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Pursuing Equity for Black Students in K–12 Education:
Exploring the Intersection of Race and Disability
Framing the Issues to Start the Conversation

Introduction

Alarming disparities exist between the educational experiences and outcomes of Black students and those of their peers. Similar gaps emerge when comparing the experiences and outcomes of students with disabilities and those without disabilities. When considering the intersection of race and disability, a clear picture emerges of the need for equity-driven, inclusive education beliefs, policies and procedures, and practices — ranging from the classroom to the state education agency level — in order to meaningfully support the success of Black students with disabilities (Hernández et al., 2020).

Systemic Inequities in Teaching and Learning Conditions:
The Influence of Beliefs, Policies and Procedures, and Practices on Students' Experiences

Within local and state education systems, policies and procedures often interact with biased beliefs and practices, resulting in systemic disadvantages for Black students and, in particular, Black students with disabilities. Biased beliefs held by educators and educational institutions (such as poverty disciplining, implicit bias, institutional racism, color evasiveness, deficit thinking, and dominant culture) inform the creation and implementation of biased policies and procedures, as well as classroom practices (Hernández et al., 2020; Fergus, 2017). These forces — beliefs, policies and procedures, and practices — work together to form educational environments, conditions, and experiences that disadvantage students based on their race/ethnicity and disability status (Fergus, 2017).

Research has revealed that Black students and other students of color with disabilities fundamentally experience different conditions of teaching and learning than their peers.

For example:

- During the 2018–19 school year, Black students were more likely to be identified as having an intellectual disability and emotional disturbance and less likely to be identified as having a language impairment or autism compared to all other students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

- When controlling for income, Black students are more likely to be identified for special education in disability categories that are typically identified by school personnel (learning disabilities, emotional disabilities, and intellectual disabilities), but not in those disability categories that are most often identified by a health-care provider (deafness and blindness) (Grindal et al., 2019).

- Black students with disabilities are educated in more restrictive settings (in a regular class less than 40 percent of the day) compared to all students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

- As a result of implicit bias, preschool teachers more closely observe Black children, particularly Black boys, than White children, leading to disproportionate disciplinary actions (Gilliam et al., 2016).

- Black students with disabilities experience disproportionately high rates of exclusionary discipline (e.g., out of school suspension and expulsion), beginning as early as preschool, and are more likely to be referred to law enforcement for school disciplinary reasons (Anyon et al., 2014; Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Losen, 2011).

- Black students do not experience high rates of exclusionary punishment in schools simply because they misbehave more frequently (Losen, 2011). Rather, these data are the result of racist and ableist disciplinary systems in schools (Annamma, Morrison, & Jackson, 2014).

- Students of color are more likely than White students to attend a school with a presence of school police (often referred to as school resource officers or SROs) but not a school counselor (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

- The presence of school police/SROs increases arrest rates at schools exponentially and disproportionately increases the chances that Black students and students with disabilities will be arrested (Merkwae, 2015).

- Black youth are more likely than White youth to be incarcerated, and youth in the juvenile justice system are three to seven times more likely to need special education services than children outside of the system (Merkwae, 2015).

- Black students are provided less rigorous feedback about their work from classroom teachers than White students (Harber et al., 2012).

- Schools serving mostly students of color are more likely to be taught by out-of-field and novice teachers (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

- Students of color are more likely to attend a school where more than 50 percent of teachers were absent for more than 10 days per year (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Systemic Inequities in Student Outcomes

These systemic inequities in learning conditions — shaped by biased beliefs, policies and procedures, and practices — have produced significant opportunity and outcome gaps for Black students with disabilities.

For example:

- During the 2017–18 school year, Black or African American students with disabilities ages 14–21 exiting school were more likely to drop out and less likely to graduate with a regular high school diploma than all students with disabilities. While 73 percent of all students with disabilities graduated with a high school diploma, this was only true for 66 percent of Black or African American students with disabilities. Furthermore, one in five (20 percent) Black or African American students with disabilities dropped out as compared to 16 percent of all students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

- On the 2019 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Reading assessment, 35 percent of 4th-grade White students with disabilities performed at or above the Basic level compared to only 13 percent of Black 4th-graders with disabilities. And while 14 percent of 4th-grade White students with disabilities performed at or above Proficient on the same assessment, this was true for only 3 percent of Black 4th-graders with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

- On the 2019 NAEP Mathematics assessment, 36 percent of 8th-grade White students with disabilities performed at or above the Basic level compared to only 13 percent of Black 8th-graders with disabilities. And while 9 percent of 8th-grade White students with disabilities performed at or above Proficient on the same assessment, this was true for only 2 percent of Black 8th-graders with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

Reflection Questions

Question	Notes/Thoughts
1. What surprised you about the information shared here? What stood out to you?	
2. What do the data in your education system reveal about: a. Learning conditions of Black students with disabilities? b. Educational environments of Black students with disabilities? c. Disability identification rates and categories for Black students? d. Disciplinary actions for Black students with disabilities? e. Coursetaking patterns including enrollment in honors, advanced or AP courses of Black students with disabilities?	
3. How often are these types of data analyzed and discussed by educators in your education system?	
4. In what ways do teaching and learning conditions in your education system impact students based on their race/ethnicity and/or disability status? How do you know?	
5. How do Black students with disabilities feel about the quality and inclusivity of their educational experience in your education system? What steps have you taken to gather this type of information?	
6. What underlying beliefs and implicit biases about Black students with disabilities are reflected in your education system's structure, policies and procedures, and practices? What story is your education system's design telling (or not telling) about the inherent worth and value of all students?	

Citations

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