (ED), Educable Mental Retardation (EMR), Learning Disability (LD), Speech Impairment (SI), and Trainable Mental Retardation (TMR). In schools, these diagnoses are often determined by the Committee on Special Education, a team of school-based personnel that test and diagnose students, usually through a combination of observations, academic testing, interviews and through teacher referral.

It has been widely noted by scholars that current identification methods tend to over-identify culturally and linguistically diverse students as having disabilities and many agree that the special education identification process is flawed and needs to be re-vamped (Sullivan & Bal, 2013). General education teachers are the primary "judges" when referring a student to receive special education services. General education teachers initiate the pre-special education referral process, where they gather the necessary documents for referral to special education. They then collect data about the student's performance, noting if the student benefits from typical classroom instruction and procedures (Soodak & Podell, 1993). For a student who is not making gains, according to the teacher, the next step is to provide an intervention and evaluate how the student responds. Using informal assessments and observations, this student is compared to his "normally functioning" peers. If the given intervention is not helpful in supporting the

student to access the general education curriculum, the student can be referred to the Committee on Special Education for a formal evaluation to be considered as entitled to receive special education services (Soodak & Podell, 1993). Unfortunately, not all referrals are based on the academic functioning alone. Students' ability to behave in school sanctioned ways, and according to the teacher's preferences, are considered as part of the referral process. This procedure leaves African American students more susceptible to being labeled with ED due to the mismatch between social and cultural norms that exist in the classrooms inhabited by African American students, who are largely taught by White teachers.

In the U.S. educational system, it is too common to see African American males overrepresented in special education classrooms, including segregated special education settings. There are many ways in which researchers have shed light on the issue of overrepresentation for African American males in special education. For example, researchers who focused on the evaluation and referral of students find that the process puts African American students at risk (McKenna, 2013; Patton, 1998). Researchers have also focused in on teacher perceptions and how mismatched cultural styles or a "cultural clash" can lead to overrepresentation (Chang & Sue, 2003, Siwatu & Starker, 2010). Further, scholars have also detailed how underfunded school systems and preservice teachers lack specific training and knowledge (Shealey & Lue, 2006). Although these are just a few examples of the ways researchers have shed light on the issue of overrepresentation, it seems as if only a small number of studies have focused solely on the high-occurrence emotional disturbance label (Eaves, 1982), none of which have

focused their attention to include the voices of those who experience this situation firsthand and in the moment.

Through researching the initial referral process, scholars have provided insight into how a student's behavior and the manner in which that behavior becomes interpreted by teachers plays a major role in how students get diagnosed with ED (Harry & Klingner, 2014; Rogers, 2003; Skiba, Simmons, Ritter, Kohler, Henderson, & Wu, 2006). The consequences of the ED label can be devastating for African American males. Research has shown that teachers perceive African American male students as more aggressive than their white counterparts, even when they exhibit the very same behaviors (Harry & Anderson, 1994). Harry and Anderson (1994) also found that African American males' tone of voice is interpreted differently by their white teachers leading them to be viewed as more aggressive or hostile. The implications of this label include, but are not limited to higher chances of, school dropout, academic underachievement, increased chance of incarceration, limited career preparation, restricted employment opportunities and enhanced negative judgements (Patton, 1998; Shealey & Lue, 2006; Lewis & Moore, 2008; Gay, 2018; NCES, 2017).

African American males continuously experience disproportionate representation and placement in special education, especially under the label of ED (Harry & Anderson, 1994). Students who are labeled with ED have the lowest educational outcomes as well as lower success rates in life than *any* other disability classification (Merrrell & Walker, 2004). This occurs not only due to the judgmental nature that society has placed on the disability, but also how students come to feel about themselves.

Although there is an abundant amount of research published illustrating the factors contributing to overrepresentation, not only are students' voices absent in the research, but seldom have there been any counter-narratives offered that hold these key stakeholders accountable. The stories of these students are one way to hold the system of special education accountable for these diagnoses and can expose the unethical consequences for the many African American students who have been misdiagnosed and placed in special education classes (Patton, 1998). It is imperative that student voice be included in the research to offer alternative narratives to the dominant ideology of special education. According to Patton (1998),

> It is essential that new ways of knowing and new types of knowledge producers are called upon to uncover the philosophical underpinnings of special education and replace them with a paradigm that expresses cultural "insider" knowledge, epistemologies and experiences that are social, political and cultural and speak in multilectal terms. (p. 29)

This insider knowledge can only come from those who have experienced the effects of this label firsthand. Few research studies have focused on students' perceptions of and experiences with being labeled as Emotionally Disturbed, as well as how they could use their voices to influence the dominant narrative and shift best practices to meet the needs of all students.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to privilege students' voices so that we can develop a further understanding about how the label of Emotionally Disturbed impacts African American males' educational experiences. The counter-stories collected

can inform and serve as a counterbalance to the dominant ideology that that entry into special education provides the effective teaching strategies necessary to serve the needs of students with Emotional Disturbance. These participants' reflections on their educational trajectories can allow us insight into any barriers and obstacles that these students faced as they negotiate the special education system. Understanding these experiences can inform what we know about improving access to the general education curriculum in order to avoid over-referral and identification of African American students for special education. This study used the tenets *Counter-Storytelling*, *Permanence of Racism* and *Whiteness as Property* through the theoretical framework of Critical Race Theory (CRT) to explore the present-day reality of the disproportionate placement and overrepresentation of African-American males diagnosed with Emotional Disturbance in special education.

Significance of the Study

This research study seeks to contribute to the current body of knowledge about overrepresentation and explore the consequences of the continual placement of African American males in special education labeled with emotional disturbance. This study is significant because it can provide an alternative narrative that can be used to counter the current deficit model employed in traditional special education settings about African American male students. African American male students' perspectives can inspire solutions that are student centered based off of their experiences. African American youth can benefit from this study because it can provide them with an avenue to share how the assessment, diagnoses, and placement processes might have led to them being falsely diagnosed or over-referred as emotionally disturbed. Further, this study shows how the

disability label of ED, determined to be judgmental and a result of a cultural mismatch between teachers and student, impacts students. The results of this study may be valuable for improving the referral process that relies on behavioral observations by teachers, which clash with social and cultural schooling norms, to diagnose students, often times removing them from the general education setting and negatively altering their life trajectory (Bradley, Doolittle, & Bartolotta, 2008; Cartledge, Kea, & Simmons-Reed, 2002; NCES, n.d.b). This study also opens up possibilities for students to reflect on "effective teaching strategies" that are shared widely in teacher education research but rarely assessed by the students themselves. By allowing students to voice their opinions on what strategies and supports teachers could have used to better grant them access to the curriculum, less African American students may be labeled as ED and placed in special education. Through this study, teachers can learn from student experience along with the racial and cultural implications of the referral process. This study also has the potential to shift the narrative on the best teaching practices that teachers can utilize in their classrooms. Too often, educational policies and strategies are crafted and designed by the dominant white culture, excluding the voices of students of color. By allowing African American males to share their experiences, a paradigm shift can emerge from only white adults determining what strategies work best for students to students informing adults on what works best for them. The results of this research study could lead to a change in teacher dispositions and practices to better support the educational and cultural needs of African American males as well as reduce the over-identification of students diagnosed as having emotional and behavioral challenges.

Theoretical Framework

This research employs understanding from two major theoretical frameworks and an emerging framework that was developed to account for the intersectionality of race and disability. First, I draw from Critical Race Theory to account for the way in which race and white privilege plays into the history, diagnostic and placement processes for African American males in special education. Next, I draw on Disability Studies in Education which pushes against the medical model, rejects deficit thinking and privileges the voices and experiences of people with disabilities. Finally, I draw on the emerging framework of DisCrit, which promotes the intersectionality of both race and disability and moves beyond the idea that they can operate as separate entities. Together, these three frameworks are useful theoretical mechanisms in understanding the overrepresentation of African American males in special education as well as their experience with being labeled as ED.

Critical Race Theory

Due to the racist history of American society, it is crucial to examine the role race plays in the educational experiences of African-American students. The issue of disproportionality can be credited, in part, to the intersection of race, culture, and disability. These factors cause students of color to be perceived or misperceived as incompetent, unworthy of a rigorous education, and not as intelligent as their White counterparts. The consequences that these misperceptions can have can diminish student-teacher interaction, negatively affect the implementation of effective teaching strategies, deny access to rigorous curriculum, assign harsher discipline policies and lower academic achievement for African Americans (Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Gallini, Simmons &

Feggins-Azziz, 2006; Howard, 2013; Kaplan, 2011). The idea that African American students are overrepresented in special education supports the belief that there are deep-rooted issues within the context of American schooling, namely, race and racism. In order to understand the role of race and racism in the disproportionality of African American males who are placed in special education, Critical Race Theory (CRT) will be used as a theoretical framework. CRT has been chosen as a framework for this study because it is a powerful theoretical and analytical tool that enables the examination of race in American education (Matias, Viesca, Garrison-Wade, Tandon, & Galindo, 2014). CRT presents a radical lens through which to understand, analyze, deconstruct and challenge racial inequality in society.

CRT dates back to the 1970s and was derived from the early legal movement called Critical Legal Studies (CLS). CLS, which challenged the customary liberal methodologies and approaches to legal ideology, was deemed a leftist legal movement. The aim of CLS was to deconstruct the form of discourse/scholarship that perpetuated a type of law that created structural inequalities and specifically addressed groups and individuals in social and cultural contexts (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Tate, 1997; Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller & Thomas, 1995). Although many scholars such as Derrick Bell, Richard Delgado, and Kimberlé Crenshaw originally related with the purpose behind CLS, they quickly came to the realization that it not only failed to recognize racism in its critique but it also positioned racism as the equivalent to class-based discrimination (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Crenshaw et. al, 1995).

CRT was then born out of the work of two discontent legal scholars, Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman, who were extremely distraught with the slow rate the United States

was generating racial reform (Ladson-Billings, 1998, Tate, 1997). Bell and Freeman were then joined by other legal scholars of color who displayed the same dissatisfaction with customary civil rights approaches and thus, CRT came to be. Although there are 6 tenets that characterize CRT, the central role of them all revolves around the notion that racism is normal in U.S. society. According to Bell (1992), racism is so ingrained in the structure and composition of U.S. social order that it appears both ordinary and widely accepted to the majority of citizens in this culture. In fact, racism is so pervasive that Bell termed it a permanent fixture of American life (Bell, 1992). CRT puts forward the argument that White people have predominantly benefited from civil rights legislation. Therefore, under the premise of CRT, it is a responsibility to expose and reveal all aspects of racism (Gillborn, 2009).

The 6 tenets of CRT are: Counter-Storytelling; The Permanence of Racism; Whiteness as Property; Interest Convergence; Critique of Liberalism; and Intersectionality. For the purposes of this study, I will be using 3 tenets of CRT as a lens to explore how race and racism contribute to the overrepresentation of African American males in special education. The first tenet I will use is T*he Permanence of Racism*, which states that racism is a standard, common, and a permanent component in American life and society. Given that by definition the *Permanence of Racism* suggests that race is present in all facets of society including hierarchical structures, schooling is very much included in that hierarchical structure. More specifically, special education is very much steeped in legal proceedings. It is a legislative act which, as research and data has shown, aims to protect White Americas. The disproportionate number of African-American students in special education compared to White students strongly suggests that race

plays a critical factor in such referrals for classification as ED.

The second tenet I will use is *Whiteness as Property*. Throughout history and to the present day, *Whiteness as Property* has operated as a means to award social benefits to those who were born with it and to suppress those who were not. According to Harris (1993), the history of *Whiteness as Property* dates back to the days of slavery when being white was equated to a person being legally free and blackness was defined as being a slave. Within our educational system, whiteness as property has become the sole indicator of who not only creates educational policies and practices but also who has the means to acquire the benefits of education through the value of their skin color (Harris, 1993). For this reason, communities with more whiteness find themselves with having higher intellectual property equating to higher funded schools which provide enhanced resources, advanced curriculum, higher academic success rates, better access, and more qualified teaching staff (Harris, 1993). When looking at the overrepresentation of African American males in special education through this lens, there is no question why the educational system was created to fail students of color and repeat history by placing them in more segregated settings. A perfect example of this is what happened after the legal decision of *Brown vs Board of Education*. It was speculated that special education was created as another legal act to continue the segregation of Black and Brown students from their White counterparts in schools (Patton, 1998). Now, special education became available as a means to separate African American students in legal ways, replacing forms of Jim Crowism and slavery (Patton, 1998).

The third and most critical tenet this study is centered around is *counter-storytelling*. As will be done in this study, CRT utilizes counter-storytelling to challenge

the assumptions and stereotypes about the African American race that ultimately strips them of their cultural capital, causing society to place them in inferior positions (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). By using stories, narratives, testimonios, and folk tales, counter-storytelling gives voice to marginalized classes and communities and allows them to share their stories around what life is really like for them living beyond the margins of society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Utilizing participant voice delivers a way for those who have been oppressed to communicate their lived experiences and realities. This is a crucial step in understanding the intricacies of racism and creating procedures that dismantle structural inequalities (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Not only is counter-storytelling a successful method to decipher and understand the real factors and regular encounters of African-Americans through the perspective of racism and prejudice, but it also challenges the popular narrative and dominant belief system that society deems as more important. In education, the dominant narrative revolves around policies and procedures that ensure the success of the dominant culture. Oftentimes, curricula and best teaching practices are designed by white people and disseminated to white teachers, regardless of who is sitting in their classroom. This can lead to unfulfilling experiences for African American students at best, and worse, to cultural mismatches that lead white teachers to see African American students as disabled.

By allowing African American students to share their educational experiences, their voices are being honored and valued, and their realities are being redefined from what society has regarded as nonexistent. It is clear that the voices of African Americans are absent in the research about overrepresentation and this study aims to change that.

Disability Studies in Education

The academic discipline of Disability Studies in Education (DSE) emerged from the interdisciplinary field of Disability Studies (DS). DSE was formally founded in 1999 by a group of about 30 disability researchers from around the world whose main purpose was to forge new alternatives to traditional special education research (Baglieri, Valle, Connor & Gallagher, 2011). Historically, traditional understandings of disability within special education have been founded on notions of disability deriving from scientific, psychological and medical model frameworks, which has thus prevented the further progression in the field and instead created segregated policies for how students with disabilities are educated (Collins, Connor, Ferri, Gallagher & Samson, 2016).

Pushing against the medical model, which is centered around deficit and theorizes disability as being an individualistic trait in need of diagnosis and treatment, DS proposes the social model of disability (Valle & Connor, 2011). This social model faults the environment and the social constructs that are put in place that create disabilities rather than focusing on what the individual is capable of doing despite the environmental barriers (Schwitzman, 2019). Emerging from DS, Disability Studies in Education continues to reject deficit thinking focused on educational contexts and aims to dismantle school environments in which students with disabilities are stigmatized and seen as the problem. In addition, the philosophy of DSE is to value, listen to and learn from the voices and experiences of persons with disabilities, rather than marginalize them (Connor, Gabel, Gallagher, and Morton, 2008).

Although DSE scholars understand that the perspective of disability being a social construct has certain limitations when examining specific disabilities that have medical

and/or painful aspects to them (Connor et al., 2008), at its core, DSE re-conceptualizes disability and holds true to the notion that disability takes place through human expectations and connections in social contexts (Baglieri, Valle, Connor & Gallagher, 2011) and is simply another aspect of human diversity that is part of someone's identity (Erevelles & Minear, 2010). Because of this, DSE scholars continuously push back on the notion that simply placing or including students with disabilities in general education classrooms is sufficient and instead promote an inclusive stance that questions the obstacles to learning that all students face (Schwitzman, 2019).

Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit)

Informed by Critical Race Theory and Disability Studies in Education, Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) offers a new framework to give a more clearer picture of the ways in which racism and ableism are deeply intersected (Annamma, Connor & Ferri, 2013). Moving beyond a unidimensional comprehension of race and ability, DisCrit offers a "dual analysis of race and ability" (Annamma et al, 2013, p.1) and posits that "race does not exist outside of ability and ability does not exist outside of race" (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2013, p.6).

Although CRT and DSE have both provided a unique lens in which to examine the lives of students with disabilities of color, there was a disconnect between the two in which they respectively solely focused on one component of identity (race) or method of oppression (disability) as opposed to looking at them together (Annamma, Ferri & Connor, 2018). Questions of disability remain largely underexplored in CRT and similarly, questions about race have largely been absent from DSE. Together as well as separately, both CRT and DSE have failed to effectively address intersectionality by

exclusively centering conversations around structural inequalities on one-dimensional justifications (Annamma et al, 2018, p.49). In education, there is a belief that race, as an individual, singular characteristic, has impact on a student's ability to learn. Very often, researchers will make claims in relation to race and learning without providing any theoretical explanation or rationale used to study it, which in turn becomes detrimental to students of color who very often reap the negative consequences of those claims (Connor, Cavendish, Gonzalez & Jean-Pierre, 2019). For example, stating that Black students are more likely to drop out of high school than White students invokes a negative racial hierarchy and is extremely problematic due to the fact that it allows for race to be used as a singular, non-intersectional tool to determine a student's ability to be successful (Connor et al, 2019).

Through the lens of traditional special education, disability has functioned as a way to "other" students who were viewed from a deficit lens for having differences. DisCrit scholars aim to expose and dismantle deep rooted inequities in education by opening the door to new opportunities to not only study but deeply examine and analyze how intersecting methods and systems of oppression target students at the margins of Whiteness and ability (Annamma et al, 2018). DisCrit scholars also call attention to labeling and diagnosing practices connected to traditional special education that appear to be not only maintaining but also expanding racial segregation among students, making the case for why disability and race warrant examination through an intersectional lens (Erevelles, 2002; Harry & Klingner, 2006; Artiles, 2013).

Although DSE and CRT are useful theoretical tools in conceptualizing how race and ability shape educational discourses and experiences independent of one another,

"DisCrit aims to create new knowledge rooted in intersectional commitments, seeks to understand how interlocking oppressions of racism and ableism work in tandem, and pushes the boundaries of intersectionality" (Annamma et al., 2018, p. 63). As an intersectional framework, DisCrit has allowed scholars to reveal the social constructs that enable the continuation of deep-seated inequities in education as well as trace how racism and ableism cannot be mutually exclusive in the search for equity.

Background and Need

Schooling and African American Students

The problem of the overrepresentation of African American males in special education is not a new one. An understanding of the educational history for African American students in the United States is essential in order to comprehend why overrepresentation of African American males in special education is a prejudiced and racial issue in our present reality. For over 300 years, African Americans have received less than equal treatment in the United States, which extends to their educational experience. Prior to *Brown vs. The Board of Education* in 1954, two educational systems existed; one for African Americans and one for White Americans. These two separate systems existed due to Jim Crow in which the entire society was divided by law in accordance with their race. Not only were African American students not allowed to attend schools with White Americas, but there was a disparaging difference in the level of educational resources that were allotted to African Americans. Through the forms of Jim Crowism, slavery and placement in special education, African American students have experienced segregation, prohibition and exclusion by the dominant culture (Patton, 1998; Noguera, 2005; Holmes, 2017). After the *Brown vs. The Board of Education* in

1954, which is thought to be the most important civil rights case in the 20th century because it overturned separate but equal doctrine, it was speculated that special education was created as another way to continue the segregation of Black and Brown students from their White counterparts in schools (Patton, 1998). Special education became available as a means to separate African American students in legal ways, replacing forms of Jim Crowism and slavery (Patton, 1998). Harry and Anderson (1994) reveal that even after segregation in schools ended, concentrated efforts to keep African American students separate from White students were still happening. Moreover, when legal mandates for students with disabilities were enacted, the overrepresentation of African American students in special education programs became prevalent (Harry & Anderson, 1994). According to Dunn (1968), the practices used to place students in special education were described as morally and educationally wrong and he contended that the needs of socio-culturally diverse students with learning differences were not effectively being met in special education classes. Dunn's examination allowed for the recognition and acknowledgment of racial discrimination in general education and the unacceptable placement of African American males in special education.

The Creation of Special Education and its Effects on African American Students

Special education was then created as a separate but parallel system to general education. Rather than extend general education to meet the needs of disabled students, a different and separate system was put in place through federal legislation. Entitled the Education for All Handicapped Act of 1974, later changed in 1990, and most widely known now as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), this federal law mandated that every student with a disability be entitled to a free and appropriate public

education (FAPE), to receive their education in the least restrictive environment (LRE) and nondiscriminatory evaluation measures. The idea behind special education was to provide support and specific services to children with disabilities in order to access the general education curriculum. What special education was not intended to be was a separate place (outside of the general education setting) where students who needed help in order to learn were sent (Losen & Weiner, 2001). Unfortunately, enacting this system of special education had unintended consequences and has led to the continual marginalization of African American students (Blanchett, 2009). One way this happens is through the subjective labels, such as ED.

Diagnosis and Overrepresentation

Today, there are 13 categories of disability. These categories include autism, developmental disability, specific learning disability, intellectual impairment, emotional and/or behavioral disability, intellectual disability, speech and language disability, deaf-blind, visual impairment, hearing impairment, orthopedic or physical impairment, other health impaired (including attention deficit disorder), multiple disabilities, and traumatic brain injury (Banks, 2014). Out of these disability categories, some are clinical diagnoses and some are termed judgmental. A clinical diagnosis incorporates a thorough clinical assessment by a doctor and proper standardized testing to determine the diagnosis, identify the seriousness of the effect of the disability, and communicate the students' capacities, limitations, and requirement for modifications (Mehan, 1996; Banks, 2014; Allen & Honchon, 2013). In the disability categories where these clinical diagnoses are made, African American students are not overrepresented.

Subjective diagnoses refer to the disability categories in which observations, interviews and rating scales, conducted by a school psychologist, conducted by a school psychologist who is expected to use clinical judgement, are used to determine eligibility. Establishing the existence of a disability in this situation may be harder due to the unsupported subjective report of the interviewees as well as the observations completed may not be considered sufficiently reliable evidence (Mehan, 1996). Of the 13 disability categories, Emotional and Behavioral Disturbance falls under the subjective category, which also houses an extreme overrepresentation of African American students.

A report published by the National Research Council (2002), showed that the disability categories in which the criteria for diagnosis is solely grounded on the basis of clinical judgment are also those with the highest rate of disproportionality. These disability categories include: Educable Mental Retardation, Emotional/Behavioral Disorders, and Learning Disability. On the flip side of this, categories such as deafness or visual impairment do not show certain ethnicities disproportionately represented due to the diagnosis being based on biologically or physically verifiable conditions. More recently, according to the US Department of Education 38th annual report to Congress regarding IDEA (2016):

> "Black or African American students ages 6 through 21 were 2.08 and
> 2.22 times more likely to be served under IDEA, Part B, for emotional
> disturbance and intellectual disabilities, respectively, than were the
> students ages 6 through 21 in all other racial/ethnic groups combined. The
> risk ratio for Black or African American students ages 6 through 21 was
> larger than the risk ratio for the students ages 6 through 21 in all other

racial/ethnic groups combined for every disability category except autism

(0.99), deaf-blindness (0.76), and orthopedic impairments (0.86)" (xxvi).

The public-school population nationwide is composed of roughly 17% African

American students and out of that percentage, 27.3% receive special education services

for ED and are 1.92 times more likely to be diagnosed with ED in comparison to

Caucasian students (McKenna, 2013).

Subjective Labels and the African American Student

For many years, the federal definition of emotional disturbance has caused a great

deal of debate and controversy (Theodore, Akin-Little, & Little, 2004). It was not until

the 1997 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), that

emotional disturbance (ED) formally became a disability category (Theodore et al.,

2004). In order to be identified or "diagnosed" as emotionally disturbed, one must fit into

one or more of the following five domains: 1. an inability to learn that cannot be

explained by intellectual, sensory, or health problems; 2. an inability to build or maintain

relationships; 3. inappropriate behavior or feelings; 4. pervasive mood of unhappiness or

depression; and 5. a tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears (Theodore et al.,

2004).

Unlike many other disability diagnoses, the people within the environment of the

child, which is almost always the teacher, use their subjective norms to determine the

criterion for disturbance. In areas such as reading or math, educators can use specific

grade level benchmarks to determine student performance levels and make inferences on

how to best support the student. Contrary to this, there are no such benchmarks available

for educators to make inferences or determine student performance in the

social/emotional domain (Eaves, 1982). Unlike other domains, when a teacher attempts to conceptualize social/emotional adjustment, they must deal with behaviors that they may find to be desirable (i.e. friendliness, dependability, honesty) and they must also deal with "unwanted" behavior such as foul language, fighting, and noncompliance (Eaves, 1982). This subjective definition leaves too much room for interpretation and aids in the overrepresentation of African American males diagnosed with emotional disturbance.

Nondiscriminatory Evaluations

Before being able to discuss the role that referral and assessment has on the disparate rates of African-American males in special education, an examination at the subjective nature of the definition must first take place. Currently, educational teams are utilizing a definition that has not been effective nor changed over time when assessing for eligibility under emotional disturbance (McKenna, 2013). The National Mental Health and Special Education coalition recommended the use of an updated description of the characteristics which would classify a student as having ED with a section declaring that the current definition is conflicting with cultural or ethnic standards and changing it would alleviate the overrepresentation of a specific group of students being classified (McKenna, 2013). In spite of this suggestion, the federal definition still contains language such as "long period of time," "marked degree," and "inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances," causing the identification process to be extremely biased, prejudiced and subjective with an observer's perceptions being the sole determining factor of a behavior being evidenced as a disability (McKenna, 2013).

The referral process is spearheaded by teacher perception. Teacher perception coupled with the vagueness and subjectivisms rooted in the definition for diagnosis and

the inherit biases in the informal judgments that teachers make as well as the assessment process contribute to the disproportionate referrals of African American students (Patton, 1998). To clarify, the diagnosis of emotionally disturbed does not rely on standardized assessment instruments, and the teacher's decision to refer a child is the most crucial step in the process. Given that each teacher has their own perception about both physical and verbal appropriate behavior, this creates an inconsistent referral process based on cultural preferences.

After the initial referral process, students must be assessed to determine eligibility in order to receive special education services. This is perhaps the most widely criticized part when diagnosing students with ED. In order to acquire the functional and developmental data about the student, a variation of non-standardized assessment tools and approaches are used. During this process, the educational team, which consists of the teacher, parents and an assigned school psychologist, will conduct a series of interviews, observations and complete rating scales to determine if a student is eligible. Although the school psychologist will take the interviews into consideration, there is more importance placed on observations and rating scales which further promote the issues of subjectivity. During these observations, district assigned school psychologists, who are strangers to the student being observed, will conduct a minimum of 1 observation in the classroom setting. While observing, a behavioral checklist observation form is filled out with notes on the behaviors the student was displaying in order to increase the chance of making a correct assumption. Along with observations, rating scales identify characteristics of emotional disturbance and the extent of behaviors (intensity, frequency). They also identify the observations of those who regularly engage with the individual (e.g., teacher,

parent). Both of these measurements for diagnosis produce elevated possibilities of misdiagnosis on the bases of judgement.

Consequences of the Label

The mislabeling of children, especially in their early years, can have negative academic, social and emotional implications throughout school and into adulthood. The ramifications of this negative and often times mislabeling of children include, but are not limited, to increased school dropout rates, academic underachievement, transfer into the juvenile court system, and eventually the state jail and federal prison system (Eaves, 1982). Research has shed light on this issue, however, very few studies have been exclusively dedicated to exposing the truth behind the high-incidence emotional disturbance label (Eaves, 1982) and even less have included student voice.

The negative implications for students labeled as emotionally disturbed are far worse than any other disability category. Students with ED have a higher chance of being placed in restrictive educational settings and drop out of school as compared with all students with disabilities (Merrell & Walker, 2004). Within 3 years of leaving school, more than 50% of ED students have had at least one arrest (Merrell & Walker, 2004). African American males who were classified as Emotionally Disturbed or as having an Emotional and Behavior Disability/Disorder (ED) demonstrate the poorest educational, social, and behavioral outcomes of any other disability group (Serpell, Hayling, Stevenson, & Kern, 2009). Only 28 percent of African American students with ED graduate from high school, and as many as 50 percent drop out of school (Serpell et al., 2009).

Research Questions

This research study is developed around three main questions. They are:

1) How do African American males in special education labeled as ED describe their educational experiences both before and after receiving the label?

2) How do African American male students understand the implications of being labeled as ED? How do they perceive this diagnosis playing a role/affecting their future?

3) What teacher specific supports do African American males labeled as ED, believe would have positively changed their experience in a general education setting?

Definition of Terms

Throughout this paper, the words overrepresentation and disproportionality/disproportionate will be used interchangeably. By definition, **overrepresentation** is having a higher percentage of representatives than the average as a whole (Merriam-Webster). In regards to special education, Shippen, Curtis and Miller (2009) defined overrepresentation as a minority population, specifically African Americans, being over identified more frequently than their white peers with a disability and placed in a special education program. Similarly, Harry and Anderson (1994) defined overrepresentation as a group of students in special education programs being represented in such programs at a higher rate in comparison to their proportion in which they are represented in the school population as a whole.

Disproportionality is described as a represented group in a specific category that has exceeded their expectation for that group or varies significantly from the overall

representation of others in that category (Skiba, Simmons, Ritter, Gibb, Rausch, Cuadrado & Chung, 2008). Although disproportionate representation can seem easily detectable through the naked eye, measuring it can be quite complex. Generally, there are two approaches that can be taken when assessing for a disproportionate representation of a specific group. First, one may evaluate the degree in which a group is comparatively over or underrepresented in a category to their percentage in the larger population as a whole. Second, one may evaluate the degree to which a specific group is receiving services or qualifies for services at a percentage that is either higher or lower than other groups (Skiba et al., 2008).

Summary

The field of special education has historically been controlled by the assumptions, beliefs, viewpoints, and processes of the dominant culture, therefore eradicating the African American experience. Within special education exists an enormous and immense divide between the social, political and cultural backgrounds and experiences of those in power who create knowledge and those African American students who are studied, placed and overrepresented in special education (Patton, 1998). For this reason alone, there is a need for this study to be conducted and shared with the stakeholders that create educational policies, strategies and structures.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research reveals that the number of African-American male students placed special education has been a persistent problem for over four decades. Schools in America have used mild disability categories such as emotional disturbance in special education to categorize students based on the foundation of perceived disability, which has then led to black and brown students being overrepresented in special education. Subsequently, students of color are historically affected by having the highest probability for being placed in special education in addition to being moved to segregated school settings (Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachman, 2005). African Americans are more likely to qualify for special education services and be labeled as specific learning disabled, intellectually disabled or emotionally disturbed (Bollmer, Bethel, Garrison-Mogren, & Brown, 2007; Coutinho, Oswald, & Best, 2002). Cultural mismatch, unexamined biases and assumptions, and stereotypes of African-Americans contribute to the high rate of special education referrals for African-American males (Sullivan & Bal, 2013). Once eligible for special education services, it has been shown that African American males spend more time in restrictive settings, are given remedial instruction, are given less chances to gain access to the general education curriculum and classroom setting, and have higher chances of being alienated from their non-disabled peers (Blanchett, 2009). This has then resulted in the marginalization of students of color, causing vast disproportionality among African American males in reaching academic success, leading to historically poor educational outcomes.

Although there are various disability diagnoses, the assessment criteria for ways in which they are assigned or labeled varies based on the disability. Because of this, some scholars argue that disproportionality or overrepresentation is an issue that only applies to "judgmental," "mild" or "soft" disability categories such as emotional disturbance (Sullivan & Bal, 2013). "Judgmental" or "subjective" disabilities are those whose diagnoses are not based on provable biological data but rather clinical judgment and opinion (Harry & Anderson, 1994). According to Harry & Anderson (1994), there are five disability categories that are susceptible to bias because of the role that judgment plays in the diagnosis; these categories are Emotional Disturbance (ED), Educable Mental Retardation (EMR), Learning Disability (LD), Speech Impairment (SI), and Trainable Mental Retardation (TMR).

Specifically, with the diagnosis of emotional disturbance, African American male students incessantly experience disproportionate reputation and placement in special education (Harry & Anderson, 1994). As stated by Merrell & Walker (2004), students who are labeled with Emotional Disturbance have the lowest educational outcomes as well as the lowest success rates in life, greater than any other disability classification due to the judgmental nature of aggression that society has placed on the disability. The educational system seems to be failing African-American boys, and has been for several decades.

It has been widely noted that current identification methods tend to over-identify culturally and linguistically diverse students as having disabilities; therefore, many agree that the special education identification process is flawed and needs to be re-vamped (Sullivan & Bal, 2013). Teachers are the primary "judges" when referring a student to

special education. As part of their job, general education teachers assume the responsibility of the pre-special education referral process, where they gather the necessary documents for referral to special education, and then collect data about the student's performance, noting if the student benefits from typical classroom instruction and procedures (Soodak & Podell, 1993). For a student who is not making significant gains according to the teacher, the next step is intervention. This entails informal assessments and observations that compare the student to his "normally functioning" peers. If the given interventions are not proving to be beneficial in allowing the student to access to the general education curriculum, students are then referred for formal evaluation and the possible delivery of special education services (Soodak & Podell, 1993).

In this section, I review the scholarly literature that has addressed the overrepresentation of African American males in the category of ED. First, background information regarding the history of special education and the cultural deficit model is provided. Next, an overview of the disabilities covered under IDEA is provided along with an in depth look at the current federal definition of ED and its problematic terminology. From there, follows a discussion Emotional Disturbance as a disability category, specifically, evaluation and referral practices. After that, culture and race in the classroom are examined, along with Critical Race Theory. Lastly, recommendations for future studies and gaps missing in the literature are discussed.

Theoretical Framework

Critical Race Theory

In order to begin to address the reasons for why African American male students are overrepresented in special education, an examination of CRT is necessary. The notion that African American students are over-represented in special education leads to the belief that there is a deep-rooted issue within the context of American schooling; race and racism. In order to understand the role that race and racism play in African American males being overrepresented in special education, three tenets of Critical Race Theory will be used. Critical Race Theory has been chosen as a framework for this literature review due to it being a powerful theoretical and analytical tool that enables the examination of race in American education (Matias, Viesca, Garrison-Wade, Tandon, & Galindo, 2014). CRT not only focuses directly on race and racism and the perpetuating systems of white supremacy (Delgado & Stefanic, 2017; Matsuda, 2018; Crenshaw & Bonis, 2005) but it also aims to promote social change to combat the inequities that marginalized people face (Crenshaw & Bonis, 2005).

Counter-Storytelling

According to Delgado and Stefanic (2017), counter-storytelling is an essential tenet of CRT. Scholars use CRT as a way to challenge the assumptions and negative stereotypes about race, which perpetually demotes African Americans to lesser and poorer positions in society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013). It is a technique that "aims to cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones held by the majority" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013 p. 144). Historically, recounting stories has been a solution for minorities to heal the torment and pain incurred by racial oppression

(Delgado, 1989). This component of giving voice offers a way to convey the realities and experiences of those who are oppressed, which Ladson-Billings and Tate (2006) assert is first step in comprehending the complexities of racism and establishing a process to rectify the legal reparations owed. CRT scholars utilize parables, stories, chronicles, and narratives to make sense and unravel the realities and daily experiences of African Americans through the racism lens. Ladson-Billings & Tate (2006) state, "The story of one's condition leads to the realization of how one came to be oppressed and subjugated and allows one to stop inflicting mental violence on oneself" (p. 57).

Since White Americas are often ignorant to the fact that their actions are oppressive towards minorities, having people of color name their own realities with their experiences and stories can impact the oppressor (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006). Delgado (1989) claims that White Americas rationalize their power and maintain their privilege in society with stories and narratives that construct their realities, causing insufficient room for self-examination. For self-examination to occur, Ladson-Billings and Tate (2006) feel it's imperative that the realities and experiences of African Americans are communicated in a way that White Americas can hear and make sense of in order to provoke self-reflection and divulge the impact of their behaviors.

Not only is counter-storytelling an essential instrument to challenge the discourses that perpetuate racial stereotypes, it is also a vital method to dismantle the racism that is so prevalent in education (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Counter-storytelling empowers African American students by recreating popular beliefs in and out of the classroom. In order to deeply understand the educational system, hearing the voices of people of color is needed. Delpit (1988) contends that one of the greatest heartbreaks in the field of

education is the eradication and silencing of the dialogue of people of color. In education, counter-storytelling can play a crucial role in making sense of the underachievement of African American students as many CRT scholars have utilized counter-stories to emphasize how race and racism operate in certain settings, such as the general education classroom (Barnes, 1990). CRT challenges white privilege and asserts that the school curriculum overwhelmingly silences, ignores, and distorts the realities and shared experiences of African-Americans (Bernal, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2009).

An example of counter-storytelling is Berry's (2008) study focusing on eight Black male middle school students who experienced success in mathematics. Through observations, interviews and the student's mathematical autobiographies, Berry was able to better understand the experiences of African American male students who achieved the opportunities to take advanced middle school math classes. This study brought to light the power that White teachers have over the educational access granted to African American males being placed in advanced math classes. Despite demonstrating the academic abilities to be placed in a gifted math class, four out of the five students had not been recommended by their teachers to be in these math classes due to the teachers' negative perceptions of the students as being childish and not displaying appropriate behaviors that would be suited for gifted classes. This study serves as a vital counter-story to the negative perceptions of African American males as having low academic achievement or being uninterested in education (Ross & Stevenson, 2018). This study also highlighted the negative effects that teacher perceptions of African American male behavior has on African American student's access to advanced academic classes and potential positive educational outcomes being denied due to teachers' perceptions of

African American male behavior being seen as inappropriate (Ross & Stevenson, 2018). The stories of the participants in Berry's (2008) study serve as valuable counter-stories because they reveal instances of African American male academic success despite the negative role that the student's teachers played as, what should have been, educational gatekeepers providing all students with opportunities to succeed. For African American kids and guardians, counter-stories imply that their voices and experiences are no longer quieted by the presumptions of others; rather, their stories are utilized to look at different methods of knowing and understanding (Ross & Stevenson, 2018; Ellison & Solomon, 2019).

Permanence of Race

In order to understand the role that racism has enacted and continues to enact in society, CRT scholars must acknowledge that racism is a permanent part of American society and assume a realistic view (Bell, 1987). CRT researchers start with the idea that racism is normal. They affirm that racism has become an essential, inescapable, prevalent and standardized approach to shape society (Delgado and Stefanic, 2013). Utilizing CRT is fundamental and a key step in fighting oppression in schools (Bell, 1992). As per Bell (1992), CRT is neither a theoretical framework of desperation or surrender, yet more precisely, a framework of opposition, confrontation and a reclamation of mankind for all oppressed people. CRT researchers further state that White Americans shaped and constructed race and racism to serve their personal circumstances and have utilized it to steal land and oppress minorities. In spite of the fact that racism has changed and taken on new practices and procedures, it keeps on profiting White Americans and results in

African American's unequal access to housing, occupations, money, and quality education.

The permanence of race impacts all societal structures for the benefit of White Americans, including schooling. Ladson-Billings and Tate (2006) supposed that the distinct difference among White Americans and African-Americans' school success and accomplishment ought not be astounding, for it is the legitimate and unsurprising side-effect of race and racism. They claimed that race matters and should be carefully dissected when looking at the reasons for injustices in education (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 2006). To repeat, CRT researchers declare that racism is unavoidable and profoundly rooted in U.S. society. CRT scholars also assert that the high poverty levels of African Americans and the condition of their schools, educational rigor and access are the consequences of systemic and institutionalized racism (Delgado and Stefancic, 2013). Considering the fact that race is permanent and embedded in U.S. society, CRT is an essential framework through which to prime and coach educators on how to successfully teach multicultural classrooms to ensure the academic success of African American males. It is extremely imperative for African-American males to be equally granted access to high quality education, and for people with great influence on education reform to recognize that racism is present, inescapable and widespread within U.S. society in order to enact change (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 2006).

Whiteness as Property

White Americas' control of property, power and privilege has prompted a longstanding and dangerous consequence of racism—the development of whiteness as a definitive property (Harris, 1993). Whiteness as property proposes certain

advantages/compensations for acting white. It standardizes white conduct and sets it as the norm, while simultaneously limiting non-white behavior. As per Harris (1993), property proprietorship has presented specific rights and advantages to White Americas that African-American students have normally not had. Traditionally, White Americas have exploited these rights and advantages to gain assets and opportunities to serve their personal matters (Zamudio, Russell, Rios, and Bridgeman, 2011).

CRT researchers declare that one of the most considerable advantages White Americas have gotten from racial manipulation is financial gain through educational opportunities afforded to them (Zamudio et al., 2011). Through the access of education, white communities have accrued substantial wealth, more prestige job opportunities, housing and better resources (Zamudio et al., 2011). For instance, in special education, white guardians are more familiar with and well-informed of their legal rights to the resources awarded to them and their child with special needs. White guardians will in general come into Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings with more knowledge and vocabulary around how to obtain specific services that will aide in educational success for their child. On the other hand, parents of minority students in special education are normally less informed and knowledgeable of the laws and resources accessible to them, causing them to not be able to advocate as effectively in the interest their child (Lavine, 2010).

According to Blanchett (2006), White Americas disregard how the educational system benefits them to the detriment of minority students. She attested that White Americas have control over the educational standards and therefore, the school curriculum to establish what is fundamental and taught in schools. In particular, she

referenced master scripting to depict the control White Americas have on the curriculum and instruction. She stated that master scripting is the act of silencing and/or completely deleting minority stories if they threaten or challenge the power of the dominant race (Blanchett, 2006). As a result, African-American males struggle to access a curriculum that speaks to them, gives them a voice, as well as connects with their day to day lives and encounters. This omission of accurate representation in school curriculums is further exacerbated when the families of African American male students are steered to believe that by receiving special education services, their child would be provided access to quality curriculum and instruction (Blanchett, 2009). In reality though, African American male students receive remedial instruction, spend considerably more time in segregated special education classrooms and have less access to their non-disabled peers when they are diagnosed as needing special education services (Moore, Henfield, &Owens 2008). This further adds to the widening of the achievement gap between white and African American students.

Within U.S. society, education is centered around property rights rather than human rights and those who own better property feel more qualified for better quality schools. Alternately, school districts that serve African-American students are less likely to receive equal funding for resources, placing students at an enormous disadvantage. Ladson-Billings and Tate (2006) contended that rigorous school curriculum and instruction have been explicitly established to profit white students. Ladson-Billings and Tate (2006) explained that programs such as advanced placement courses have always excluded the involvement and admission of African American students, leading to another example as to how schools have become re-segregated and how inequalities are

so prevalent in education through the denial of opportunities to better prepare African American students for college or post-secondary careers.

A Brief History of Special Education

A brief history of special education is necessary in order to understand how it functions in today's schools. Thanks to the civil rights movement, universal schooling for students regardless of disability was inspired and fought for by advocates who believed in equality and solidarity. The inspiration and strategic approaches used by such advocates arose from the efforts of the civil rights movement. People with disabilities insisted and in turn helped to create the first national special education legislation. Subsequently, the Bureau of Education for the Handicapped was created in 1975, and the Education for all Handicapped Children Act (EHA) was passed (Blanchett, Klingner, & Harry, 2009). Through this act, students with handicapping conditions were required to be granted a free and appropriate public education (Martin, Martin & Terman, 1996). The act, which was reauthorized with a title change in 1983, 1997 and most recently in 2004 was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). IDEA authorizes local school districts to provide students with disabilities from the ages of 3 to 21 free special education services. Students must to classified as disabled in one of the 13 disability categories in order to receive these services. These categories are autism, developmental disability, specific learning disability, intellectual impairment, emotional and/or behavioral disability, intellectual disability, speech and language disability, deaf-blind, visual impairment, hearing impairment, orthopedic or physical impairment, other health impaired (including attention deficit disorder), multiple disabilities, and traumatic brain injury (Banks, 2014). Depending on the disability category as well as the severity of

the disability, students may be placed in different educational settings ranging from general education settings, self-contained classrooms, segregated specialized schools or even residential programs.

In 1975, the passage of the Education for all Handicapped Children Act (EHA) allowed the special education and desegregation movements to became one. Unfortunately, this meant that educational systems began framing their belief systems around the notion that students who did not fit the status quo or appeared different from the majority were deficit and hence, disabled. This belief lead to decisions about how to best educate students. Students of color, specifically African Americans, who were now allowed to attend schools with White students, were being placed in special education programs at terrifying percentages in comparison to their population in school as a whole (Blanchett, Klingner, Harry, 2009). Although the Education for all Handicapped Children Act and now the IDEA represented the fulfillment of society's goal of equity, it is highly ironic that one of the gravest issues facing the field today is the racial disparity among the rates of those who receive special education services (Skiba et al., 2008).

Overrepresentation and Disproportionality

Throughout this paper, the words overrepresentation and disproportionality/disproportionate will be used interchangeably. By definition, overrepresentation is having a higher percentage of representatives than the average as a whole (Merriam-Webster). In regards to special education, Shippen, Curtis and Miller (2009) defined overrepresentation as a minority population, specifically African Americans, being over identified more frequently than their white peers with a disability and placed in a special education program. Similarly, Harry and Anderson (1994) defined

overrepresentation as a group of particular students being represented in special education at higher rates in comparison to their proportion in which they are represented in the school population as a whole.

Disproportionality is described as a represented group in a specific category that has exceeded their expectation from the total representation of others in that category (Skiba, Simmons, Ritter, Gibb, Rausch, Cuadrado & Chung, 2008). Although disproportionate representation can seem easily detectable through the naked eye, measuring it can be quite complex. Generally, there are two approaches that can be taken when assessing for a disproportionate representation of a specific group. First, one may evaluate the degree to which a group is comparatively over or underrepresented in a category to their percentage in the larger population as a whole. Second, one may evaluate the degree to which a specific group is receiving services or qualifies for services at a percentage that is either higher or lower than other groups (Skiba et al., 2008). Disproportionality has been an issue since special education was created.

For over 40 years, the disproportionality of African Americans in special education has overwhelmed special education. It was addressed head-on in the 1997 reauthorization of IDEA but continues today. To try to counteract the problem of overrepresentation, the 1997 reauthorization of IDEA emphasized the significance of "preventing the intensification of problems connected with mislabeling and high dropout rates among minority children with disabilities" (p. 265) and that determination has been made stronger in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (Skiba et al., 2008).

Again in 2004, the IDEA Improvement Act lawfully acknowledges

disproportionality within special education programs as problematic (IDEA 2004, Public

Law No. 108-446). The findings shared in this IDEA Improvement Act noted that:

> (A) Greater efforts are needed to prevent the intensification of problems connected with mislabeling and high dropout rates among minority children with disabilities.

> (B) More minority children continue to be served in special education than would be expected from the percentage of minority students in the general school population.

> (C) African-American children are identified as having mental retardation and emotional disturbance at rates greater than their White counterparts.

> (D) In the 1998–1999 school year, African-American children represented just 14.8 percent of the population aged 6 through 21, but comprised 20.2 percent of all children with disabilities.

> (E) Studies have found that schools with predominately White students and teachers have placed disproportionately high numbers of their minority students into special education.

These findings, still relevant today, are troubling. If teachers are the gatekeepers, in many

instances, to who is and who isn't referred for special education services, why are African

American male students being over-identified in the disability category to ED?

A report published by the National Research Council in 2002, showed that the

disability categories solely grounded on the basis of clinical judgment are also those with

the highest rate of disproportionality. These disability categories are: Educable Mental

Retardation, Emotional/Behavioral Disorders, and Learning Disability. On the other end,

disabilities such as deafness or visual impairment do not show certain ethnicities

disproportionately represented due to the diagnosis being based on biologically or

physically verifiable conditions. When the overrepresentation data for the three most

frequent disability categories-MR, ED, and LD-is analyzed, it becomes clear that African

American students are not only overrepresented in special education, but are also given the most stigmatizing disability classifications. (Jordan, 2005).

With the increased attention to disproportionality in the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004, there was local and statewide pressure to remediate disproportionality in special education. Under the new reauthorization, IDEA implemented regulations that mandated states track disproportionate representation, by race or ethnicity in disability categories and special education settings. If disproportionate representation is found, states must reassess their local policies and procedures and create a plan of action (Skiba et al., 2008). This reauthorization of IDEA also required educational agencies that have been identified as having disproportionate representation to set aside 15% of their Part B funding to support students who are struggling to learn and provide them with early intervention programs (Skiba et al., 2008). Although this new requirement is meant to aid and support school districts and states with counteracting overrepresentation, the idea of what constitutes significant disproportionality is not defined in the new reauthorization of IDEA. This allows for states to utilize their own discretion when developing their own measurable indicators used to determine significant disproportionality (Banks, 2014). In other words, each state has their own definition of what "significant disproportionality" means and looks like, allowing them to decide when and how action is taken to alleviate the problem. This has allowed the issue of overrepresentation in special education of certain groups to persist. There is no federal accountability and states can easily create their own significance of a problem that may or may not exist in their eyes. The deficit lens of special education, focused only on the perceived weaknesses, contributes to the overrepresentation of African American males in the ED category.

Deficit Model

Although special education was meant to be a set of services that supports students in being able to access the general education curriculum, it instead focuses on student deficit rather than students' strengths. Deficit is defined as a "deficiency or impairment in mental or physical functioning or an unfavorable condition or position; a disadvantage" (Banks, 2014, p. 512). Deficit approaches highlight incompetence or inadequacy and centers the student as being the major issue without questioning the type of classroom environment they are placed in nor the instructional practices given to the students. According to this approach, students are referred and tested for special education services and then removed from the environment where the initial referral was given, which is almost always the classroom (Dunn, 1968).

Harry and Klinger (2007) declared that the emphasis on disability has grown to be interwoven with the historical lessoning of people of color inside the United Stated. The deficit model impacts the special education placement procedure, causing disproportionality to happen amongst specific minority groups within special education. This deficit model, which in part is compounded by a white teaching force with little to no training in cultural competence, has created mounting concerns for the manner in which federal legislation has allowed its implementation to persist for more than two decades, calling into question the consequences of students who have been served this way. Regardless of the laws and regulations put into place, many students, particularly African Americans who are diagnosed with a mild to moderate disability continue to be improperly served (Harry & Klinger, 2007).

Because race and poverty have such a high level of overlap in our society today, it is thought in both academic studies and practice that cultural disparities in special education are largely a result of the ramification of poverty (Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Simmons, Feggins-Azziz & Chung, 2005). In the case of African Americans, prevalent stereotypes about harmful settings and child-rearing methods among African Americans living in poverty have also affected the deficit narrative (Hart, Cramer, Harry, Klingner & Sturges, 2010). Although there is a great deal of research on the effects of harmful and unhealthy environments on children's early development, a study by Skiba et al. looked into the links between race, poverty, and special education identification to see what role poverty plays in racial inequities. They discovered that poverty plays a limited, unpredictable, and inconsistent role in predicting disproportionality in a variety of ways. They also discovered that while poverty did have a role in disability identification outside of race, it mostly served to exacerbate already existing racial inequalities (Skiba et al., 2005). In addition, Sameroff, Seifer, Baldwin and Baldwin (1993) underlined that no single stressor, including poverty, can be expected to cause unfavorable outcomes in children; rather, a combination of stressors should be considered.

Stereotypes based on insufficient family information that result from this deficit model of thinking typically overshadow thoughtful perspectives on the lives of urban families and disadvantaged teenagers. In a study conducted by Hart, Cramer, Harry, Klingner and Sturges (2010), they discovered that many school professionals working in the classification process of special education, regardless of race, linked their strong belief in ED as an underlying condition with prejudices against poor African American families. The most common attribution for the origin of children's difficulties, which

school personnel believed to be intrinsic deficiencies and family environments including poverty, was premised on such ideas, which were based on a lack of understanding of particular family conditions and did not acknowledge potential family strengths or protective behaviors, according to the same study (Hart et al., 2010). In regards to poverty, R.J. Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Simmons, Feggins-Azziz, and Chung (2005) looked at the connections between race, poverty, and special education identification to see how poverty contributes to racial inequities. They discovered that the impacts of poverty were minor and inconsistent, and that where poverty did play a role in predicting disability identification beyond race, it primarily served to exaggerate existing racial differences. By focusing on the shortcomings of student performance as opposed to their success, wrongful diagnosis of African American students will persist.

Emotional Disturbance as a Disability Classification

Background of the Definition

The diagnosis of emotional disturbance and its federal definition has caused a tremendous amount of debate and controversy (Theodore, Akin-Little, & Little, 2004). The establishment of the definition begins with psychologist Eli Bower's 1957 study of the characteristics of ED in children (Barnett, 2012). In her study, she looked at over 6,000 elementary, junior high and high school level students in 200 different classes across 75 school districts in the country. Out of the 6,000 students, 200 of them were labeled as ED and received mental health services without their teachers knowing. After analyzing the major differences in behaviors between the students who were labeled as ED and the students who were not, the five characteristics included in the federal definition were created (Barnett, 2012). In order to be identified or "diagnosed" as

emotionally disturbed, a student must exhibit at least one of the following characteristics

over an extended period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a student's

academic ability:

> 1. An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health
factors.
> 2. An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with
> peers and teachers.
> 3. Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances.
> 4. A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression.
> 5. A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or
> school problems (IDEA, 2004, Sec. 300.8 (c) (4)).

The definition also includes an exclusionary clause that states that the diagnosis of ED

takes into account students who experience schizophrenia but does not include students

who are socially maladjusted.

Unfortunately, very slight changes have been made to the original 1975

definition, none of great significance. The first change that was made was in the 1980's

was removing the term autism from the definition and students identified with autism

were no longer covered under the disability category of ED. The second change made

was removing the word 'seriously' from the federal definition in 1997. Instead of

referring to a student as seriously emotionally disturbed, the term became emotionally

disturbed. In 2004, IDEA went up for re-authorization and despite strong pleas from

expert scholars in the field, no significant changes were made to the definition of ED

(Coutinho, Conroy, Forness & Kavale, 2000).

A Problematic Definition

The terminology in the definition for ED has always been problematic due to the

subjectivity, possible misinterpretation of the five criteria, stigma surrounding it,

ambiguity, and the lack of common understanding of what this disability presents itself as

(Coutinho, Conroy, Forness & Kavale, 2000; Forness & Knitzer, 1992). In addition, phrases in the definition such as "over an extended period of time," "to a marked degree," and "adversely affects" have not been defined and are left up to the assessor to determine their significance when establishing eligibility (Coutinho et al., 2000).

The first criteria, which uses the terminology "inability to learn," often conflicts with the definition for having a learning disability. In addition, the phrase "inability to learn" is extremely biased, dehumanizing and leaves too much room for subjectivity on what the student is unable to learn. The second criteria states "an inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships." This refers to having social adjustment issues but yet the exclusionary clause states that socially maladjusted students are not eligible. Merrill and Walker (2004) suggested that a major issue in eligibility under the diagnoses of ED is heighted due to the problem surrounding the definitions of ED and Social Maladjustment as well as the vagueness related to the exclusionary clause. Research has shown that assessment procedures do not effectively distinguish between students with social maladjustment and those with emotional disturbance due to there being considerable overlap between externalizing and internalizing disorders (Merrell & Walker, 2004; McConaughy & Skiba, 1993; Cloth, Evans, Becker, Paternite, 2014). The third criteria refers to students displaying inappropriate types of behaviors or feelings but leaves the interpretation up to the assessor. No direct examples or uniformity is given which makes this criterion extremely subjective. What may constitute as inappropriate behavior to one teacher may not be considered inappropriate to another. The fourth criteria includes the word pervasive yet does not give clear bounds for what pervasive looks like. The fifth criteria references physical symptoms or fears associated with

personal or school problems but no clear distinction is made on what would constitute a personal or school problem. It also fails to clearly define what a physical symptom entails.

In a study done by Barnett (2012), she examined how practitioners employ the criteria given for ED to identify and diagnose students with emotional and behavior difficulties for special education services. Her study was conducted in a county alternative and correctional education program where a high percentage of the population of students exhibit complex emotional, social and behavioral needs. Her results showed an inconsistency among the 27 practitioners and how they conceptualized the criteria for ED. Some practitioners chose a more holistic approach that took the whole child into account and steered away from the confines of the definition while others stuck with the limited conceptualization of the characteristics included in the federal definition. Another distinction that appeared from her study was the practitioner's different interpretations of the exclusionary clause.

Diving deeper into the article written by Juliet Hart, Elizabeth Cramer, Beth Harry, Janette Klingner and Keith Sturges (2010), they analyzed data from a three-year ethnographic research study that looked at all aspects of the special education placement processes at 12 schools utilizing this definition in one of the country's largest and most diverse school districts. Using purposeful sampling, Hart et al. followed 12 students going through the special education referral process. Out of those 12 students, four of them were classified under Emotional Disturbance. In each one of the four case studies of students diagnosed with ED, there were three inappropriate and problematic contributors to all four students' classification of ED. First, each case study showed inadequate

instructional quality as well as behavior/socioemotional management prior to referral in each general education classroom. In all of the four cases, the teacher's skills and abilities in managing behaviors was not considered in understanding the students' academic success/failures and classroom appropriate/inappropriate behavior during the referral process. In three out of the four case studies, the classroom environment from which students were referred were "exceedingly problematic" (pg. 155) with teachers exhibiting a laissez-faire approach to classroom management, poorly planned instruction which almost totally relied on repetitive, unmonitored seat work, little attempts to engage student's interests, and ignoring misbehaviors until they had escalated considerably (Hart et al., 2010). In one instance, an interview with a 16-year teacher showed her steady disillusion with the students' behaviors and began relying more on special education referral rather than allocating time to manage behaviors.

The second problematic contributor with students being classified as ED under the current definition that Hart et al. found was the complete ignoring of contextual classroom information from the decision-making process. In all four cases, the school personnel failed to consider the effects that school has on the behavior of the students and instead placed full blame on home conditions and parenting as the reason for all the issues, all while knowing very little about their home life and employing stereotypical opinions and assumptions that were contradicted by the authors home visits. In one case, the school psychologist who had no previous connection or interaction with the student nor the family, reported that due to the mother's imprisonment and the father's lack of involvement in the student's life, the student's family was "dysfunctional." The psychologist described that with the grandma raising the child and having "a bunch of

people" (pg. 158) living with her, this added more proof to the dysfunction she had previously described and this contributed to the student's disturbance at school. In another case, the school continuously treated the student's mother with disrespect because the mother had a history of drug misuse and was living on welfare with her four children. Her son's school ordered her to pick him up every day at 11 a.m. for 5 months as a way to teach her to be responsible for her son and his behavior at school.

The last problematic contributor was subjective assessment processes that included external influences at times. In one case, after conducting a very thorough and careful initial evaluation, the school psychologist explained that his finding of ADHD was more reflective of the student's behaviors as opposed to ED. This led to a very angry school personnel who knew that with an ED designation, the student would have been removed from the school and sent to a self-contained classroom in a different school. After only a few short weeks and no behavior plan in place, the teacher called in the school psychologist yet again due to the student still exhibiting challenging behaviors and is was then that the school psychologist "updated" the student's evaluation and found him eligible under ED (Hart et al., 2010). This is a clear example of how the subjectivity of the definition could be altered without further assessments and a simple behavioral incident displayed by the student.

Overall, this current definition is outdated and lacks any consideration for ethnic or cultural differences as well as consistent procedures for practitioners to address the five criteria. Furthermore, this definition fails to take student's developmental stages into consideration and acts as a "one size fits all" by encompassing students from kindergarten all the way to twelfth grade (Callinan, Cunningham & Theiler, 2013). In

addition to this, the criteria defined is based on research that was conducted over forty

years ago and no longer reflects recent educational research or clinical diagnoses.

Moreover, forty years ago, the students that this study was conducted on had far more

limited exposure to violence, trauma, substance abuse than students do now (Barnett,

2012). While changes have been made to the definitions of other disability categories to

address the vagueness, such as learning disability (Callinan, Cunningham & Theiler,

2013), no significant changes have been made to the definition of ED, despite many

scholars advocating for a changed definition as well as providing evidence that the

current definition is outdated and needs revamping (Forness & Knitzer, 1992;

Oelrich,2012; Scardamalia, Bentley-Edwards, & Grasty, 2019). With a definition that

has been classified as "poorly operationalized with insufficient detail" (Scardamalia et

al.,, 2019, p. 570), lacking guidance, and no standardized models for determining

eligibility, a questionable level of subjectivity surfaces during the eligibility

determination process and brings forth a high chance of misdiagnosis (Scardamalia et. al.,

2019).

Overrepresentation of African American Males

When a new disability category becomes available, it will be filled with students.

Between the years of 1974 and 1998, there was a 500 percent increase in the number of

students diagnosed and labeled with Emotional/Behavioral Disorders (National Research

Council, 2002). According to the US Department of Education Office of Special

Education Programs, there were approximately 358,028 students who were receiving

special education services under the emotionally disturbed label during the 2018-2019

school year (US Department of Education, 2019). In comparison to White students,

African Americans have a 1.92 higher chance of being identified as having emotional disturbance. When attending public schools in affluent communities, African American students are 1.5 times more likely to be diagnosed with ED and when the population exceeded 90% White, Black students were an alarming 11 times more likely to be diagnosed (McKenna, 2013). Students diagnosed with emotional disturbance can be classified as displaying either internalizing behaviors, externalizing behaviors or both. Internalizing behaviors are often times exhibited as being reserved, quiet, withdrawn, isolated, depressed, suicidal and anxious. Externalizing behaviors are often times exhibited as displaying outwardly aggressive behaviors such as anger, hostility, aggression, physical violence, impulsivity, and noncompliance (Smith, 2011).

In public schools, African Americans make up 17% of the student population and out of that, 27.3% receive special education services for ED (McKenna, 2013). With such a high percentage of black students receiving services for ED, the proportion of students diagnosed with ED being placed in restrictive educational settings also grows in comparison to other groups of students with disabilities (Merrell & Walker, 2004). African American males who were classified as emotionally disturbed demonstrate the lowest outcomes out of any other disability group educationally, socially and behaviorally (Serpell, Hayling, Stevenson, & Kern, 2009). Only 28% of black students diagnosed with ED graduate with a high school diploma, up to 50% drop out of school before earning a diploma (Serpell et al., 2009) and 73% end up getting detained within three to five years of dropping out (McKenna, 2013). These statistics are staggering and cannot be analyzed without taking a deep dive into how students obtain this diagnosis to begin with.

Culture and Race in the Classroom

The typical public-school teacher in the United States is a white female. According to Milner, Tenore and Laughter (2008), 2003-2004 data indicate that 81.6% of elementary public-school teachers and 84.2% of secondary public-school teachers were white. Data from 2007-2008 indicates that 76% of all teachers are female and 83% of all public-school teachers are white; indicating that the typical public-school teacher is a white female (Milner, Tenore and Laughter, 2008).

The process of identifying a student for special education begins with a referral process. The referral process to classify a student as emotionally disturbed is not based on standardized assessments as are most other special education disability qualifications. The process for referring a child as a having an emotional or "behavior problem" is centered around teacher perception and discernment (Harry & Anderson, 1994). Since there is such a misunderstanding of the African-American culture, there tend to be misinterpretations of behavior that is normal within the culture. This lends itself directly to the referral process to an exclusionary behavioral placement. When a white teacher observes culturally normal behavior and determines it as disruptive and violent, the next step is almost always a special education referral. This causes a high percentage of referrals to exclusionary programs for African-American males. In reference to the deficit model explained earlier, the culture of African American's is not recognized as having the social advantages of the mainstream culture, therefore making them inferior compared to the culture of European Americans. As a result, schools are sites where if behavior does not match that of European American norms, black students' behavior is seen as maladaptive and leads to a referral (McKenna, 2013).

The perceptions of teachers on culturally-related identities and how these identities play out in the classroom are especially pertinent to student achievement (Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson & Bridgest, 2003). Research shows that African American students benefit from a culturally responsive pedagogy grounded in research on teaching-effectiveness (Ladson-Billings, 1994) in addition to an increase in school achievement happening when they have an educational experience with teachers who not only comprehend their sociocultural intelligence but also prioritize cultural factors when creating, implementing and evaluating curriculum and instruction (Ellison, Boykin, Towns & Stokes, 2000). Since White, middle-class professionals make up the majority of the education profession, there is an evident disconnect and lack of knowledge of black culture. This disconnect then leads to disparate rates of suspensions, expulsions and discipline referrals for African Americans that are attributed to the "cultural clash" which arises between minority students and white teachers (Chang & Sue, 2003).

According to Chang and Sue (2003), the "cultural clash" refers to the "proxemics (personal space), paralanguage (voice, tone, pitch, rate of speech), and verbal behavior (facial expressions, eye gazes) between the minority student and the teacher as a cultural misunderstanding" (p. 240). These characteristics mentioned by Chang and Sue (2003) and interactions are normal for African-Americans as a means of communication. When teachers cannot distinguish the connection between a student's classroom behavior and the student's culture, a cultural conflict is bound to arise (Siwatu & Starker, 2010). These cultural misunderstandings can lead to a false impression of a minority student's class behavior, often times triggering an unnecessary referral to special education, and additionally, unnecessary disciplinary action (Siwatu & Starker, 2010). Furthermore,

teachers have been observed viewing culturally appropriate behaviors that are welcomed and accepted in the student's families and communities as overly aggressive, threatening, unacceptable, offensive, disrespectful, intimidating and hostile (Neal et al., 2003). Additionally, teachers who are not culturally competent are blind to the fact that the knowledge and skills African American students have acquired from their personal experiences may be competing with the knowledge, skills, and behavior sought after by the school system. This competing knowledge may also create alienation from the schooling process for students of color due to the fact that the American education system often pressures students to be someone or something that they're not (Ladson-Billings, 2001). "It asks them to dismiss their community and cultural knowledge. It erases things that students hold dear" (Ladson-Billings, 2001, p. xiv).

Studies have shown that social and cultural preferences for both physical and verbal conduct impact educators' perceptions (Harry & Anderson, 1994). A study completed by Neal, Webb-Johnson and McCray (2003) looked at the potential issues that can arise by teacher perceptions of students. In this study, Neal and colleagues (2003) examined the perceptions of others when watching the manner in which students moved. One hundred and thirty-six study participants were charged with analyzing the different movement styles of two students, one African American and the other European American, walking to their lockers. After both students had been recorded walking according to their cultural preference on two separate occasions, participants analyzed the distinct walks and through the use of a survey, their views of student behavior, academic functioning, and need for specialized services were assessed (McKenna, 2013). According to the findings, the study participants perceived the African American student

as being academically lower than the white student with a higher chance in displaying

violet behaviors and needing special education services. This study demonstrates a prime

example of how culturally relevant behaviors, movement patterns, and ways of being can

negatively affect perceptions of student performance through the eyes of those who are

meant to support all students equally (McKenna, 2013).

Referral and Assessment

As outlined in a previous section, the data stemming from the three-year

ethnographic study by Hart et al., adds an essential and extremely valuable in-depth view

of the decision-making procedure for determining whether or not a student qualifies for

special education services. The idea that lower-incidence diagnoses, which depend on

assessments that clearly demonstrate evidence of biological irregularities, often do not

mirror ethnic disparity, suggests that clinical judgment plays a role in African Americans'

overrepresentation in higher-incidence categories of learning, emotional, and moderate

cognitive disorders (Hart et al., 2010). According to research, teacher judgment and

referral play a substantial role in detecting and placing students in special education

settings, accounting for more than 80% of students with high-incidence disabilities

identified and placed in special education settings (Jordan, 2005).

Before being able to discuss further the role that referral and assessment has on

the disparate rates of black males in special education, an examination of the subjective

nature of the definition must first take place. Currently, educational teams are utilizing a

definition that has not been effective nor changed over time when assessing for eligibility

under emotional disturbance (McKenna, 2013). The National Mental Health and Special

Education coalition recommended the use of an updated description of the characteristics

which would classify a student as having ED. This includes a section declaring that the current definition is conflicting with cultural or ethnic standards and changing it would alleviate the overrepresentation of a specific group of students being classified. In spite of this recommendation, the federal definition for ED continues to contain language such as "long period of time," "marked degree," and "inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances," causing the identification process to be extremely biased, prejudiced and subjective with an observer's perceptions being the sole determining factor of a behavior being evidenced as a disability (McKenna, 2013).

The referral process is spearheaded by teacher perception. This coupled with the vagueness and subjectivisms rooted in the definition for diagnosis, the inherit biases in the informal judgments that teachers make, as well as the assessment process, all add to the significant number of referrals of African American students (Patton, 1998). To make clear, the diagnosis of emotionally disturbed does not rely on standardized assessment instruments and the teacher's decision to refer a child is the most crucial step in the process. Given that each teacher has their own perception on both physical and verbal behavior, this creates an inconsistent referral process based on cultural preferences. After the initial referral process, students must be assessed to determine eligibility in order to receive special education services. This is perhaps the most widely criticized part when diagnosing students with ED.

When assessing a student to determine eligibility for ED, there are considerable differences that occur amongst the practices of school psychologists (Hanchon & Allen, 2013). In order to acquire the functional and developmental data about the student, a variation of five non-standardized assessment tools and approaches are used to determine

eligibility. These data tools include classroom observations, student interview, teacher interviews, parent interviews and data collected from normative rating scales. Allen & Honchon (2013) found that roughly 5% of school psychologists do not consistently utilize any of the five data tools listed and 13% only consistently utilized one of the five data tools. In addition, Allen and Honchon (2013) discovered considerable inconsistencies between the data tools that psychologists most commonly utilized in their evaluations and the data tools that they ranked as the most valuable when gathering data to adequately make an ED determination. For example, some psychologists rated parent interviews as the most valuable data source but one study found that 47.1% of school psychologists incorporate parent interviews in less than 50% of their assessments (Allen & Hachon, 2013). Furthermore, a study conducted by Cluett, Forness, Ramey, Ramey, Hsu, Kavale and Gresham (1998) investigated 13 different combinations of assessment measures commonly used by psychologists for their predictive ability in diagnosing students with ED. Out of these 13 combinations investigated, the identification rates for finding a student eligible under the disability category of ED ranged from 1.1% to 27.5%. This sizeable range signifies that the differences in assessment procedures conducted by psychologists has a clear influence on the rate at which students with ED are identified.

During the observation stage, district assigned school psychologists, which is typically an overly White role in schools, who are strangers to the student being observed, will conduct a minimum of 1 observation in the classroom setting. While observing, a behavioral checklist observation form is filled out with notes on the behaviors the student was displaying in order to increase the chance of making a correct assumption. Along with observations, rating scales are meant to detect the qualities that

would be reflective of emotional disturbance by someone who regularly engages with the student and the extent of behaviors (intensity, frequency). These measurements, overwhelmingly administered by white professionals, elevate the possibility of misdiagnosis on the basis of judgement.

In regards to the normative rating scales, parents and teachers are asked to answer questions using a rating scale of never, sometimes, often or always. The directions given on the BASC 3, which is a rating scale given by psychologists for teachers to fill out state "this form contains phrases that describe how children may act. Please read each phrase and select the response that describes how this child has behaved recently in the last several months" (3rd ed.; BASC-3; Reynolds & Kamphaus, 2015, p. 1). Already, the statement "in the last several months" creates an issue with validity given that teachers have to think back months ago and attempt to remember how frequent the child displayed specific behaviors. On top of this, some examples of statements that teachers and parents are asked to rate either never, sometimes, often or always are "is easy to please; pays attention; refuses to talk; argues when denied own way; turns in work on time; is irritable; misses deadlines; is overly emotional; reacts negatively; annoys others on purpose; has headaches; and demonstrates critical thinking skills" (3rd ed.; BASC-3; Reynolds & Kamphaus, 2015, p. 1). These statements are all very subjective, leaving room for teachers to assume and can change on any given day depending on what the student is experiencing that day as well as how the teacher is feeling towards the student on that day.

After rating scales are complete, the psychologist will score them and use the scores to determine eligibility and diagnosis. These scores are then placed into an

inclusive report with the few classroom observations completed along with the interview data, and presented as clinical data to the student's team at a meeting. The psychologist will then give a recommendation on a diagnosis. The team, including the teacher and parents, will then agree or disagree, and that is how a student becomes diagnosed as emotionally disturbed.

Consequences of the label

Researchers have long voiced concerns around the negative outcomes for students diagnosed with ED. African American males are predominately affected by this label. Compared to their non-African American peers, they are 1.5 times more prone to be diagnosed with ED (Skiba et al., 2006). A diagnosis of ED is often coupled with poor academic outcomes, higher chances of coming into contact with the juvenile justice system, and reduced rates of employment after high school (Bradley, Doolittle, & Bartolotta, 2008; Cartledge, Kea, & Simmons-Reed, 2002).

In an analysis completed by Bradley, Doolittle, and Bartolotta (2008), they examined three longitudinal studies supported by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) in order to paint a clearer picture of what students face when diagnosed with ED. Through their examination of the Special Education Elementary Longitudinal Study (SEELS), the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2), and the National Adolescent and Child Treatment Study (NACTS), they found that when measuring growth in the areas of academic success, social skills, and positive adult outcomes, only minimal gains have been attained by students diagnosed with ED (Bradley et al., 2008). These longitudinal studies, which focused on students transitioning from elementary to middle school and from high school into early

adulthood, were illustrative of students with disabilities being served under IDEA on a

national level and gave the most thorough portrayal of the experiences of students with

ED from youth to adulthood. A summary from their analysis showed that:

- compared to other disability categories, students with ED received lower academic grades and ranked among the lowest disability category to receive As or Bs
- 12.2% of parents reported that their student with ED received mainly Ds and Fs
- students with ED get reported for "fighting" twice as often by their teachers compared to students with other disabilities
- suspension and expulsion rates for students with ED (64%) is three times as high compared to any other disability category
- 55% of students with ED who left school dropped out, amounting to more than double compared to students in general education who left school
- 40% of students with ED did not attain a high school diploma or GED
- three-fourths of students with ED scored below expected grade level in reading
- 97% of students with ED were below expected grade level in math
- students with ED showed significant deficits in social and adaptive behavior (Bradley et al., 2008)

This diagnosis not only negatively impacts students' chances of academic success

in school but it continues to affect students into their adulthoods. Students with ED have

the lowest percentage rate among all disability categories when it comes to pursuing any

form of postsecondary education, with only one in five students continuing their

education after high school (Wagner, Kutash, Duchnowski & Epstein, 2005a). When

compared to white students with impairments, black students with disabilities graduated

with the lowest percentage (64%) of standard high school diplomas in 2017 (NCES,

n.d.b). Additionally, employment rates among students with ED rank the lowest with

only 30% of students employed after 3 years of leaving high school compared to 67% of

students with learning disabilities (Wagner, Amico, Marder, Newman & Blackorby,

1992). The NLTS2 study analyzed by Bradley et al. (2008) also looked at the trends of

employment faced by students with ED after leaving high school. The study showed that

the employment positions that students attained did not need a high school diploma to be hired, did not include health benefits, and were mainly part-time positions.

The NACTS study, which followed 800 students ages 9-16, showed that 67% of the students had been in contact with law enforcement and 43% had been arrested at least once. The NLTS2 study, which followed 11,000 students ages 13 and older, showed that 58% of the students had been arrested at least once. Within five years, at least 73 percent of students diagnosed with ED who drop out of school were arrested (Mader & Butrymowicz, 2014). Moreover, a juvenile correctional systems national survey showed that 47.7% of the incarcerated youth with disabilities were diagnosed with ED (Quinn, Rutherford, Leone, Osher, & Poirier, 2005). In summary, the consequences for African American males diagnosed with ED have a widespread impact and hinders their quality of life after high school.

Teacher Preparation Programs

Under the IDEA, schools are required to modify and accommodate the curriculum and practices used in the general education setting before considering moving a student to a placement that is more restrictive. This means that all possible options need to be exhausted which leads to general education classroom teachers requiring specialized training to work with and understand the learning differences of their students. The IDEA mandates school districts to provide staff training and create personal development plans for every staff working in an educational organization. Under this mandate, school districts are not allowed to use the excuse of lack of qualified staff as a rationale for removing students from the general education classroom (Martin, Martin & Terman, 1996).

Positive student outcomes and the quality and effectiveness of teachers are intricately connected. Therefore, addressing the impact of ineffective teaching practices and teacher preparation on the academic achievement of students of color is crucial in being able to understand the disconnect. When obtaining a general education teaching credential, preservice educators are not obligated to learn about special education practices. If wanting to become a special education teacher in California, educators are mandated to obtain an education specialist credential, which is a completely separate credential focusing solely on special education. This creates a vast separation between special education and general education and does not support students with disabilities within the general education setting. A study done by Shealey and Lue (2006) most accurately represents this disconnect and the impact it has on quality of education on students with disabilities at Douglas Elementary School, where out of all the 5 teachers teaching special education, none of them were licensed to do so.

Teacher education programs, specifically general education credential programs, should be responsible for including the values and philosophies of multicultural education as well as culturally responsive teaching practices into their programs. This should also include providing the space for incoming teachers to examine their biases, attitudes and opinions towards students of color and how their biases can influence the achievement of minority students in order to reduce the instances of disproportionate minority representation (Shealey & Lue, 2006).

Summary

This literature review section explored the history of special education and the problem of over-representation with regards to African American male students in special

education diagnosed with emotional disturbance. The review included literature that addressed the emotional disturbance disability label, the experiences and factors related to teachers not being culturally relevant in their classroom practices, and the role of culture and race in the classroom. Some consistent themes found in this review were the intersections of race and culture between black students and white teachers and how this presents itself in the disproportionate representation in special education.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Restatement of Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to privilege students' voices so that we can develop a further understanding about how the label of Emotionally Disturbed impacts African American males' educational experiences. The counter-stories collected informed and served as a counterbalance to the dominant ideology that entry into special education for African American males is the most effective way to serve the needs of students with Emotional Disturbance. These participants' reflections on their educational trajectories provided insight into any barriers and obstacles that these students faced as they negotiated the special education system. Understanding these experiences informed what we know about improving access to the general education curriculum in order to avoid over-referral and identification of African American students for special education. This study used the tenets *Counter-Storytelling*, *Permanence of Racism* and *Whiteness as Property* through the theoretical framework of Critical Race Theory (CRT) to explore the present-day reality of the disproportionate placement and overrepresentation of African-American males diagnosed with Emotional Disturbance in special education.

Research Questions

This research study investigated three research questions.

1) How do African American males in special education labeled as ED describe their educational experiences both before and after receiving the label?

2) How do African American male students understand the implications of being labeled as ED? How do they perceive this diagnosis playing a role/affecting their future?

3) What specific teacher supports or strategies do African American males labeled as ED believe would have positively changed their experience in a general education setting?

Research Design

The research design for this study was a qualitative case study. According to Bogdan and Biklen (2003), a qualitative researcher's objective should always be to better comprehend human behavior and existence by "seeking to grasp the processes by which people construct meaning and to describe what those meanings are" (p.38). Similarly, Creswell (2009) defines qualitative research as an approach for examining and understanding the meaning that groups or individuals ascribe to a social or human problem. In addition, Guest, Namey and Mitchell (2013) state that an important aspect of qualitative research includes using methods such as case studies, which result in a narrative, descriptive account of an experience or practice. These methods call attention to the importance of being close to the setting, situations and people so that the researcher can understand the realities of daily life (Patton, 1990). In this study, I used individual interviews and document analysis to investigate the students' experiences with and perspective on, being diagnosed with an emotional disturbance.

According to Yin (2003), the necessity for case study research comes from the longing to understand complex social phenomena. In a case study design, the phenomena or "case" being studied is examined through comprehensive data collection involving

several sources of information such as observations, interviews and documentation reviews, which in turn would yield case descriptions and themes (Creswell, 2013). Using a range of data sources allows the issue to be investigated through multiple approaches which in turn will allow various aspects of the phenomenon to be exposed and understood (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Case studies are common amongst qualitative researchers due to the level of flexibility offered that is not always offered by other approaches.

Case study research was chosen for this study because of my desire to draw clear boundaries around the unit of analysis. A case in this study was the individual student. This is different from other qualitative approaches in that I did not plop myself down in the field to see what I could find but rather I designed a study that has particular boundaries drawn around it. This allowed me to investigate the experiences and counter-stories of my participants. In this study, I sought to understand the African American male experience of being overrepresented in special education within the real-world context of Bay Area Public Schools. The case study design of this study gave me the opportunity to intensely examine the experiences, realities and feelings of African American male students diagnosed with emotional disturbance in an effort to paint a complete and in-depth picture of their educational history and trajectory.

Setting

All participants were from the Bay Area and were currently attending or had attended a Bay Area school. Participants were students drawn from four different school districts, including the following: Oaks Unified, The City Unified, West Unified and Mariner County Office of Education.

Oaks Unified School District. During the 2018-2019 school year, Oaks Unified consisted of 87 TK to 12th grade district ran schools and 34 authorized charter schools serving a total of 50,077 students. Out of the 50,077-total population of students, 36,286 students were served in district run schools with 24.3% of that population being African American students and 12.7% of students had disabilities receiving special education services. Out of the students with disabilities, 249 of them are eligible for special education services under the designation of ED and out of those 249, 180 are African American.

The City Unified School District. During the 2019-2020 school year, The City Unified consisted of 133 TK to 12th grade district ran schools as well as charter schools. The City Unified serves a total population of 71,506 students. Out of the 71,506-total population of students, 9.5% of the population were African American and 10.8% of students had disabilities and were receiving special education services. Out of the students with disabilities, 354 of them are eligible for special education services under the designation of ED and out of those 345, 79 are African American.

West Unified School District. During the 2019-2020 school year, West Unified consisted of 62 TK to 12th grade district ran schools as well as charter schools. West Unified serves a total population of 33,449 students. Out of the 33,449-total population of students, 14.3% of the population were African American and 13.1% of students had disabilities and were receiving special education services. Out of the students with disabilities, 27 of them are eligible for special education services under the designation of ED and out of those 27, all 27 are African American.

The School for Boys. As part of Catholic Charities, one of the most comprehensive human services agencies in Northern California, The School for Boys is a nonprofit organization that serves as a 52-bed licensed Short-Term Residential Therapeutic Program (STRTP) dedicated exclusively to providing therapeutic services for traumatized boys. Students who attend The School for Boys are referred by in-patient psychiatric facilities and county agencies throughout Northern California. Serving up to 60 boys annually ages 7 through 18, students live on campus and are supervised 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Students attending The School for Boys are required to participate in family therapy, individual therapy and/or rehabilitative services.

Participants

The study collected and examined counter-stories from African American males currently and formerly placed in special education. The participants for this study were 8 African American males who are currently diagnosed or have in the past had a primary eligibility of ED and received special education services. Selected students ranged in age from 15 to 23 years old and had received special education services for at least two years. Purposeful sampling, which Maxwell (1998) defines as an approach wherein a specific setting, person, or activities are purposefully and methodically chosen in order to gather and deliver information that otherwise would not have been collected as well from other choices, was used in this study. Purposeful sampling is often used in qualitative case studies and was used by selecting specific students that met specific criteria to best answer my research questions. The data for this study was drawn from a population of students throughout the Bay Area public schools. Because the aim of this study is to gain more insight directly from the participants on their educational experience being

diagnosed with ED, this study focused on interviewing participants in 9th grade and higher in order to ensure that they displayed the cognitive ability to comprehend and reply appropriately to the questions asked during the interview, as well as understand the goal of the study.

The student participants included at least one African American male student with a diagnosis of emotional disturbance in the following grades: 9th, 10th, 11th and 12th. There were also two participants who had graduated high school. The reason for choosing one student from each grade level was to see the different experiences students go through at the various developmental stages and age ranges as well as to see the different levels of understanding they have of their diagnosis and the special education system at large. The age at which participants were diagnosed as having ED was not a criterion for selection or exclusion in the study.

Participants were purposely chosen from a range of different special education settings including special day classes, full inclusion classes, short-term residential therapeutic program and non-public schools. A special day class is a self-contained special education class on a general education campus that delivers services to students who are in need of more intensive supports that cannot be met by the general education classroom setting. Students are typically in their special day class for more than 50% of their school day and will slowly mainstream back into the general education classroom once they demonstrate growth. A full inclusion class consists of students with disabilities being taught in a general education classroom, with their non-disabled peers, accessing the general education curriculum with appropriate support services. Non-public schools are schools that districts partner with when appropriate placement cannot be found for a

student with disabilities within the scope of the public education setting and all options have been exhausted. A short-term residential therapeutic program (STRTP) serves the most severe cases of students needing specialized therapeutic care. Short-term residential programs receive referrals for students who have been admitted into in-patient psychiatric facilities and county agencies. Students attending STRTP's are supervised 24/7 and live at the residential facility. This is the most restrictive school setting a student can be placed in. While living there, students receive therapeutic interventions to foster healing as well as rehabilitative services and individual and family therapy. Non-public schools only serve students with diagnosed disabilities and are segregated campuses away from the general education setting.

The reason for including participants from these various setting is because I was interested in learning and hearing the individual stories of students as opposed to making an overall generalization from participants all in the same setting. In special education, the level of placement a student is in is usually indicative of the level of need they require due to their disability and the settings range from least restrictive to very restrictive. The more constricting my sampling of settings was, the greater the chance for the stories to be similar. Hearing a range of experiences from students across different educational settings allowed for me to not only learn about different interventions or strategies teachers could have attempted but it also allowed for a wider range of data that showed how the educational setting had an impact on students and how different settings affect students differently. Learning from the experiences of different students from different settings also spoke to the ways in which and reasons why students are placed in special education. In order to allow students to be full participants in their stories, I gave each

participant the option to choose their pseudonym. This allowed participants to create their

own character and feel more comfortable sharing their story with the world.

Participant Recruitment

Participants were recruited through convenience sampling. First, personal contacts

from being in the field of special education in the Bay Area for the past 10 years were

utilized. I reached out to former colleagues and friends whom I know teach special

education and asked them to recommend any students that fit the criteria. I was able to

recruit two participants through utilizing my personal contacts. Participants were also

recruited through random sampling. Knowing that the study was limited to participants in

the Bay Area, a recruitment email (Appendix B) was drafted and sent out to 25 different

high schools across the Bay Area. The email included a brief summary of the study as

well as the criteria of students needed and lastly, asking teachers if they had any students

that fit the criteria. Included with the email as an attachment was an in-depth overview of

the study (Appendix C). The process behind this included looking through each school's

staff directory and individually emailing the staff in the special education department or

any staff with a title associated with special education. In total, 161 emails were sent to

special education staff across the Bay Area.

Once a response was given from the teacher stating that they did have a student/s

that fit the needed criteria, a Zoom meeting was coordinated with the teacher and student

in order to further explain the study and gauge interest. After giving and overview of the

study and explaining that they could decline participating in the study without any

consequence, students were asked if they would be interested in participating in the

study. Students were also told that if they did participate from start to finish, they would

receive a fifty-dollar gift card of their choice. If the student was under 18 years of age and agreed to participate, their parent/guardians were contacted via telephone. Parents/guardians were given an introduction that gave my name and affiliation as well as a reason for the call and why their child was being asked to participate in the study. A brief description of the purpose of the study was given along with what the prospective research participants were going to be asked to do if they were to be given permission to participate. During this call, it was also disclosed to the parent/guardian that the interviews would be audio-recorded and that participation was completely voluntary and anonymous and that there would be no consequences for their child not participating or deciding to withdrawal at a later date. Once all the questions were answered, the parents were asked if they would allow their child to participate in the study. All four parents of students under the age of 18 agreed with their child participating in the study. Once verbal agreement was given, the Guardian of Minor Consent form (Appendix D) as well as the Minor Assent form (Appendix E) was explained and reviewed with both the parents and students. By obtaining a signature on the Guardian of Minor Consent form, guardians provided written consent to allow their child to participate in the study. After reviewing the both consent forms, parents and students were asked to sign and date the forms through DocHub. DocHub was chosen due its ability for parents and students to keep a copy of the signed form for their records. Participants 18 and over underwent the same process and were given the Adult Consent Form (Appendix F) to sign at the time of their agreement to participate. Each consent form also included a list of possible resources for both the guardians and students to access in the case of emotional harm or distress being caused during the interview. There was a total of 10 potential participants

who fit the criteria and were invited to participate in the study. Out of those ten, eight agreed to participate.

Once the consent forms were signed and returned, an interview date was scheduled with the student during a time when the student was not in class. Being that all interviews were conducted over Zoom, students were given the option to keep their camera off during the interview for an extra added layer of confidentiality.

Human Subjects Consideration

Approval to conduct this study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects at the University of San Francisco. Once approved by the IRB, participants were provided thorough details about the study and given the option to participate. Following agreement to partake in the study, an informed consent letter was provided and signed by all participants and their guardians if they were under 18 years of age. In addition, each participant as well as their guardians were informed that participation was voluntary and that any information given would remain confidential. To preserve anonymity, a pseudonym was used unless participants requested otherwise. Being that most participants were under 18 years of age, written permission from their guardians was acquired in order for their participation to be possible. All documents collected as well as interview recordings were stored in a secure location and were not be shared with anyone.

Data Collection & Procedures

Although there are many forms of qualitative data permissible, the three most common are visual, text and sound data (Guest et al., 2013). For this study, data was collected through conducting individual interviews and gathering personal narratives. In addition, background information was collected through reviewing individualized

educational plans (IEPs), initial psychoeducational reports, and triennial psychoeducational reports. Although not every participant was able to provide me these documents for various reasons, the documents were reviewed and used to gain a better understanding of the participants background and educational history. The data for this study was collected through one individual interview with each participant.

Semi-Structured Interviews

A total of one individual interview took place with each participant. There was a total of 16 pre-determined questions asked. All interviews were semi-structured and open-ended to allow for more dialogue and a greater chance to build a relationship with the participants. See a list of interview questions in Appendix A. Semi-structured interview protocols allow the researcher the flexibility and fluidity to ask new questions during the interview based on the response that the interviewee gives (Creswell, 2003). This method allowed me to ask follow up questions or probe, in order to gain a deeper level of understanding. Probing is a technique that was used during the interviews. Probing refers to an impromptu or unplanned question asked by the interviewer based on the participants previous response and explicitly seeks clarification or expansion of a participants answer (Guest, Namey, Mitchell, 2013). The goal of probing is to stimulate a participant to produce more information without interjecting yourself into the conversation (Guest, Namey, Mitchell, 2013). Due to COVID-19, participants all chose to conduct the interviews over Zoom. The interviews occurred beyond regular school hours, during non-instructional time, so educational services were not interrupted. Introductions were made before the interview questions were asked, and participants were given a detailed explanation of the process. Participants were told that the interview,

as well as any personally identifying information, would be kept private and not shared with anybody. In order to alleviate any nerves or feelings of needing to answer the questions in a politically correct way, I shared the following with each participant before we began: "When answering these questions, please answer them as honest as possible. This is your story and I'd love for it to accurately reflect your personal lived experiences as much as possible. Please don't worry about any judgement from me as there are no wrong answers. Your voice is extremely important and your story should be heard and recognized." All individual interviews were recorded and transcribed through Zoom. All interviews were completed in one session with the option to follow-up if more questions arose after reviewing the recording. The duration of the interviews varied in length, ranging from 28 minutes to 43 minutes long.

Document Collection

A review of documents was completed in order to get a better sense of how the participants were viewed by other. The documents consisted of individualized education plans (IEPs), initial referral documents, and triennial psychoeducational assessments. Typically, when these documents are created, the student is not involved in the process. They are written by stakeholders who carry power in the student's educational trajectory and often times have no personal relationship to the students.

Individualized Education Plan- An IEP is a legal document for students with disabilities. The purpose of the IEP is to improve teaching, learning and academic performance. It lays out the type of special education instruction, supports and services students need to make progress and thrive in school. Since every student is different, this document is meant to be individualized to meet the needs of that specific student. Each

student's IEP describes the individualized educational services and accommodations that have been designed to meet that student's unique needs and is provided to all stakeholders involved for its implementation. This is a legal document that holds school districts accountable to providing the necessary accommodations, modifications and services detailed in the plan.

Initial Referral Documents- Before a student qualifies for special education services, a referral process needs to happen. Although this may look different for each student, there needs to be a basis for referral or request for evaluation. Before this happens, different steps and interventions need to be taken and documented to provide evidence of a student needing evaluation. These documents will show what interventions were tried and why they were not effective.

Psychoeducational Assessment- Once a student is referred, an assessment is conducted by a licensed psychologist in all the suspected areas of disability. This includes classroom observations, academic testing, cognitive and socioemotional assessments. Once the assessment is complete, the results are reviewed and eligibility is determined. This document will show the reason for which special education services are being recommended.

Data Analysis

Once all the interviews had been transcribed, they were analyzed through two different coding processes. According to Saldaña (2015), coding involves identifying and classifying data collected during the study into themes and groupings. The data was analyzed to identify persistent or repeated topics, specific words, language, ideas, and themes which were then sorted into coding categories. Once all the data had been coded,

it was examined further to gain insight and form conclusions of the given participant's narratives.

In vivo coding

In vivo coding was utilized as the first round to code the interviews. In vivo coding, also known as literal coding, is a method of qualitative data analysis that emphasizes the significance of the actual spoken words of the participants and is particularly valuable in educational settings with youth (Saldaña, 2015). In vivo coding was the method chosen due to the fact that it not only highlights the voices of the participants but it relies on them to give meaning to the data. In addition, in vivo coding assists to establish the lived experiences of the participants and how they make sense of these experiences. Since I was focusing on counter-storytelling, the participants narratives are the essential piece of data. Utilizing in vivo coding allowed the direct words or phrases of the participants to address the tenet of counter-storytelling as part of CRT. The interview transcripts were read thoroughly and each line of the interview transcript was assigned codes by using direct words or phrases that the participants used. Saldaña (2015) stated that in vivo coding is a valuable method in research studies involving students, because adolescents' words are typically disregarded, and "coding with their actual words enhance and deepens adult understanding of their culture and worldviews" (p. 106). During the coding process, I looked for salient words or short phrases that stood out and appeared relevant to the study. Being that the interviews were between 28 to 43 minutes long, each interview elicited a significant amount of codes.

Code charting

Code charting was done concurrently throughout the in vivo coding phase. Due to the length of the interviews and the amount of questions asked, there were over 1,000 codes. Having these many codes made it very difficult to begin categorizing the codes, which is where code charting came into play. Code charting is the act of placing all coded data into a table to summarize and compare. Through code charting, I was able to eliminate codes and narrow down the categories through the use of an excel spreadsheet. Saldaña (2015) asserts that this technique is helpful when there are multiple participants in a study as separate cases who have been individually interviewed. This way of charting allows the researcher to scan and create patterns from the codes. This chart allowed me to compare the participants with each other and construct patterns from the similarities and differences.

Focused coding

Focused coding, also known as selective coding, was used as the second cycle coding method. The goal of the second cycle of coding was to take the first cycle of codes and develop thematic, conceptual and/or theoretical categories. Focused coding, which follows the in vivo coding process, examines the first round of codes and extracts the most frequent or substantial codes to develop the major categories or themes from the data (Saldaña, 2015). The goal of focused coding is to narrow down the original codes into groupings, identify categories or themes that seem to be connected, create a list of final codes with clear definitions for each and finally, recoding the dataset using the final list of codes created (Saldaña, 2015). During focused coding, each interview's codes and related coded data were restructured and reorganized to create a smaller and more

focused list of extensive categories, topics, and/or concepts. Focused coding allowed me to measure the comparability of the newly formed codes amongst all participants in order to develop a sense of thematic, conceptual or theoretical understanding. These categories and correlations constituted the study's key findings, which reflected new information from the participants' perspective. This newly formed understanding would then progress into assertions or perhaps a new theory to explain participants' experiences of being labeled with ED.

Thematic analysis

Once the two rounds of coding were completed, a thematic analysis of the data took place. This was a necessary step in my study because it allowed me to pull themes from the data that lead me to higher level theoretical constructs. After sorting through the codes developed during the focused coding stage, I read through all the transcripts and highlighed sections in the transcripts that directly answered or were in line with my research questions. During this process, I sorted through each participant's interview transcript, integrated the coding scheme and the highlighted sections together to develop themes and subthemes for each research question. I also pulled quotes from each participant's transcript that directly aligned with the three research questions. Once every participant's transcript had gone through this process, I then went back and pulled the common themes and subthemes that matched across participants for each research question and used that data to inform my findings. According to Saldaña (2015), a theme is an extended phrase or sentence that distinguishes the meaning behind piece of data. Thematic analysis is a very applicable method when analyzing interviews as it allows the researcher to explore the participants psychological world of beliefs, character

development, emotional experiences and the ways in which they create knowledge. As cited in Saldaña (2015), Rubin and Rubin (2012) state that "themes are statements in the role of ideas presented by participants during interviews that summarize what is going on, explain what is happening or suggest why something is done the way it is" (p. 118). This process can operate successfully, and even simultaneously, with in vivo coding by utilizing the participants own language to precisely capture and summarize their ideas presented through their statements.

Analytical memo writing

Analytical memo writing was done alongside the coding and data analysis process. Saldaña (2015) believes that analytical memo writing enhances the quality of analysis through continual reflection of the data collected. The purpose of analytical memo writing is to document and reflect on the coding process and take note of any emerging themes or concepts being revealed in the data that could ultimately lead to a theory (Saldaña, 2015). Analytical memo writing allowed me to dive into a deeper reflection around the data collected and reflect on all the aspects of the study from start to finish. Analytical memo writing also served as a tool to connect me to the stories of the participants and allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the student's perspective and worldviews.

Analytical memo writing and coding work simultaneously together as analytical qualitative data tools being that there is a mutual relationship between the creation and implementation of a coding method and the development of comprehending a phenomenon (Saldaña, 2015). Coding goes deeper than just identifying words or phrases in data pieces of information but rather, it is meant to incite written reflection on the

deeper and complex meaning those words or phrases suggest to the researcher. This is where researcher reflexivity comes in to play, allowing the researcher the space and time to think critically on their own assumptions and how that shapes the ways in which your own thoughts and actions influences what you pull from your research data (Saldaña, 2015). Some examples of what analytical memos can reflect on are (1) how the researcher personally relates to the participants and the social world being studied, (2) how and why the researcher chose specific code choices and their functioning definition in the data, (3) how the researcher views the participants' routines, rituals, rules, roles and relationships, (4) any developing patterns, themes or declarations the researcher is seeing and (5) how those patterns, themes or declarations overlap or are linked together (Saldaña, 2015).

Ensuring Validity

Multiple steps were taken to ensure this research study was implemented with validity and fidelity and that all the data that was collected was accurate. In addition to triangulation and member checking, I constantly practiced reflexivity throughout the study. Having taught students with emotional disturbance for 9 years, my own bias was a potential threat to the validity of this study. I entered this study with my own perspectives and experiences and I acknowledge that it is easy to enter into a study seeking and finding data that confirms what I want or expect to find. For this reason, reflexivity was practiced by constantly thinking about my biases and diminishing their effects. One important way to be reflective is to not lead or influence the student participants' responses by being conscientious of how my questions are framed, my level of interest on one topic, probing too much on a certain response, and my tone of voice (Creswell,

2003). To mitigate the chances of my bias influencing the study, I made sure to utilize interview best practices and check my prejudices prior to conducting the interviews.

Member checking

To ensure the data collected had accurately portrayed the student's thoughts and feelings, member checking took place. Member checking, also known as participation validation, is a strategy to discuss the students' responses and the findings of the collected data with them to verify the accuracy before the coding happens (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell & Walker, 2016). Participants received a copy of the transcript as well as the audio recording to confirm their responses and to eliminate any possibility of me skewing the data a certain way. In addition, during each interview, I would often restate the participants responses in order to verify their accuracy. This strategy empowers the participants to own their own words and reflect on their responses in order to confirm that they are indicative of their views, feelings and experiences (Birt, et al., 2016). This strategy also aids in showing students that the integrity and credibility of this study rests in their hands. If participants felt there was an error in their response or in the way in which their words were transcribed, changes were made.

Triangulation

An effective approach in verifying the integrity of a study is through the use of triangulation. According to Patton (1999), triangulation alludes to the utilization of various strategies or information sources in qualitative research to build up a thorough understanding of an occurrence and is seen as a technique to test validity through joining various data sources. Mixing qualitative methods through the use of individual interviews and documentation review allows for different perspectives that may otherwise be

overlooked and allowed me the opportunity to triangulate the data for verification. Once all the interviews had been individually coded and the documentation analysis had happened, I looked for patterns across all the data, examining it for similarities and differences. Through this triangulation, I was able to identify clear themes that appeared in all data sources.

Researcher Subjectivity

Having taught in special education for 9 years, I have witnessed first-hand the inequalities that our educational system upholds, specifically within special education and for minority students receiving special education services. This has been my experience for the past 9 years and the reason for which I am embarking on this doctoral journey. For the past 9 years, I have worked in the field of special education as a non-public school (NPS) teacher. Through my experience, I have observed firsthand the disproportionality that occurs with African American males being placed in highly segregated special education settings. At my previous school site, one which is completely segregated from a public-school campus, students do not have access to general education curriculum. Over 70% of the population of students in special education are African- Americans with the Emotional Disturbance label being the top diagnosis for the population that we serve. In my classroom alone, 7 out of my 10 students are African American with 6 out of those 7 students having a primary diagnosis of Emotional Disturbance. With new students continuously being referred as "needing" the level of placement that our school provides, it is clear that students are often being referred into special education due to behavior problems exhibited in the public-school setting.

My experience in special education has given me information about and insight into how my students' lives are affected by being labeled as not only having a disability, but specifically an Emotional Disturbance disability label. When reading the IEPs of the students with ED labels that attend my school, the most cited behaviors are fighting, displaying disrespectful acts such as cursing, yelling, defiance and being unable to remain in the classroom without displaying a behavior the teacher deems inappropriate. The negative picture that is painted of the students follows them wherever they go and allows teachers to continue this "judgmental" cycle of treatment and inappropriate placement of African American students. In addition, students labeled with ED often end up being syphoned to prisons or juvenile detention centers. Once a student is diagnosed with ED, they are seen as ED for the rest of their educational careers. In addition, I have also experienced how much building relationships and providing culturally relevant curriculum and classroom culture can positively affect students. From many conversations with my students, they felt there was a lack of connection and cultural relevance happening in their classrooms, causing a huge divide between student and teacher. My experiences have directly guided this study in hopes to begin the conversation of centering and privileging the voices and experiences of African American males in special education.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to privilege students' voices so that we can develop a further understanding about how the label of Emotionally Disturbed impacts African American males' educational experiences. These participants' reflections on their educational trajectories allowed us insight into the barriers and obstacles that these students faced as they negotiate/d the special education system. Understanding these experiences informs what we know about improving access to the general education curriculum and classrooms in order to avoid over-referral and identification of African American students for special education. This study used the tenets *Counter-Storytelling, Permanence of Racism* and *Whiteness as Property* through the theoretical framework of Critical Race Theory (CRT) to explore the present-day reality of the disproportionate placement and overrepresentation of African-American males diagnosed with Emotional Disturbance in special education.

The findings point to elements that could improve African American males' success and learning in special education, improve their access to general education settings and curriculum, and lower their categorization as needing special education services. The findings from the study are presented in two sections. The first section introduces the students interviewed and gives a brief summary of their educational history. The second section presents the findings from the interviews, which are organized by the three research questions. Each research question will present its own themes and subthemes from all 8 participants.

Student Participants

The student participants for this study included 8 African American males, ranging from the ages of 14 to 23 years old. The students' grades ranged from 9th grade to having graduated high school and currently attending community college. Each student participant previously attended at least two different school placements before arriving at the school they were currently at during the time of the interview. Student participants also attended a range of different placements throughout their educational trajectory ranging from full inclusion programs to residential school placements.

Isaac: Isaac is an 11th grader who currently attends a non-public school. Isaac, who at the time was in 6th grade, first qualified for Special Education in May, 2016. His triennial evaluation report completed in March 2019 shared the following as background information: Isaac is being assessed as part of a state mandated reevaluation that takes place every three years for all students who receive special education services. The purpose of this evaluation is to determine present levels of functioning, most appropriate educational placement, and continued need and eligibility for special education services. Isaac currently qualifies for special education under the Emotional Disturbance category. Isaac was first referred for an initial psycho-educational evaluation due to concerns regarding his socio-emotional and academic functioning. Mother indicated that Isaac has a history of trauma, had faced abuse from his biological father, and has been hospitalized due to self-harm and harm to others. The medical document further indicated in order for Isaac to address the underlying issues it was suggested he participate in therapy, and develop his coping and communication skills to safely express himself.

David: David is a 21-year-old graduate from the SDC class. David was unable to provide his educational documents in order to provide more background details about him.

Tony: Tony is a 17-year-old senior currently in a resource program. He began in the SDC program and was then moved to resource his senior year based on his academic progress. He originally qualified for Special Education services in August 2017 at the beginning of his ninth-grade year. At the time his parents were concerned about his "academic challenges" according to his initial evaluation. in his initial psychoeducational report completed 4 years ago, there were many behavioral, social and emotional concerns that were raised. Most significantly, there were clinically significant concerns about both Externalizing behaviors such as Aggression and Conduct Problems as well as Internalizing Problems such as Depression. There were also significant concerns regarding behavioral patterns of Withdrawal. In addition, he was found to have clinically significant problems with Inattention. Tony's mother reported that in middle school, Tony began displaying outwardly aggressive behaviors in school due to ongoing abuse by Tony's father that went unreported for years. Tony reported that he had been getting bullied and would dream about hurting people.

JT: JT is a 10th grader who has attended his current SDC placement in for two years. His triennial assessment report completed in October 2017 shared the following background information: JT was referred for this triennial file review by the IEP team due to continued concerns regarding JT's academic achievement and adequate support services. The last time JT was evaluated for special education was in October of 2014. At that time, JT was found eligible for special education under the categories of Emotional

Disturbance and Specific Learning Disability. JT, who at the time was in Kindergarten, first qualified for Special Education in 2011. JT was referred for the additional initial evaluation in May, 2011 due to concerns with his social emotional development and display of significantly problematic behavior in the educational setting. Present levels of performance were examined to determine special education eligibility and whether additional special education services were warranted. Based on the evaluation, JT was found to have significant social/emotional difficulties, which severely impaired his abilities to access the general education curriculum. It was determined that JT qualified for additional special education services under the Emotional Disturbance (ED) category. JT has received mental health services at school for several years. He currently receives individual counseling with a therapist and receives these services under the diagnosis of Generalized Anxiety Disorder. JT's therapist reported that JT's anxiety manifests itself through excessive worrying about his mother and his housing status, difficulties concentrating in the classroom, irritability, and task avoidance. However, his therapist reported significant progress in JT's ability to access his coping skills, and his externalizing behavior has decreased significantly.

Liam: Liam is a 14-year-old freshman who is currently attending an SDC program. Liam qualified for special education services in 3rd grade. His initial psychoeducational evaluation report completed in 2015 shared the following as background information: According to the BASC-3 teacher report completed by Liam' student support assistant, Liam' adaptive behaviors, externalizing behaviors, school problems, and overall behavioral symptoms fell in the clinically significant range, while his internalizing behaviors fell in the at-risk range. It was concluded that Liam met

eligibility criteria for Emotional Disturbance at that time. His cognitive profile was not consistent with a specific learning disability. Current treatment plan goals include increasing Liam' ability to safely participate in the school routine and increasing his ability to manage his impulses in order to maintain safe peer interactions.

Carl: Carl is a 19-year-old senior who currently attends an SDC program. This is his second year as a senior due to not completing enough credits to graduate on time. Carl was referred for special education services in 3rd grade. His initial assessment shared the following: Carl was referred for an initial assessment for Special Education eligibility by his parents, teacher and principal due to a pattern of atypical behavior and socialization issues at school. In the past, he has had several outbursts at school that have included tantrums and hitting other students. A series of Student Study Team meetings have been held over the past 2 school years. Topics included: difficulty with expressive language, functional communication and peer/social relationships. According to the SST worksheet and teacher interviews, Carl struggles with following directions, has difficulty comprehending what he has been told and struggles with developing and maintaining appropriate peer relationships. According to Carl's teachers, he struggles with completing assignments in class. He often refuses to complete work. When asked to participate, he is noncompliant. At times, when he becomes defiant it will escalate into an argument between him and the teacher. During these episodes, he is sent to the office. Review of his current and past academic records indicate a student with good academic skills in math and reading.

Matt: Matt is a 23-year-old graduate who attended The School for Boys residential therapeutic program. His triennial review completed in during his fourth-grade

year shared the following: This is a three-year review to determine ongoing eligibility and services for special education. Matt' first triennial assessment took place when he was in the first grade and attending a non-public school. Matt is currently in the 4th grade. Previous reports indicate that Matt is diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and a Behavioral/Emotional Disorder. Matt was home-schooled for his first year of kindergarten. He was reportedly retained in kindergarten and attended a general education class. He demonstrated a challenging behavioral profile including aggression, yelling, throwing objects, scratching, hitting and biting. Matt originally met eligibility for special education services under Other Health Impairment relative to ADHD. His eligibility later shifted to Emotional Disturbance related to PTSD. He attended an NPS for his early elementary years.

Gelo: Gelo is a 20-year-old graduate from an SDC program. His triennial assessment report completed in 2018 shared the following background information: Gelo was referred by teachers and staff at school. Gelo does not complete his work and is failing several classes. Gelo is often leaving his classroom and found wandering in the halls. There are emotional and academic concerns for him. Mother reported that she wants him to finish high school with better grades and get a career in something he likes. She stated, "I think what most affects him is what others say about his weight. He was bullied in elementary and middle school and he pretends to be strong by responding back, but at the end, I think that affects him." According to the psychoeducational report, Gelo reported to his mother that he was being teased and will resort to verbal and physical aggression. Mom stated that he had made good behavioral progress since the beginning of the year.

Findings

This section will present the findings as organized by the three research questions used to guide this study. The themes and sub themes for each research question will be presented along with direct quotes from the participants to support the given themes.

Research Question 1: How do African American males in special education labeled as ED describe their educational experiences both before and after receiving the label?

Table 1. Educational experience before and after receiving special education diagnosis

Themes	Subthemes
Educational experience	N/A
Quality of education	N/A
Attitudes and perceptions of school	N/A
Impact of school	N
	/A

Before SPED diagnosis

Educational experience

When describing their educational experience before receiving their diagnosis of emotionally disturbed, the participants shared that school was very difficult for them. Although their educational experiences varied, they all shared countless damaging events. Many of the participants shared that they were bullied in school and went through many negative experiences. Gelo shared:

"I would have to start off with the word, with one word, which would be toxic, I'll have to say, toxic at the least um yeah. The problem with the with my experience was that I was being put in a very toxic situation, I was being put in a class to where I wouldn't learn much of anything right. You know, just waiting or you know, having other classmates going through drama and all types of fighting and arguments and stuff would hurt me. I feel like I was in a very toxic scenario

with so many kids in a class where there was a lot of fighting, a lot of arguing, a

lot of people that were going through a lot of different things.

He went on to explain how he felt there was no guidance at his school and how he wishes

there was someone who could have helped him accountable for holding true to his morals

and principles:

"You know, there was always excuses and I was enabled to continue doing what I

was doing and like I say that's very harmful, you know what I mean and like I say

I really wish that, you know, I had somebody that would've really nailed down on

my principles, you know, like hey, I'm saying you know the cursing we can't have

that here. You know the drugs, we can't have that here. But you know it was

almost groomed into me like it's okay to go in the bathroom stall, as long as

nobody's there, nobody's gonna check, nobody's gonna, care nobody's going to

investigate, no one's going to crack down on anything and so the school just kind

of let me do what I did, and it was only until later when I turned 18 and I was out

on my own and I was still cursing and acting like a little kid that I really got hit

with reality and I really got slapped in the face with the truth. So you know, I had

to change that quick and I'm still kind of suffering from that now, I mean I can't

even really read a book. I mean, ever since I was in kindergarten you know, I was

always behind, but I was always be pushed up a grade even though I was never on

grade level. And that was harmful."

Tony, when recounting his education experience shared:

"Um I guess prior to that I felt. I just felt like what's the word I'm looking for, I

felt really like just like uncared for I guess. Like I felt I don't know I just felt like

I wasn't really receiving that help that I needed. I guess when I would feel that way like just trying like my hardest, but always reaching like a like a wall or something just not be able to you know figure it out. I know it was hard to focus on every student back then like we were all like some bad ass kids so I really can't blame them [*general education teachers*] but I feel like, you know, I just wasn't receiving the help I needed."

Matt shared how before being placed in special education, school was both easy and hard. He expressed, "It was super negative. I didn't know how to communicate. I didn't get any school work done. I would just kind of sit there, just kind of be half ass invested, yeah. Because I thought something was wrong with me." When asked why he was moved schools and placed in special education he shared:

"I just know I was there, because I was having problems with my mainstream school and current mainstream school and the district was having problems with my grades, and I wasn't going to graduate so they sent me there. I also had an auditory processing problem."

Expressing similar sentiments, David shared that going through school was very difficult for him. He expressed:

"Originally going through school, it was really hard. You know it like caused like a lot of issues because, like, I think I just felt like I was just out of place and it felt hard for me to actually get the help that I needed and it made me feel worse because like I just felt down about it. Like why am I in a class with people younger than me [*due to having to retake classes he failed*], you know, and I'm not even around my same age group."

When asked if there was a reason for him failing classes, he mentioned,

> "It's hard to talk to teachers that aren't you know, actually able to help you in the way that you need the help. It makes it hard because they're not helping you. They're always saying we're here to help if you got any questions then just ask, we're here to help, but it doesn't feel that way. It makes it hard. Normal teachers, even though they offer help, it still feels like they play favorites you know."

Liam expressed how before being in special education, he experienced a lot of behavioral issues and frustration due to the working being too difficult for him saying, "I mean, before, I was messing up a lot. I felt like too much work was building up on me, and I thought I just couldn't do it." He continued by sharing: "

> So, middle school to now school was hard for me because I had plenty distractions in class, but I always made sure I got my work done and plus I was on the basketball team, so I kept my grades up in middle school all the time. But I used to always walk out of class, 'cuss teachers out, uh, but- but like all regular classes I been in, elementary, going into middle school, I was always good, but until seventh, I went to Aptos. Like, that school was just weird for me. I'd like get into it with some kids because they kept bothering me, I'm trying to do my work. And that's why I used to always walk out of class, that's what a lot of people don't understand. I used to always try to say something about it."

Carl, sharing his experience prior to being in special education, explained how he "hated going to school." He shared how he didn't like being forced to do something that he didn't want to do so he wouldn't attend school regularly. When asked why, he said:

"I never had a simple interest back then, I was interested in playing things like video games and stuff and following the things that I felt like I wanted to do, but since nothing in school led to a career path that I was interested in, I never really liked it and I always saw no point of it. I felt like I was wasting my time because I've always wanted to become a youtuber growing up since I was at the age of 11. And I would make YouTube's on my grandma's tablet and stuff and I'd do these things, and I would just be excited to play the game. I would ditch school to play the game and stuff. That's just what I love doing."

Similar to Liam, Isaac expressed how he displayed a lot of behavioral issues before being placed in special education saying, "I remember. I was bad. Haha. I was bad. I would like to fight and stuff. I was just bored. I was just bored at school. The teachers didn't care about me so I would fight to get attention." He went on to share how his teachers did not understand him and the work began getting more and more difficult so therefore he would not complete the work assigned to him. "I would just get mad and shit and then not do the work. Because I was getting mad. When I was younger it was easy, it was very easy. Middle school, that was easy. Then when high school came, it started getting harder and I couldn't keep up. Yeah." JT also shared a similar experience stating that, "It [school] was hard, always been. It's still been, it still is to this day. Sometimes it'd be too much and sometimes it'd be too hard for me." He continued by sharing how he would display attention seeking behaviors to purposely be removed from class. "Somebody just always had to sit in the classroom with me 'cause I wouldn't act right. And then I got into a fight with people and teachers. Yeah it wasn't good." When asked why it wasn't good, he expressed how he didn't have any connections to his teachers and felt like they didn't

care about him. "They just didn't fuck with me. They thought I was bad so then I acted bad."

Quality of education

When speaking of their educational experiences, participants spoke about the difference in the quality of education pre and post special education diagnosis. Gelo began by expressing his frustrations with the common core standards and attending an Oaks school.

"Um you know, I didn't really get to learn much and, obviously, you know in Oakland schools and things like that there's not a lot of solid education that we're being taught and I think that that's one of the most harmful things that really affected me during school. You know and for the most part they [*teachers*] don't really get to decide the material that we're getting taught. Common core is probably one of the worst platforms…. Like I said that the common core system, it's made in a very, you know, specific way and people don't learn all in one way… I think that common core system, to be honest, I don't like how you come to a class, you have to take a test on memory, you know what I mean? Learning isn't just memory and memorizing certain words and phrases but it's actually being able to apply that information to something. So basically, gen ed for me was just like, I say it was just something that you know, a lot of the information just was not applicable to me. Um I just didn't quite frankly line up with a lot of the information. The essentials, I could tell you I know I graduated every year with the essentials that I feel like I use today right, like addition and subtraction. I had no problem with that but reading Dr. Sues' Green Eggs and Ham, I don't use that

today and that's probably why I didn't understand or listen to any of that stuff they were trying to teach me."

He went on to explain how his grades were not reflective of his comprehension of the curriculum but rather attendance.

"You know I didn't really care about my grades or anything but when you put in perspective, like it really shows you that you know, even though I got a B, I got a B in common core. I got a B for sitting and staring at a wall. A lot of my grades were based on if I even showed up to the class or if I walked out too early or not. That's why like I say, a lot of the education system that we're in is really flawed. Like something I had to learn quick on my own was financial freedom. Financial freedom is something they're not even touching on in schools. As a black man, these are the things I need to know to survive and schools aren't teaching us them."

David, when sharing his experience, spoke about how the pace of the general education curriculum was too fast for him. He expressed frustration when talking about how teachers would focus their teaching style on the "kids that get things really fast" and not break down the material for students that needed more support. "They [*general education teachers*] would teach to the smart kids that got everything really fast. And if you didn't get it then there was no point in trying because you were going to fail. So for me, the material was too hard for me to understand and with not help from the teachers, I had to retake classes."

Similarly, Matt shared that while in general education, the quality of education was compromised due to teachers not understanding what a learning disorder was. He

shared, "It was hard to learn, because then, at that point, I felt like I had to constantly ask them for help. While also trying to learn how to communicate efficiently like why this isn't, why your teaching style isn't working for me."

Attitudes and perceptions of school

While describing their educational experiences, a common theme that came up were participants' attitudes and perceptions of school both before and after receiving a special education diagnosis. Their attitudes and perceptions reflected the difference they felt when being in general education versus special education. Before receiving the diagnosis, participants shared common negative perceptions of school. Gelo began by sharing:

> "Oh man, I mean just enabling. Just enabling me to make you know, make mistakes and it'd be okay. You know it's okay to you know fail your math test, it's okay to fail your, you know I'm saying, your quiz, it's okay to cut class you know or whatever, or you know you could do what you want. I think that stuff was really harmful for the most part, because that shaped me into a very, very um just kind of not the man I was made to be you know, strong, you know take accountability um do the right thing um you know things like that so I learned early on that school's don't care about kids. They enable them. Or at least they did me. As long as you weren't fighting they didn't care."

David added that due to not being able to focus with all the loud noises happening in his class and in his head, he became a class clown:

> "I wasn't able to focus, but I wasn't able to get things done with all the loud noises in my head. With everyone around me being loud it's kind of hard to focus

on one voice, which is the teacher. Which made me not able to focus properly on the work and because of that I end up becoming more of a class clown than I did an actual student."

He continued by saying:

"There are a lot of teachers in the general education system who are believe it or not very bias. And I can say that because I see it, and I've been there. A student that has been very unruly, very bad, very unfocused compared to a student that can get things done. You know and have been getting things done on time on top, on top of everything, since day one, who do you really think that they're going to give the more attention to the student that's already caught up and then they can give more work to or the person who's still behind by like three weeks' worth of work, you know they're going to give more attention to the one who's already ahead."

On the opposite spectrum, Liam shared his perception around being black and the impact it had on his attitude in school:

"But with the white teachers, say a white kid get in trouble for cussing, it's not as bad. They sometimes let it go. But if I get in trouble for cussing, you just know, you gonna get sent to the office, call my parents, saying I'm cussing and yelling at others. Black people got a lot of stuff going on in this school like racism and stuff like that, me too and we just gotta accept it even though we know it's happening."

Carl, who openly shared that he hated school, expressed how it wasn't that school was difficult for him, he just hated feeling forced to do something that he felt wouldn't benefit him.

"It wasn't hard, it was just I didn't want to do it and I noticed a lot of kids in the classroom do more stuff than I did. And I used to think, 'Oh, my goodness, this kid is more smarter than me or this is kid is more intelligent than me' but in reality, I just wasn't doing the work because I didn't really care. I hated school because I felt like I was forced and I don't like people trying to take away my freedom. I don't think I was too dumb enough to understand. I feel like, I was just too lazy and felt like there was no need for any of it. That was the issue, I feel like I didn't have an interest in it and if you don't have an interest in it, it's like 'Why am I even doing this?' I don't want to do this, like I'm forced to learn something I don't want to learn it."

He went on to share the lengths that he would go to not have to attend school:

"In eighth grade I started hating school again. I didn't want to go. I didn't like it. And I started getting suspended on purpose. I would cuss out the teachers. Throw pencils at teachers. Get in fights with kids, argue with kids in the classroom, and I kept getting suspended and, eventually, they threw me in TEP. Which was okay."

Thinking deeply around his perception of school, Tony shared some deep insight into how he feels about being a black male in the school system:

"I think one of the biggest problems right now is you know when you're a young boy in class, you're going to be more energetic. You're going to be a little bit more, you know, a little bit more wild, you know, naturally. The younger kids, the younger boys, rather they have a lot more energy. They have a lot more hormones going on, where they're a little bit more, you know, where they don't really know how to really sit still in a classroom. So the sad thing about it is, what they'll do is

they'll take someone like me who maybe needed more time at recess or PE and they'll say, 'Oh my gosh you have autism, or you have ADHD, you're very fidgety.' But you know, in reality, maybe I'm just young and you know, maybe I'm just a little jittery and because I'm still developing and really trying to figure out who I am and things like that. I'm not bashing you know people that do that because I know they get their certifications and things but what I am saying is in objective truth that happens, and I'm pretty sure you've seen it, where a male will be seen as that you know, no matter what, mostly males would be the ones with the autism or the ADHD things like that because it's mostly us the ones that you know have IEPs and we fidgety this and that. And I think that that's a huge problem. I honestly think, like I say I blame the school system, one more time with a shot right there because again, the school system is not really built for everyone equally."

Impact of school

Throughout their educational experience, school has had many different impacts on the participants. The interviews brought to light the vast difference the impact of school had on students while being in general education versus special education. Tony began by sharing how being bullied at school and not having supportive adults who believed him or did anything about it affected his mental health:

"So it started, well I feel like it fully just hit like a tidal wave like seventh grade is when it really just started hitting me out of nowhere, but before that, when I was younger, I was bullied a lot and no one ever did anything. And it kept happening day after day and then I guess as a kid you don't really you know. You don't really

understand, and so I guess I shrugged it off like I don't know, it took a while to fully hit me I guess. And then yeah just really, really bad it on myself. And then seventh, eighth grade I had serious anger issues and I would just go to sleep dreaming about hurting people and I just felt like a monster for it. I would just be angry all the time just trying to hide it behind the smile, you know saying, 'I'm fine, I'm okay' and all that. I was just really bad and I didn't see a therapist until the end of eighth grade because that's when I hit an all-time low so it took a lot of you know, to be able to talk to someone about it."

He continued by adding:

"My grades were really bad. I had like less than a 2.0 but I feel like well, part of it was me just not giving a shit and then also because of my mental health and all that, and you know, eventually just fully became me overthinking everything and just doubting myself like, 'I'm not going anywhere, I have no future', so I just basically just gave up. I mean it got a little bit better towards eighth grade when I started seeing a therapist, but you know, it was it was pretty bad."

David shared how he had to retake some general education classes with students younger than him due to not passing them. He shared how his confidence was affected and how this "made me feel like a failure." He added that his general education teachers did not support him in passing his classes and this really affected his mental health.

Carl and Isaac both shared very personal stories about how school impacted them before they were placed in special education. Carl, having not wanted to attend school, shared, "Yeah so I still didn't want to go to school, so around sixth grade, I got a pair of scissors and I said I was going to kill myself and evacuated the classroom. And I ended

up getting kicked out of school in sixth grade. That's how much I hated school."

Similarly, Isaac shared:

> "It was really the work and like the stress and the anxiety. The stress and the anxiety of like how much work you gotta do to get good grades, but it is too much because like tests and quizzes and exams. That is what stressed me out on top of homework, you know. I noticed that it was stressing me out too much and that's when I said, hey I'm not going to do this work. My teachers would tell me, 'You gotta get this work done because your grades is falling down' and in my head I'm like, 'man, I really don't care at this point."

When asked what was causing his stress and anxiety he expressed, "It was the school. It was really the school cuz it was giving me depression and anxiety and stuff. I always talk to my counselor and I would always tell her, 'Hey I'm stressed right now, like I'm getting depressed,' and all that. Like I don't want to do this school no more. I also told my mom and dad aye I don't want to go to school no more then there was an incident where I thought about committing suicide. I told my teacher, 'I don't want to be here' and they said, 'Aye you gotta do this and that' so they wasn't listening when I say I don't wanna go to school anymore, I want to drop out."

After SPED diagnosis

Educational experience

After receiving their special education diagnosis, students' educational experiences changed drastically both positively and negatively. Depending on the setting, student shared a range of stories about how being in special education changed their life for the better or made their educational experience worse. Gelo began by sharing:

"Okay, special ED for me um to be honest, it was the same thing, but, but just

even more so, I didn't really necessarily mesh with a lot of this stuff because it

was still the same type of classes, it was just slower, you know. And so it was

basically the same thing, but just you know, with a lot of kids going through a lot

of crazy stuff as well with me now next me in seats and then you know it was just

kind of just really difficult and more challenging you know, like less learning of

anything and the stuff that was applicable that I probably would have learned if I

was in the in the gen ED classes, I was learning super slowly and almost to the

point where I would forget it as I'm learning it. So I mean, you know, special ED

I mean you know, there may be a place for that, for some people, but definitely

not me."

On the opposite side of the spectrum, Tony shared how being in special education helped

him significantly, both academically as well as social emotionally:

"Yeah like it definitely helped me like especially like if I didn't have it, I

definitely would not have been able to get a 4.0 like them [*comparing himself to

gen ed students*]. Just like that this extra help definitely helped me improve like a

lot more and just I guess, just made me feel like more confident in my in my

abilities and like what I can do, and you know stuff like that. Just helping me

realize like my full potential and like what I can do and my strengths and

weaknesses."

He continued by sharing how special education has improved his outlook and made him

appreciate the teachers he's had.

"I feel like it's like improved like my outlook on it [*schooling*], I guess, I don't

know, like just with the help I got. There was really just like so many nice people

that really want to help you. Like you're just a complete stranger to them like day

one, but they really care about you so much. They put in just all this time and

effort into just you, you know, helping you be the best you can be. I feel like my

school has really good teachers, that really are, what's the word, really looking out

for their students."

Similarly, Matt shared that his educational experience improved in special education due

to the teachers he had:

"Um, I felt like it became easier when I got teachers that really understood and

really took the time to like understand and help me with like an algebra problem.

They would try and work with you the most to get the best grade and I feel like

that was really important to have that at such a young age. To know that it was

still possible, rather than having a bunch of bad experiences when I was in high

school."

He added:

"As I went through special education in high school, I started to realize that there

actually was nothing wrong with me, actually, you can turn something like this

into a blessing."

David, having nothing but positive things to say about his educational experience after

being placed in special education shared:

"In special ED I don't think I've had any days like that [*like the teacher didn't

care about him*] you know, because every like I said the classes were smaller and

they gave you the attention you needed so that they can help you do what you

needed to do. If I had not been a special education classes, I honestly did not think

I would have graduated. I do not think I would have graduated at all on time,

because I would have been too busy making up credits too busy trying to catch up

and learn things that I couldn't learn in a general education classroom. I would

have been so far behind that honestly, I don't think I would have graduated."

He continued to add:

"In special ED they treat everyone equally. Everyone needs the same amount of

help or attention more or less, depending on their levels that they need, you know.

My teachers really helped me. They were actually legitimately there for me. They

were the ones that I kept inspiring me. get your grades up, let me, what do you

need help with what can I do to help you get your grades up, they were actually

helping me in the ways that I needed it and because of that I managed to get out of

having to retake classes."

Similar to Tony, Carl shared that although he met a lot of great teachers, when he entered

special education, he felt very controlled stating, "Before TEP, I mean I was more free. I

was way more free actually because I was able to do what I want, go to classes and stuff.

I was treated like a normal kid." Despite him feeling this way, Carl did share that overall,

being in special education was a positive experience:

"I would say. Overall, it was positive, because I don't think I would have

graduated if I didn't have that help. Because due to me not going to school and

stuff like when I was mainstream, I'd eventually just became a dropout. Yeah like

since I was special ed they kept trying to drag me back in over and over so yeah."

Isaac shared his experience around moving to multiple different schools and being "taken to the ground" but ultimately expressed:

> **"**It [*special education*] helped, it helped a lot. Because if like, I was in a regular class, I would get bad grades. I will tell you that straight up. I would get bad grades if I was in a regular class. Because sometimes that work be hard. And sometimes, if its math, some kids don't know math like that cuz some kids they don't know their multiplication and their adding and subtraction and some kids they really good at math but some kids they're not that good. They're good but not that good."

Quality of education

When describing their educational experience, students spoke about the difference in the quality of education and teaching. Although students mostly focused on the ways in which being in special education helped them and not necessarily the quality of the education being provided, this was still a theme that resonated with many participants. When asked how being in special education has been for him, David responded by saying:

> "It helps because it feels like the help that they're giving you is pretty much custom tailored to you to give you a challenge but at the same time help you to be the best that you can."

He then went on to add how being in special education has made him feel:

> "When you're in special ED every day is Jenga. I don't mean that in a literal sense. Every day is something new. From students that just know how to be funny to a teacher's joke. It helps us use our mind, you know. It helps us understand what's

going on, even if they put like a very bad pun into a slide show that they're presenting. It helps out because you know it's not boring, you know you you're gonna have boring days, you know you're, gonna occasionally have days where you don't really do anything right but not everything needs to be. Well, hard. Not every day has to be something tough. Not every day has to be a new challenge for you to face, you know. You're going to have challenges almost every other day of your life and they help you prepare you for that."

Isaac similarly added:

"My sped teachers know me. They want to help me and teach me what I need to know. They be saying like just take your time, like the same stuff. Just take your time and um like to just try to get the work done."

JT, sharing his experience spoke about how being in special education was easier for him. He shared, "Well from when I had seven classes, the special ed, the teaching was way way easier. It was way easier." When asked what made it more easier, JT responded by saying, "The work was just easier. Like they gave me work at my level that I could do."

Tony also shared a specific quality that he felt was impactful while in special education:

"Um I remember I would usually, like I would take, like you know when there'd be like quizzes or tests or something and then me and a handful of students would be taken out into another room. Like where it was more quiet and we could like get more I guess like one on one help. Yeah and then that was actually pretty helpful. It helped me out quite a bit, especially with the math thing but that only happened when I was in special education. They wouldn't do that for me when I wasn't."

Attitudes and perceptions of school

For many of the participants, their attitudes and perceptions of school changes drastically after being placed in special education. Matt began by sharing his perspective on how being placed in special education changed his whole outlook on life. He shared:

No, no, no. I really don't think I would have [*graduated high school*]. special education actually kind of like saved me from my own situation and my own housing situation because, unfortunately, I was put in that home, that place but it actually helped me focus on high school. For me it wasn't where I wanted to be, but actually got the one on one help I needed and I got teachers that were good. Like special education, for me, it really helped me open up my horizon to learn, instead of so shut down and shallow because of my negative experiences."

He went on to add:

"I feel like it's only made me want to, I'm not gonna lie, I've been discouraged sometimes but I feel like it always has made me want to work harder or even myself learning like wanting to just learn more. You just have to learn how to like work with it, it's like Play-Doh. Sometimes you get some Play-Doh and you just got to put some water on it and just try and make it into something that works for you, rather than what somebody else wants you to be become or let alone like what society wants you to become because I'm assuming a lot of high school students, even college students have imposter syndrome. Do I belong here like?"

Similarly, David shared how he also feels that being in special education was a blessing for him:

"Because they've really been helpful to me, and not just me but to a lot of the
other people who's been in special ED. They've helped them graduate you know
they've helped them walk the stage, they've helped them do what normal teachers
cannot help them do. So honestly, it's a blessing, and I would gladly welcome my
students to special ED."

Liam, citing that his temper was the reason for being in special education, shared how he
was "messing up a lot" before being placed in special education but "now I'm doing
better." When asked if special education has helped him, he expressed:

"Yeah, it has. But I believe, like, if I keep doing good and I move out, I believe
I'm gonna do way- I'm gonna do- I believe I'm gonna do way better in the mainstream
classroom with my teachers that have taught me- that talk to me about... So, like,
basically, I'm in this classroom, because of my temper and stuff like that." He then went
on to add why special education is a good thing in his opinion, stating:

"Yes, it's a good thing. It's a good thing so like when you're removed from this
class (special education) and you get mainstream classes um, that you're prepared
for them again. And you're ready to not act how I used to act out, to learn how to
be paying attention to the teacher."

Similar to Liam, Carl shared a similar perspective in regards to behavior. He mentioned:

"I didn't like being categorized as a special ed kid when I actually wasn't. I didn't
have a disability, I had behavior problems and that's why I was inside these
classrooms. I already knew how the classroom was. They had me in one
classroom all day. I already knew how restricted they wanted me to be. So, I
didn't want to go in that classroom at all. I didn't want to go at all."

He then went on to share his perspective around not feeling free:

"That's the difference that we weren't as free. What we did was controlled by them. If we didn't go to school, they'd be the first ones to call and stuff and if we didn't do what they say, they would find ways to force us to do what they say."

Impact of school

The impact that being in special education had for the participants varied. Most participant shared the positive impact being placed in special education had on them. Tony shared how being in special education allowed him to obtain a 4.0 grade point average. He shared:

"High School, like ninth grade was sort of the same thing, but eventually once I got into special education, I started to get better. Like I think in like last year as a junior I was able to get a 4.0. I feel like you have the most opportunity because you can make your learning experience more enriched and get like one-on-one help. Like that's huge and kids don't get that."

Matt also shared his insights around the impact school had on him once he was placed in special education:

"Yeah, um the positive experiences that I've had, I felt like have really helped me pursue college and to graduate college and mainly also too I feel like having a teacher that really understands you, and that will help you will also help change yourself in a way because it will make you feel like okay, 'well actually. I can understand this subject' and it's in actually pushed me to want to like help other people, but just in a different way, you know around mental health. Because you can make your future, however, you want it."

Carl, sharing that he didn't like being labeled as having a disability, stated, "I never liked

the title of that, of me having a disability and I always hated school, so I stopped going to

school freshman year." Despite his strong feelings and being forced to attend school, he

explained how being placed in a special education program called TEP not only helped

with his behavioral issues but also helped him graduate high school:

> "TEP is a transition educational program and it's also special ED but it's even
>
> more extreme than what I was in before. So instead of staying and having one
>
> class as a support class, I would have one class all day and depending on what
>
> level I'm in or how good I'm acting, they would give me more and more
>
> mainstream classes as I go. And that's what TEP basically was. And at first, I
>
> didn't want to go there, I remember telling my grandma, "I don't want to go, I
>
> don't want to be considered special ED." I don't want to be considered like I have
>
> some type of disability and stuff so I didn't want to go. I was telling my grandma
>
> this, I was about 13 at the time, and I was telling her I didn't want to go. But I still
>
> had to go. And basically that's what I was doing try my hardest to get out of it,
>
> trying to avoid school as much as possible, and as soon as they threw me in TEP
>
> that's when I started not having behavior problems. Throughout my whole high
>
> school, I haven't gotten suspended once since I started high school so I guess it
>
> helped."

He then added how being in this program essentially helped him graduate:

> "I feel like it helped me graduate a lot, because Mr. Falgaras, he bailed me out a
>
> lot, like he'd go to the teacher and he would tell him he's doing this and this such

and thing, and he'd build these relationships with these teachers and stuff and he's the reason I graduated."

Similar to Carl, JT shared how being in special education has "made me feel worse" and "I am embarrassed. I shouldn't be in there with five people that... I shouldn't be... I know I shouldn't be in there. It makes me not even want to go to school anymore. I hate it….I don't want anybody to know. I kept it a secret my whole life. Nobody don't need to know that. People judge you for things like that. Say that you're stupid for being in it and stuff." He then went on to add that he has lost motivation by saying:

"It set me back 'cause I don't try. I don't have any motivation because I have been in it for my entire life basically. It's like they won't even give me a chance to see if I can do good without it. They just assume I still need to be in these special classes. I haven't gotten one chance to be in a regular class to prove myself. And they don't want to hear me out when I tell them to let me."

On the opposite end of the spectrum, David shared his perspective around being proud to be in special education and that it won't affect his future:

"Being labeled as special ed doesn't particularly affect anything that I have planned for my future, specifically due to the fact that I already want to go into many different advanced fields of study, you know. I want to learn coding, I want to learn many different things I'm already learning, Dutch and Japanese. I'm learning so many different things that you can't learn in school as a public school that are already poorly funded, you know. I can make a living after graduating from special ED. And I don't have to worry about not understanding anything because I've learned it."

Research Question 2: How do African American male students understand the implications of being labeled as ED? How do they perceive this diagnosis playing a role/affecting their future?

Table 2. Implications of being labeled as ED and how future will be affected

Themes	Subthemes
Lack of knowledge	N/A
Seen and treated differently	-Different levels of treatment dependent on setting
Positive outcome despite feelings	-Able to graduate -Did/will not affect future

Lack of knowledge of ED

Perhaps one of the biggest eyeopeners was seeing that only one out of the 8 participants had ever heard of the diagnosis of emotionally disturbed let alone understood what it meant and why they were diagnosed with it. When asking students the question of what the diagnosis of emotionally disturbed meant to them and when they first heard of that label, the responses were overwhelming skewed one way. When asked, Isaac responded by saying, "What's that? I've never heard that before." Similarly, Liam responded with, "What's that? Well this is my first time I don't really know all about it," JT responded with, "What do you mean? I don't know what that is," and Carl's response was, "No what does it mean? Disturbed emotionally? No, I've never heard of it." David, although he gave a response to the question, didn't include any indication of ED, alluding to his understanding of him having a disability but simply was not aware of what his actual diagnosis was. He stated:

> "For me, I had a lot of things going on for me but it's mostly for my ADHD. You
>
> know, my disability to focus properly, you know, but like it wasn't only my

inability to focus, even though it was like bad. I wasn't able to get things done with all the loud noises in my head. With everyone around me being loud it's kind of hard to focus on one voice, which is the teacher. Which made me not able to focus properly on the work, you know, and because of that I ended up becoming more of a class clown than I did an actual student."

Matt, the only student who had heard of the diagnosis shared:

"Emotionally disturbed means to me that that your emotions just are all over the place, right now, and you need some help sorting them out. And sometimes like I also consider that, like something, some people have a hard time dealing with emotions. Like being mentally disturbed about something there's different ways to go about handling and coping with it, rather than emotional. More like being in distress emotionally. When I first found out that I was emotionally disturbed was definitely in middle school."

Despite not knowing or having heard of the diagnosis emotionally disturbed, Gelo stated:

"And they'll take a kid like me and they'll say oh my gosh you have autism, or you have ADHD you're very fidgety. But you know, in reality, maybe I'm just young and you know, maybe I'm just a little you know jittery and because I'm still developing and really trying to figure out, who I am and things like that. But what I am saying is an objective truth that happens more and I'm pretty sure you've seen it is more than not, a male will be seen as that you know, no matter what, males would be the ones with the autism or the ADHD things like that, because it's mostly us the ones that you know, like I say in the schools were IEP kids because were fidgety and this and that."

Similarly, when asked why he was placed in special education after having never heard of the diagnosis of emotionally disturbed, Liam shared:

> "I used to- I used to walk out of class and stuff, used to walk away from the teachers, that's why I'm really put in here, 'cause my temper, I used to walk away from the teachers. They would try to grab me and I would pull away from them, like, 'Don't touch me.' So, like, basically, I'm in this classroom, because of my temper and stuff like that. Well, It's not even my temper. It's like, my actions, like, based on how I react to things."

When asked the same question, JT responded by saying that he didn't even know why he was placed in special education stating, "In middle school, I was doing good on my work and stuff, I was doing it, I did what I needed to do but then in high school they put me back in here for some reason." When asked if he had inquired as to why he was back in special education in high school he shared that he did ask but was never given a response by his mom nor his teachers stating, "I did ask. I asked almost every day and they never told me why I'm back in there." He also replied with, "I don't even know if I have gen-ed classes in high school... I don't even know" when I inquired about his class schedule and how much time he spends in his general education classes versus his special education class.

Feelings of being seen and treated differently

A repeated concern was shared amongst all 8 participants in regards to being seen, feeling and treated differently in a negative aspect. Regardless of their feelings towards special education, every participant identified negative feelings towards the diagnosis.

Gelo, when sharing a story about how low the expectations were for him while being in special education and how all they did was stare at walls during class, stated:

> "I felt very embarrassed because I knew I was capable. I was an F student and then you know I made a commitment, so you know I said I'm gonna get straight A's in this IEP stuff. I mean hey, I'm only looking at walls all day so I'ma stare at this wall, hard. And I'm gonna do a good job staring at that wall and you know, I will do my little tiny assignments that I got during the day you know, get it done, and you know I'll move up and get into the regular classes and that's what I did and then I got A's in my last year"

Tony described how he would get teased by his friends when for being in special education stating:

> "I mean, just some just some light teasing I guess you could say like really just like from my friends, and everyone knows that really think serious, just like oh you have your therapy, you must be depressed or something blah, you know something like that or you're in special ED what are you retarded or something stupid like that never really personally got to me yeah but yeah."

When asked what he thought when he heard that he was emotionally disturbed, Matt replied:

> "I felt different. I felt there was something wrong with me, maybe. You know, I didn't know...like this was going to negatively impact me for the rest of my life? Like do I have to tell everyone about this? You know when I'm having a hard time like, oh I'm emotionally disturbed, it's like how do I communicate with people that?"

David, who has shown that being in special education was a very positive experience for him, still shared that being in special education wasn't always easy, stating:

> "You know, because, like there are a lot of students who get like in special ED but get made fun of just being in special ED classes like 'oh he's special ED, oh he's a dumb ass oh he's this and that' and it doesn't help you know. We just need more help than you do it's nothing major. We just need the need the help. So, when you go into a special ED classroom and people are over here like oh they're all dumb oh they're all this, they're all that, you kind of just like start to act like it and refused to learn, because there are already people who think you won't make it anyway. No know that view kind of makes it hard to learn because so many people don't understand that when you're given a pre-set view of how they think that you are, when you have that concept of how people think you are you kind of live up to it."

Similarly, Carl revealed:

> "I hated it more so there [*a specific school*] because I knew everyone there but they didn't seem to care because I didn't like look disabled. I had kids come up to me and say 'Carl, you're special ed this, that and the third. Then they would ask me multiplication questions. This girl literally said "Carl are you special Ed?" Then she asked me multiplication questions, I got them all right and she's like "oh Okay." I didn't like being categorized as a special ed kid when I actually wasn't. I didn't have a disability, I had behavior problems and that's why I was inside these classrooms. I never liked the title of that, of me having a disability and I always hated school, so I stopped going to school freshman year."

When asked if any of his friends know he is in special education, JT responded with:

> "I don't want anybody to know. I kept it a secret my whole life. Nobody don't
> need to know that. People judge you for things like that. Say that you're stupid for
> being in it and stuff. I am embarrassed. I shouldn't be in there with five people
> that... I shouldn't be... I know I shouldn't be in there. It makes me not even want to
> go to school anymore. I hate it. Because I'm just seeing all my other friends go to
> their classroom, while I'm stuck in a class with five people I shouldn't even be in a
> class with. Sometimes it makes me feel worse."

When discussing special education and how school negatively impacted him, Isaac
shared a deeply personal experience. Upon entering high school, his self-esteem was
severely impacted due to not being able to keep up with the workload, despite asking for
help from teachers. He shared how failure set in and eventually, his mental health began
to suffer significantly.

> "My teachers or my counselors they wasn't listening. So, in my mind, I was like,
> if no one is going to listen, then what's the point of living? Because if like, if
> they're not gonna listen, then hey, I'm just gonna take my life. And when I take
> my life, that's when they're gonna be like oh we should've listened….So that
> night, I wrote a suicide letter to my parents, left it on my bed and went to the
> kitchen to grab a knife. When I was about to slit my wrist, my little sister had
> woken up and walked into the kitchen to grab water."

Severity of treatment dependent on school setting

Although every student reported at least one negative feeling of being seen and
treated differently, the severity depended on the school setting in which the participants

were in. Being that the participants were chosen from different special education settings, a common theme showed that the students in more restrictive settings had stronger negative feelings towards how they were treated. Matt, who spent his high school years in a residential program shared that he felt like a prisoner while at school. The students were watched and monitored 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and had to earn all of their privileges. He shared:

"It was like being in a prison and having no freedom. You were allowed to earn privileges but if you did anything wrong, they were taken away. The staff there weren't always the nicest unless they knew you weren't going to start shit with them. I wasn't allowed to leave the campus without permission and even that had to be earned. I lived there so they basically controlled everything I did. They were even allowed to put their hands on us if we got outta line. It was awful but now that I'm older I understand why I needed that in my life at the time."

Carl, who had experienced both an NPS and an SDC setting shared:

"And that kind of got on my nerves, that's one of the big negatives, how they [*they = Special Ed. Teachers*] would treat us in those classes. Unlike the other students, we were able to get restrained and put down and sat on and physically touched and things like that. That's the difference that we weren't as free. What we did was controlled by them. if we didn't go to school, they'd be the first ones to call and stuff and if didn't do what they say, they would find ways to force us to do what they say. So yeah that was a different."

He then went on to explain how was treated by his teachers saying:

"The teacher didn't really care. They would have us walking in a line in front of all these kids like we're special ed, and we had to do these things like like we have some type of disability so what I would do, I would start ditching them. I would start leaving the lines and act like I was going to the bathroom. Like when the yellow bus would come, I would never take the yellow bus. I would skip that and I'd take a public bus. I would maneuver around and eventually people didn't think I was special or whatever. I didn't like how the teachers, like eighth grade was when it was worse, they would have us literally walking in a line of 10 to 12 kids. And people would act like we were disabled and they would take us into a line into the lunch room or whatever, and they didn't have any sympathy about how we would look. Or how we was and they didn't really care at all and that kind of got on my nerves a lot. They didn't care how we were stereotyped."

When comparing how his experience before special education changed, Carl replied:

"Um before TEP I mean I was more free. I was way more free actually because I was able to do what I want, go to classes and stuff. I was treated like a normal kid. Then, once I got into the special ed programs it's like you guys, this group of people, you're separate from the kids, you do what I say, you do this system, otherwise you're staying inside the classroom, you're doing this you're doing that."

Similarly, JT recalled how his teachers treated him while in special education:

"All they [*special education teachers*] do is... They used to just play dominoes and then just talk shit. They was just talking hella shit. They was just talking like shit. Like they had power over us and could control us. But lucky for me, I wasn't

in there... Only had one class in there. I had all my other classes with regular kids. Like In my opinion, I've never needed it [*special education*] in the first place, but I was in there for something that happened in kindergarten. And here I am in high school still in it. I learned everything I needed to learn about how to behave in elementary school. I'm too old to be treated the way that they treat us in these classes in high school. Like were stupid or something.

While attending an NPS, Isaac shared a story about when he was "taken to the ground" by staff members at his school:

"No, he was like a staff. He was like a staff but not a teacher. He was in the classroom and I don't know what happened, I can't remember. And uhh. I started fighting or cussing, I can't remember and I guess him and this woman they put me to the ground and they were holding my arms. Then I do remember, I was screaming because he had his knee on my leg and I told him, 'aye move your knee from my leg' and like he didn't. So I started spitting because I wanted him to stop doing that because that was hurting my leg so yeah."

Positive outcomes despite feelings (impact of school)

Despite the manner in which participants felt about their diagnosis of emotional disturbance and placement in special education, a common theme across all participants was that their placement served as a positive outcome in one way or another. When sharing about how special education helped Tony achieve a 4.0 gpa he stated:

"Yeah like it definitely helped me like especially like if I didn't have it, I definitely wouldn't not have been able to get a 4.0. Just like the extra help and stuff and like the therapy was also very helpful too."

Tony continued by saying:

> "Definitely helped me improve like a lot more, and just I guess just made me feel
> like more confident in my in my abilities, I guess, and like what I can do, and you
> know stuff like that just helping me realize like my full potential and like what I
> can do my strengths and weaknesses. I feel like it's improved like my outlook on
> it, I guess. I don't know, just all the help I got. It's really just like so many nice
> people that you're just a complete stranger to them like day one, but they really
> care about you so much, just putting all this time and effort into just you, helping
> you be the best you can be."

Gelo reported how being in special education has made him more resilient:

> "I'm trying to get some property and invest like you would never think of guy like
> me came from like some special ED you know what I'm saying usually a guy like
> me should be sitting at the House, you know popping pills, and it taking
> medication and stuff like that, for all them things but because I went through so
> much adversity being special ed, I learned how to be resilient and always push
> forward to get to where I want to be and not let my current circumstances define
> me."

Matt, the participant placed in the most restrictive school environment, shared his
positive outlook on his experience in special education:

> "Do I belong here? like people seem so much smarter than me, but then, as I went
> through special education in high school, I started to realize that there actually
> was nothing wrong with me, actually, you can turn something like this into a
> blessing. I feel like it's only made me want to, I'm not gonna lie, I've been

discouraged sometimes but I feel like it always has made me want to work harder or even myself learning like wanting to just learn more."

He followed by adding:

"I feel like being in special ED, just like with everything, you can take the good with it, you can take the bad with. I feel like you have the most opportunity because you can make your learning experience more enriched and get like one on one help like that's huge and kids don't get that."

Similarly, Liam spoke about how special education has helped him learn how to behave in the classroom:

"Yes, it's a good thing. It's a good thing so like when you're removed from this class (special education) and you get mainstream classes um, that you're prepared for them again. And you're ready to not act how I used to act out, to learn how to be paying attention to the teacher. That's what special education is helpful for. To learn how to not act out in class."

Carl, who struggled to attend school, shared how being in special education helped him not become a dropout:

"Overall, it was positive, because I don't think I would have graduated if I didn't have that help. Because due to me not going to school and stuff like when I was mainstream, I'd eventually just became a dropout. Yeah like since I was special ed they kept trying to drag me back in over and over so yeah."

Isaac, who had identified that the difficulty of the work in his general education classes was causing him anxiety, shared that special education helped him a lot:

"it helped, it helped a lot. Because if like, I was I a regular class, I would get bad grades. I will tell you that straight up, I would get bad grades if I was in a regular class. Because sometimes that work be hard. And sometimes, if its math, some kids don't know math like that cuz some kids they don't know their multiplication and their adding and subtraction and some kids they really good at math but some kids they're not that good. They're good but not that good."

Ability to graduate

A subtheme that emerged as part of the positive outcomes for participants despite their feelings towards special education was their ability to graduate. All five of the participants who had completed high school or were seniors at the time of the interview credited special education as the reason for them being able to graduate. When asked if he would have graduated high school without being in special education, Matt shared:

"No no no. I really don't think I would have. Special education actually kind of like saved me from my own situation and my own housing situation because, unfortunately, I was put in that home, that place but it actually helped me focus on high school. For me it wasn't where I wanted to be, but I actually got the one on one help I needed and I got teachers that were good. Like special education, for me, it really helped me open up my horizons to learn, instead of so shut down and shallow because of my negative experiences."

Similarly, David shared:

"If I had not been a special education classes, I honestly did not think I would have graduated. I do not think I would have graduated at all on time, because I would have been too busy making up credits too busy trying to catch up and learn

things that I couldn't learn in a general education classroom. I would have been so far behind that honestly, I don't think I would have graduated."

He continued by adding:

"You know I managed to graduate with grades that can get me into college if I want to go to college. And my IEP will help me get into College as well, because my IEP is there. It means that I've had the help and the understanding to make it into College and then on top of that, they will also provide me with services I need in order to make it through college. I can make a living after graduating from special ED. And I don't have to worry about not understanding anything because I've learned it."

As a graduating senior at the time of this interview, Tony spoke about the humanizing approach that special education teachers employ that helped him gain the confidence to graduate:

"If it weren't for the special ed teachers, I wouldn't be graduating this year. They just cared so much, more than my general ed teachers. Like they cared about me as a person and not just another student in their class and that helped me be more confident and graduate."

Gelo, one of the participants who spoke at length about the negative experiences he had while being in special education, shared that despite him feeling like he didn't need to be placed in special education, the small class sizes did help him stay focused enough to 'get out of high school." He stated:

"Pretty much all throughout high school um you know I went through a lot of bullying. I went through a lot of this stuff and you know um a lot of bullying and

things like that kind of you know, I guess, put me in a situation where I wanted a

smaller class size but it didn't mean I couldn't learn the same rate as everybody

else and so because I wanted to be safe, you know you know from our brothers

and sisters, I went to special education classes and it helped me focus on myself

and not about the bullying that I was going through and get out of high school and

graduate."

When talking about if special education impacted his future, Carl stated:

"Any impact on my future yeah? Well yeah because I feel like if they [special

education teachers] didn't do those things or try to bail me out all those times I

probably wouldn't even be graduating. I probably wouldn't be able to try to

become a philosopher, so yeah."

Did not/will not affect future

The second subtheme that emerged was that despite not knowing or

understanding what the diagnosis of emotionally disturbed meant, all participants shared

that the diagnosis did not/will not affect their future. David, when speaking about his

future shared:

"Um me being labeled as special ed doesn't particularly affect anything that I

have planned for my future, specifically due to the fact that I already want to go

into many different advanced fields of study, you know. I want to learn coding, I

want to learn many different things I'm already learning, Dutch and Japanese I'm

learning so many different things that you can't learn in school as a public school

that are already poorly funded, you know."

When asked if he thought the label of emotionally disturbed would impact his future, Carl asserted:

"Do I think it will impact me in the future? That label? Probably not. Well, I mean, you mean like if a professor or someone knew that I was special ed or knew that I had that label? Well no, they would see my essays and how smart I am and know that label wouldn't matter. They'd see, they'd see how I complete my assignments and speak in class. I don't think it would matter at all."

By the same token, Liam shared how being in special education would not prevent him from being successful in. He indicated:

"I mean, everybody has their problems in school. A lot of- a lot of people who can't be always successful with a school, 'cause everybody got their own problems and got their own things going on with their self and stuff like that. But no, there's nothing preventing me not even being in special education, 'cause I'm- I'm- I'm- I'm always pushing myself to get to where I got to be in life, 'cause like, me I wanna be a basketball player. I'm gonna push and push to get there."

Research Question 3: What specific teacher supports or strategies do African American males labeled as ED believe would have positively changed their experience in a general education setting?

Table 3. General education teacher supports

Themes	Subthemes
Identifying and providing support (feeling supported)	-Equal support for all students
Understanding students as individuals	-N/A
Positive Student and Teacher Relationship	-Building personal connections -Positive affirmations/encouragement
Culturally Relevant Curriculum	-Engaging teaching strategies

Identifying and providing support (students feeling supported)

One of the most common themes amongst the participants in regards to specific teacher supports or strategies was having teachers identify and provide support to students when needed. Although this may seem like common sense, the majority of participants expressed the need for wanting their teachers to identify on their own when they would be in need of support and provide that support. This included teachers observing their students and actively offering support. Students feeling supported in this manner by their teachers was a shared strategy amongst participants that would have positively changed their experience in a general education setting. When speaking about strategies that would've helped him, Tony shared:

"I wish teachers would've come to me personally, like ask, "Do you need help?" because they see that I do need help, or something you know, like if I'm not writing or I'm just like you know, dozing off. And then they'd come to me and like notice I'm struggling and then give me the help that I need. Just really like notice, just like you know, like just overall like notice your students and stuff like you know. Like I said, if I'm just staring off or I'm just doodling or whatever, just really paying attention to detail, but like not just for me, you know, for each and every student. I feel like that would have helped me just pay more attention, I guess. Just showing more care for students, I guess you."

When asked this question, David shared that he felt there weren't any specific strategies that his general education teachers were doing to positively impact his experience:

"In my normal classes, my general education classes, I don't think there really was

a strategy. For most classes that I wasn't able to focus in there wasn't a strategy,

there was nothing there to help me, you know the teachers weren't really there to

help you they just wanted to get you in and get you out, you know there wasn't

really a strategy there. It was hard to focus in and get the help that I needed, you

know it's hard to talk to teachers that aren't you know, actually able to help you in

the way that you need the help. Because most teachers would just like brush it off

say things like, "Weren't you paying attention to things I was saying in class?"

Like they would brush it off, as if it's something that you are doing intentionally

you know, and when you're actually trying to graduate so that you go somewhere

and be somewhere in life, it makes it hard because they're not helping you.

They're always saying were here to help if you got any questions asked we're here

to help, but it doesn't feel that way. It makes it hard."

Although Matt couldn't think of any specific strategies that his general education teachers

provided him, he shared a story about one of his special education teachers and how she

identified a need and came up with a creative way to support him through it:

"I can't think of any specific strategies that my general education teachers gave

me but um Alyssa [*special education teacher*] helped me develop the strategy

where learning how to count by 3's and twos and 8's and 9's because I know those

are like pretty tricky. Um she helped me develop like or like understand the

rhythm so like she made you know, like 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12 like kind of keeping it

like rhythm because she knew I was in music so she's like "Okay, I can get him to

learn this a little bit more if I just come up with a rhythm for him." Yeah. And that

is something I think all teachers should be able to do for their students."

Liam shared his insights around how his special education teachers would provide him

support and expressed that his general education teachers failed to do so, causing him to

not perform well in their classes:

"If anything, teachers- my sped teachers will always wanna help me out. They

don't wanna knock me down. They always wanna help me out. It's like, if I'm

having a hard time, sometime I could try to talk it out with a teacher. If I need a

break, I could go take a break with a teacher. But it wasn't always like that with

my regular teachers. They didn't know what I needed but they didn't care to

figure it out. So, I never did good in their class."

When asked what his general education teachers could have done more of, David

responded:

"I feel like for some of my gen ed teachers, if they had honestly checked in a bit

more, and I don't mean checked in as like, "Oh what's going on in your personal

life?" No. if they actually just like talk to you, you know. Occasionally, maybe

after class call you over like "Yo, what's up?" you know see why you're falling

behind and talk to you about it and help you see what can you do to catch up, you

know. Like there are just little things that could have just been tended to by

general education teachers to provide support for students but not all general ed

teachers do."

Equal support for all students. A subtheme that was also identified by students as

a way to have positively changed their general education experience was the idea of equal

support for all students. Many participants shared how general education teachers would provide unequal support, focusing mostly on the students who were doing well in their classes. David shared:

"In special ED they treat everyone equally everyone needs the same amount of help or attention more or less, depending on their levels that they need, you know. So it. It helps because it feels like the help that they're giving you is pretty much custom tailored to you to give you a challenge same time help you as best as they can. Without making you feel worse than you already do but that's not what happens in general ed. Everyone isn't equal. They focus more on the students that are on top of things and not the ones struggling because they just assume they're not going to pass the class anyways so why waste their time."

Similarly, Tony expressed how he felt like his teacher played favorites and wouldn't give him the support he needed by saying:

"What I think is honestly, there are teachers who say they don't play favorites. But it's so obvious that they do you know. They will mostly pay attention to students who are doing everything right you know. Like turning in all their work or getting A's on tests. But if you were a student like me in the class, or if you were labeled as the 'bad student," the teachers wouldn't waste their time on you. I ended up failing the class anyways."

Additionally, Liam shared:

"The other teachers [*general education*], they don't treat everybody the same way in my perspective, but that was just one time, I felt racism. I felt weird. And the teacher apologized to me at the end of the day. That's really when they show you

that, 'cause she apologized to me, knowing that it wasn't me and she blamed me. She said, "I'm so sorry Liam. It's my fault. I thought it was you. It's my fault." I told her listen, "I know it wasn't me." And I'm like, "It's all right." But after that I didn't feel supported by her."

Carl too expressed his concerns around teachers not treating him equally. "Man, they didn't want me in their class. I was the bad kid always getting kicked out." According to Carl, his general education teachers "didn't have the patience for me. They only wanted to help me if I was like all the perfect student that got straight A's and that wasn't me." JT also expressed how his general education teachers "only helped the smart kids in the class" and how that made him feel isolated. "I couldn't ask for help. Because when I did, they almost made me feel stupid as f*** for asking questions and they would just tell me that I need to pay attention and that it's my fault I don't understand." David ended by saying, "um normal teachers, even though they may think they offer everyone help, it still feels like they play favorites you know."

Understanding students as individuals

A second theme that arose was participants wanting to be understood as an individual in the classroom by their general education teachers. They shared how helpful it would have been to have general education teachers that took the time to learn their individual needs and not utilize a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching. Tony, recounting how there were times where he was too ashamed to ask for help shared:

"Um I guess like when I'm struggling and sometimes too ashamed to admit like I needed help, I would try to solve it on my own and try my hardest on my own before I would raise my hand or something. I remember back then, I had like a

really big problem with raising my hand and asking for help, I don't know I guess

like nervousness because teachers would always use that against you. Like if I got

a bad grade or something they would say, "well you never ask for help" and I

would think like "well you never ask me if I need help." It's like they expect all

students to be the exact same way but that not how life works. Some students

don't feel comfortable or have anxiety asking for help but that doesn't mean they

don't deserve it you know. So if the teacher would come to me personally, like do

you need help, like they see that I need help, or something you know, like if I'm

not writing or I'm just like looking lost and they'd come to me and like notice I'm

actually struggling and offer me help, that would've been a game changer for

me."

Similarly, Matt expressed:

"It definitely, like the negative experiences were around who didn't really know

how to handle or just simply understand what a learning disorder was. It was hard

too, because then, at that point, I felt like I had to constantly ask them for help

while also trying to learn how to communicate efficiently like why this isn't or

why your teaching style isn't working for me so I feel like if gen ed teachers were

able to understand me as an individual with an individual learning style then that

would have been more helpful."

Feeling very passionate about what his general education teachers could have done to

support him better, David reported that he would not have needed special education

services had he received the help he needed:

"If my teachers were able to help me the way that I feel like I would have needed

help. Honestly, I don't think I would have needed to go to special ED because I've

already been I've already be receiving the type of help that I need I wouldn't be

falling behind because I'm getting the extensions on work and stuff that I need to

actually be able to turn things in you know."

He continued by saying:

"So, like if, like general education teachers could do like at least that small thing

honestly, I think that students would honestly feel like they don't have to go to

special education just to get the help they need, because they are already receiving

it. They're receiving it even without having to be in special ED which is even

more focused on actually helping people you know. But at the same time, you

know, like it's tough because of you having these disabilities, a lot of your

teachers aren't just going to notice like "Oh, he has this or that" you know, "let me

help him or try to help him more", or you know they're not going to because they

don't see the small things because they're too busy trying to focus on the bigger

picture to help everyone learn, and not you as an individual. They don't notice

every student's individual strengths and weaknesses which is what every teacher

should be doing."

Isaac shared a similar story about how he would be forced to work with others during

class and how that caused him a lot of anxiety due to him feeling not as smart as the rest

of his classmates. "They would make me work with other students. Like we would be

sitting next to each other and have to work on problems together and I didn't like that. I

didn't like that at all because I like working by myself. Everyone else was way smarter

than me and it made me feel dumb so I wish they [*general education teachers*] wouldn't do that." JT also echoed Isaac's point by sharing how he would constantly get in trouble for not doing his work but he simply didn't understand it. "I would always get in trouble cuz I wouldn't complete my work but they [*general education teachers*] just expected me to do it like everyone else. I ain't them. I needed more help and instructions but they would just sit there and talk s*** about me not knowing how to do my work." David added, "because like you're just one amongst the many hundreds of freshmen students that they got to teach, there's nothing really for them to really help you with if you can't keep up you can't keep up. They don't worry about the individuals but rather cater to the masses"

Positive student and teacher relationships

Students reported that having positive student and teacher relationships would have been instrumental in their general education experience. Many participants recounted stories of how their special education teachers fostered positive relationship with them but it was not always reciprocated by their general education teachers. Matt recounted an experience he had with one of his former special education teachers, sharing:

> "Um but my experience, I would say my best learning experience was definitely with Alyssa. She really took the time to like really like help you understand the curriculum and like not even just a curriculum, if you had anything in your personal life, you want to talk or if you needed help with anything else, like food or anything that was more personal she was there, or if she couldn't help she could try and like find a resource, but to shift to the negative parts."

When asked if he ever received this type of treatment from his general education teachers before, he responded with, "No. never. I think they were always too busy to care." David shared some insight on how having a positive relationship with your teacher creates an internal drive to want to try your best as a student. He expressed:

"You know, I believe your relationship with your teacher speaks for itself. If you're able to talk to that teacher and be able to get the help you need with that teacher and be able to trust that teacher cares about you as an individual and be able to feel like, 'this teacher really helped me," it makes you feel like "I'm gonna try my best in this class for this teacher."

Although not being able to recount many positive or helpful strategies his general education teachers have used in the past, Liam shared about a teacher he had that he appreciated.

"Like, Miss Kerry, the teacher. I appreciate her for helping me out and making sure I do all my work and get it in on time. Every morning I come to school, write my morning check-in, stuff like that and just be ready to do my work and she would always ask me about my night and tell me she cared about what I was doing after school."

Similarly, Isaac and Tony both shared stories about teachers that they had positive relationships with and how much of an impact that had on their educational experience. Isaac stated, "Every time I get in trouble I'd go and talk to him, every time... Every time I need help, I go to him. If there's anything I need help with school I can go to him. Him being there for me meant a lot." Tony shared, "Oh yeah I mean there was this one teacher that influenced me in a positive way. She was the only one who I think ever asked me

how I was doing mentally. She knew I was struggling but that made me feel like I could trust her."

Building personal connections

Students reported that building personal connections was an essential strategy to having changed their experience in general education. Participants shared many stories and insights for how their general education teachers could have shown more care for their personal lives outside of school. Matt, when recounting the time when he became homeless but was still expected to attend school and perform as if nothing was happening, shared:

> "But for the most part, I really don't think they cared. I knew they talked to my grandma a lot, so they kind of had a...they knew something was going on but they never asked me about it. I was still just expected to come to school and perform as if I wasn't homeless at the time. So having teachers who understand you and care to ask about how you're doing and help you develop good coping skills is so important to student, especially in high school."

David, feeling strongly about this gave his insight on what he loved about one of his favorite teachers and how much it meant to him for a teacher to simply know his name. He expressed:

> "Even then there's some teachers, like the teacher I said was my favorite by the way he taught. He knew everyone's name, without even having to look at a role sheet. Amongst these hundreds of students, he was literally the one person who would know everyone's names, why you're here, and how to help you. His class didn't feel like the general education class to where the teacher can say your name

but doesn't know anything about you. You know, it didn't feel like that you know. So like in general education, there were days where I tried to talk to my teachers every now and then to strike up conversations with my teacher and honestly, I don't think they knew me at all. Because general education teachers always seem so busy attending to the masses, you know. During free time they're usually trying to have the time you know, during the free periods, but also time that they're also using to prep for the next set of masses to come in so they don't really care or maybe have the time to get to know each and every one of their students. But I think that is so important as a teacher. To know your students, even just on a surface level but that never happened with me in gen ed only in special ed."

Liam shared how growing up he experienced a lot of anger in his life and in turn would take it out on his teachers at times and when asked if he ever spoke to his teachers about his struggles with anger, he replied:

"I could of talked about these things, but, like, teachers never wanted to talk about it. They never knew what was going on for me. They never asked me about my life or why I was mad. They just like, "Liam got to be removed from the classroom." And I didn't do anything or, "Liam there's too much going on for you. You should leave."

When asked what he wishes teachers would have done he said:

"Maybe like, sit down, talk to me after the class. Like, "Liam, what's going on? How are you feeling?" Maybe something like that, like- like, "What's going on?"

Like, "Why are you so angry right now?" Like, "What's going on?" I would have

wanted that but they just ain't ever want me in class."

Similarly, Isaac and Carl shared the same sentiment by sharing, "They should have talked

to me more to get to know me. It's like codes with black kids. Man codes to understand

me more but they didn't want to. To give me ideas when I was struggling. School was

hard for me." Carl shared, "If I felt my teachers cared about me then maybe I would have

gone to school more but I didn't."

Positive affirmations/encouragement

Participants reported that receiving positive affirmations and encouragement from

their general education teachers was another strategy in which students felt would have

positively impacted their general education experience. Many of the participants

expressed how they would receive positive affirmations from their special education

teachers and wished that their general education teachers would have done the same.

Participants reported that receiving encouragement from teachers boosted their

confidence and made them feel more motivated. Unfortunately, participants did not have

specific examples of when one of their general education teachers gave them some

positive affirmations but the stories they shared depicted how impactful it was when done

in the special education setting. Tony began by sharing a story about one of his special

education teachers and how the small things matter. He shared:

"One day when I was feeling down there was this one teacher that just like he came

up to me, gave me a hug and just told me all kinds of good stuff about myself. Like

all the good things he had noticed about me and I wasn't expecting it but ya. It was

small but you know those little things go a long way, you know."

Matt also expressed how the teachers he's had while in special education made him feel as they were all about their students and always gave them encouraging words.

> "There was just like teachers like Alyssa who were just very invested but also seemed to learn how to like, um I don't really know how to put. It's like I don't want to sound like you know, when you come to work you're supposed to just like leave your shit out the door, but like all the teachers that were there, like once they walked into work, it was just all about you, "what do you need?" you know. I know some things around grading and homework, like you, can't really change, but they would try and work with you the most to get the best grade and encourage you and tell you that you could do it and to not give up. I feel like that was really important to have that at such a young age, to know that it was still possible and I think every teacher needs to be that way with their students, not just special education teachers. It goes a long way"

David shared his perspective and how he felt some general education teachers were only there for a paycheck:

> "You know they [*special education teachers*] have a journal for you to write in so that they can help monitor you, you know give you points and give you the stuff you need so you can keep your grades high you know. And like not it's not just Oh, they just gave us stuff you know, no, they actually gave us a reason to do it, you know. They're that way, everyone has a reason to do it. They make you feel seen and you feel more motivated to get the work done. I never felt motivated by any of my gen ed teachers. It felt like they were just there for a paycheck."

Noticing the change in students was an important aspect for Liam. He shared:

"And the teachers even said they seen some change in me this year. They say,
"You're doing your work, you coming in on time. Lot of changes." I say, "Ah,
thank you." I told myself I need to do a lot of things, and I said, "I'm gonna just, I
ain't gonna say new year, new me, I'm gonna just change my attitude towards
stuff." That's how I said it. And they noticing it too. Yep."

Isaac also shared how when he would be struggling in school, his special education
teachers would encourage him to take his time and do what he could.

"They be saying like just take your time. Just take your time and do what you can
and um like to just try to get the work done. It was helpful."

Culturally relevant curriculum

Participants shared feelings around the curriculum being taught in general
education not being relevant to them and their experience. They expressed wishing that
teachers would have known more about them as students and applied that to curriculum.
Additionally, participant shared that the curriculum taught in general education was not
information that would be beneficial to their lives after high school. Tony, who felt very
strongly about this, expressed:

"Yes, something that's more applicable to me right if I'm reading green eggs and
ham and I'm forced to do it in the classroom for an entire hour that's like that's
like an internment camp man. It's crazy! Like that that's like crazy, you know.
That's like prison and so that's kind of how I really felt to me a lot of my life
reading. Man reading was so bad to me growing up and even now I struggle
sometimes. But in the 10th grade I really started like delving into financial
freedom and oh my gosh. May I tell you I actually turned into quite the

bookworm when I started reading those books and it was crazy to me because I didn't like to read, I thought I just didn't like reading but it turned out that I just needed to find something that was interesting to me. But my teachers didn't do that for me. I had to find that on my own."

Similarly, Matt shared:

"Umm like just around learning different stuff like taxes, like actual meaningful stuff that will help you in the future, I would have loved that. Like even just like hearing someone talk about it in high school and then you start to grow up you're like "Oh wow, I remember having that that experience with that teacher who talked about taxes and tax brackets." I don't know just giving, I feel like we should put more tools inside of students toolboxes for them to pull from rather than trying to help them develop a tool, you know it goes both ways like trying to help them understand that."

When asking Carl what could have changed in his general education experience to help him want to attend school more often, he shared:

"Well, what could have been the change? I felt like if some teacher or some special ED teacher or any teacher, counselor, someone could have heard my interests out. And could have heard what I was interested in and knew me more as a person and knew what I like to do. And they was able to correlate school and the subjects in school with what I like to do, and they would have said, "well, if you do good in this, this can help you with this or this can help you with that." I would have been able to be more interested in school, which would motivate me more to go and do it and take it more serious."

He then added:

> "Just honestly, I felt, if I had if I if I had an interest in what I was learning. And I would have gained a pursuit to learn the things that they were teaching and I had an end goal to learning those things I feel like I would have learned it because I don't think I was too dumb enough to understand. I feel like there was no need for me to learn any of it because I'm not going to college so I'm never going to use any of it."

Gelo also shared similar feelings stating:

> "So basically, gen ed for me was just like, I say it was just something that you know, a lot of the information just was not applicable to me. Um I just didn't quite frankly line up with a lot of the information. The essentials, I could tell you I know I graduated every year with the essentials that I feel like I use today right, like addition and subtraction. I had no problem with that but reading Dr. Sues' Green Eggs and Ham, I don't use that today and that's probably why I didn't understand or listen to any of that stuff they were trying to teach me."

Engaging teaching strategies

General education teachers employing engaging teaching strategies was a strategy many participants shared would have benefited them but never experienced. Participants revealed stories about engaging strategies that some of their special education teachers utilized in the classroom that enhanced their learning experience. Tony, shared:

> "Just like some of that, like some of the teachers are like this cool as hell, you know. There's like some really cool teachers and stuff especially this one teacher had when I was a junior. He was an environmental science teacher he made the

classes like really interesting. He would do a lot of hands on things to keep us engaged and made class fun."

David echoed Tony's sentiment by adding:

"It wasn't always the same for some teachers like that we're actually really helpful, I had a teacher in ninth grade that I did actually really good in his class because of the way he taught. The way he taught, you know it wasn't just oh from the book, it was actually really interactive and very, you know, unique. I honestly think he deserved to teach for all grades by the way he taught and just how I felt, you know. Like if I had him for every year of history man, I would have honestly never failed history. So, if they were all like that then I would have done well in gen ed but the majority of teachers I has were just like hard to talk to when I was not in special ed."

He continued to add:

"Even the way he taught like do you know how many times, I mean not how many times, do you know how rare it is for a teacher to try and teach you using Jenga? This is general education. Jenga normally does not enter the classroom unless it's lunch. You know that, like the way he taught just made everyone pay attention. I don't think there was a single student who ever would have failed his class because of how he taught and the attention that he was able to give every student."

Matt shared a specific strategy that one of his special education teachers did that he found to be helpful:

"she taught a very specific way to write down notes. The way she, like she had worksheets that were printed out and she'd be like "okay just pay attention to the lecture and all you go to do is just got to fill this in." And then you have something right there that you can use. It's basically fill in the blank taking notes on this, it's not, "oh hey, read this and take notes." No, it's a KWL chart. What would you want to know, what you need to know, what do you take out of it. She gave you what you needed to know and just didn't expect students to do things on their own."

Summary

The themes that emerged from interviews with African-American males in special education had or currently are receiving special education services were highlighted in this chapter. Students in this study gave voice to their own educational experience through meaningful, vivid details. In Chapter V, I will be presenting an analysis of the data as well as the implications for research and practice.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, LIMITATIONS, DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The current study used counter-storytelling to investigate historically poor educational outcomes and overrepresentation of African-American males in special education, as well as provide useful recommendations for teacher credentialing programs and the educational system at large, which currently operates off of racist and ableist structures, using the theoretical framework of critical race theory. The following research questions guided the study: (a) How do African American males in special education labeled as ED describe their educational experiences both before and after receiving the label? (b) How do African American male students understand the implications of being labeled as ED? How do they perceive this diagnosis playing a role/affecting their future? (c) What specific teacher supports or strategies do African American males labeled as ED believe would have positively changed their experience in a general education setting? Open-ended interviews and special education records were utilized to collect data and served as a basis to develop themes from student responses.

Summary of Study

This qualitative case study aimed to understand the educational experience of African American males in special education with a diagnosis of emotional disturbance. This study's main premise was to center and uplift the voices of African American males in special education as well as to add their narratives to the lacking body of research that centers their experiences. Through open-ended interviews, eight participants ranging from ages 15 to 23 were interviewed individually over zoom. All the participants were from the Bay Area and were currently receiving special education services or had

previously received services. The student participants included at least one African American male student with a diagnosis of emotional disturbance in the following grades: 9th, 10th, 11th and 12th. In addition, two participants were high school graduates. Participants were recruited through random sampling. Students from each grade level were chosen to see the different experiences students go through at the various developmental stages and age ranges as well as to see the different levels of understanding they have of their diagnosis and the special education system at large. Participants were purposely chosen from a range of different special education settings including special day classes, full inclusion classes, short-term residential therapeutic program and non-public schools. Once interviews were conducted, they were transcribed and coded by means of in vivo coding as the first cycle coding. Code charting then took place and was followed by focused coding, the second cycle coding method. Once two rounds of coding were completed, a thematic analysis of the data took place. From here, themes and subthemes were pulled from the coded data and the findings were analyzed.

Summary of Findings

The summary of findings will be broken up into the three research questions due to the results of the findings being organized in that manner. Overall, participants described that many of the actions and inactions at school, both in special education and general education, caused immediate difficulties with their emotional regulation, overall mood, academic success, and their ability to focus at school. Despite the educational disparities they faced, students expressed their desire to attend college, provide for their families, and find a vocation that allows them to help others. The following paragraphs summarize the findings for each research question.

1) *How do African American males in special education labeled as ED describe their educational experiences both before and after receiving the label?*

The four themes that arose when participants described their educational experience both before and after receiving the label of emotionally disturbed were (a) educational experience, (b) quality of education, (c) attitude and perceptions of school and (d) impact of school. Participants shared that overall, their educational experience before being placed in special education was not the best. Participants used words such as "toxic, super negative, uncared for, not helpful and bullied." Participants spoke about the schooling system in general and how there was no accountability in general education classes and larger schools where students are simply seen as "part of the masses." They also spoke about how in the general education classrooms, participants were not receiving the support that they needed to be successful. Participants also shared that this caused school to be very difficult for them. Many recalled instances where they would feel less than for not being able to understand or complete the assigned work due to not receiving the help they needed. Once being placed in special education, this changed for many participants. They began receiving the support they felt they deserved and saw many successes. Participants used words such as "beneficial", "slower", "easier", "equal", "positive" and "helpful" to describe their experience. The findings indicated that when referring to educational experience after being placed in special education, participants equated that to grades and being able to complete work. Many of them spoke about how they would not have graduated or received good grades had it not been for their special education supports.

The second theme that the findings pointed to was the difference in the quality of education. Participants shared that before being placed in special education, the quality of education was compromised due to teachers not understanding the students different learning disabilities or how to differentiate between the students. They spoke about a "one size fits all" educational structure and citied how there was not a "solid" education taught in their school district. One participant also cited how harmful common core was to his learning due to not all students learning in the same way. In addition, participants shared experiences around the pace of the general education curriculum. They stated how the fast-paced teaching of "the masses" was not beneficial and would cause them to be left behind due to not being able to keep up with the class. Once being placed in special education, participants shared ways in which it helped them. Participants expressed that they were given a "custom tailored" education where every day was different. They shared how teachers would take their time to help students understand the material and would do so in unique and engaging ways. In addition, participants shared how the work was easier for them to not only complete but also comprehend due to the one on one help they would get. Receiving one on one help was something that participants across the board mentioned never receiving in their general education classes and was cited as a huge reason for their success in high school.

The third theme that surfaced were the participants' attitudes and perceptions of school both before and after being placed in special education. Before being placed in special education, participants shared that they were not fond of school. Participants shared that they felt school was a racist institution that "enabled negative behaviors." Participants expressed how their lack of interest in the school curriculum coupled with

their racist teachers not understanding them nor providing adequate support gave them a negative perception of school. For many of the participants, their attitudes and perceptions of school changed drastically after being placed in special education, both positively and negatively. A few participants shared that being in special education "opened up their horizons to learn" and awarded them the motivation to learn citing that special education was a blessing. On the other hand, participants shared that they were placed in special education due to their behavior and when this happened, they were "not as free" and were more controlled.

The last theme that arose was the impact school had both before and after the diagnosis. Before being diagnosed, participants revealed that their mental health was severely impacted due to being bullied, not listened to, having to retake classes with younger students, and feeling uncared for in the classroom. Two out of the eight participants shared very personal stories of how their depression and anxiety became so severe that they had suicidal ideations and were hospitalized. Participants expressed how school was the common factor to all of their negative thoughts and depressive state. Once in special education, six out of the eight participants shared the positive impact special education had on their educational experience. Participants recalled how special education helped them obtain a 4.0 gpa, feel confident enough to pursue college, eliminated behavioral challenges, and graduate high school. The two participants who did not share the same sentiment expressed that being placed in special education had a negative impact on them, sharing that it "made me feel worse" and that it caused them to lose motivation.

2) How do African American male students understand the implications of being labeled as ED? How do they perceive this diagnosis playing a role/affecting their future?

The three themes that emerged from the data were (a) lack of knowledge of ED, (b) seen and treated differently with the level of treatment being dependent on the setting, and (c) positive outcomes (ability to graduate and label not affecting future as sub themes) despite their feelings of being placed in special education. Perhaps one of the biggest eyeopeners was seeing that only one out of the 8 participants had ever heard of the diagnosis of emotionally disturbed let alone understood what it meant and why they were diagnosed with it. When students were asked the question of 'What does the diagnosis of emotionally disturbed mean to you and when did you first hear of that label?', the responses were overwhelming skewed one way. This is not surprising being that in traditional special education, students are not valued as active participants in their individualized educational plan. Special education is something that is done to them, most often as a means of "fixing" something about that student that is viewed as wrong or seen as a deficit. With that, all participants recounted stories and feelings of being seen and treated differently once they were placed in special education. The severity of the treatment depended on the educational setting the participants were in, but overall, every participant shared harmful and negative aspects in the ways in which they were treated by both staff and peers. Participants shared how they had to cope with this stigmatizing identity after being rejected by peers and degraded by teachers. By expressing their feelings of being socially outcasted, students conveyed the extent to which labeling causes a sort of social stigma. Despite this, every participant shared that the diagnosis

would not and did not affect their future. They were able to identify the positive outcomes despite their feelings around needing special education services such as being able to graduate. Students detailed several of the personal, social, and educational costs associated with labeling.

3) *What specific teacher supports or strategies do African American males labeled as ED believe would have positively changed their experience in a general education setting?*

The four themes that emerged were (a) identifying and providing equal support for all students, (b) understanding students as individuals, (c) positive student and teacher relationships with building personal connections and positive affirmations/encouragement as subthemes and (d) culturally relevant curriculum with engaging teaching strategies as a subtheme. When reviewing the data, it was apparent that participants felt their general education teachers could have done a much better job at identifying and providing equal support to all students, understanding students as individuals, taking time to form positive student/teacher relationships and making the curriculum relevant to students. One of the most common themes amongst the participants in regards to specific teacher supports or strategies was having teachers identify and provide support to students when needed. Although this may seem like common sense, the majority of participants expressed the need for wanting their teachers to identify on their own when they would need support and provide that support. This included teachers observing their students and actively offering support. Students feeling supported in this manner by their teachers was a shared strategy amongst participants that would have positively changed their experience in a general education setting.

Participants shared how they felt teachers were not there to help them and would mostly focus on the students who were excelling in their classes. This led to a subtheme of providing equal support to all. A subtheme that was also identified by students as a way to have positively changed their general education experience was the idea of equal support for all students. Many participants shared how general education teachers would provide unequal support, focusing mostly on the students who were doing well in their classes. Participants also shared that having their teachers understanding them as individuals would have positively changed their general education experience. Participants wanted to be understood as an individual in the classroom by their general education teachers. They shared how helpful it would have been to have general education teachers that took the time to learn their individual needs and not utilize a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching. Many participants felt that had their individual needs been understood by their teachers, they would not have needed to be placed in special education. In addition, students reported that having positive student and teacher relationships would have been instrumental in their general education experience. Many participants recounted stories of how their special education teachers fostered a positive relationship with them but it was not always reciprocated by their general education teachers. A subtheme that emerged was building personal connection. Students reported that building personal connections was an essential strategy to having changed their experience in general education. Participants shared many stories and insights for how their general education teachers could have shown more care for their personal lives outside of school and not just see them "as a paycheck." An example of this was one student sharing a story about a time he was homeless and how his teachers didn't care to

ask what was happening for him when he began missing a lot of school and his grades started slipping. He shared, "But for the most part, I really don't think they cared. I knew they talked to my grandma a lot, so they kind of had a...they knew something was going on but they never asked me about it. I was still just expected to come to school and perform as if I wasn't homeless at the time." The last theme that arose from this research question was the feelings participants had around the curriculum being taught in general education not being relevant to them and their experience. They expressed wishing that teachers would have known more about them as students and applied that to curriculum. Additionally, participant shared that the curriculum taught in general education was not information that would be beneficial to their lives after high school.

Limitations

As with any research, it is essential to identify and consider the limitations of the study. There were many limitations that hindered my ability to answer the research questions. These limitations should be considered for future practice and research. In the following paragraphs, four limitations are identified: (1) COVID-19, (2) inconsistent documentation, (3) data collection, and (4) personal bias.

The first limitation is the way in which COVID-19 has affected my ability to conduct this research in person. Due to COVID-19, all of the interviews had to take place via zoom. This limited me as the researcher in making genuine connections with participants and potentially hindered the ways in which participants answered the questions. Conducting interviews online created a less personable environment and potentially impeded the participants vulnerability levels to share their experiences. COVID-19 had many implications on this study. Due to the shelter in place and schools

all over the country participating in virtual learning, finding students to participate in the study was extremely challenging. First and foremost, everything had to be done electronically. With school campuses not being open, I was unable to physically attend different schools or speak with teachers and students directly. This added an extra barrier in obtaining participants for the study. During a time where teachers and educational staff were inundated with emails, I found it very difficult to obtain responses to my email. After being granted permission by the IRB to conduct my study, the first recruitment email was sent on February 2nd, 2021. Out of the first 98 emails sent, I received responses from 9 people. Out of those 9 people, six of them informed me that the population of students I was needing for my study was "difficult to reach during distance learning and not attending classes." They informed me that they would reach out and share this opportunity with them but that it would be unlikely they would respond being that the students had yet to respond to any of their emails regarding attending virtual classes. Only three teachers out of those 9 had students that were attending classes or were in communication with them that fit the criteria and were willing to help me. With the help of those three teachers, I was able to recruit two students to participate. At this point, months had passed and it was already the beginning of April. Worry began to set in and with only 4 participants recruited, I decided to change my approach and shorten my recruitment email (Appendix G) as well as change the title of the email. I attempted to obtain the phone numbers of special education staff at certain high schools but was unsuccessful. With schools still participating in distance learning, everything had to remain electronically. An additional 63 emails were sent and a total of 13 responses were received. From April 10th to when the last interview happened on June 6th, I was able to

recruit 4 more participants to complete my study. In total, it took 4 months to gather 8 participants for my study. This significantly impacted not only my timeline but also my ability to conduct focus groups as well as the second interview.

A second limitation was not being able to obtain all of the same documents for all of the participants. Due to COVID-19 and everything having to be electronic, it made it difficult for the parents of the participants to locate the needed documents to send to me. In addition, the participants that were 18 years old or older, were not all able to find or did not know what the documents I was asking for were. For example, one parent was only able to send me an older version of the participants IEP while others sent me the full psychoeducational evaluation as well as the participants IEP. This did not allow me to conduct a document analysis for the participants. Instead, the documents were utilized for gathering background information about the participants.

The third limitation was the type of data collection used, which was only collected from open-ended interviews. Originally, the method of qualitative data collection was projected to be through two one-to-one interviews with each participant, three focus groups, and documentation analysis but due to the COVID-19 pandemic, data collection was limited to one individual interview with each participant. It should be noted that there were no follow-up interviews conducted with any of the participants nor focus groups due to the difficulty of scheduling and gathering participants. After the last interview was conducted, two attempts were made to hold the focus groups as well as the second individual interviews. An email was sent to the participants with two dates to choose from to attend a focus group. At this point, summer had already begun and students were not responsive. Having access to only the participant's email addresses, I

received only one response from the 8 participants saying they would be available for the first focus group date. One week later, a follow-up email was sent to the participants and there were zero responses given. After receiving no responses for the focus groups, one more email went out to schedule a second individual email. Only two participants responded. After reviewing and transcribing all of the individual interviews conducted, it was then decided that that there was enough data to proceed with the study. In addition, no triangulation was used to check the validity of participants' responses and reduced biases. This was a limitation due to there only being one method of data collection. Overall, future studies should employ a variety of data collection methods to see if different approaches with different strengths and weaknesses all support the same conclusion, helping researchers to obtain a better knowledge of the topics under investigation (Maxwell, 2013).

The last limitation was my personal bias teaching students with emotional disturbance. Having taught special education for 9 years in a very restrictive educational setting, I am privy to the system and have experienced the negative affects it has on African American students. In fact, the desire to return to school and study the effects that being diagnosed with emotional disturbance has on African American students came from my experience in the classroom. At one point in my career, out of the 12 students in my class, 9 of them were African American males diagnosed with ED. Despite these limitations, I believe the findings in this study will be relevant considering the need for student perspective and voice in the field of special education.

Discussion of Findings

This study utilized the framework of Critical Race Theory to analyze the overrepresentation of African American males diagnosed as emotionally disturbed. As mentioned in chapter two, due to the racist history of American society, it was crucial to examine the role race plays in the educational experiences of African-American students. The issue of disproportionality can be credited, in part, to the intersection of race, culture, and disability. These factors cause students of color to be perceived or misperceived as incompetent, unworthy of a rigorous education, and not as intelligent as their White counterparts. The consequences that these misperceptions can have can diminish student-teacher interaction, negatively affect the implementation of effective teaching strategies, deny access to rigorous curriculum, assign harsher discipline policies and lower academic achievement for African Americans (Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Gallini, Simmons & Feggins-Azziz, 2006). The idea that African American students are overrepresented in special education supports the belief that there are deep-rooted issues within the context of American schooling, namely, race and racism.

It was my understanding that in order to better comprehend and investigate the role of race and racism in the disproportionality of African American males who are placed in special education, Critical Race Theory (CRT) was the appropriate lens from which to examine this phenomenon. Without question, CRT is a powerful theoretical and analytical tool that enables the examination of race in American education (Matias, Viesca, Garrison-Wade, Tandon, & Galindo, 2014) and it presents a radical lens through which to understand, analyze, deconstruct and challenge racial inequality in society but it

lacks a critical component in regards to the intersections that African American male students with disabilities face.

Despite the fact that critical race theory may be used as an interdisciplinary theoretical and analytic framework in the field of education, I believed there was a gap in my study that looked at race and disability together being that issues of disability remain largely underexplored in CRT. After analyzing the data gathered from the participants, it was evident I needed to discuss the findings of my study through the lens of the intersectional issues that affect this particular student population, including disability. The findings of my study indicate that DisCrit theory is essential in doing so. The purpose of this study was to use counter storytelling to better understand how disability, specifically the diagnosis of emotionally disturbed, might have influenced the participant's educational experiences. This study centers important voices and brings deeply the experiences of African American males that live at the center of race and disability and for that reason, omitting a discussion of the findings through a DisCrit lens would be doing this study and the participants involved an enormous disservice. For this reason, the discussion of the findings will touch on the CRT tenets mentioned but will largely be centered around a DisCrit analysis.

DisCrit is a more specific epistemological, theoretical and methodological framework through which to understand the experiences of Black boys labeled with disabilities, and whose stories reflect the interlocking forces of racism and ableism, as described by the tenets of DisCrit. DisCrit investigates the nexus of ableism, racism, and other forms of oppression that affect people of color with disabilities. DisCrit examines the theory and practice used to systematically oppress people of color with disabilities

and challenges the prevailing deficit discourse on disability, ableism, race, racism, and disability and racial stereotyping as it relates to education. DisCrit is grounded in the "interdependent constructions of race and dis/ability in education and society in the United States" (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2013, p. 1). In terms of education, DisCrit encourages educational stakeholders to identify and work to abolish racism and ableism in schools as a catalyst for eliminating oppression in educational policy, pedagogy, curriculum, and research agendas. As an intersectional framework, DisCrit has allowed scholars to reveal the social constructs that enable the continuation of deep-seated inequities in education as well as trace how racism and ableism cannot be mutually exclusive in the search for equity. In this qualitative case study, five major findings emerged:

The Effects of the Deficit Model

Directly tied to DisCrit's first tenet, which focuses on the ways in which the forces of racism and ableism circulate interdependently to uphold notions of normalcy (Annamma et al., 2018), findings in the study revealed that part of the participants' negative experiences in the classroom were directly tied to teacher's deficit model of thinking. Deficit is defined as a "deficiency or impairment in mental or physical functioning or an unfavorable condition or position; a disadvantage" (Banks, 2014, p. 512). The present special education system, in which perceived differences in ability and conduct result in a disability designation and, in most cases, exclusion from the general education population, reinforces the deficit paradigm. 'Ableism' is a collection of beliefs that influence societal and institutional actions that assign negative values to people with disabilities while considering able-bodied and able-minded people to be normal and thus

superior to their disabled peers (Annamma et al., 2013). In American schools, ableism

promotes the notion that individuals with disabilities are incapable of meeting their own

needs and learning. This leads to paternalistic ideas that students with disabilities should

be isolated, supervised, and watched by adults for the greater interest of everyone (Ware,

2002). Participant's narratives highlighted the harmful ways in which this deficit model

of thinking for multiply-marginalized students of color negatively impacts their

educational experience both in special education and general education. Teachers'

assumptions and the manner in which they build difference are frequently based on a

picture of the ideal student, namely, specific methods of speaking, writing, behaving,

interacting, and learning that are derived from white, middle, and upper-middle-class

viewpoints. That is, everyone is judged against the desired standard (e.g., white, male,

able, middle class). Those who do not match these criteria are viewed as abnormal, and

are frequently regarded as disabled (Annamma & Morrison, 2018). As a result,

assumptions and bias promote and support dominant ideas of normalcy, which impact

classroom expectations, curricula, and educators' perceptions of ability, impairment,

success, and failure. As a result, pedagogy and curricula play a crucial role in

legitimizing those life experiences that are most closely aligned with middle-class values

and practices. Educational methods, curriculum, and assumptions about ability or success

may serve to exclude, restrict, and limit the opportunities of people thought to be

different by prioritizing and valuing particular life experiences over others. As a result,

depending on how social behavior and educational outcomes are interpreted—that is,

how such differences are conceptualized and accepted within schools—different groups'

histories, experiences, linguistic practices, and cultures may be devalued, discounted, marginalized, and in some cases, even pathologized (Kalyanpur, & Harry,1999).

The deficit paradigm focuses on the student as the primary issue, without considering the environment or classroom instructional procedures. The standard method, according to this model, is to evaluate the student, determine eligibility for special education, and then remove the student from the environment(s) where the problem existed (Dunn, 1968). Participants shared countless stories around being compared to the "smart" kids and how teachers would "not waste their time" trying to help them because in the teacher's eyes, the participants were a lost cause due to their failing grades.

Through the DisCrit lens, racism and ableism are both common and interconnected. These interdependent processes are so deeply embedded in our institutions, practices, and policies that teacher perceptions on student's abilities are mostly based on race. In curricula, education, and discipline, these mutually dependent processes are both systemic and interpersonal, and their fundamental ideologies place chosen identities as normal and all others as abnormal in every aspect of education (Ladson-Billings, 1998). As a result, education procedures label certain students as deserving of support in the classroom, while others are labeled as problematic and hence require remediation or segregation (Annamma & Morrison, 2018). We must recognize how racism and ableism influence and destabilize perceptions of normalcy in educational institutions.

Whiteness as Property upholding normative practices and structures causing the "need" for segregation

Because one of CRT's fundamental beliefs is to challenge Whiteness as the defining norm, it's beneficial in deconstructing normal. Similar to CRT, the sixth tenet of

DisCrit "recognizes whiteness and ability as property and that gains for people labeled with dis/abilities have largely been made as the result of interest convergence of white, middle-class citizens" (Annamma et al., 2018). Perhaps the most eye-opening finding that emerged was how participants positioned their need for special education. Every participant, regardless of their feelings towards being placed in special education, when comparing it to general education, shared not only how it benefited them in one way or another but that they would not have been able to graduate high school without it. This changed, however, when speaking directly about their special education experience exclusively depending on the type of special education setting they were in. It is clear that the due to the normative practices of general education, the "need" for segregation the participants felt they needed was due to the ableist/racist structures within the educational system that reflect a colonial lens of behaviorist/positivist assimilation within its structures. These structures such as "teaching to the masses," curriculum that is not culturally relevant, "getting students in and out," large class sizes not conducive to receiving one on one help, harsher disciplinary practices and a heavy focus on classroom management and discipline are not, and have not been, put in place to set up African American students with disabilities for success. This 'general-special education' divide can be interrupted by incorporating DisCrit principles, which allow for more permeable understandings of nuanced connections between CRT and disability studies in order to engage with all students' personhood, dignity, and humanity (Kulkarni, Nusbaum & Boda, 2021). Through a variety of rules and practices that often disadvantage some members of society, schools shape educational opportunity and, inevitably, social reproduction and opportunity. One of the most important findings by Harry and Klingner

(2014) overturned all stereotypes about African American and Hispanic students being overrepresented in special education. They stated, "We learned that special education placement showed no systematic relationship either to school quality or to children's own developmental or skill levels. Rather, it reflected a wide range of influences, including structural inequities, contextual biases, limited opportunity to learn, variability in referral and assessment processes, detrimental views of and interactions with families, and poor instruction and classroom management" (p. 31).

Exclusionary practices such as segregated classrooms and schools, a disproportionate number of students in special education, deficit-based remedial curriculum, unequal resource allocation, and unequal discipline practices establish ability and whiteness as property in public schools (Annamma, Boele, Moore, & Klinger, 2013). Exclusionary practices exist to benefit more privileged kids, schools, and communities. This has happened throughout history in education, where decisions made for oppressed groups are only examined and implemented to benefit or have minimal impact on the requirements of white, middle-class students and families. When students are labeled as less desirable, they are denied access to: (1) engaging and accurate content; (2) responsive and creative teaching and instruction practices; and (3) authentic and positive relationships. Each of these functions as intellectual property and is most typically distributed to individuals who are white and capable. It is in the interests of the powerful to limit access to whiteness and ability, and this is done through debilitating behaviors in dysfunctional education settings (Annamma, 2015).

Historically, education has mirrored an ideology based in part on the belief that individual variations, particularly those linked to race, ethnicity, and ability, were

abnormal or inferior in origin and required specialized teaching (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999). Social and educational practices were greatly influenced by intelligence testing and eugenics policies and practices. As a result of the findings of intelligence testing, social policies that further disenfranchised African Americans, immigrants, and persons with disabilities were promoted (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999). Formal education, which seemed to be a right and entitlement for White Americas, was systematically designed to keep African Americans out and marginalize them. Prior to 1954, there was a continuing practice of underfunding African American schools, which resulted in African American students receiving substandard education in comparison to their white peers (Jordan, 2005).

Whiteness as property has become a symbol of who acquires the benefits of education based on the value of property possessed in public school. As a result, populations with more valued property fund schools at higher rates, resulting in more resources, and access to intellectual property in the form of high-quality curriculum, resulting in increased academic benefits, and power over public education, influencing policy and law (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). One of the most important characteristics of whiteness as property was the ability to exclude others from its benefits, resulting in an unequal distribution of resources. The degree of integration of African Americans and other nonwhite students to mainstream culture does not, and should not, determine the opportunities accessible to them. Instead, educational practices need to recruit, rather than attempt to disregard and erase, the various identities, interests, conceptualizations, knowledge, and purposes that students bring to learning (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999).

Whiteness as property also helps to maintain systematic structures that are put in place to segregate students with disabilities. Because African American students are frequently placed in restrictive, self-contained classes rather than classrooms with their general education peers, this problem is exacerbated. Findings from this study showed that participants whom were placed in more restrictive settings described their experience as more detrimental not only to their educational experience but also to their self-esteem and confidence. These findings are consistent with current research. Institutionalization and segregation have been two of society's responses to African American students with disabilities. These dehumanizing practices were used to keep people with disabilities contained as they were seen to be unfit for reproduction. As a result, eugenics policies were based on the belief that race controlled not only physical characteristics, but also IQ and character (Jordan, 2005). This segregation is nothing new as African American children who were thought to have poor mental abilities were frequently labeled retarded and placed in special classes for "defective" children. As a result, these students were placed at the bottom of the educational system and were frequently segregated or excluded from public schools. Such discriminatory practices were based on white America's notion of intellectual inferiority in African Americans, which some psychologists attempted to validate through the use of IQ testing. Individuals assessed to have 'impairments' are placed in educational environments ostensibly more suitable for serving their 'needs' in the special education system, which separates them into classrooms away from the general education environment (Reid and Knight 2006). Despite IDEA stating that students with disabilities must have access to the general education curriculum, placement into special education frequently restricts students'

access from the general education curriculum (Gallagher 2005). Research has also shown that when students are denied access to grade level general education curriculum, there are negative academic, social and emotional implications throughout school and into adulthood. The ramifications of this segregation of students include, but are not limited, to increased school dropout rates, academic underachievement, transfer into the juvenile court system, and eventually the state jail and federal prison system (Eaves, 1982).

Culturally relevant teaching and instructional practices

The perceptions of teachers on culturally-related identities and how these identities play out in the classroom are especially pertinent to student achievement (Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson & Bridgest, 2003). Directly tied to DisCrit's second tenet, which values multidimensional identities and troubles singular notions of identity such as race, dis/ability, class, gender, sexuality, and so on (Annamma et al., 2018), imploring culturally relevant teaching for multiply marginalized students of color works against the dominant narratives that position African American males with disabilities as incapable of learning and therefore needing special education services. Research shows that African American students benefit from a culturally responsive pedagogy grounded in research on teaching-effectiveness (Ladson-Billings, 1994) in addition to an increase in school achievement happening when they have an educational experience with teachers who not only comprehend their sociocultural intelligence but also prioritize cultural factors when creating, implementing and evaluating curriculum and instruction (Ellison et al., 2000). Culturally responsive teaching encourages students to feel welcome and valued in the classroom, and to get learning that is tailored to their specific needs, regardless of their culture, race, or language. In the current study, students spoke explicitly and inexplicitly

about the culturally relevant teaching practices and strategies that their general education teachers were lacking, which would have contributed to a positive educational experience. More importantly, participants shared that had their teachers implemented more culturally relevant teaching practices and strategies, they felt that special education services would not have been needed. This revelation aligned with current research on the importance of culturally relevant teaching practices for the success of African American males. Improving the quality of African American students' education means guaranteeing that their teachers, curriculum, and general school environment fit their needs and allow them to succeed, reducing the cultural mismatch that plagues many schools today and increasing these students' chances of academic success. Since White, middle-class professionals make up the majority of the education profession, there is an evident disconnect and lack of knowledge of black culture. This disconnect then leads to disparate rates of suspensions, expulsions and special education referrals for African Americans that are attributed to the "cultural clash" which arises between minority students and white teachers (Chang & Sue, 2003).

Culturally responsive teaching has been advocated by Ladson-Billings (2009) as crucial to addressing African-American students' underachievement. Because it builds on students' past knowledge and connects to their daily lives and experiences, culturally responsive teaching is an effective instructional method. Culturally responsive instruction empowers students by instilling self-efficacy, cultivating critical thinking, and encouraging them to take action (Ladson-Billings, 2009). It respects students' cultures and is aware of how culture influences students' attitudes toward education and learning capacity (Gay, 2018). All students should be involved and represented in the formal

curriculum, according to culturally responsive teaching, which recognizes all cultures (Gay, 2018). It involves a variety of educational tactics that connect to students' diverse learning styles and bridges the gap between home and school experiences. Students learn to respect their own culture as well as the cultures of others through culturally responsive instruction. External resources and information are also included in all courses, allowing students to learn from a variety of perspectives. According to Nieto (2001), in public education, knowledge of students' lives and everyday experiences is undervalued and, at times, ignored, resulting in negative effects on student learning and accomplishment. She argued that teachers must be invested in learning about their students' lives in order to tailor the type of instruction that will improve learning and achievement (Nieto, 2001). As a result, as classrooms become more diverse, culturally responsive teaching has become a vital instructional strategy. Teachers who are culturally competent value their students' cultures, experiences, and perspectives and use them as resources to improve their teaching techniques and promote student learning (Gay, 2018). They are willing to learn about their students' many cultures and individualities, and they apply what they learn to convert their classrooms into empowered learning environments (Gay, 2018). In an effort to reduce the disproportionality rates, culturally relevant teaching practices must be employed by teachers to not only support but to set multiply marginalized students up for academic success.

Building authentic classroom relationships

DisCrit suggests that it is necessary to understand the intersection of ones' disability with other identities such as race and gender on the educational experiences of youth (Annamma et al., 2013). African American males diagnosed with ED face the

largest obstacles related to their academic achievement, both inside and outside the classroom. Racism and ableism exist both independently and in tandem to maintain normalcy, necessitating a focus not just on single identities such as color, ability, gender, or socioeconomic class. It is critical to comprehend the precise relationship between their various intersecting identities and related oppression and their educational experience, including teacher attitudes, perceptions and connections. While some special education teachers provided academic support, participants in this study generally spoke of bad connections and little support. Because of their capacity to instantly connect with their special education teachers, these students had overwhelmingly more positive interactions with them. They spoke about their great relationships with teachers who took the time to get to know them, appreciate them, and be patient with them when they had difficult days but also shared how not having these authentic relationships with their teachers negatively impacted their educational experience. When asked what strategies their general education teachers could have implemented in order to positively impact their educational experiences, participants overwhelmingly spoke about the lack of care, connection, concern and support was given to them. Connecting learning to students' lives and experiences, forming caring relationships, providing individual support and having high expectations of students are all things that participants shared would have been beneficial to their educational experience. The present study's findings also pointed to strained teacher-student interactions and a lack of teacher preparation on issues such as racism, emotional and behavioral needs, individualized support and special education.

When teachers do not create a classroom climate in which every student feels comfortable, protected, supported and seen, it is clear that they are either unprepared or

unfit due to a cultural mismatch. Teachers may be ill-prepared not only to meet the needs

of African American students, but also to understand them, as a result of cultural

mismatch. Teachers who have had minimal exposure to cultures other than their own may

regard "whiteness" and the behaviors, abilities, and communication style associated with

it as the norm. Behaviors and qualities that do not conform to that model may be regarded

as deviant or otherwise deviating from the norm. As a result, they may place a higher

weight on the behaviors and abilities that white students demonstrate more frequently.

Educators' views and assumptions about different cultural standards of communication,

body language, and conduct have an impact on multiply marginalized students who are

already excluded. Several factors influence these attitudes and prejudices, including

White privilege among teachers, institutional racism, and a lack of preservice instruction

on cultural responsiveness and student behavioral and emotional needs (Halberstadt,

Castro, Chu, Lozada, & Sims, 2018). Several studies have found that when students are

considered to be male and Black, teachers, who are predominantly White middle-class

women, are more likely to regard their behavior as defiant, disrespectful, and likely to

recur. Students are more likely to be disproportionately or harshly reprimanded and

referred for special education services as a result of these negative views, which generate

inequitable experiences for them (Flores de Apodaca, Gentling, Steinhaus, & Rosenberg,

2015). African American males' successes and possibilities are limited due to this cultural

mismatch, which often times leads to negative student-teacher relationships. Students'

capacity to focus and keep a positive mood is exacerbated by poor relationships and

uncomfortable educational environments.

The importance of remaining committed to teaching and creating classroom environments that enable students to achieve and see their potential and possibilities beyond the present is essential for African American male students. Because adult connections have a significant impact on pupils, it is critical to understand how they are guided or impacted. Students' actions in and out of the classroom, as well as their educational experience, are influenced by the quality and type of adult relationships they have (Wang, Brinkworth, & Eccles 2013). According to research, the influence of one positive adult can drastically alter the course of a student's life (Land, Mixon, Butcher & Harris, 2014). When a positive adult, such as a family member, coach, or instructor, is able to guide students toward adequate emotional regulation and critical thinking abilities, this mitigation happens (Land et al., 2014). Positive teacher relationships have been found to be moderating variables, whereas poor interactions with teachers have been linked to future depression or maladaptive behavior (Wang et al., 2013). For this reason, in order for African American male students with Ed to succeed, there is a high need for positive teacher interactions while minimizing issues such as adverse settings and institutional barriers. Furthermore, good teachers seek out and build relationships outside of the classroom, in the communities where their students live and implement varied and creative ways in which they seek to build such connections with and among students that facilitate learning.

Student's lack of eligibility knowledge and implications

Perhaps one of the most eye-opening but not surprising finding in the present study was the participants lack of knowledge in regards to what their eligibility category of ED meant as well as the implications of it. Out of the 8 participants, only one knew or

had heard of the diagnosis of emotionally disturbed. The rest of the participants had never heard of it and some even asked what it meant. This was profound being that all of the participants were in high school and had been in special education for well over 2 years yet had never been included or granted the autonomy to be an active member in their special education trajectory. This is not surprising being that in traditional special education, students are not valued as active participants in their individualized educational plan. Special education is something that is done to them, most often as a means of "fixing" something about that student that is viewed as wrong or seen as a deficit. Although they had no knowledge on the meaning of their eligibility category, students were aware of their lack of control over the process. Students felt powerless over the decision-making process as they are pushed and pulled between general education and special education classes. As Harry and Klingner (2006) explain, "Once the discourse of disability is initiated, interrupting it becomes a very difficult mechanism" (p. 7). "Social pressures interact to create an identity of 'disability,'" which defines a subset of students for whom general education "finds it too difficult to serve" (p. 9). Students are made to feel powerless over decisions that will affect their lives for years as a result of this procedure. Students often feel confused and bewildered about the process of being labeled and placed in special education and the present study substantiates this assertion.

Conclusion

Motivated by a desire to have students' lives and voices represented in professional writing and research that has typically depicted them in unidimensional ways, this study provided an in-depth look into the experiences of African American males in special education. Simply said, oppression does not occur in isolation and race

has always played a role in education and continues to do so. Researchers and educators alike must understand whose story is being conveyed and work to dispel the negative misconceptions and prejudices about minorities by providing counter-stories from those who have been most affected. Centering the voices of African American males that live at the center of race and disability is vital. Educators must also concentrate on creating curriculum that is meaningful, inclusive, and accessible to all students.

In order to address the overrepresentation of African American males in special education, an intersectional approach is imperative. The necessity to reconstruct systems in order to rethink educational justice as intersectional is highlighted by oppressive school structures. Disproportionality is a severe educational issue that necessitates an examination of how difference is perceived and accommodated in the classroom. Teachers and other school personnel must critically analyze their preconceptions about students whose racial, ethnic, and social class origins differ from their own, as well as the societal and institutional narratives that shape how they comprehend cultural and learning differences among students. In addition, it is time for society to stop comparing African American students to white students and recognize that achievement ratings are not the only indicator of student learning. It is critical that we, as a society, finally allow people who have been historically marginalized and silenced to have a voice in research, academia, educational policies and practice. Giving the present study's participants a voice has provided insight into the situation. Educators may finally start making progress in narrowing the disparity of African American students in special education by focusing on the problems they identified and providing a solution.

To become interrupters of the problems we see in our practice, educators must be willing to collaborate with students and see them as co-creators of knowledge. Educators must push back on racist structures within schools that reflect a colonial lens of behaviorist/positivist assimilation. African American male students in special education will continue to do poorly in educational systems if they are not interrupted. We must break the research-defined trajectories that place African American male students with disabilities in segregated schools, prison or dead at a young age. More research in this area is needed to better understand, treat, and provide voice to the students who are most affected by persistent rates of overrepresentation. More importantly, I hope that we use the knowledge to raise our own voices in support of students and in manners that seek to break the cycles of overrepresentation and poor long-term outcomes that continue to negatively impact African American male students. I hope we start to value diversity, not just in terms of skin color, but also in terms of voice, lived experiences, and other ways of knowing. Never mutually exclusive, racism and ableism must be considered interdependently if the possibility of transformative education for social justice is to be achieved.

Implications for Research

The current study's findings indicate that more work needs to be done to address the educational and life experiences of African American males with disabilities. Currently, there is a gap in disability literature associated with the intersectional lived experiences of people with disabilities at the intersection of race, sexual orientation, gender, religion and socioeconomic status. There is a scarcity of narrative research on high achieving African American males with disabilities. The majority of research in the

existing literature is based on a deficit model that emphasizes the achievement gap, disproportionately higher discipline, overrepresentation in special education and other factors such as socioeconomic status and poverty. The exclusive and relevant perspectives of African American males with disabilities can be revealed through narrative research, not only to provide insight into factors related to systematic racist and ableist structures in schools, but also to emphasize important measures schools must take to eliminate these structures. The ability of a school's staff to engage with, acknowledge, comprehend, and confront concerns and obstacles faced by African American male students will result in policies and practices that are no longer led by racist and ableist viewpoints. The voices and educational experiences of students in special education settings must not only be heard but understood in order to serve as the foundation for future studies and to give empirical support for educational practitioners' daily practice. Black voices matter, and the absence of those perspectives and experiences further marginalizes people of color.

Additional research is needed to investigate the beliefs and biases that reinforce teachers' constructions of difference when it comes to African American males; a construct that frequently ends in an unjustified diagnosis of disability and placement in special education. According to research, instructors' beliefs about students' cultural backgrounds, learning styles, and differences in their classes play a significant role in their placement in special education. These assumptions are frequently based on deficit thinking, such as the belief that students lack motivation, have limited intellectual ability, or come from poor home environments, with little, if any, attention paid to the ways in which educational environments have a significant impact on these students' personal and

educational experiences. Moreover, research needs to be done on how schools as racist and ableist institutions perpetuate trauma for African American males and reinforce negative stereotypes.

In addition, to better comprehend the ever-changing demands of public education and the increasingly diverse number of students it promises to serve, more research in the field of special education is required. While unequal overrepresentation in special education has been well-documented, I concluded that all other aspects of special education research, including student experience, placement, evaluation, classification, and data driven interventions, appear to be lacking. More research is needed to better understand the identification and evaluation mechanisms that allow such a large percentage of African American males to be tracked into special education and placed in restrictive settings. We also need to learn more about the special education system and the largely unsuccessful interventions it utilizes to keep Black male students in self-contained and restrictive special education placement for long periods of time. Furthermore, research on the effects of student involvement and participation in their special education placement, diagnosis and decision making is needed. Currently, traditional special education practices do not actively involve students and instead, is something that is done to them. Student's do not have a say nor are they an active participant in the process. This needs to be examined in order to see if there are positive educational effects.

Implications for Practice

Teacher education centering DisCrit curriculum and intersectional praxis

Teacher education's purpose has long been a contentious issue. While some believe that teacher education should be focused solely on the curriculum and standards, it has been demonstrated that teacher education courses contain political messages that promote whiteness, ableism, and racism. Teacher education requirements and credentialing procedures, unsurprisingly, place a strong emphasis on linguistic and cultural diversity (Kulkarni et al., 2021). Pre-service teachers sometimes maintain narrow perspectives of race, sexuality, gender identity, and disability as a result of these limiting theorizations of difference, rather than investigating their intersections and interdependencies (Kulkarni et al., 2021). When it comes to conceptualizing and understanding the vast realities that students of color face in schools, and more extensively in society, where racism leads to disproportionately insignificant forms of self-determination, Milner and Howard (2013) highlighted the severe underdevelopment and lack of consistency of racial theorizations among teacher education programs. When it comes to students whose identities are shaped by racism and disability, there is a lack of critical praxis among teachers. Teacher education can and should be based on a clear mission to acknowledge the historical production and reproduction of oppressive systems (e.g., white supremacy, ableism), as well as clear commitments to disrupting these patterns. Rather than ignoring systematic injustices, teacher education must explicitly link these racial inequities (e.g., the achievement gap, disciplinary exclusion, special education assignment, and the entire school to prison pipeline) to the presumably race-neutral education laws, policies, and practices that produce and enforce these patterns.

For this reason, it is imperative that teacher education center DisCrit curriculum (Kilkarni et al., 2021) and embed an intersectional praxis.

To acknowledge and disrupt the many structures of structural oppression, teacher education must openly prioritize intersectional justice, rejecting hegemonic norms and values. To embrace a DisCrit-informed curriculum and explicitly center students of all disability identities, first a breakdown of the current framework of schooling and how teachers are educated and prepared is required (Kilkarni et al., 2021). A total revamp and disintegration of present teacher education systems would be needed for teacher educators to really embrace a DisCrit-informed curriculum. Everyone involved in teaching and training teachers should be aware of how intersectional oppressions are used to support arguments about who has a right to education and who has traditionally been excluded from schools. Beyond that, they must comprehend how oppressions reinforce one another and how education produces and reproduces these ideas. Beyond addressing cultural and linguistic diversity as othered in a special education environment, a DisCrit-informed curriculum aims to overcome the chronic invisibility of the voices of disabled people of color. This transformation in curriculum would include challenging and demolishing present curricula while re-centering disability and racism using resources such as ethnic studies. Through teacher education programs, racism and other intersecting vectors of oppression must be not only articulated, confronted, and disrupted in ways that touch the lives and schooling experiences of multiply oppressed students of color but the experiences with oppression and solutions multiply-marginalized students of color suggest should be central to any teacher education mission. We can create more generative teacher education programs that better serve and equip teachers by

acknowledging and challenging interlocking oppressions through specific pedagogical positions and structures, such as a DisCrit informed curriculum, that promote a pedagogical philosophy founded in liberation.

"School-based risk" as part of assessment practices

Currently, there is little attention paid to the effects of school context on student's behavior or re-traumatization during the referral and assessment phase. Only the student, not the system or the greater educational context, is regarded inadequate and in need of assistance in this decontextualized understanding of disability. In other words, when traditional teaching approaches fail students, it is the student, not the instructional model, who is blamed. As a result, students are characterized as deficient, disturbed, or impaired rather than classroom methods (or teachers). Psychologists frequently lack firsthand experience of the school settings to which students have been referred. Rather, psychologists believe that the root of the student's problems is within the child. The world of educational practice and the ideal of an objective, scientifically based referral, evaluation, and placement procedure have a disconcerting disconnect. The reality of educational practice is defined by multidimensional, multiple social realities and interactions, whereas the ideal of psychology as science strives to isolate the individual psyche from the complex situations in which children act and respond to the actions of others (Hart et al., 2010). Teacher skill levels, potential impact of classroom disorder, low level instruction, and the effects of detrimental and harmful school environments are ignored in the referral and assessment process. Schools policies, structures and culture play a significant role in student's educational outcomes and it is vital that they are taken into consideration when assessing a student for special education services in order to end

the disproportionality rates and false positives in special education. For this reason, it is imperative that school-based risk be taken into consideration during the assessment and referral process of students. Given the challenges of analyzing overrepresentation, I believe that disability identity should be examined from a social, cultural, and historical perspective. The need for assessment to shift away from its conventional focus on intrinsic deficits and toward a holistic approach in which a student's troublesome behaviors or lack of knowledge are addressed in the context of the environments in which they occur is crucial in order to address overrepresentation. Each student's cognitive and behavioral abilities, as well as the influence of his or her educational environment, should be evaluated with greater care. Instead of focusing just on "within-child" issues, more emphasis should be paid to the educational context. In addition, teachers' skills should be considered in understanding children's academic achievement and classroom behavior.

Upgrade Emotionally Disturbed Eligibility Definition

Due to the ambiguous terminology and vague definition, identifying students with emotional disturbance is subjective and inconsistent, allowing for the over-identification of African American students with ED. Despite the fact that Congress and the Department of Education have upgraded other eligibility criteria in the more than 30 years since IDEA's passage, the only adjustment to the emotional disturbance eligibility definition happened in 2004, when the DOE eliminated "severe" from "severe emotional disturbance" (Oelrich, 2012). The outdated definition fails to define essential words, leading to differing interpretations of when a student should be labeled as having an emotional challenge. This contributes to African American males being overrepresented in special education. The present IDEA definition of emotional disturbance is neither

clear nor comprehensive enough to determine adequate eligibility, making the identification of students with ED subjective and inconsistent.

The current definition has far too many ambiguous and confusing elements for schools to use it effectively and consistently, enabling African American students to be over-identified with ED. This needs to change. It is time for Congress and DOE to reexamine and update the current eligibility definition to address its high subjectivity in rating behaviors hat may contribute to the widespread overrepresentation of African American male students.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

*Red questions indicate main question; black questions indicate possible probes.

1. If you were going to explain what school is like for you to someone who had no idea about you or your school, how would you describe it?
2. Tell me about some of your positive experiences in school. Tell me about some negative experiences in school. Do you like it? Give me an example of what do you like about school and what you don't you like it?
3. How have your past and present teachers influenced your positive and negative experiences around school?
4. Talk to me about the grades you receive in school? Tell me what you think you could have done better? Why do feel you receive those grades? Would you like to do better? How do you think you could do better? Who can help you do better?
5. What was your first memory of being in special education? What grade were you in? Do you like being in special education? Why or why not?
6. What does the diagnosis of Emotionally Disturbed mean to you? When was the first time you heard that label?
7. What was school like for you before you began receiving special education services? Did you like school? How is school different for you now?
8. Before you were placed in special education, what strategies do you remember your teacher using to help you learn? How are those strategies different now that you are in special education?
9. Tell me when you feel most paid attention to in the classroom. Why do you feel this way? Give me an example.
10. Tell me when you feel least paid attention to in the classroom. Why do you feel this way? Give me an example.
11. In what ways do you feel your general education teachers could have supported you more in your general education classroom? How do you think these supports would have helped you? Do you think it would've helped you not need special education services?
12. Tell me what you think can prevent you from doing well in school and life. Why do you feel this way? Do you think this is the same for other kids?
13. Do you think all students have an equal chance to do well in school? Why do you think that? Give me an example.
14. If you were a parent and the teacher told you that your child was labeled as ED and needed to be placed in special education, how would you feel?
15. How has being labeled as ED and being placed in special education influenced your educational experienced?
16. What do you want for your future? How do you think this label will affect that?

Appendix B

Participant Recruitment Email

Email title: Participants for Doctoral Study in Special Education

Hello *(name of staff member),*

My name is Sara Ordaz and I am a Doctoral student at USF working on my Ed.D in Special Education. I am currently in the process of completing my dissertation and I just received approval to begin conducting my study. I am reaching out to you and teachers across the Bay Area in hopes that you could help me gather participants for my study. The title of my dissertation is **Understanding the African American Males Experience of Being Diagnosed with Emotional Disturbance through the use of Counter-Storytelling** and I am looking for 6-8 participants that meet a certain criterion to participate in individual interviews with me and focus groups with the other participants. The goal is to have them share their educational experiences. I see you are a *(job title)* at *(name of school).* Do you think any of your students would be interested? My plan is for this to be a liberating process. Oftentimes, student voice has been silenced in academic research so my goal is to amplify their voice and allow them to share their stories, especially being that there is an overrepresentation of African American males in special education. Also, apart from the intrinsic rewards (which I know many students may not see it that way) there is a minimum $50 gift card compensation of their choice if they complete the study. This amount may potentially be higher depending on the number of participants involved but at minimum, they will earn $50. I am attaching a detailed overview of my study but below is the criteria of students I am looking for:

- African American male students
- Diagnosed with Emotional Disturbance
- One student in each of the following grades: 7th, 8th, 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th
- One student who has graduated high school and was diagnosed with ED
- One student who has dropped out or attends a continuation school

If you could please put me in contact with any special education teachers, directors or contacts that you may know that would be so soo amazing. I have been having a difficult time finding participants so any help would be greatly appreciated! Also, please feel free to share this with anyone you may know who could possibly help me. Thank you! Please feel free to reach out with any questions.

Appendix C

UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

CHANGE THE WORLD FROM HERE

Overview of Study

WHAT THE STUDY IS ABOUT:
The purpose of this research study is to privilege students' voices so that we can develop a further understanding about how the label of Emotionally Disturbed impacts African American males' educational experiences. These participants' reflections on their educational trajectories will allow us insight into any barriers and obstacles that these students faced as they negotiate the special education system. Understanding these experiences will inform what we know about improving access to the general education curriculum in order to avoid over-referral and identification of African American students for special education.

WHAT WE WILL ASK YOU TO DO:
During this study, you will be asked to participate in up to two individual 45 minute interviews with myself and two 45 minute focus groups with the other 5 participants in the study. During the individual interviews, I will be asking you questions regarding your educational experience. During the focus group, participants will be sharing similar experiences with the group.

DURATION AND LOCATION OF THE STUDY:
Your participation in this study will include up to two 45-minute individual interviews and two 45-minute focus groups. The study will take place over zoom unless in person

PRIVACY/CONFIDENTIALITY:
Any data you provide in this study will be kept confidential unless disclosure is required by law. In any report we publish, we will not include information that will make it possible to identify you or any individual participant. Specifically, we will not use your real name in any report or document created. I will be the only one who has access to the data. The consent forms as well as the interview transcripts will be kept in an undisclosed location with a lock on it to avoid a confidentiality breach. The consent forms will be destroyed after 3 years of the completed study. Any identifiable data will be destroyed within one year of the completed study.

VIDEO AND AUDIORECORDINGS:
The interviews and focus groups will be audiotaped. This is necessary for the researcher to review question answers and transcribe the data accurately. The recordings will be stored in a secure location with only the researcher having access to them. The audio

recordings will not be made public. The audio recordings will be destroyed one year upon completion of this study.

COMPENSATION/PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION:
You will receive a $50 gift card of your choice for your participation and completion in this study. If you choose to withdraw before completing the study, you will receive $0 (zero).

VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY:
Your participation is voluntary and you may refuse to participate without penalty or loss of benefits. Furthermore, you may skip any questions or tasks that make you uncomfortable and may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty but you will exempt from the payment for participation. Nonparticipation will not affect your grades, employment status, or treatment in any way. In addition, the researcher has the right to withdraw you from participation in the study at any time.

OFFER TO ANSWER QUESTIONS:
Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you should contact the principal investigator: Sara Ordaz at (209) 663-3006 or s.ordaz5@gmail.com. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact the University of San Francisco Institutional Review Board at IRBPHS@usfca.edu.

Appendix D

UNIVERSITY OF
SAN FRANCISCO

CHANGE THE WORLD FROM HERE

Department of Education
Guardian of Minor Consent Form

(Date)

Dear Parents:

My name is Sara Ordaz and I am a graduate student in the School of Education at the University of San Francisco. I am sending this letter to explain why I would like for your child to participate in my research project. I am studying the Overrepresentation of African American males within Special Education and would like to examine how the label of Emotionally Disturbed and being placed in special education impacts African American males' educational experiences.

With your permission, I will ask your child to participate in up to two individual interviews with me and possibly one focus group with the other participants. These interviews and focus group will be roughly 45 minutes long. Your child's participation in this study is completely voluntary and will not affect his or her grades in any way. Your child may quit this study at any time by simply saying "Stop" or "I do not wish to participate."

The study will be conducted over the next 2 months via zoom. Upon completion of the study, your child will receive a $50 gift card of his choice as compensation for his participation. To protect your child's confidentiality, your child's name will not appear on any record sheets. The information obtained will not be shared with anyone, unless required by law. The records will be maintained by me and my faculty sponsor, Dr. Apedoe.

Please read for full study details:

WHAT THE STUDY IS ABOUT:
The purpose of this research study is to privilege students' voices so that we can develop a further understanding about how the label of Emotionally Disturbed impacts African American males' educational experiences. Understanding these experiences will inform what we know about improving access to the general education curriculum in order to avoid over-referral and identification of African American students for special education.

WHAT WE WILL ASK YOU TO DO:
During this study, your child will be asked to participate in up to two individual 45 minute interviews with myself and two 45 minute focus groups with the other 5 participants in the study. During the individual interviews, I will be asking your child questions regarding their educational experience. During the focus group, participants will be sharing similar experiences with the group.

DURATION AND LOCATION OF THE STUDY:
Your child's participation in this study will include up to two 45-minute individual interviews and two 45-minute focus groups. The study will take place over zoom.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS:
The research procedures described above may involve the following risks and/or discomforts: There is potential for psychological risks in this study. Participants will be asked to recount what may be traumatic experiences for them in their lives. Through sharing experiences, participants may experience re-traumatization. If your child wishes, they may choose to withdraw your consent and discontinue their participation at any time during the study without penalty.

BENEFITS:
Your child will receive no direct benefit from their participation in this study; however, the possible benefits to others include the potential ability to change perspectives and teaching practices through participation in this study. Through their story, we hope to learn more about the impact that being placed in special education has on African American students labeled with Emotional Disturbance.

PRIVACY/CONFIDENTIALITY:
Any data your child provides in this study will be kept confidential unless disclosure is required by law. In any report we publish, we will not include information that will make it possible to identify your child or any individual participant. Specifically, we will not use their real name in any report or document created. I will be the only one who has access to the data along with my chair, Dr. Apedoe. The consent forms as well as the interview transcripts will be kept in an undisclosed location with a lock on it to avoid a confidentiality breach. The consent forms will be destroyed after 3 years of the completed study. Any identifiable data will be destroyed within one year of the completed study.

VIDEO AND AUDIORECORDINGS:
The interviews and focus groups will be audiotaped. This is necessary for the researcher to review question answers and transcribe the data accurately. The recordings will be stored in a secure location with only the researcher having access to them. The audio recordings will not be made public. The audio recordings will be destroyed one year upon completion of this study.

COMPENSATION/PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION:

Your child will receive a $50 gift card of their choice for their participation and completion in this study. If they choose to withdraw before completing the study, they will not be eligible for the gift card.

VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY:
Your child's participation is voluntary and they may refuse to participate without penalty or loss of benefits. Furthermore, they may skip any questions or tasks that make them uncomfortable and may discontinue their participation at any time without penalty but they will be exempt from the compensation for participation. Nonparticipation will not affect their grades, employment status, or treatment in any way. In addition, the researcher has the right to withdraw them from participation in the study at any time.

OFFER TO ANSWER QUESTIONS:
Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you should contact the principal investigator: Sara Ordaz at (209) 663-3006 or s.ordaz5@gmail.com. If you have questions or concerns about your child's rights as a participant in this study, you may contact the University of San Francisco Institutional Review Board at IRBPHS@usfca.edu.

This letter will serve as a consent form for your child's participation and will be kept in the School of Education at the University of San Francisco. If you have any questions about this study, please contact Dr. Apedoe, the faculty sponsor of this project, at   If you have any questions about your child's rights as a participant, you may contact the University of San Francisco IRB at IRBPHS@usfca.edu.

 Please return this form to me via email at your earliest convenience.

Sincerely yours,

Sara Ordaz

Statement of Consent
I read the above consent form for the project conducted by Sara Ordaz of the University of San Francisco. The nature, demands, risk, and benefits of the project have been explained to me. I am aware that I have the opportunity to ask questions about this research. I understand that I may withdraw my consent and discontinue my child's participation at any time without penalty.

_____

Child's Name (print clearly)

_____

Signature of Legal Guardian   *Date*

Available Resources

Below is a list of psychological resources participants can access should they become triggered or need additional support.

Lincoln Child Center
(510) 273-4700
1266 14th Street Oakland, CA 94607
 lincolnfamilies.org

Mission: Lincoln disrupts the cycle of poverty and trauma, empowering children and families to build strong futures.

Target demographics: Children, youth, & families.

Geographic areas served: Alameda & Contra Costa Counties

Programs: Early Childhood Mental Health, EXCEL Special Education Services, Family Resource Center, Helping Open Pathways to Education (HOPE), Intensive Home Based Services, Kinship Services, Multidimensional Family Therapy, Oakland Freedom Schools, Project Permanence, School Engagement, Therapeutic Behavioral Services.

Gratitude Alliance
5111 Telegraph Avenue #310 Oakland, CA 94609
 www.gratitudealliance.org

Mission: Unhealed trauma fuels fear, hate, violence, oppression, and injustice. We're working to change that. We help communities disrupt cycles of generational trauma and harm and transform them into legacies of healing, resilience, and collective power.

Results: We have trained over 500 teachers, caregivers, and community leaders around the world in trauma-informed care and healing advocacy - who support over 60,000 survivors of trauma.

Target demographics: survivors of individual, collective, and generational trauma

Geographic areas served: Sub-Saharan Africa, Central Asia, Bay Area, California, USA

Programs: training in community-led mental health and trauma healing

Mind Body Awareness Project
415-824-2048
1721 Broadway Suite #201Oakland CA 94612
 www.mbaproject.org

Mission: Our mission is to help youth transform harmful behavior and live meaningful lives through mindfulness and emotional awareness.

Target demographics: at-risk youth

Geographic areas served: Alameda, San Mateo Counties

Programs: Our services are based upon a proprietary curriculum synthesized from best practices in counseling, meditation, group-process modalities and socio-emotional learning models.

East Bay Agency for Children
 (510) 268-3770
2828 Ford Street Oakland CA 94601
www.ebac.org

Mission: East Bay Agency for Children improves the well-being of children, youth and families by reducing the impact of trauma and social inequalities.

Target demographics: Children, Youth and Families

Geographic areas served: Alameda County

Programs: School-based behavioral health services programs' mental health therapists, who work on-site at schools, counsel children and youth from mainstream classrooms who have been referred by their teachers, principals, parents, and themselves because they are struggling with issues like anxiety, depression, or aggression. Through art, play, and other therapeutic tools, EBAC clinicians help these children develop ways to self-regulate their emotions and behaviors. Additionally, clinicians work with teachers and administrators to create trauma-informed school environments and support a positive school climate. EBAC school-based behavioral health staff work on over 40 elementary, middle, and high school campuses in Oakland, Fremont, Hayward, San Lorenzo, Newark, and San Leandro. Each year about 1,000 children receive vital mental health support through EBAC's school based behavioral health services.

Appendix E

UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

CHANGE THE WORLD FROM HERE

Department of Education
Minor Assent Form

(Date)

Dear Student:

My name is SARA ORDAZ and I am a graduate student in the School of Education at San Francisco State University. I am asking you to participate in a project that examines how the label of Emotionally Disturbed and being placed in special education impacts African American males' educational experiences.

I am asking you to participate in up to two individual interviews with me and two focus groups with other students. Both the interviews and focus groups will be roughly 45 minutes long. Your parents or legal guardians have already given permission for you to participate in this study, but you do not have to participate if you choose. You may quit this study at any time by simply telling me that you do not want to continue. You can skip any questions or tasks that you do not want to complete. Your participation in this study will not affect your grades in any way. Upon completion of this study, you will receive up to a $50 gift card for your participation. To protect your confidentiality, your responses will not be shared with anyone unless required by law. The responses you make will be kept by my professor Dr. Apedoe and me. Neither your teacher nor your parents will know if you chose to participate in this project or will know the answers you provide.

If you have any question about this study, please contact me at (209) 663-3006.

Sincerely yours,
Sara Ordaz

Agreement

I agree to participate in this research project and I have received a copy of this form.

_____

Student's Name (Please Print)   *Date*

_____

Student's Signature

I have explained to the above named individual the nature and purpose, benefits and possible risks associated with participation in this research. I have answered all questions that have been raised and I have provided the participant with a copy of this form.

_____

Researcher   _Date_

Available Resources

Below is a list of psychological resources participants can access should they become triggered or need additional support.

Lincoln Child Center
(510) 273-4700
1266 14th Street Oakland, CA 94607
lincolnfamilies.org

Mission: Lincoln disrupts the cycle of poverty and trauma, empowering children and families to build strong futures.

Target demographics: Children, youth, & families.

Geographic areas served: Alameda & Contra Costa Counties

Programs: Early Childhood Mental Health, EXCEL Special Education Services, Family Resource Center, Helping Open Pathways to Education (HOPE), Intensive Home Based Services, Kinship Services, Multidimensional Family Therapy, Oakland Freedom Schools, Project Permanence, School Engagement, Therapeutic Behavioral Services.

Gratitude Alliance
5111 Telegraph Avenue #310 Oakland, CA 94609
www.gratitudealliance.org

Mission: Unhealed trauma fuels fear, hate, violence, oppression, and injustice. We're working to change that. We help communities disrupt cycles of generational trauma and harm and transform them into legacies of healing, resilience, and collective power.

Results: We have trained over 500 teachers, caregivers, and community leaders around the world in trauma-informed care and healing advocacy - who support over 60,000 survivors of trauma.

Target demographics: survivors of individual, collective, and generational trauma

Geographic areas served: Sub-Saharan Africa, Central Asia, Bay Area, California, USA

Programs: training in community-led mental health and trauma healing

Mind Body Awareness Project
415-824-2048
1721 Broadway Suite #201Oakland CA 94612
 www.mbaproject.org

Mission: Our mission is to help youth transform harmful behavior and live meaningful lives through mindfulness and emotional awareness.

Target demographics: at-risk youth

Geographic areas served: Alameda, San Mateo Counties

Programs: Our services are based upon a proprietary curriculum synthesized from best practices in counseling, meditation, group-process modalities and socio-emotional learning models.

East Bay Agency for Children
 (510) 268-3770
2828 Ford Street Oakland CA 94601
www.ebac.org

Mission: East Bay Agency for Children improves the well-being of children, youth and families by reducing the impact of trauma and social inequalities.

Target demographics: Children, Youth and Families

Geographic areas served: Alameda County

Programs: School-based behavioral health services programs' mental health therapists, who work on-site at schools, counsel children and youth from mainstream classrooms who have been referred by their teachers, principals, parents, and themselves because they are struggling with issues like anxiety, depression, or aggression. Through art, play, and other therapeutic tools, EBAC clinicians help these children develop ways to self-regulate their emotions and behaviors. Additionally, clinicians work with teachers and administrators to create trauma-informed school environments and support a positive school climate. EBAC school-based behavioral health staff work on over 40 elementary, middle, and high school campuses in Oakland, Fremont, Hayward, San Lorenzo, Newark, and San Leandro. Each year about 1,000 children receive vital mental health support through EBAC's school based behavioral health services.

Appendix F

UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

CHANGE THE WORLD FROM HERE

Department of Education
Adult Consent Form

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Below is a description of the research procedures and an explanation of your rights as a research participant. You should read this information carefully. If you agree to participate, you will sign in the space provided to indicate that you have read and understand the information on this consent form. You are entitled to and will receive a copy of this form.

You have been asked to participate in a research study conducted by Sara Ordaz, a graduate student in the Department of School of Education at the University of San Francisco. This faculty supervisor for this study is Dr. Apedoe, a professor in the Department of Education at the University of San Francisco.

WHAT THE STUDY IS ABOUT:
The purpose of this research study is to privilege students' voices so that we can develop a further understanding about how the label of Emotionally Disturbed impacts African American males' educational experiences. Understanding these experiences will inform what we know about improving access to the general education curriculum in order to avoid over-referral and identification of African American students for special education.

WHAT WE WILL ASK YOU TO DO:
During this study, you will be asked to participate in up to two individual 45 minute interviews with myself and two 45 minute focus groups with the other 5 participants in the study. During the individual interviews, I will be asking you questions regarding your educational experience. During the focus group, participants will be sharing similar experiences with the group.

DURATION AND LOCATION OF THE STUDY:
Your participation in this study will include up to two 45-minute individual interviews and two 45-minute focus groups. The study will take place over zoom.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS:
The research procedures described above may involve the following risks and/or discomforts: There is potential for psychological risks in this study. Participants will be asked to recount what may be traumatic experiences for them in their lives. Through sharing experiences, participants

may experience re-traumatization. If you wish, you may choose to withdraw your consent and discontinue your participation at any time during the study without penalty.

BENEFITS:
You will receive no direct benefit from your participation in this study; however, the possible benefits to others include the potential ability to change perspectives and teaching practices through participation in this study. Through your story, we hope to learn more about the impact that being placed in special education has on African American students labeled with Emotional Disturbance.

PRIVACY/CONFIDENTIALITY:
Any data you provide in this study will be kept confidential unless disclosure is required by law. In any report we publish, we will not include information that will make it possible to identify you or any individual participant. Specifically, we will not use your real name in any report or document created. I will be the only one who has access to the data. The consent forms as well as the interview transcripts will be kept in an undisclosed location with a lock on it to avoid a confidentiality breach. The consent forms will be destroyed after 3 years of the completed study. Any identifiable data will be destroyed within one year of the completed study.

VIDEO AND AUDIORECORDINGS:
The interviews and focus groups will be audiotaped. This is necessary for the researcher to review question answers and transcribe the data accurately. The recordings will be stored in a secure location with only the researcher having access to them. The audio recordings will not be made public. The audio recordings will be destroyed one year upon completion of this study.

COMPENSATION/PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION:
You will receive a minimum $50 gift card of your choice for your participation and completion in this study. If you choose to withdraw before completing the study, you will receive $0 (zero).

VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY:
Your participation is voluntary and you may refuse to participate without penalty or loss of benefits. Furthermore, you may skip any questions or tasks that make you uncomfortable and may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty but you will exempt from the payment for participation. Nonparticipation will not affect your grades, employment status, or treatment in any way. In addition, the researcher has the right to withdraw you from participation in the study at any time.

OFFER TO ANSWER QUESTIONS:
Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you should contact the principal investigator: Sara Ordaz at (209) 663-3006 or s.ordaz5@gmail.com. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact the University of San Francisco Institutional Review Board at IRBPHS@usfca.edu.

I HAVE READ THE ABOVE INFORMATION. ANY QUESTIONS I HAVE ASKED HAVE BEEN ANSWERED. I AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT AND I WILL RECEIVE A COPY OF THIS CONSENT FORM.

PARTICIPANT'S SIGNATURE   *DATE*

Available Resources

Below is a list of psychological resources participants can access should they become triggered or need additional support.

Lincoln Child Center
(510) 273-4700
1266 14th Street Oakland, CA 94607
 lincolnfamilies.org

Mission: Lincoln disrupts the cycle of poverty and trauma, empowering children and families to build strong futures.

Target demographics: Children, youth, & families.

Geographic areas served: Alameda & Contra Costa Counties

Programs: Early Childhood Mental Health, EXCEL Special Education Services, Family Resource Center, Helping Open Pathways to Education (HOPE), Intensive Home Based Services, Kinship Services, Multidimensional Family Therapy, Oakland Freedom Schools, Project Permanence, School Engagement, Therapeutic Behavioral Services.

Gratitude Alliance
5111 Telegraph Avenue #310 Oakland, CA 94609
 www.gratitudealliance.org

Mission: Unhealed trauma fuels fear, hate, violence, oppression, and injustice. We're working to change that. We help communities disrupt cycles of generational trauma and harm and transform them into legacies of healing, resilience, and collective power.

Results: We have trained over 500 teachers, caregivers, and community leaders around the world in trauma-informed care and healing advocacy - who support over 60,000 survivors of trauma.

Target demographics: survivors of individual, collective, and generational trauma

Geographic areas served: Sub-Saharan Africa, Central Asia, Bay Area, California, USA

Programs: training in community-led mental health and trauma healing

Mind Body Awareness Project
415-824-2048
1721 Broadway Suite #201Oakland CA 94612
 www.mbaproject.org

Mission: Our mission is to help youth transform harmful behavior and live meaningful lives through mindfulness and emotional awareness.

Target demographics: at-risk youth

Geographic areas served: Alameda, San Mateo Counties

Programs: Our services are based upon a proprietary curriculum synthesized from best practices in counseling, meditation, group-process modalities and socio-emotional learning models.

East Bay Agency for Children
 (510) 268-3770
2828 Ford Street Oakland CA 94601
www.ebac.org

Mission: East Bay Agency for Children improves the well-being of children, youth and families by reducing the impact of trauma and social inequalities.

Target demographics: Children, Youth and Families

Geographic areas served: Alameda County

Programs: School-based behavioral health services programs' mental health therapists, who work on-site at schools, counsel children and youth from mainstream classrooms who have been referred by their teachers, principals, parents, and themselves because they are struggling with issues like anxiety, depression, or aggression. Through art, play, and other therapeutic tools, EBAC clinicians help these children develop ways to self-regulate their emotions and behaviors. Additionally, clinicians work with teachers and administrators to create trauma-informed school environments and support a positive school climate. EBAC school-based behavioral health staff work on over 40 elementary, middle, and high school campuses in Oakland, Fremont, Hayward, San Lorenzo, Newark, and San Leandro. Each year about 1,000 children receive vital mental health support through EBAC's school based behavioral health services.

Appendix G

Second Participant Recruitment Email

Email title: *(Name),* I'd really appreciate your help

Body of email:

So I realize that I'm a stranger sending you a cold email asking you for a favor...

But I'm a fellow Special Education teacher (9 years working for Seneca Center) turned SpEd Director, so I'm hoping you'll hear me out.

My name is Sara Ordaz and I am a Doctoral student at USF working on my Ed.D in Special Education.

I'm working on a study called **Understanding the African American Males Experience of Being Diagnosed with Emotional Disturbance through the use of Counter-Storytelling.**

I am looking for 6-8 participants for individual interviews and focus groups who fit any of the criteria below:

· African American male students diagnosed with Emotional Disturbance
· One student in each of the following grades: 7th, 8th, 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th
· One student who has graduated high school and was diagnosed with ED
· One student who has dropped out or attends a continuation school

The students will receive a minimum of $50 for participating.

I am also attaching a detailed overview of my study. Thanks in advance for your time, it is greatly appreciated!

PS- Even if you don't know any student who fit the criteria, you can help me out by pointing me in the direction of anyone else who might be able to help. Thank you SO much!